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Making Sense of Global Awareness on American College Campuses: Women’s History in the African Tradition

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I feel deeply honored and privileged to have been asked to deliver the Keynote Address for this 2019 College of Arts and Sciences Alumni Chair in Humanities Symposium—Global Voices on the University of Dayton Campus. I wish to thank Professor Julius Amin, the Alumni Chair in Humanities for inviting me, and Heidi Hass for making all the arrangements.

As I contemplate the challenge before me, I have decided to approach it from a very personal space: to speak to, with the aim of making sense of, my journey into awareness, African awareness—an awareness that materialized out of my desire to decolonize knowledge on, and about, Africa and African women; and how I have transmitted that awareness into my teaching about Global Africa on two American college campuses — the College of William and Mary and now Michigan State University. It is an awareness that developed and found expression at another American college campus: namely, the University of California Los Angeles, the
institution from which I earned my master’s and PhD degrees. Thus, I have necessarily tweaked the title of this presentation to make sense of my journey to that awareness. The slightly amended title now reads: “Making Sense of Global Awareness on American College Campuses: Women’s History in the African Tradition.”

The Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria have a fable that speaks to the importance of the journey. Akara-Ogun was a hunter who had to journey into the forest of a thousand spirits in search of a keg of knowledge. To get to the keg, Akara-Ogun had to overcome insurmountable obstacles. He wrestled with dangerous spirits, some with two heads and eight legs; others with eyes in the front and back of their heads; and still others with heads of burning bush. Each of these spirits had a test for Akara-Ogun. Failure was not an option. He used his power of oratory to convince the spirits with the burning bush; he used his prowess as a wrestler to overcome the spirits with two heads and eight legs; he used his singing and dancing to charm the spirits with eyes in the front and back of their heads. Akara-Ogun eventually reached his destination, only to discover that the keg of knowledge that he was in search of was a mirage; he discovered that the journey itself, his process of discovery was the real knowledge that he was after.

As an African-born women’s and gender historian, I too have come to the realization that the received knowledge about African women on American college campuses is little more than a mirage: like Akara-Ogun, my personal journey of uncovering and unearthing African women’s lives has been a trek through a forest of a thousand spirits, a trek that has propelled me to decolonize and counter the
narrative of received canon in my American college classroom. It is a journey that I share with you now.

In her essay “The African Woman Today,” Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo laments “the sorry pass the daughters of the African continent have come to.” Hear her words:

It might not be fair to blame as well-intentioned an event as Bob Geldof’s Band Aid, which was staged to raise awareness of the plight of drought victims in Ethiopia, and even raise funds for them, but there is no doubt that, ever since, the image of the African woman in the mind of the world has been set: she is breeding too many children she cannot take care of, and for whom she should not expect other people to pick up the tab. She is hungry, and so are her children. In fact, it has become a cliché of Western photojournalism that the African woman is old beyond her years; she is half-naked; her drooped and withered breasts
are well exposed; there are flies buzzing around the faces of her children; and she has a permanent begging bowl in her hand.

Yes, indeed the image of the African woman has been set. It is an image that I am confronted with each and every time I walk into my American African history classroom.

 Permit me then to spend a little time unpacking this western construction of African images—a construction that did not merely suddenly come into being, but one that has, like the handshake in that perceptive Igbo proverb that extends beyond the elbow, “resulted in something else.”

 As a history professor at Michigan State University, I have found it necessary to begin each new African history course with an assessment of my students’ knowledge about Africa. To this end, I have begun each semester by asking the following question: “tell me what comes to mind when you think about Africa.” And as many times as I have asked this question, the response is always the same: the class quiets down and students focus on anything in the classroom but me. This dodging of glances invariably continues until I assure them that my question comes without judgment; that all that I am after is an uncensored list of the images that come to mind when they think about Africa—in other words, everyone thinks something about Africa! I have found that no sooner do I elucidate my intentions, that answers start pouring out, sometimes faster than I am able to list them on my PowerPoint. I do not think that it is necessary to rehash the exact images my students have shared with me here, but suffice it to say that the vast majority of the images have in fact been negative. It is this exercise that has propelled me to create what I call my African Studies “STOP WORD LIST,” which is in essence a list of words or constructions that “STOP” meaningful and respectful engagement with Africa.

 In an important study, The Africa that Never Was: Four Centuries of British Writing on Africa, Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow tackle this issue of images. They conclude, in the last paragraph of their book, that “four centuries of British writing about
Africa has produced a literature which does not describe Africa, but in actuality describes British response to Africa.” The authors further contend that, and I quote again, “The image of Africa remains one of negative reflection, the shadow, of the British self-image.”

A similar argument could be made about the visual images that have emerged and are consumed about Africa on American college campuses. Before the era of the Atlantic slave trade, a trade that has been described as the “greatest forced migration in human history,” the relationship between the West and Africa was one of respect, a relationship that celebrated the racial differences between Africans and Europeans, while at the same time purporting them as equal: hence Basil Davidson’s contention that during this early period that there was a feeling in Europe that “Africans were different, yet equal.”

After all, it was during this period (specifically in 1325) that King Mansa Musa of Mali, after having returned from his famous pilgrimage to Mecca—a pilgrimage that had the effect of not only devaluing currency in Africa, but as far north as Europe!—put his kingdom on the international map. In this map a black man, quite obviously a king, was depicted sitting on a throne and surrounded by numerous weights of gold.

And let us not forget the memorable story of King Dom Afonso, who, before the Atlantic Slave Trade had virtually consumed and
depopulated his Kongo kingdom, had forged a friendship with the king of Portugal—a friendship in which the royal brothers of Portugal and Kongo were writing letters to each other that were couched in terms of complete equality of status. History informs us that emissaries went back and forth between them, thus establishing relationships between Mbansa and the Vatican. And so strong was this relationship that a son of the Mwene Kongo (ManiKongo) was actually appointed as a bishop of his country in Rome!

Even the sketchiest telling of this history reads like a fairy tale: not because it did not happen, but because we, on American college campuses, have become so accustomed and familiar with the Africa of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*—a tradition which invented an Africa where nothing good happens or has ever happened, an Africa that has not been discovered yet and is waiting for the first European visitor to explore it and explain it to itself.

And explore and explain it they did: the end-product of this “mapping,” as well as its “civilizing mission,” were images of Africa that Africans themselves found strange. Take, for instance, the eighteenth-century portrait of Francis Williams: an exceptional African who had graduated from Cambridge University, Francis Williams was a mathematician and would become a poet and founder of a school in Jamaica. The portrait of him by an anonymous artist showed him with a big, flat face lacking any distinctiveness, standing in a cluttered library on tiny legs, which looked like broomsticks. The portrait was clearly an exercise in mockery. Perhaps Francis Williams aroused resentment because of his accomplishments, because it was clear that the anonymous caricature was intended to put him in his place.

Or perhaps we should consider for a moment the plight of the poor Khoi Khoi woman, Sarah Baartman, a.k.a. The Hottentot Venus: who, a couple decades after Williams, was sold to a European visiting Cape Town in 1810, taken to Europe, and put on display in England and France as a freak show. She too would be subjected to portraits, which dehumanized her by depicting in the
most grotesque and exaggerated way her protruding backside. The spectacle of Baartman’s body continued even after her death at the age of 26. Pseudo-scientists interested in investigating “primitive sexuality” dissected and cast her genitals in wax.

Let us now fast forward to the early 1990s and my graduate student days at UCLA, where I too was bombarded by negative images of Africans—this time, in the form of the written text. It was these images, these skewed representations, and interpretations of Africa and its peoples that led me on my journey of helping to propel and shape global awareness about Africa on American college campuses; it was these same images that encouraged me to paint a counter-narrative of “another Africa” on American college campuses, and become the Africanist historian that I am today.

I especially remember being forced to engage with Margaret Kinsman’s *Journal of Southern African Studies* article “Beasts of Burden: The Subordination of Southern Tswana Women, ca. 1800–1840.” I have vivid memories of sitting in class and working to subdue my annoyance, while at the same time trying to figure out for myself who exactly these beasts of burden, these African women who were sold to the highest bidder for their productive and reproductive labor, were? Several years later, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch adopted the same disparaging clause (“beasts of burden”) to describe African women in her *African Women: A Modern History*, and to further denounced them as having “a negative image of themselves”—an image that was
the result of the society’s refusal to recognize them as individuals, an entire existence devoted to the domestic economy, and training from their earliest years in humility and acceptance as normal of an ideology that was entirely based on labor (13).

Again I ask, whose African women are these? Because Kisman’s and Coquery-Vidrovitch’s African women most certainly did not represent me, or any African women that I knew for that matter! However, to cast blame solely on these authors would be to miss the point, because these very imaginings of African women—as beasts of burden, legal minors, overtly sexual beings, and the numerous derivatives of the aforementioned constructions—are ubiquitous in the consciousness of American college students. Images such as the following [images projected on presentation screen are not available for reprint].

Are these images representative? Surely there was more, something missing.

Let’s, for a moment, turn to history to help solve this conundrum. African women have been known to occupy a variety of leadership roles in their societies. In ancient Egypt, Hatshepsut ruled as Pharaoh. Tiye and Nefertiti ruled as queens. The Lovedu rain-queens controlled the fertility of the crops. The “Amazons” of Dahomey served as a special corpus of trained palace guards and a specialized army for their kingdom.

In 1623 at the age of 41, Nzingha became the ruler of Ndo-ngo (Angola). Like Hatshepsut before her, she forbade her subjects from calling her queen. She instead insisted on being called king and marched into battle dressed like a man. She fought the Portuguese all her life, suffering severe setbacks. Even though Nzingha failed in her mission to expel the Portuguese, her historic importance transcends this failure, as she awakened and encouraged the first known stirring of nationalism in West Central Africa.

Other African queens were equally known for their warrior instincts, including the Luena queen, NyaKarolo of Angola, who
during her reign instituted a system of female chiefdoms in all the countries she conquered; and Queen Amina of Hausaland, a West African warrior woman who was said to have not only created the Great Hausa empire, but also led into battle a fierce army of horsemen. Indeed, so powerful is the memory of [Amina’s] exploits that songs of her deeds are still being sung today.

We cannot also forget Mbuya (grandmother) Nehanda, the female incarnation of the royal Shona mhondoro (lion spirit) Nyamhika Nehanda. Mbuya Nehanda II would emerge 500 years after her forebear’s death as that suitable medium to lead the first chimurenga (war of liberation) of 1896–97. She was captured in December 1897 and went to her death in defiance, denouncing the British. Her dying words, “My bones will rise again,” predicted the second chimurenga, which culminated in the independence of present-day Zimbabwe.

Around the same time, Yaa Asantewa, the Asantehemma or Queen Mother of Ejisu, Asanteland, would nurture the same smoking
flame. The year was 1899. The British had exiled Asantehene [King] Prempeh II two years earlier and, in an attempt to further humiliate them, had sent the British governor to Kumasi to demand the Golden Stool, a symbol of Asante unity. In the face of this insult, even the bravest male members of the nation were cowed. In her now famous challenge, Yaa Asantewa declared:

How can a proud and brave people like the Asante sit back and look while white men took away their king and chiefs and humiliate them with a demand for the Golden Stool. The Golden Stool only means money to the white man; they searched and dug everywhere for it. ... If you, the chiefs of Asante, are going to behave like cowards and not fight, you should exchange your loincloths for my undergarments.

That was the beginning of the Yaa Asantewa War, which would eventually lead to her capture and deportation to the Seychelles Islands, but would, like the fine example shown by her foremothers before her, revive the spirit of pride and resistance among Asante.

Having touched on African warrior women, let me now briefly say a word or two about other expressions of female power and authority in African societies. In some societies, a system of joint sovereignty existed whereby leadership responsibilities were shared between a king and a female counterpart. In these systems, women held power because of their relationship to the ruler in question, especially as mother, daughter, or sister. The mother of the Fon (male ruler) of the Kingdom of Kom (West Cameroon) advised him and watched over the children of the palace. In the Mossi Kingdom, the eldest daughter of the Mossi king dressed in the king’s attire and held royal power until the next ruler was installed.

Amongst the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, the Iyaoba (Queen Mother), the Olori (the head wife of the Oba [king]), and the Iyalode (ceremonial minister of social affairs) all held significant political power, exerting considerable influence over men’s offices while participating actively in policymaking and traditional government.
Some small-scale African societies had a dual-sex political system, in which each sex managed its own affairs. Amongst the non-centralized Igbo, a joint system of male and female government typically obtained. In this system of government, the umuada (daughters of the lineage) and inyomdi (wives of the lineage) emerged as supreme political bodies—with the otu umuada featuring as the supreme court of arbitration.

The question that now arises is, if all of the above is true about African women, where then does the ever-present image of the African woman as subservient—a beast of burden, legal minor, and oversexed—on American college campuses come from? I suggest, much like Hammond and Jablow before me, that the downtrodden, subordinate, and oversexed African woman is very much a figment
of Western imagination, a lark that allowed them to construct an African woman *that never was and never would be*. For were the truth be known, most of these early authors would have had little meaningful contact with African women, and hence little firsthand knowledge of them. However, this fact did not prevent them from crafting stories of her toils in numerous pieces of fiction and nonfiction—stories that have survived and thus shaped how African women are imagined and constructed in the present day on American college campuses. The following passage from Stuart Cloete’s 1955 best-selling travel log, *The African Giant: The Story of a Journey*, demonstrates this obsession:

One is suddenly aware of the immense sexuality of African [women]. Many of [them] were beautiful once you became used to African beauty. One could see why white men took them as house keepers. They were all women. They were, in a sense, without souls. … They were bold and without innocence. They said with their dark eyes: we are women. You are a man. We know what you want.

Listen now to a similar passage, this time from Joyce Cary’s famous novel *Mr. Johnson*:

The girls and women know that speech is none of their business. They will do what they are told. They fix their sleepy eyes on the speaker and allow their usual train of feelings to continue.

This assumption that the African woman is nothing but a drudge, completely subjugated if not actually enslaved, is reinforced by a superficial knowledge of the African cultural and social institutions of bride-price, polygamy, and, more recently, female circumcision (or as these Eurocentric gazers prefer to call it, “female genital mutilation”). Allow me a moment to address these misconceptions. First, African bride-price: The true significance of bride-price, bride-wealth, or bride-service is well described by Edwin W. Smith and
Andrew Dale in their ethnography on the Baila of Northern Zimbabwe. Their description could apply to almost any African group in which the custom obtains. Hear their words:

The goods given by or on behalf of the bridegroom to the … parents of the bride are called the chiko. … To us it may seem to be a matter of buying and selling, but the Baila would repudiate any such ideal. … The woman is not bought. Her husband does not acquire … propriety rights [over] her. … The chiko is more properly regarded as a compensation to the girl’s clan, a return to parents and guardians for the expense they have incurred in her rearing, the seal of that contract by which she is to become the mother of the man’s children, and a guarantee of good treatment.

In fact, among the Igbo of eastern Nigeria, bride-price simply guarantees the bridegroom rights over his soon-to-be-born children—so that those children can bear his name, and belong to his lineage, rather than their mother’s.

With regard to polygamy, I would like to say but three things. First, polygamy is not, and I repeat not, the most common form of marriage in Africa. In fact, only very few Africans are polygamous, because only very few Africans can afford to be polygamous. Second, there are many types of polygamy in Africa. In some African nations—particularly among the peoples of the plateau region of Nigeria as well as some small pockets of the Sudan, Benin Republic, Congo, Angola, Mozambique, Tanzania, and Kenya (Turkana and Maasai)—women marry many husbands in an institution known as polyandry. Also, African women have been known to marry other women! These relationships, which are not lesbian in nature, afford the African female husband, the opportunity to marry a wife, and in essence assume the gendered social role of husband and father. All children borne of unions such as these belong to the female husband and bear her name.
I have but a few words to say about female circumcision, genital mutilation, genital cutting, and all of its derivatives. Ever since Alice Walker dedicated her book *Possessing the Secret of Joy* “with tenderness and respect to the blameless [Africa] vulva,” and in the same breath strong-armed Africans into accepting “what [she], someone who loves [her] former home, [is] saying”—the discourse on female circumcision has been reframed and remapped along imperialist and colonial discourses. Western feminists have been given the license and authority to practice the very silencing and stigmatization of women that feminism challenges. And this silencing has been framed around debates over human rights. No one has thought to question the politics of one part of the world—the “first” world nonetheless, defining human rights for the rest of the so-called “third” or developing world. I suggest, much like Sondra Hale, American anthropologist of Sudan, that this feminist led insurgency against female circumcision in Africa, actually has more to do with the western feminists themselves and less to do with the African women they seem so impatient to save. It concerns an eagerness to erect the “we” versus “them” hierarchy that objectifies and inferiorizes African women. Hear her words:

We might also ask how and why so many westerners, especially (but not only) white feminists are becoming active in either scholarship or politics around this issue without knowing anything about the practices or without having had a single conversation with a circumcised woman! In this sense and in others, we seem to have engaged in a great deal of arrogant perception which really relates not so much to what we think of something, but what we do with that information, and especially, how we use our analyses to set ourselves apart.

It would appear that Eurocentrism and ethnocentrism in present-day scholarship has come full cycle, 40 years after Hammond and Jablow’s revelations of the “Africa that never was.” We must remember that this type of armchair activism is a form of invasion,
perceiving, as it does, the oppressed as helpless victims—proxies who are totally devoid of the agency required to change their oppressive reality.

We have thus far dedicated our time to considering episodes of female power in the human visible realm—that is, discussing African women leaders in their various societies; and confronting the misconceptions that STOP the conversation, which allows us to make sense of, and see, African women as they truly are. But by focusing exclusively on the human visible realm, we only paint one part of the African woman’s narrative. We leave untouched that which is by far the most superior expression of female power in Africa—the female principle in the spiritual, non-visible realm. Painting the total narrative—or, put different, viewing the masquerade dance from all perspectives—is where my own work on, and teaching about, African women and gender makes its most valuable contribution.

And what, you may ask, am I talking about? What is this spiritual realm? The answer is simple. The African world operates within a cyclical movement of time, i.e. a continuum. African peoples, therefore, identify two worlds: the human or physical/visible world; and the non-human or spiritual/invisible world. These worlds are not separate but rather like two half circles—or two halves of a kolanut—that, when connected, make up one continuous, complete, and whole African world.

Therefore, in politics, for instance, African peoples identify two distinct political systems: the human (which we have already talked about) and the spiritual. The spiritual political consistency is made up of spiritual divinities as well as male and female functionaries who derive their political power from an association with the spiritual world. A higher form of government, these medicines, goddesses, priestesses, and diviners figure as political heads in their communities: hence C. K. Meek’s assertion that gods and goddesses are the true rulers of African towns and human beings are there merely to interpret the will of the gods. The female masked spirits of West Africa, for instance, feature prominently as judicial courts and judges of moral conduct. One such masked spirit, Abere, operated as
an integral part of the legal system and actively functioned as an agent of social control. She had the power and authority to order humans without challenge and her decrees and punishments were uncontestable.

As far back as the 1800s, Nyamwezi women engendered an unusual degree of authority in ritual situations. In the kingdoms of Bunyoro and Buganda (modern Uganda) and Buha, Unyamwezi, and Usukuma (northwestern Tanzania), spirit societies were centered on groups of legendary heroes known as Cwezi or Imandwa. The Cwezi were the names of the early rulers of western Uganda. As the Cwezi kingdom declined, people began to honor the spirits of their former kings.

In these hierarchical societies, women’s positions depended on their status in the class system. Few upperclass women attained considerable wealth and authority. Spirit-mediumship societies thus provided women with the greatest avenues for active participation in politics and religious life.

Spirit mediums were separated from society by the special regalia they wore. They had a secret vocabulary and possession of esoteric knowledge. Most importantly, they possessed legal immunity. They were concerned, like their Igbo counterparts, mainly with female activities such as fertility and agriculture.

My talk thus far has attempted to paint a counter narrative to the received canon on African women’s pre-colonial political and religious roles on American college campuses. I unfortunately do not have time to speak about the disadvantaged political and religious position that most African women found themselves in during the colonial era. Yet, in many ways, my book *The Female King of Colonial Nigeria* does not rest satisfied with simple answers. It instead methodically complicates the received canon about African women’s disadvantaged position during the colonial period, by situating the life story of one woman who not only was *not* disadvantaged, but managed to rise to unforeseen heights as a result of her collaboration with the British colonialists.

Allow me now to end my narrative about making sense of Global Africa awareness on American college campuses by briefly
exploring African women’s presence in two important areas of endeavor today.

First, politics. The 1980s and 1990s ushered in an era of renewed political zeal amongst women across Africa. Women in as many as five African countries—Tanzania, Angola, Central African Republic, Guinea Bissau, and Nigeria—were placed on ballots to become presidential candidates. From 1994–2003, Uganda’s Dr. Wandira Kazibwe served as vice president. A year later in 2004, Mozambican Luisa Diogo became the first African woman head of government. She would serve as prime minister until January 2010. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf followed suit, becoming the first female president of Liberia in January 2006. Africa’s second female president, Joyce Hilda Banda of Malawi, was sworn in on April 7, 2012, following the sudden death of President Bingu wa Mutharika. Africa’s third female president is Ameenah Gurib: a biodiversity scientist by training, she served as the sixth president of Mauritius from 2015–2018.

African women also made gains in other arenas of national politics, with women averaging 23.7 percent of parliamentary seats in sub-Saharan Africa. Twenty-five African countries rank in the top 100 for women representation worldwide in their national legislatures or parliaments. With 61.3 percent of the parliamentary seats, Rwandan women rank number one in the world for female representation. South Africa ranks seventh in the world, with women holding 42.1 percent of its parliamentary seats. With between 41.8 and 31 percent representation, the following countries rank in the top 43 in the world: Senegal (41.8 percent), Namibia (41.3 percent), Mozambique (39.6 percent), Ethiopia (38.8 percent), Tanzania (37.2 percent), Burundi (36.4 percent), Uganda (34.3 percent), Zimbabwe (32.6 percent), Tunisia (31.3 percent), and Cameroon (31 percent). With between 30.5 and 20 percent representation, Angola and Sudan (30.5 percent), South Sudan (28.5 percent), Algeria (26.7 percent), Mauritania (25.2 percent), Somalia (24.2 percent), Lesotho (22.1 percent), Eritrea (22.0 percent), Guinea (21.9 percent), Kenya (21.8 percent), Seychelles (21.2 percent), Morocco (20.5 percent), and Equatorial Guinea (20.0 percent) all place in the top 99. In
comparison, the United States ranks 100th in women representation with 19.4 percent of total members.

How are African women faring in the economic realm of their societies today? According to a 2018 report of the MasterCard Index of Women’s Entrepreneurship (MIWE), Africa has the highest growth rate of women entrepreneurs. Moreover, African women entrepreneurs have fared better than their European counterparts. For example, in Switzerland one out of every four companies is owned by women; whereas in Ghana, women own one-half of the companies. In fact, Ghana has the highest percentage of women business owners worldwide. And Uganda comes in third overall.

So, who are some of these businesswomen? With an estimated net worth of $3.3 billion, Angolan investor and businesswoman Isabel dos Santos is Africa’s richest woman and one of the continent’s most powerful businesswomen. dos Santos accumulated her wealth in oil, diamonds, communications, and banking.

Nigeria’s Folorunso Alakija is Africa’s second-richest woman. She serves as vice chair of Famfa Oil, a Nigerian oil exploration company with an abundant offshore field. South African born Sibon-gile Sambo is the founder and managing director of SRS Aviation, the first black-female–owned aviation company in South Africa. Another South African business woman, Bridgette Ra-debe, is Africa’s first black-female mining entrepreneur and president of her country’s largest mining chamber, the South African Mining Development Association.
The fifty-one-year-old Kenyan Tabitha Karanja is founding CEO of Keroche Breweries, the only large-scale brewery in Kenya owned by a Kenyan. Last but not least, in 2004, Beth-le-men Tila-hun Alemu founded soleRebels: an eco-friendly footwear company, the company has grown to become one of the largest footwear companies in Africa, with flagship stores around the globe in countries like Taiwan, Spain, Switzerland, Austria, the United States, Singapore, and Japan. Forbes magazine named Alema to their Twenty Youngest Power Women in Africa list, as well as one of the World’s One Hundred Most Powerful Women.

My people, the Igbo, have a saying that a friend is like a water source for a long journey. I embarked on this journey of making sense of Global African womanhood on American college campuses amongst friends. So permit me, my friends, to leave you with another fable—this time from the Akan people of Ghana—which speaks to the importance of sharing of knowledge.

A long time ago, Anansi the spider had all the knowledge in the world stored in a huge pot. Nyame, the sky god, had given it to him and instructed him to share it with everyone. Every day, Anansi looked in the pot and learned different things. The pot was full of wonderful ideas and skills. Anansi greedily thought, “I will not share the treasure of knowledge with everyone. I will keep it all to myself.” So, Anansi decided to hide the knowledge on top of a tall tree. He took some vines, made a strong string, and tied it firmly around the pot. He then tied the other end around his waist so that the pot hung in front of him. He started to climb the tree. He struggled, because the pot of wisdom kept getting in his way. Anansi’s son watched in fascination as his father struggled up the tree. Finally, he called out to his father, “If you tie the pot to your back, it will be easier to cling to the tree and climb.” Anansi tied the pot to his back, and continued to climb the tree, this time with much more ease than before. When Anansi got to the top of the tree, he became angry. “A young one with some common sense knows more than I, who has the pot of knowledge!” In anger, Anansi threw down the pot. It broke, and pieces of knowledge flew in every direction. People found the bits scattered everywhere, and if they wanted to, they could take
some home to their families and friends. That is why, to this day, no one person has all the world’s knowledge. People everywhere share small pieces of it whenever they exchange ideas.

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