

## Macalester International

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Volume 4 *The Divided Self: Identity and Globalization*

Article 16

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Spring 5-31-1997

# Response to Comaroff

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### Recommended Citation

Rotimi, Ola (1997) "Response to Comaroff," *Macalester International*: Vol. 4, Article 16.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol4/iss1/16>

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# Response

Ola Rotimi

## I. Globalization and Doublespeak

Albeit erudite in its exegesis, Dr. Jean Comaroff's essay seems to accept the term *globalization* without question; its conception and usage seem axiomatic. I take it that globalization, as a concept, derives from the word *globalism*. Globalism in itself is defined as "the quality of being concerned with causes and effects of the whole world, not just single parts of it."<sup>1</sup>

To my mind, the pivotal word in this definition is "concerned." In this context, the connotation of the word is altruism, that impulse to be of service for the benefit of others. By inference, then, the term globalization need imply a concern for *benefits distributable* over a *global spread*. My response to the discourse on hand will prove that, at present, "globalization" is a mere projection of a humanist desire — it is simply, to borrow from Shakespeare, "a consummation/Devoutly to be wished."<sup>2</sup> In reality, the term, with its putative seepage of wholesome values throughout our universe, is a misnomer of disingenuous coinage and delusive purpose.

Our African elders say that a man once bitten by a snake springs back, wary at the curl of a mere rope in the grass. Could it be that for some communities the term *globalization* recalls memories of colonization? This is the prime inquiry of my essay, which will reflect the perspective of those communities. I am referring here to those nation-states variously referred to as the Third World, the Developing World, or simply "the South": Nigeria, Algeria, Guiana, Ghana, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Ethiopia, India, Burma, Mali, Uruguay, Haiti, Indonesia, Venezuela, Kenya, Jamaica, Togo... the list seems endless. These are countries afflicted with strikingly similar developmental maladies, of which the following stand out: high blood pressure in illiteracy; acute diarrhea in population growth; psychotic tendencies in human rights violations; technological epilepsy; industrial anemia; high mortality syndrome; a recurrent state of political convulsion; malignant tumors of ethnocentrism and

corruption aggravated by nepotism; and, finally, the “mother” of all maladies, an Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome in economic growth.<sup>3</sup>

The causes of these maladies are, of course, traceable as much to internal as to external factors. I shall address the internal factors later in contemplating the impact of what is conceived as globalization on the verities of the self, identity, and ethnicity. For the present, I will examine the external factors that impair the health of Third World nations and show how the virulence of those factors has been further exacerbated by the ways in which globalization is being purveyed today.

It is a truism that transnational corporations, not governments, now rule our world. This is a phenomenon assiduously documented by David C. Korten in his recent publication *When Corporations Rule the World*.<sup>4</sup> Korten is right in inferring that the economic policies of governments have become, by and large, subservient to the business sector. Indeed, “[a]s flies to wanton boys” are politicians now to corporate gods.<sup>5</sup> The relevance of this analogy to the Third World can be explained with a little background. Even after colonialism, the governing elite of many Third World countries continued the economic relationships between their nations and foreign corporations. What was disturbing, however, was that the collaboration degenerated into a collusion whereby the natural resources of those nations were routinely exploited to the huge commercial advantage of the corporations with scant attention given to strengthening the domestic economy by developing its own products.

The cumulative consequence of this dereliction was the foisting of economic problems upon the lands and their peoples. Predictably, the problems took root from debts in trade relations. Against this backdrop, it is noteworthy that from about 1980, two world economic institutions (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, or IMF) liberalized their criteria for membership. The original mandate of these world monetary bodies was to reconcile the financial anomalies among member-nations. By 1982, more than 140 nations had rushed to become members, a good many of them in the Third World and, by this time, fiscally distressed. Membership seemed to promise solutions to Third World debts in trade with the industrialized nations. As a measure to this end, the IMF proffered loans to the

debtor countries through a program touted to help restructure their economic systems. Labeled "Structural Adjustment Programmes," the ultimate goal was to align the local economic policies to the priorities of a new global economic order styled the "Free Market." Parenthetically, the new order idealizes *exportation* on a competitive basis. And so, menaced by the possibility of being ostracized from the global market—an economically suicidal option—the debtor countries conceded to the offer of loans from the IMF in hopes of relieving their debt burden through revenue from expanded commerce. So far, perhaps, so good. However, with the loans came a daunting package of conditions. And with these began the social and economic pestilence that has harried those lands and their peoples with no relief in sight. At the human, visceral level, an all-consuming export drive in lands still dominated by subsistence farming inevitably caused local food scarcities, largely unaffordable prices, starvation, malnutrition, and premature deaths. At the level of national polity, the pacts with the IMF soon exposed the futility of repaying the loans as Third World countries found themselves unable to compete with rivals from Europe, America, and Asia, agog in a "free market" where technology and robust capital dictate the terms. A salient sequel to this mercantile handicap of the Third World countries was a deepening indebtedness to their trading counterparts, whose penchant for profit repatriation only worsened the countries' glide into deeper trade deficit. For instance, within the twelve years of the IMF's intervention in the economic circumstance of Third World countries (1980-92), their debt burden burgeoned from \$134 billion to \$473 billion, with the interest bounding from \$6.4 billion to \$18.3 billion. To service these debts, governments of those countries took austere measures to conserve funds, the consequence of which has continued to inflict enormous hardships on ordinary people. The situation confirms the assertion by Dr. Comaroff, in citing Ross, that "forces of global capital . . . now determine state policy."<sup>6</sup> For example, the pact between the economically distressed Third World countries and the IMF invested, in the latter, the power to determine the value of the local currency—most of the time demanding its devaluation. While this may be an inducement to importation, it certainly is a risk to an export-oriented economy. This overriding power is

exerted by the IMF just as imperiously on the internal policy of a debtor country. One instance, which usurped a function of the local legislature, is the directive on restraint in subsidy to social services, which include education. The rationale for this is that the savings from such stringency could be used to repay debts.

Perhaps America, the de facto leader of present-day world civilization and a nation that flaunts a literacy rate of 97 percent, could accommodate a political agenda that advocates a \$10-billion cut in financial aid to students. Perhaps at this stage of its development, too, America could afford to do without governmental input into the National Endowment for the Arts. Perhaps, perhaps. But such policies cannot be justified in the Third World, which has a dominant subclass of illiterates and is heir to an artistic heritage not long liberated from colonial repression and now endangered in a whirl of electronically powered foreign cultures. Put bluntly, to implement such measures would easily expose the country's human and material resources to internal and external forces of abuse. By marginalizing education, governments are engaging in *obscurantism* — a policy of withholding knowledge and restricting the flow of ideas. In essence, this amounts to a preference for benighted minds docile to ill-use. An ideal of the Dark Ages, this now is the policy being recommended by the IMF and the World Bank for adoption by Third World enclaves as economic gospel!

In turn, this development has pitted the governments of those Third World nations — which are bent on meeting the terms of their loans — against the countries' educators and students — who are determined to resist the cutbacks. The governments counter that resistance by containing the establishment of more schools, paying teachers irregularly, and cutting funds for the purchase of books and equipment. In the face of all this, when the academic staff unions, backed by the more feisty student organizations, protest, the governments react with immediate closure of the universities. Sometimes this is done with a touch of high drama, spotlighting armed security agents, suitably dour of visage, in a siege at the gates of the campuses. Because of these shutdowns, it is not unusual nowadays for a student to spend upward of six years hobbling through a degree program originally meant to take just four!

While the world finance institutions prevail upon developing nations to reduce investment in the education of their peoples, these very organizations encourage those governments to increase spending in the capital sector. Since this is the sector that caters to machinery and allied manufacture—of which military armaments are a substantial component—it is obvious that the financial beneficiaries of these transactions are the industrialized nations. It then follows that while the advanced superpowers gain an *abundance of cash*, the developing countries gain a *superabundance of arms*. By this, the developed nations succeed in enlisting the Third World in the “globalization” of civil wars. Statistics show that between 1989 and 1992, 79 of the 82 wars that were fought involved kindred killing kindred, mostly in the developing world.

Still another prescription of the IMF and World Bank, again for purposes of conserving funds for debt servicing, is the downsizing of the labor force under the employ of government. What such thinking seems to have discountenanced is the peculiar sociology of most, if not all, Third World countries. To start with, the banking policy on loans to individuals in those countries is willfully frustrating. Furthermore, the indigenes hardly possess the acumen or the resources needed to hold their own against multinational and transnational forces, even within the home market. For these basic reasons, most citizens seek out safer niches in government employment. Even so, statistics show that, on average, industrialized nations allocate some 16 percent of their Gross Domestic Product to sustaining government employees, compared to 2.4 percent for Third World governments. Yet, the world financial institutions still demand that Third World nations downsize their governments’ labor force. Needless to say, doing so in countries with no unemployment relief causes mass destitution, dislocation of family bonds, and a strain on the moral values of a people.

Yet another economic policy that is being globalized under the mandate of the IMF and World Bank is *privatization*. The idea is for a debtor country in the Third World to literally auction off the nation’s means of production to private entrepreneurs, thereby limiting the scope of the government’s fiscal obligations. A wise policy, perhaps, since government’s sense of business is habitually long on bureaucracy and short on finan-

cial acumen. But what does “privatization” do to the peoples of the Third World? Since the vast majority of citizens are illiterate, unskilled, and poor, the institutions put up for sale invariably settle in the hands of a privileged few who turn out to be in partnership with multinational and transnational interests. The scene is thus set for the recruitment of desperately jobless citizens to yet another offshoot of the free market: the sweatshop.

### **A. The Sweatshop Syndrome**

It is curious that the obsession of modern corporations with low labor costs and high profits has fostered the growth of sweatshops in Third World countries with much abandon. This seems to hold even in countries with strong labor laws like the United States. A classic case in point is Kathie Lee Gifford’s one-time clothing line for Wal-Mart.

As African elders say, “If fire can consume the tortoise—he with the iron coat—what won’t fire do to the hen—she with the feathered gown?” If the sweatshop syndrome can affect even the “U.S. of A.” (a swagger-nickname for America in some parts of the Third World), how could its presence in a Third World country be expected to be less brazen? The case of Honduras readily comes to mind. There it seems routine for multinational clothing manufacturers to hand out sachets of contraceptive pills to the young girls in their employ, or casually inject them with drugs to flush out signs of inchoate motherhood. The tempo of the modern production line has a short temper for human embryology!

### **B. Ecology**

What else is being globalized? Environmental degradation. Without question, the Third World benefits from the globalization of consumer products. However, when its ecology is consigned to the extractive machinery of multinationalism, or is conceived as a handy dump for toxic waste, the ring of “global benefit” begins to sound perverse. Basically, what is being spread about here—or, rather, globalized—to the regions of the Third World is carcinogenic diseases, in the same way that tuberculosis, smallpox, and syphilis were spread through these

same parts of the world during the Age of Navigation under European Imperialism.

What else has been globalized throughout the ecosystem of Third World countries? Land mines. It is intriguing that inasmuch as these purveyors of instant death and mayhem are virtually nonexistent on the landscape of the countries that produce them, they are full-primed and ubiquitous in a number of Third World enclaves. Land mines marketed liberally from the robust arsenals of technologically advanced nations to help globalize personifications of brute disfigurements.

### **C. The Communications Media**

Even in the communications sphere, the benefits of globalization remain ambiguous — at least from the perspective of Third World peoples. While the “Information Superhighway” may have coalesced far-flung regions into the proverbial global village, the offerings of globalization, even in this context, are decidedly compromised. The communication media’s reference to “globalization” would sound less impersonal if it were a sustained effort among them to raise the world’s consciousness of rulers who deny their subjects’ right to the rudiments of food, shelter, social equity, and peace. And the entertainment media, when complaining about the degeneration of culture and morality in our Age, must also remember their own obsession with profit maximization that extols gratuitous sex and violence on television and movie screens for global consumption.

## **II. The Divided Self, Ethnicity, and Globalization**

As I have said, this examination is from the perspective of a scion of the Third World. In those regions of the world, the sequence of self, ethnicity, and nationalism can be said to be normal stages in a people’s demotic ontology. Simply put, the advance from the basic self to an identity with ethnicity, and then to heights of nationalism, by which we imply the positive sense of “love of and pride in one’s country,” is a logical progression, under congenial circumstances. A corollary of this thesis is that a people’s sense of national “being” develops only after an affirmation of their ethnic “being.” This is the opposite



of the case in most industrially advanced countries, where the dynamics of ethnicity have either diminished over time or are, providentially, nonexistent. Even so, as Dr. Comaroff explains, certain alliances have arisen in those societies to substitute for the ethnic lineages common in the Third World.

Be that as it may, it is noteworthy that a major problem confronting the Third World is getting the citizenry to adopt a positive nationalism with overtones of patriotism. We need to examine the context of this problem.

In an earlier part of this essay I blamed external forces for the propagation of economic malaise in Third World countries. In examining the impediments to the ideal of nationalism in Third World countries, we can identify two factors that are *endemic* to those nations. Unlike the *external* factors that subvert *economic* and *social* advance, these *internal* factors reveal tragedies of a *political* strain. The first of these factors is inequity. This is most pronounced in nations of diverse ethnicities, where it is increasingly being entrenched as an ethos of governance. Here, inequity reveals itself strongly in a certain arrogance. It is the arrogance of one ethnic group within a nation-state believing it is destined to rule all the others in perpetuity. This is the bane of Third World polity—particularly of a classic nation-state whose evolution bespeaks a collage of diverse ethnicities tacked in place at the whim of European colonialists.

Current events in these nation-states only validate a definition I once gave of colonialism: “the idiocy of bringing together those whom God had put asunder in the first place!” By contrast, I have defined ethnicity as “that sense of security you feel when someone relates to you in a language you understand in a situation you don’t understand!”

We needn’t cite events in the Sudan, Somalia, Liberia, Rwanda, Burundi, and, above all, Nigeria to appreciate why victimized ethnic groups in most Third World nation-states recoil into atavistic shells of ethnicity for succor and counteraction. In most Third World countries, ethnicity is a vital, protective expedient. This, however, is not to imply that a recourse to atavistic group identity is salutary politics, especially if it is inimical to national oneness and, by extension, renders the ideal of “pride in one’s country” illusory and otiose. Having said that, however, it is also to be expected that an individual’s allegiance to a

nation follow where that individual's civic rights and privileges are not transgressed by the ethnic bigotry of those in power. The subject of this Roundtable discussion highlights a problem that has surfaced in the Third World since political independence. This is the volatility of one's sense of patriotism. The problem arises from a divided *self*, causing a dilemma of conscience. The dilemma, in turn, is further complicated by a *disenchantment arising from the prevailing style of rulership* in the country of one's origin.

This brings us to the second *internal* factor that inhibits the advance of most Third World countries. There is an African proverb that illustrates my point. "The lizard," African elders say, "the lizard, too, loves to sit on its haunches, relaxed, like the frog. But the lizard has a problem — its tail!" Third World nations, too, have an obstructive tail—their leadership, whether democratic or stratocratic. Nurtured on greed, most rulers are unwilling to stimulate conditions for the pursuit of productive concerns—indeed, that burdensome *tail!*

The pertinent question here is this: How do Third World countries resolve the problem of leadership? In my view, a resolution of it would (for reasons that will be self-evident in my ensuing argument), depend on the *understanding* and *will* of the international community at large. I refer here particularly to nation-states and institutions keen on fostering globalization of the positive kind, as opposed to *Colonization of the Third Kind*. To explain this allusion quickly, colonization of the "First Kind" equates to the era of imperialist domination. The "Second Kind" refers to that era of independence when corporate vestiges of imperial rule shared economic hegemony with the local rulership to introduce *neocolonialism*. The "Third Kind" is currently being instanced by the roles of the IMF, the World Bank, the multinationals, and the local political moguls.

From history, it is clear that all three eras of political and economic abuse of Third World nations share one tactic. It is the fomenting of hate and distrust among ordinary peoples by the domestic rulership in order to keep the people distracted while their exploitation goes on. It can't be denied that in most cases, the civil tensions that climax in mutual massacres in the Third World have roots in the monetary ambitions of some leaders of

the ethnic factions. The solution that I intend to proffer to this problem derives from this premise.

I recommend that, pending a probe, the personal bank accounts of certain current and former heads of state in those developing countries be frozen. These are, invariably, deposits hidden in distant banks of advanced countries. A worthy humanitarian cause could begin with the forfeiture of any unexplainably vast deposits traceable to those rulers and the repatriation of them to the lands and peoples from whom they were plundered.

It is encouraging that the principle of this reasoning is not totally lost on world conscience. An instance of this awareness was the fortitude, not too long ago, of the United States. Single-handedly, the United States retrieved much of the fortune squirreled away by the Marcos family over their twenty-year rule in the Philippines. Then, with befitting altruism, the United States again transferred the massive loot back to that country. How one had also wished that the United States had displayed a similar "red badge of courage" in the case of Cedras, et al. versus the long pauperized peoples of Haiti as well! Yet another pertinent precedent is the example of the State of Israel, whose moral and legal pressure now compels the Swiss banks to release the assets they had stashed away all these decades from Holocaust victims to the rightful owners or their descendants.

To be expected, of course, are advocates with misplaced sympathies who would question the right of any nation or world institution to tamper with the private affairs of a country's ruler. In response to which, world conscience should pose a counter-question: Which, in humanist terms, is more worthy of protection: the private right of a self-seeking individual, or a people's collective right to a fair share of the earnings of their homeland? To stretch the counter-question to its bottom line, *Isn't a ruler's deprivation of his people's means of obtaining better health, food, and shelter a crime against humanity?* To this moral challenge, the least response to be expected of the United Nations is the formulation of a framework for international cooperation in locating the foreign fortunes of those privileged croppers of human misery and death. It is not sufficient to airfreight food and medicine along with peacekeeping armies to survivors of indiscriminate civil

massacres. A more enduring humanitarian act must also exert deterrents to the motivations that invoke internecine carnage.

In sum, it is about time that world bodies, spearheaded by the United Nations and the International Court of Justice, fathomed the ethics whereby kleptocrats (crudely put, stealers of public assets while serving as heads of state) would stand trial on what is intrinsically a crime against humanity. At least four kinds of benefit would result from such reprisal. First, measures against kleptocracy are certain to be of far more lasting value than those skewed international loan schemes that tend to leave the peoples irredeemably mired in misery. Second, punishment of the kind suggested above would deter premeditated abuse of office. The third benefit is the fiscal resources that would henceforth be spared to ameliorate the living conditions in the Third World. Last but far from least is the benefit which our universe at large stands to gain from a reduction of the inexcusable gap between the rich and poor nations. A world in which the poorest countries outnumber the wealthiest by a ratio of 150 to 1 hardly augurs well for peace and human coexistence.<sup>8</sup>

But then, some may ask, why focus on kleptocracy only in the Third World? What about kleptocracy in the advanced countries? Admittedly, the incidence of kleptocracy may be commonplace. However, the issue here is that of degree, the level of audacity in its practice. This is where the Third World seems to loom in the extreme. A salient reason for this, perhaps, is that the systems of checks and balances in the governments of Third World countries are either effete or wholly dysfunctional. This condition is the consequence of either a general climate of official corruption or a climate of direct meddling from an incumbent rulership. More precisely, it is the inevitability of both climates meshing together to create the miasma in which the creed of public accountability remains devalued. Naturally, succeeding rulerships in the Third World have found this condition suitably empowering and so have helped it to persist with the tenacity of a curse! Given this fact, an effective counteraction would be the liquidation of the gains from malfeasance. Only then could the instruments of checks and balances begin to change the attitude of these governments.

### III. Final Remarks

In my opinion, the debate over the “divided self” is merely rhetorical — a sophism proffered to problematize, for the delights in academic jaw-jawing, what really does not exist outside the purview of psychiatry! The Self is innately resilient and, one should also think, possessive of a free will by which it can determine its own reaction to situations, thereby striving to sustain its whole. What, in one’s view, is not only *divided* but also craves urgent reexamination is the *condition* of our universe. In specific terms, it is the problem of economic inequity that is steadily splitting its inhabitants. Dr. Comaroff’s essay never loses sight of this crisis either. It identifies the “underlying structures of inequality and exploitation that are . . . global in scale.”<sup>9</sup> For this condition, much thanks goes to the impetus of multinationals and the world monetary institutions! A further illustration of this point is the fact that by 1950 (about when the IMF and World Bank were committed to the “globalization” of development in the world), the ratio of wealthiest to poorest countries was in the region of 30:1. With the institutions’ exertions gaining momentum, the ratio became 60:1 by 1989. Three years later, it chalked up 150:1 and is still widening. As inferred in an earlier analysis, also not to be taken lightly, is the role of kleptocracy in the deepening of poverty among Third World peoples. The caveat from all this is that positive *globalization* must restrain the corporate and systemic excesses aggravating that divide. It is when we start addressing such human predicaments as these that formulations like “globalization” would begin to gain credit from the insights of all quarters of our world.

I conclude here with a lesson on insight learned from that madman in Acts of the Apostles. Seven brothers break into the abode of the madman, insistent on curing him. Madman eyeballs the charlatans, then queries: “Jesus, I know; and Paul, I know. But who are ye?”<sup>10</sup>

So it is. Cultural exchange to foster understanding among the diverse peoples of our world, I know; sustaining the integrity of the world’s ecosystems, I support; economic and technological expansionism *with a human face*, I respect. But that movement

being labeled smugly as “globalization,” with its lopsided goodwill to men? Well...

Our African elders say, “When a handshake of goodwill slides past the region of the elbow, take note — a grapple is in sight!” A pressing problem for humankind today is how to obviate the grapple in a grimly divided economic world where, as Longfellow lamented, “Hate is strong, / And mocks the song of / ‘Peace on earth, goodwill to men.’”<sup>11</sup>

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## Notes

1. *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Harlow, Essex, England: Longman Group U.K., Ltd., 1992).
2. *Hamlet*, act 3, scene one, line 63.
3. Ola Rotimi, *African Dramatic Literature: To Be or To Become?* University of Port Harcourt Inaugural Lectures Series, No. 11 (Port Harcourt, Nigeria: University of Port Harcourt Press, 1991).
4. David C. Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World* (West Hartford, Conn.: Kumarian Press, 1995). See also David C. Korten, *Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda* (West Hartford, Conn.: Kumarian Press, 1990); Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1981); and Chinweizu, *The West and the Rest of Us: White Predators, Black Slavers, and the African Elite* (New York: Random House, 1975).
5. *King Lear*, act 4, scene one, line 38.
6. Jean Comaroff, “The Portrait of an Unknown South African: Identity in a Global Age” in *Macalester International* 4 (Spring 1997), 126.
7. Ola Rotimi, “Wastebasket of Upended Definitions,” unpublished manuscript.
8. Much of the statistics used in this paper are culled from David C. Korten’s *When Corporations Rule the World*.
9. Comaroff, “The Portrait of an Unknown South African,” 127.
10. Acts 19:13–16.
11. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “Christmas Bells,” in *The Poetical Works of Longfellow*, ed. H. Frowde (London: Oxford University Press, 1904 [reprinted various times through 1968]), 534, sixth stanza.