

Full Length Research Paper

# “Cutting off the shackles of bondage: Freedom, redemption and the movement back to Africa in Haile Gerima’s *Sankofa*”

Samba Diop

Professor of French, Kwara State University, Ilorin, Nigeria.

Received 22 November 2013; Accepted 6 February 2014; Published April 2014

Haile Gerima’s *Sankofa* (1993) provided a good example for the study of Public History in film that is, the study of how history is presented and recreated for public consumption. In *Sankofa*, the running thread is the direction that the film provides for a grasp of the past in order to live with confidence in the present and plan for the future. Gerima, originally from Ethiopia, chronicles the Middle Passage and the horrors of trans-Atlantic slavery (the African Holocaust); in the process, he pays homage to the spirits of those who died during the crossing and by the same token, pays tribute to the black and African Diaspora of the Americas. *Sankofa* is a story of pain, resistance to plantation brutality, tragedy, death, suffering but also, of freedom, redemption, healing and re-discovery. The narrative resorts to oral history and to drumming. Gerima gives centre place to the sacred (the bird) as the latter is in contraposition to the loss of memory and language of the transplanted Africans in the New World. The film *Sankofa* is fictionalized, hence the interest in the relation it entertains with history.

**Keywords:** Freedom, redemption, healing, Haile Gerima

## INTRODUCTION

Haile Gerima belongs to the 20th century generation of African filmmakers, writers, intellectuals and artists whose world view is pretty much shaped by Manichean vision which sustains their art. Generally speaking, generation of Africans who have experienced either European colonialism or racism in the West (or both) tends to exhibit what Gerima himself describes as the Fanonian steps (Pfaff 2004:204). The process was named after the famed psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, the black person who first showed a lot of anger towards the West because of all the ills the West has heaped upon Africans and black people. More rational steps consist in taking the good

things of the West, its tools and technology for example, along with adopting the positive achievements of the Western world.

Gerima treats a controversial theme: The transatlantic slave trade, also known as the Middle Passage. Even though transatlantic slavery was as an event that originated from Africa, there is the fact that it was primarily designed in Europe but affected America as well. It is also a well-known fact that European merchants and slave traders funded the slave trade, hence the triangular commercial activities between Europe, Africa and the Americas. Slavery has a special meaning for Blacks and

E-mail: [sbkdiop@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:sbkdiop@yahoo.co.uk).

Author agree that this article remain permanently open access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License

Africans. One major challenge that Gerima had to handle in the course of shooting his film is the dual pillar of past and present; therefore, according to Anne (2008: 66), this situation is akin to that of a “palimpsest narrative” in which there is ‘a bitemporal perspective that shows the continuity and discontinuities (of slavery).’ There is interplay between past and present; the same author asserts that ‘the present is always written against a background where the past is erased but still legible.’ I must add that since the transatlantic slave trade is temporally and spatially removed from the present—at least from the African side—the erasure is even all the more compelling.

How then, does one re-visit that past? Where are the ‘areas of memory’ (*lieux de mémoire*)? As I will specify later, the symbolism of the slave castles such as the one at Cape Coast (Ghana) and Goree Island (Senegal) must be deconstructed in order to lay bare the multiplicity of meanings and metaphors as inscribed inside those historical monuments. Gerima is aware of the fact that it is impossible to have a perfect remembrance of the past; likewise an absolute forgetfulness of that same past is not viable. Life would be impossible to live if we were to have the painful event of slavery ever-present in the memory of Africans and peoples of African descent in the diaspora. Hence the need for that narrow band of memory where a balance is struck between remembrance and forgetfulness. In turn, the idea of a narrow band gives even more potency to the concepts of palimpsest and erasure as highlighted above, in particular when the filmmaker must contend with the relation between fiction and reality as expressed through image.

The overarching theme in *Sankofa* is racism, namely the Western and European brand that African Americans and Africans have experienced. However, racism does not manifest itself in an even fashion, for the context must be taken into account, depending whether we are in America (plantation slavery and later on, segregation) or in Africa (European colonialism). As a matter of fact, dark-skinned people in America are visible minority as remarked by Pap Ndiaye (2008:47), ‘it is impossible to escape from the condition of being a black person; it is difficult to run away from one’s black appearance.’ In short, racism endures in Europe and the West. According to Patrick Chabal (2009:18), ‘racial thinking has permeated Western thought from the nineteenth century. Therefore, it is not just racism that blinds Westerners; it is the very theory they deploy to conceptualise society and politics.’ Thus, in the case of America, through the lens of slavery as filmed in *Sankofa*, ‘discussions of race and expressions of racism seem to be perpetual constituents of public opinion. Ever mutating into new forms, some modern, some regressive, they register a steady high scale of political significance’ (Rose and Ross, 1995: 1).

Conversely, in Africa, Blacks constitute the majority. Even though they have experienced racism during the colonial period nevertheless, Africans live on African soil;

have their languages, customs, worldviews, social organizations and cultures. Interestingly, with the advent of political independences, many Africans seem to regret the departure of the white man. As I will discuss in *Sankofa*, some people in Ghana envy the African-American tourist and wished their ancestors (the Ghanaians’s) were deported to America as slaves so that their descendants would be wealthy and educated, instead of surviving under the harsh living conditions in Africa. The concept of ‘Africa’ itself deserves some scrutiny. Africa is a two-pronged concept which prominently features in *Sankofa*. Firstly, up to today, Africa is construed by many non-Africans as a big village where everything is the same: people wear the same clothes, eat the same food, and speak the same language (“African”, whatever that means), etc. The Western world is primarily concerned by that kind of prevalent and stubborn perception; as outlined by Pius Adesanmi (2004: 36), ‘the self-constitution of Western Europe as the subject of history is made at the expense of “the rest of us” and lies in a spatial and chromatic representation of oppression as a territory in the discourses of Europe’s historical others.’ However, if Africans feel and know that they share a certain number of common traits at the same time. As we all know there is a wide diversity translated into a variety of ethnic groups, cultural practices, faiths and languages across the continent; hence the co-existence, side by side, of the general and the specific, the local and the global, in short, a verifiable double register when it comes to the concept of ‘Africa’.

Concerning slavery, it is often posited that Africans are chiefly involved, not as agent of their own destiny but rather, as an objects for manipulation, free labour and enjoyment by the slave master. However, some caution is in order for, in the current debate concerning the reparations vis-a-vis America’s racial legacy, the most contentious issue is the participation of Africans (mostly the chiefs and rulers) in the slave trade. I will lay emphasis on the issue of reparations in my discussion below. A concept that encompasses all of the above is the very notion of an African identity. If we take into account the double register mentioned above, isn’t African identity an imagined one? The all-encompassing concept of Africanness was first proposed by the pan-Africanist diasporic school in which one finds precursors such as W.E.B. Dubois, Georges Padmore or Marcus Garvey, just to cite a few. On the aesthetical plane, what renders *Sankofa* a realist visual narrative is the embedding technique of “realism proper” as articulated by Carina Yervasi (2008: 44): ‘A seamless narrative technique—usually by way of continuing editing—that tries to reproduce a realistic world of film.’ More over, Gerima acts as a pioneer who must establish a usable heritage. The past must be chronicled in order to better live in the present and look toward to the future; as well, only after having written down that past—from an African

perspective—is it truly possible to show mundane and accurate images of African life?

In an interesting article bearing on Albert Schweitzer and the film *Le Grand Blanc de Lambaréné* (by Bassek ba Kobhio), Francis Higginson (2005: 208) establishes the link between music and otherness and by the same token, highlights 'the ways in which (this) Western interpretation of music's place participates in the debasement and exploitation of the "other"—in this case the African.' Along the same lines, in her analysis of the film *Sanders of the River* (1933), Frances Harding (2003: 70) puts a stress on the subaltern condition of the 'other' when she observes that 'the thrust of the narrative and image foregrounded the ruling "white man" and relegated other people to a collective role as an undifferentiated back-drop.' In *Sankofa*, Gerima tries to counter the negative images as described above. However, although Gerima deals with a historical theme, it is crucial to point out that he is not doing so as an historian but rather, as a filmmaker and an artist.

## America

In an interview by Gerima and Woolford (1994), Gerima states that his main aim in making *Sankofa* is to highlight the African heritage of African Americans, the descendants of slaves moreover, according to the filmmaker, his film is also about healing, the maturation of Africans in America, a process whereby they do not need any guidance or sponsorship from any paternal mentor or slave owner in order to take care of themselves. In a similar vein, Angelyn Mitchell (2001: 51) succinctly puts forth the idea that 'Gerima's film inaugurated a cinematic trend in the 1990s for presenting the history of slavery from the perspective of the enslaved.' This remark is an interesting one so far, particularly in Hollywoodian cinema; slavery has been solely narrated from the vantage point of the enslaver, the white master and plantation owner.

In relation to the meaning of his film, in another interview, with Françoise Pfaff (2004: 211), Gerima claims that 'with *Sankofa*, black people look at slavery as an energy, as a departing point toward self-transformation, collective transformation, communal upsurge in economic, spiritual and social ways.' Thus, the outcome is that Blacks will no more be a passive agents; the heritage of slavery will not be construed any longer as a hurdle but will be perceived henceforth as a positive source of inspiration from which one digs deep in order to conquer the world with all the required confidence.

*Sankofa* is the story of Mona, an African-American woman who is transported back in time to a sugar plantation where she finds herself as a field slave on the Lafayette sugar-cane plantation. She was born on the plantation—and was known in a previous life as Shola—, an enslaved African woman caught, sold and transported

from the continent to North America. At the beginning, there is interplay between the African American identity on one hand and the other African identity. The film is replete with symbolisms, the most obvious one being the *sankofa* bird a replica of this bird is hung around Shola's neck as a necklace given to her by Shango, to wear as a charm. At the very end of the film, the scenes shot in the dungeon of the Cape Coast Castle in Ghana, the bird is present but this time as a wooden object perched atop a staff. I will come back later to the symbol of the bird, a powerful metaphor for freedom, redemption and spiritual beliefs.

Gerima's film has been the object of sharp criticism; the first critical salvo toward the film focusses on Gerima's own way of reconstructing the past and history; the second one is his very conception of blackness and race. Starting with the first one, Sylvie Kandé (1998: 131) asserts that 'the past is a place where Gerima projects a definition of racial categories that differs little from the contemporary conceptual norm, particularly that of the United States.' Before going any further, it is crucial to point out that, since the meaning and usage of the past in *Sankofa* constitute the heart of this paper, Gerima is not actually keen on finding refuge in the past for its own sake; in general, people and nations who have gone through a traumatic process have difficulty overcoming the past and such is the case of slavery and colonialism which still have lingering effects on Blacks in the diaspora as well as on Africans on the continent. Moreover, one may be tempted to revel and be stuck in the past and thus, to reject change or push back any alternative views to one's current condition. Consequently, according to Gerima, Blacks and Africans must come to terms with slavery by; manly, looking at things with a clear eye, a cool head, in addition to the necessary focus which in turn, enables one to understand what really happened. It is also in good to look at it, with courage and determination, who is responsible and for what. Most importantly, one must be determined enough to recognize one's mistakes—there are always some—and take stock of them. Additionally, in the aforementioned process, it is essential not to be too conventional and/or conservative, to be ready for change and innovation without ever forgetting the past also not letting the same past be a hurdle toward progress and emancipation.

In addition to being painful, the racial question in the USA is much. In *Sankofa*, we have the traditional racial scale of Whites at the top, Half-castes in the middle and Blacks at the bottom, in addition to the various name tags associated with the colour 'black.' David Brion Davis (1996: 448-9) emphasizes the changing image of the Negro in Western literature and art throughout the ages: From Ovid, Gower and Chaucer to Sir Thomas Brown, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Edmund Burke and Herman Melville, to cite just a few. Additionally, Davis puts a stress on the ambiguity attached to racial colour in general and to blackness in particular; according to Davis, there is at

once 'sinister connotations of blackness' and 'through the ages men (have) prized the darkest jet and ebony.' Davis recalls the dialogue in Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* between Proteus who repeats the old saying to the effect that 'black men are pearls in beautiful ladies' eyes' and Julia who replies: 'Tis true, such pearls as put out ladies' eyes; For I had rather wink than look on them.' Hence the ambiguity displayed by the colour 'black' in Western art and literature.

By looking more closely at the main characters in *Sankofa*, one unravels the complex racial architecture that was prevalent—and still is, to some extent—in American society. As I mentioned it earlier, a rigid racial classification was put in practice. Later on, with the rise of black nationalism and pan-Africanism in the US in the course of the late 19th century and the 20th century, this racial scale has led to what Naomi Pabst (2003: 191) has termed 'the hegemonic, exclusionary constructions of blackness.' However, the same author pointed out some criticism at the 'dominant voices in black transnational and diaspora studies (who chose not to) examine in their work the ways in which transracial ties and transcultural allegiances can also mitigate placement and displacement within blackness.' All in all, as advocated by Francis Higginson (2005: 220), the task at hand is 'to deconstruct epistemic difference and overdetermined racialized dichotomies.'

The first character, Shango, is a maroon slave bought in the West Indies and brought to the Lafayette plantation in North America; he is a major figure among the slaves and the leader of the rebellion. Shango is the symbol of resistance and rebellion whose philosophy is elucidated and buttressed by the slogan 'I prefer to die rather than live in bondage.' More will be said about Shango later on. Shola is the narrator, not only telling her own story but also narrating the lives of all the actors on the plantation, slaves and masters alike. Thus, from a technical point of view, Gerima judiciously uses both techniques of voice-over and direct narrative. We gather from Shola's narration that Nunu, Joey's mother, latches on to her memories from Africa; Nunu could not be sold and in her own words, 'she is too old to be sold, too old to be bought' for the owner of the Lafayette plantation was trying to sell her. In effect, both Shango and Nunu belong to the category of dark-skinned slaves who are at the very bottom however, they seem to be spiritually strong, steadfast and have endurance and fortitude, more than the other slaves. The two are, by the same token, the very symbols of the hegemonic and exclusionary constructions of blackness (as emphasized by Pabst) and on which 1950s and 1960s black radical nationalists in the United States of America (USA) have relied on their struggle for civil rights and equality. Shola herself does not seem to fit well into the racial scale for she was born on the plantation and is in a league of her own, along with the other slaves born on American soil. Of importance here is the inner-division within the slave group in which

one finds the field slave and the house slave.

Next, in the middle of the same scale, there is the proverbial half-caste, the symbol of in-betweenness, of ambiguity—and at times, the betrayer—, the link or bridge between Blacks and Whites in an ideal world. Joe, also known as Tumey, is an interesting character. He is light-skinned and is the son of Nunu, the product of the raping of black female slaves by white masters and fore-men on the plantations and as well as on the slave ships which transported the slaves from Africa to the Americas. Joey, as a head slave, is supposedly closer to the white master than he is to the other slaves; he can even perform the passing act if he wants to, that is he acts and behaves like a white man. However, Joe finds himself in a very awkward situation when he was asked by master James the white foreman to flog the run-away slaves, Joe refuses. He knows how 'to count', he is literate and he can read the Bible but when he refused to whip the run-away slaves, James asked him how come 'he cannot whip and count at the same time?' If Joey knows how to count, then he is literate enough to read the Bible, the other slaves are illiterate. In one scene, there is storytelling with the story of Nunu being narrated by a slave woman as the other slaves are seated in a circle and are intently listening to the storyteller. Thus, since there is no school, no library, no books and thus, no writing, the only form of communication and entertainment for the slaves is the Word, is the oral medium.

During his confession to Father Raphael inside the church, Joey mentions Nunu but the priest became angry and sternly told him not to mention the name of that 'heathen Guinea woman.' Nunu is, in the eyes of the priest, the symbol of dark ancient pre-colonial Africa with its traditional religions, rites, secrecy, mysticism and unfathomable, incomprehensible languages. The irony here is that Nunu is Joey's mother but Joe seems not to be riled or irritated by the priest's words; actually, Joe has a kind of detached, emotionless attitude towards his mother. This attitude is certainly due to his condition from birth, as mentioned earlier; Joey is the off-spring of the rapist white master and as such, does not know his father. Toward the end of the film, he kills his mother after having been poisoned thanks to the food prepared by Lucy under the plan designed and hatched by the rebellious Shango whose foremost weapon of choice is the poisoning of the white masters, foremen and their head slaves (including Joey). At this juncture, Gerima highlights the role that the Christian church—in the film, the Catholic Church—played a part in the enslavement and exploitation of Blacks. In the final analysis, Joey finds himself in a very uncomfortable situation because he is asked to choose a side: Either he is with the Blacks (ignorance) or with Whites (enlightenment), the former being the victims and the latter the perpetrators; there is no middle space; a hard choice, indeed, if we were to consider the fact that he is the biological product of the mixing of the two races.

Joey is well known among the slaves as Tumey; his own mother Nunu calls him by that name. Here, Gerima brings forth an interesting element in the history of African slaves in America and the New World in general, namely the naming of the slave. In effect, the slave, because of his or her subaltern position, is given a name or a nickname; he cannot and does not name himself or herself. Joey, two names highlighted his divided loyalty to the effect that, one name (Joey) is assigned to him by the white master while the other (Tumey) is the one given to him by his mother and the other slaves. To which group does he belong? Which name can he identify with? A male slave actually gives Tumey a third name by calling him 'Bible Boy.' The naming issue asks the following question: What is in a name? The name is the first attribute of a human being and as such, makes a lot of difference whether one is given a name (because of bondage and servitude) or one freely chooses one's name—more accurately, parents freely give names to their newborns. As it is obvious, Tumey and all the slaves on the plantation are not free to name themselves, they are given names and the giver of names is the white master who assigns any name however and whenever he wants to the slave. Shola's is a peculiar case to the extent that she too has two names; however, contrary to Tumey, the name Shola, was freely given to her way back, in her previous life in Africa while her contemporary name Mona, is the one she inherited through slavery.

The same male slave who nicknamed Tumey 'Bible boy' connects him with Lucy, the house slave cook; Tumey is thus challenged to show his manhood instead of 'reading the Bible all the time'. In due course, Tumey succumbs to Lucy's charms and had sex with her, in a poignant scene of love-making; afterwards, he had a sense of guilt and sin, thus following the tenets of Catholicism, in which faith states, 'the flesh is weak.' While having sex, Tumey cannot help but to look (as if transfixed) at the picture of Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus, hanging on the wall above the bed. The focus of the lens of the camera on the picture only reinforces Joey's sense of sin, hence his confession to Father Raphael. The same priest is the one who tells Shola to pray but to no avail. Shola is in so much pain because of the incessant rapes by the white foreman that, when she opens up to the priest, the only thing the latter has to provide to soothe her pain and to comfort her is prayer. Toward the end of the film, Shola kills the white foreman who raped her many times; she then runs across the ocean above the waters, back to Africa. Africa, the mythical continent which is the topic of the next section.

## Africa

The first image one sees upon the first sighting of the African coastline, as the camera shot steers away from the American side of the Atlantic and hovers from water

to land (the African continent), is that of ancient Egypt, along with the ocre-colored statues of the Pharaohs, the pyramids and the Valley of Kings. This is a powerful statement on the part of Gerima who re-ignites the controversial debate—which, according to many, is now closed—about knowing whether ancient Egypt, with its sophisticated, refined and advanced civilization, is part of the African heritage as it showcases the continent's contribution to human civilization. Without a doubt, with this image, Gerima states that, yes, ancient Egyptian civilization is part and parcel of the African and human heritage and in doing so, he toes the line of the African historian Cheikh Anta Diop (1954) whose scholarly work focuses primarily on Egyptology. Gerima's pointing to a multisecular African heritage is contrapuntal to the oft-quoted historical cesura (or absence of history in Africa) which is the bedrock on which the legacy of slavery—from the master's point of view—is built and perpetuated.

Shola's trip is akin to waking up from a long slumber, a nightmare, a dream; the journey back to Africa is just in spirit but is not carried out physically. Never mind, Shola is welcomed back to Africa (Ghana), on the grounds of Elmina Castle and becomes Mona. A white tourist dressed in a safari suit, with the usual neck-strapped camera dangling on his chest, is shown asking her where she has been all along. He has been looking for her all this while. Mona does not answer the enquirer but keeps walking like a zombie even though she is aware that she had traveled back in time, to slavery days in America.

The concept of identity is a complex one, to say the least. The debate on identity—or identities—is predicated on a paradigmatic shift in the sense that the question is to know whether we have one African identity or many identities. Interestingly enough, without going further into the core of the debate, within the frame of this paper, we can put forward the idea of an African identity, in the singular and shaped by the two most recent tragic events in history, namely slavery and colonialism; in other words, all Africans living on African soil and all black peoples living in the diaspora and throughout the world have been affected by one (slavery), the other (colonialism) or both. Seen under this angle and as treated by Gerima in his film, it makes plain sense to speak of an African identity. However, Gerima's concept of identity is sharply contested. It is worth quoting S. Kandé (op. cit., p. 132-3) at length:

"Does *Sankofa* intend to comfort the viewer with the idea that the only true African culture and identity belong to the period predating slavery and that they can only be recovered by means of a journey backwards, under the firm guidance of the prophetic voice of the Elders? Doesn't the "genius" of the peoples of the Diaspora—one thinks immediately of Jazz—define itself precisely through a triple movement of retention/rejection of the past and creation of the new? The nostalgia in *Sankofa*

for a sacralized past derives not from the pressing problems of today but from an ideological strait jacket that leaves unthought, precisely the question of the transition from the past to the present and from the old to the new” Perhaps, to Gerima’s defense, the filmmaker appeals to a double flux, to a sort of dialectics because Mona is made to live in the present but travels back to the past as Shola. The same blueprint can be extended to Joey (Tumey), albeit in a somewhat different context. Thus, in my opinion, both past and present are given equal measure and weight. P. Woolford (op. cit., p. 103) observes that ‘in the Akan language, *sankofa* means returning to your roots, recuperating what you have lost and moving forward.’ The double movement of loss, recovery/forward motion is obvious here. As well, the subterranean driving force is “the going back to Africa” movement as exemplified by well-known figures such as Edward Wilmot Blyden (British West Indies/Sierra-Leone) or W.E.B. Dubois (USA/Ghana), in addition other pan-Africanist figure such as G. Padmore. At this juncture, there is also a dialectical logos in the sense that the “going back to Africa” movement is at once spiritual and physical. What I mean is that, for various reasons, some African Americans and Blacks of the diaspora only go back to Africa spiritually (an imagined trip), they do not travel there physically, they never visit the continent whereas others choose to visit but return to America. A third group decides to definitely settle on the continent, particularly in English-speaking Anglophone countries (Ghana, Nigeria, The Gambia, Kenya, Tanzania, etc.). The choice of the aforementioned countries of settlement is obviously dictated by an assortment of facts such as a common language, ideology, religion, etc. Starting with language, where English is spoken, it is easier for the returnee New World Black to adapt and live. Ghana has a special appeal, for that simple reason it is the country that W.E.B. Dubois has chosen to settle in. He died and was buried there. One may also add the pan-Africanist ideal of Kwame Nkrumah and the early independence of Ghana (1957), the first in sub-Saharan Africa (Morocco and Tunisia had obtained their independence from France in 1956). Additionally, the presence of Christianity plays a prominent role as it is the religion in which most African Americans have been born into even though many of them do not practice it. This religion is also prevalent in many parts of Africa. It is however, important to point out that many African Americans also convert to Islam and choose to live in Sudan, Egypt, or northern Nigeria. The powerful invocation of the past by Gerima does not mean that he is fixated by it or that he wants things to stay rigid or frozen in a time warp as I observed earlier. On the contrary, with the dialectics mentioned above, he is conscious not to be a prisoner of the past. In the interview with P. Woolford (idem), he declares:

“I was in Ghana doing research on what they call *cra*. *Cra* is a belief in spirits, a belief that people who have died

but are not yet settled roam the village, trying to find a living body to enter, to go back into the living world to repent their crimes or avenge injustices done to them”

All of this was on my mind while working on the story of *Sankofa*.’ The upshot of Gerima’s argument is that in order to move forward, one must first go backward, at least where African Americans and the slave question are concerned. Looking backward may seem utopian but it is a necessary and a salutary act, before the act of looking forward can efficiently take place. In other words, in order to know and live well in the present, one must re-visit the past and even exorcise that past, albeit a painful one. According to Gerima, it is only after that salutary exercise of exorcism, and then it is possible for African Americans and black people in general to have the necessary confidence that is needed to tackle the pressing problems of the present as mentioned by Kandé. I may add, to also plan well for the future. Therefore, Gerima’s message is that past, present and futures are interwoven and it is impossible to consider one to the detriment of the other two.

The figure of the returned African American in Africa as well as the participation of the Africans in the slave trade, along with the question of reparations are part of the debate on diaspora, borderlands, hybridity and exile. Speaking of the diaspora, Edward M. Bruner (1996: 295) writes:

“When diaspora blacks return to Africa, the Ghanaians call them *obruni*, which means “whiteman,” but the term is extended to Europeans, Americans and Asians regardless of their skin color, so it also has a meaning of foreigner”

This second meaning is also ironic, since the diaspora blacks see themselves as returning “home.” So the term *obruni* labels the African Americans as both white and foreign whereas they see themselves as black and at home. A white South African will be called an *obruni*, but black South Africans, as well as blacks from other countries of Africa south of the Sahara, such as Nigeria, Burkina Faso or Kenya, will not be called *obruni* but will be referred to by another term which means “strangers.”

The situation described above is found in almost all African countries; it has to do with the perception of foreignness and it is obvious, in the extract above, a foreigner who comes from a nearby country or region is different from the one who comes from afar. As well, this situation is not unique to Africa. In Europe, a Frenchman will certainly have a better knowledge of and perhaps, an easier acceptance from an Englishman than, from an African or an Asian. Likewise, a Peruvian may be more cognizant of and conversant with the cultural similarities that he shares with a Colombian than he would with a German. The attribution of names and prevalence of

name-calling vis-à-vis—foreigners, as emphasized by Bruner, are intimately related to the question of perception and of otherness (*altérité*).

“In other parts of Africa, one finds similar situations. For example, we have the *toubab* in Senegal and the *oyinbo* in Nigeria. Just like in the Ghanaian *obruni* case, the *toubab* refers to the Westerner, the white person. However, the concept is more complex than that. Both in the *obruni* and *toubab* contexts, indigenous Africans display a sort of ambivalent attitude and even a love-hate relationship. On the one hand, the white person can be perceived as being the bearer of a set of totally different social, linguistic and cultural values. Some extremists will even posit that these values are danger to the very survival of African cultures if Africans were to copy the ways of the white man. For instance, Bruner recounts that many Ghanaians told him that they consider some African Americans to be racist, hence the hate. As to the love, still according to Bruner (op. cit., p. 296), ‘some Ghanians seeing that diaspora blacks are prosperous and educated, feel they were in a sense fortunate in being taken as slaves, because now they are economically well off and have a higher standard of living than the Ghanaians. African Americans too may ask, what would my life have been like had my ancestors not been taken as slaves but remained in Africa?’

It goes without saying that envy is apparent here. Moreover, for good or bad, the African American tourist is perceived as the symbol of modernity, the benchmark to which one must aim for in order to have a better life. By the same token, indigenous Africans—or Ghanaians as mentioned by Bruner—who have never visited the United States and who may not know much about the history of slavery, racism and segregation, do not have a clue about the hardship that Blacks have experienced—and still do to some extent—in the New World. Thus, the economic well being, education and high standards of living of the African American carry a hefty price, laden with sweat, tears, blood and sacrifice. Hence, the apparent economic success of the African American is relative when replaced within the wider context of American society. In effect, as is often the case, many people are not interested in a process; they like only to see the result. Metaphorically speaking and to provide an example, many people do not care entering the kitchen in order to prepare a tasty dish, much less going to the market to fetch the necessary ingredients to cook that dish; rather, they like it when the food is ready and was prepared by someone else so that they can sit down and enjoy the meal. By the same token, in envying the African American tourist, the Ghanaian does not have a clue about the enormous sacrifice and untold suffering the former has to go through in such a skewed, challenging and biased society such as the American one in order to become what the envier sees in front of him.

This mutual perception is compounded by the very fact that, as far as indigenous Africans are concerned, being

an *obruni* or a *toubab* is not just a matter of having a white skin for; Blacks from the diaspora are often perceived as such. Even indigenous Africans born and bred on the continent who live an extended amount of time in the West, when they return home back to the continent, they are often considered as *obruni* or *toubab*; in this instance, it is not the skin color that counts but rather, as pointed out by Bruner, the external wealth carried by the African American or the African ‘been-to.’ What does all of this tell us? Poverty, wretchedness, massive unemployment among the youth, lack of opportunity, coupled with an assortment made of corruption, tribalism, nepotism, graft and mismanagement on the part of the governing African elites have rendered life unbearable for many Africans; so much that, what many Africans want, particularly the youth, is to make it to Europe or to America (to Babylon), by any means necessary—even at the risk of their lives, embarking into dugouts and crossing the wide ocean toward the islands of Spain or, overland, trekking the Sahara Desert northwards—in their quest at becoming wealthy like the African American tourist or the African ‘been-to.’ In that regard, it is worth considering Abass Ndione’s latest novel *MbèkèMi. A l’assaut des vagues de l’Atlantique* (2008) bearing on the perilous sea voyage to Europe by desperate young Africans. The irony is that while African Americans and Blacks of the Diaspora are coming back ‘home’, many Africans are doing just the opposite, namely running away from Africa in search of greener pastures and more hospitable climes.

*Sankofa* ends with a scene taking place inside the dungeon of Elmina Castle. Mona returns from her trip in the past. People, including African American tourists and Nunu (also back on African soil, looking at Mona with tears of joy on her face), are assembled. To be more precise, they are seated in the inner court-yard; a drummer whose face is powdered with white paint plays what sounds like a tune of redemption but the same drum rhythm also reflects celebration, a muted sense of happiness and the return home of the prodigal daughter (Mona). The same drummer utters onomatopoeic incantations in an esoteric language that is certainly known only to the initiated while Mona and the drummer look at each other in a complicit and contended manner. Gerima deconstructs the famous ‘door of no return.’ In the slave castles and dungeons strewn along the African Atlantic coast such as Elmina (Ghana), Goree Island (Senegal) and Ouidah (Benin Republic), captured slaves from the hinterland were first transported to the coast and then held inside the dungeon before being shipped out to the New World, usually through a door that leads directly to the hold of the ship. However, Gerima prefers Mona to walk in the opposite direction, namely, from outside the door by the waterfront into the inner court-yard, hence the emphasis put on the return back home—as opposed to the initial itinerary that goes outwardly through the ‘door of no return’ into the hold of the slave ship. Gerima and Woolford (1994: 91) puts an emphasis on the recovery

the loss of identity and freedom in his own words, 'the end of the guilt and denial tied to both the plantation owner's perspective and that of the Africans who are condemned to be slaves. That split in perspective still exits today.'

In the same dungeon scene, we see a staff held by a teenage child with the sacred wooden *sankofa* bird on top. The bird has a powerful meaning throughout the film even at the beginning and the end—and in between—there are camera shots which show a hawk gliding in the sky. As stated by the voice-over, 'the spirit of the dead shall rise and posses the bird of passage.' The bird flying high in the sky is the very symbol of freedom, as opposed to slavery with the slaves seated below on the ground, in chains, in bondage, working very hard on the plantation, deprived of that freedom enjoyed by the bird gliding above in the sky. The dialectics of freedom and captivity in Gerima's film is truly compelling.

The final discussion of this section bears the participation of Africans in the slave trade and the meaning of the Elmina Castle—as well as the other symbols and artifacts of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in Africa. Starting with the first one, namely Africans' participation in the capture and selling of their own kin and kith, it is worth mentioning that slavery is not a phenomenon that is unique to Africans, It is a world-wide historical phenomenon ; only the scale of the Middle passage puts the latter in its own category. The other argument put forward by those who seek reparations is that only a few greedy African Chiefs are the culprits for they were the ones who captured and sold people who did not belong to their own tribe or ethnic group. The fighters captured during internecine wars were marched off to the coast, sold as slaves and then shipped to the plantations of the New World. Actually, at the core of the debate bearing on reparations is the meaning of slavery to contemporary peoples. Bruner (op. cit. p. 295) writes:

"Africans themselves were active participants in the slave trade..."

The Europeans established positions on the coast and did not conduct slave raids into the interior. It was other African peoples who brought the slaves and sell them to the Europeans on the coast. In a recent article published in The New York Times (April 2010), the Harvard African American scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. tackles the question of reparations when he considers 'the idea that the descendants of American slaves should receive compensation for their ancestors' unpaid labor and bondage.' Further on in his piece, Gates writes:

"The Middle Passage, in addition to being a remarkably messy history, was sometimes a two-way street."

Here, the author stresses the participation of both Europeans and Africans in the trade. Finally, Gates opines:

"While we are all familiar with the role played by the United States and the European colonial powers like Britain, France, Holland, Portugal and Spain, there is very little discussion of the role Africans themselves played. And that role turns out to be a considerable one."

Gates' critics, in particular those belonging to the Afrocentric school, emphatically accuse him for letting himself being used as a Trojan horse by the white conservative establishment and the History revisionists in order to derail the huge and overdue reparations owed by the West to both Blacks in the diaspora and Africans in Africa. In his film, Gerima puts a heavy emphasis on the dual theme of loss and recovery. The filmmaker does not overtly apportion blame. He strictly focus on the healing process; in this instance, one can surmise that, for the filmmaker, the harm is done so why waste time distributing blame cards instead of facing and resolving the more pressing question of rehabilitating and empowering the descendants of the Middle Passage? By the way, the partisans of reparations are of the opinion that the settling of these reparations—is not necessarily or uniquely only in monetary instruments—but is also part and parcel of that healing process which is featured in *Sankofa*. Reparations and healing process are inseparable. In the final analysis, there remains a simple question: Did Africans participate in the slave trade? The answer is: Yes. However, chiefs and traditional rulers were at the forefront. Furthermore, Europeans bear a greater responsibility in that horrible trade. Now came the ancillary queries: Must African Americans and all the descendants of slaves get reparations? The unwavering answer is: Yes, albeit with some differing views. Must Africans on the continent get reparations? The answer is: Much less than those who have been directly affected by the horrendous trade. Here too, there is a heated debate for some Africans—and African Americans—who thinks that reparations are not needed for, otherwise, it looks like the memory of their forebears who were enslaved are being cheaply sold—once again—in exchange for money (trinkets ?). A few observers think that if the West were to devise a Marshall Plan for Africa—like the one designed for and implemented in Europe after World War II—it would be better than paying any monetary reparations. Still, some make a parallel with the Jewish situation. Jews who were dispossessed and the descendants of those sent to their deaths to the European extermination camps by Nazi Germany, along with the State of Israel, are receiving compensations from the German government. Those compensatory arrangements do not compromise in any way or fashion the upholding, forever burning flame of the memory of those who died during the tragic Holocaust. Hence the motto: 'We forgive but we do not forget.' A similar parallel can be established with Japan and the reparations to be paid to South Korea.

However, this situation is slightly different from the Jewish one, between Japan and Korean, it is about the former colonizing and occupying the latter for a certain number of decades, in addition to subjecting the people

to some untold suffering (what comes here readily to mind is the case of the 'comfort women', that is, Korean women who were used by Japanese soldiers as prostitutes and sex objects). The cases mentioned above are often used as historical parallels in the debate pertaining to the reparations towards the transatlantic slave trade. However, each story of oppression, enslavement, pain and suffering is unique and the comparison can be stretched only so far.

My final observations focus on the meaning of the castles and the 'spots of memory' (*lieux de mémoire*). If we go, once again, back to Edward Bruner's piece (op. cit., p. 291), he remarks that the castles do not mean the same for African Americans and Ghanaians. For the former, 'the castles are sacred ground not to be desecrated.' More to the point, Bruner (op. cit., p. 293) writes:

African Americans want the castles to be as they see them—a cemetery for the slaves who died in the dungeons' inhuman conditions while waiting for the ships to transport them to the Americas. Ghanaians see the castles as festive places while African Americans see it as a somber place. Of course, some Ghanaians did express the hope that the restoration would not change the character of the castles and the dungeons. We are in the presence of a set of conflicting world views. It is the very meaning of tourism however, that is at stake in the Elmina Castle context. Bruner (op. cit., p. 290-1) gives the Ghanaians' side the following fashion:

What most Ghanaians want from tourism is economic development, including employment, new sources of income, better sanitation and waste disposal, improved roads and a new harbor. Expectations are high...While Ghanaians see tourism primarily as a route to development; the African American tourists have a different perspective.

The African American tourist is visiting a poor and developing country, albeit a place that has a historical meaning for him in the sense that his ancestors were shipped from there many centuries ago as slaves and auctioned off on the plantations of the New World. There exist in Senegal even more radical views for some hardcore radical nationalist activists—along with many African Americans and Blacks from the diaspora—think that the Goree Island and its famous house of slaves (*maison des esclaves*) must be off-limits to white folks. The latter are said to be responsible for the slave trade. However, the government of Senegal is of the opposite opinion, as pointed out by Bruner above, in the case of Ghana, Goree Island is seen as a source of foreign currency thanks to tourism. It is therefore out of the question to kill the hen that lays the golden eggs.

## CONCLUSION

*Sankofa* evokes an event and scenes that take place

both in America and Africa. I attempted to analyze the various historical aspects of slavery, in addition to showing how this event has deeply affected Africans and Blacks and also shaped the destiny of the African continent, at least since the dawn of the Renaissance period in Europe. At the heart of this paper is the question of history as framed into African film through the example of *Sankofa*.

What is of utmost urgency is the question of knowing who writes history. It is an established fact that the winner writes history, not the vanquished. Famous examples abound: When Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo, the English celebrated and wrote about it. In a similar vein, when Germany signed the Versailles Treaty in 1918 and when Japan capitulated in 1945, the Allied Powers (USA, England and France) took it upon them to give glowing accounts of the two major conflicts but did so from their own vantage point. Likewise, slavery accounts were so far, written by the master. Gerima, by making *Sankofa*, who wanted to give the account of the slave that is to write history from the vantage point of the enslaved, the dominated, the exploited and the downtrodden. On the aesthetical plane, in his review of Gwendolyn Audrey Foster's *Women Filmmakers of the African and Asian Diaspora*, Mark A. Reid (1998: 63) highlights the 'visual Afrocentric magical realism' of *Sankofa* as well as how Gerima influenced films such as Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*; according to Reid, *Amistad's* visual style, especially the trans-Atlantic trade scenes are heavily influenced by Gerima's film. The latter embarks upon the re-writing the history of Africans slaves in the New World and the descendants of those slaves. In doing so, Gerima cannot help it but to have an ideological bent because, as I remarked above, anyone who writes history consciously or unconsciously takes side. Haile Gerima, through *Sankofa*, has chosen his side and that of his people in the latter's attempt at recovering their memory and dignity, to reconcile with a painful past and most importantly, to have a better understanding of the past, in order to fully live the present and have enough confidence to project oneself in the future.

## Conflict of Interests

The author have not declared any conflict of interests.

## REFERENCES

- Adesanmi P (2004). "'Nous les colonisés' : Reflections on the Territorial Integrity of Oppression', *Social Text*. 78(22): 36-58.
- Bruner Edward M (1996). 'Tourism in Ghana: The Representation of Slavery and the Return of the Black Diaspora', *Am. Anthropol.* 98(2):290-304.
- Chabal P (2009). *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling*. London: Zed Books.
- Davis David B (1988). *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*. Ithaca, New York : Cornell University.
- Diop Cheikh A (1954). *Nations nègres et culture*. Paris: Présence africaine.

- Anne D (2008). "African American and Francophone Postcolonial Memory: Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Assia Djebar's *La femme sans sépulture*." *Research in African Project MUSE*. Web. 24 Mar. 2014. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>>. *Res. Afr. Lit.* 39(3):65-81.
- Gates Henry Jr. L (2010). 'Ending the Slavery Blame-Game', *The New York Times*, April 22.
- Gerima H, Woolford P (1994). 'Filming Slavery: A Conversation with Haile Gerima', *Transition* 64: 90-104.
- Harding F (2003). 'Africa and the moving image : television, film and video', *J. Afr. Cult. Stud.* 16(1):68-84.
- Higginson F (2005). 'The Well-Tempered Savage: Albert Schweitzer, Music, and Imperial Deafness', *Research in African Literatures* 36(4):205-222.
- Kandé S (1998). 'Look Homeward, Angel: Maroons and Mulattos in Haile Gerima's *Sankofa*', *Res. Afr. Lit.* 29(2):128-146.
- Mitchell A (2001). 'Not enough of the Past : Feminist Revisions of Slavery in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*', *Melus* 26(3): 51-75.
- Ndiaye P (2008). *La condition noire. Essai sur une minorité française*. Paris: Calmann-lévy. pp.218-219.
- Ndione A (2008). *MbèkèMi. A l'assaut des vagues de l'Atlantique*. Paris: Gallimard, Continents noirs.
- Pabst N (2003). 'Blackness/Mixedness: Contestations over crossing signs', *Cult. Crit.* 54:178-212.
- Pfaff F (2004). 'From Africa to the Americas: Interviews with Haile Gerima (1976-2001)', In: Pfaff F (ed.), *Focus on African Films, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press* pp. 203-220.
- Reid M (1998). 'Review' of Women Filmmakers of the African Diaspora: *Decolonizing the Gaze, Locating Subjectivity*', *Film Q.* 51(4):62-64.
- Rose T, Ross A (1995). 'Introduction' in Rose Tricia et al., eds. 'Race and Racism: A Symposium', *Social Text*: 42:1-52. <http://www.csun.edu/~snk1966/Race%20and%20Racism%20-%20A%20Symposium.pdf>
- Yervasi C (2008). 'Ouaga Saga, Magical Realism, and Postcolonial Politics', *Res. Afr. Lit.* 39(4): 40-57.