

**When and How Does Hope Spring Eternal in Personal and Popular Economics?
Thoughts from West Africa to America.**

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The Mystery of “Resilience” in West Africa

The sense of a persistent economic crisis in Africa gathered momentum in the late 1970s, after ten-to-fifteen turbulent years of Independence and five year development plans. It was around this time that the term “resilience” began to appear in the contentious literature on peasantries. The economic history literature started to discuss “external shocks” in the “open economy” (e.g. Hopkins 1973); Chayanovian (1966) theory offered a way to understand a household dynamic of shifting rates and processes of “self-exploitation”; and an extension of the Geertz/Goldenweiser notion of “involution” (Geertz 1963) – the capacity of a basic pattern to absorb more and more complexities and embellishments - met with Keith Hart’s (1973) concept of expanding “informal sector” employment. Scholars were groping for systematic ways of understanding how “life went on”, but not as “tradition”. Indeed, it was often those who seemed *least* traditional in the anthropological sense of that time (keeping their ancestral ways of life) who were *most* buoyantly surfing the storms of change in their own ways, quite differently from the formal sector that was – conceptually at least – equated with “modernity”. This was all a little earlier than the emergence of artisanal diamond mining and extra-legal trading networks, advance fee fraud, new witchcraft practices and many other phenomena that permanently obliterated the binary conceptual opposition between “tradition” and “modernity” (see Geschiere 1997). On the eve of these shifts, it seemed that if the classic dynamic concepts of that time – resilience, informal economy, household cycles – could be just qualified by allusion to the highly differential “ownership of the means of production” in the global economy, to offer a certain generalizable metaphor for the perception that things were not “the same” but neither did they utterly fall apart for

populations in Nigeria and Ghana (for example), even under increasingly adverse conditions.

In the event of the post-1989 world, this theoretical patchwork was not only unconvincing but increasingly strained by experience. Some developments went much worse than anticipated, as post-Cold War conflicts broke out. And others went surprisingly better. My own benchmark was “feeding cities”: in Nigeria in the 1980s and 1990s cities of five or more million people were fed from functioning markets even when there were petrol shortages and when vehicle repairs were made by applying improvisation to cannibalized spare parts; when money had been taken out of circulation by “mopping up” campaigns by a politicized Central Bank; and when urban water and electricity (essential for all food processing) were supplied only very intermittently. Yes, there were sparks of intense violence that made it seem as if law and order were pervasively unraveling; yes, people looked to other-worldly satisfactions in ever more imaginative religious movements; yes, the get-rich-quick schemes were stunning in their boldness; and yes, the national military leadership penetrated deeply into society with their intricate politics of personal clientage, “settlement” tactics and selective assassination. And yet, and partly through new loopholes that crisis itself opened up, people also kept ancient vehicles going on deeply rutted roads, figured out systems for getting their merchandise around the increasing number of police check points, innovated in cassava processing, created new credit instruments, and founded an entire new indigenous-language entertainment industry, the video boom in “Nollywood” (see articles in Guyer, Denzer and Agbaje 2002). In the 21st century. Lagos has the largest electronics market in West Africa, most of it in the informal sector (Koolhaas 2000).

Such a daily devotion to “life goes on” should not be reified as a cultural attribute, but neither should diffidence or skepticism cancel out the repeated perceptions and even survey findings of a certain positive orientation to the near future. Africa hardly ever experiences Gallup polls. The one major exception is the inclusion of Africans in the survey of 50,000 respondents from all over the world who are asked questions such as whether next year will be better than this year. The result? That in spite of all the well-known troubles “Africans are the most optimistic people” and “Africa has topped that scale for years” (Polgreen 2006:4). Nigerian political scientist Kayode Fayemi

commented in terms I will return to: “If I put on my academic hat, I would have nothing to tell you to explain this ... The only thing keeping people going is hope and optimism about the future that is unknown...I think that is the only way to explain optimism, because you can’t base it on any analysis of our current condition.” And again “At the heart of this seeming contradiction is a paradox – a surfeit of misery met not with stoicism but with unshakeable faith in an unknown future” (Polgreen 2006:4).

The current American view of Africa has shifted 180 degrees from this resilience, to see chaos rampant. Africans dispute it. On March 29th 2006, the organization Friends of Nigeria answered a negative editorial by taking out a full-page advertisement in the New York Times under the heading NIGERIA: Things are NOT Falling Apart (pA5): “Nigerians have taken a leap of faith with the President and are working hard to make Nigeria great again”. However transparent the self-interest on both sides of the image-making battle, the terms of the engagement are oriented towards a markedly open vista on the future. If we are to look at, and try to understand, “hope” “it”self, as well as using hope as a method, we cannot afford to dismiss what people say of themselves year after year. I am not trying to restore “resilience”, and above not being blinkered to the dangers of creating a highly questionable “object” of study. Rather I am holding open the analytical space to explore how specific processes move forward through time, and how many such specificities might be “aggregated” into broader shared orientations to the world and the future.

Working with a concept such as hope, which has so many and such powerful referents, one has to be very wary of methodological travesties in analysis. How does the case, the statistic, the flashpoint of violence, or the good deed or prayer (for the faithful) “add up” to *anything* more encompassing, let alone a phenomenon as difficult to define as hope? In my book *Marginal Gains* (Guyer 2004), I explored the idea that, as long as one’s logic of extrapolation was transparent enough to be contested, one could infer enduring patterns with arguably formal characteristics from the recurrence in many varied contexts and with varied content of certain conceptualizations and enactments. For the purpose of pattern recognition with respect to transactions, I treated time as if it were the same kind of neutral matrix or medium as space and social structures. But of course it is not. So this conference and Miyazaki’s (2004) book demand that I take a different

standpoint, albeit with a similar logic of argument, to foreground certain recurrent characteristics to people's orientation to time. This at least gets closer to one of the key qualities of "resilience", namely the internal form given to the passage of time. Only after building the case in all its specificity, may one project these properties onto the big screen: of the future, of collective life, of the social imagination and of disciplinary interpretation.

On the face of it, nowhere would seem to deserve a "method of hope" more than Africa. And perhaps nowhere is there such fertile and varied material to work with, that might in turn modify the method. The empirical material for this paper is not original to me and was not collected with hope in mind. So my contribution is to think about how the place and the method might speak to each other, for better understanding of both. So I need first to review what I take from Miyazaki's argument about what a "method of hope" would be. He insists on a temporal understanding of ritual that replicates the actors' sense of living through it rather than the analyst's sense of observing given stages. The three-step process of ritual is not the structuralist separation-liminality-reintegration of Van Gennep (1913/1960) and (the early) Victor Turner (1974), but the action-abeyance-resolution of experience. The concept of a moment of abeyance is the most innovative of his reconfigurations of the structuralist model. Abeyance is not necessarily experienced as transitional or liminal. In a state and duration of abeyance the actors express the most profound of their senses of the meaning of the entire performance, that is, their anticipation that there is a beneficent agency in the world that lies beyond and between the parties to the ritual and which inhabits the moments of their interaction. Any specific resolution is left to that agency to create and to the participants to recognize. That attitude of anticipation is based on experience of past anticipations and resolutions, hence on a kind of extrapolation at the heart of repetition and not at its endpoint: not the same each time, but perceived as having some similar properties and evoking the same tropic orientation of imagination and emotion. What is lifted off here is any sense that the resolution itself is reconstitutive. It could be strikingly innovative. Miyazaki is focusing our attention on the temporality, the cognitive attributes and the affect of anticipation.

The idea of a temporal space, where a certain creative intervention is made, resonates well with both the idea of resilience ("coming back repetitively");

“rebounding”) and with several ethnographic sources on West Africa. It is worth reviewing the concepts that these works have used, in order to pinpoint exactly where “the method of hope” would add to our acuity on what is clearly both a crucial process and a difficult conceptual challenge. Two sources of critical skepticism demand attention first. One is the theory of agency that anticipation seems to comprise. One must ask how widely one can cast the net: including the agency of aggregates, contingent events, things (as in actor network theory), or the divine or diabolic interventions to which actors themselves would channel all responsibility. The other is the theoretical basis for aggregation of hopeful processes, either as seen from a central position within them or from another angle. If an argument is to be made about processes of reproduction and even growth on the basis of “resilient” social dynamics, then it will have to be not only theoretically elegant and empirically supported, but – in our own case in African Studies – it will have to stand up to the counter-argument that all this is actually just another way of falling apart: just imperceptibly slowly instead of catastrophically. Although micro-attention to the anticipation in instances of hope would seem to negate any attempt to project trends or scenarios that might result from aggregated resolutions, people themselves are rarely without some kind of larger vista on the future. Indeed, religious people often have a detailed temporal map of where things are supposed to go, from which they “diagnose” a specific situation in the present that calls forth their attention to hopefulness. So “trends” cannot be occluded altogether.

Spaces and Creativity in West African Scholarship

For some time there has been a series of scholarly interventions on West African sciences of life that sees certain gaps and spaces, and recurrent techniques for their recognition and inhabitation, as somehow at the heart of things. We circle around them: the homing instinct for loopholes in the law; the capacity to proliferate names of things rather than assimilate novelties to old categories; tropic numbers that do not necessarily reduce to an absolute objective scale, and therefore make every numbering event into a performance; in brief, a definite and pervasive play in the parameters of life and thought, and an acuity for creating and moving into escape hatches. Apter (1992) and Matory (1994) both argue, on empirical grounds, that Yoruba religious thinking places absence rather than presence at the core. Matory argues from the study of possession: “The ritual

juxtaposition of the head with vessels full of the god's divine emblems demonstrates, for public view, (that)...heads are containers that potentially host a variety of beings...(1994: 135). The person is a container for active principles to inhabit; powerful secret discourses emanate from a space, not (or not only) from a structure or a foundation in a body of established knowledge. Apter argues that the "deeper" one goes into "deep Yoruba" the closer one comes to an inchoate potential rather than an identifiable core element or proposition.

The practice that most mundanely fills these spaces is divination. Not everyone undergoes possession, but in very many West African contexts every person's life should be submitted to divination on a regular basis. Divination is centrally important in West African indigenous religious philosophy. In the Yoruba case it is based on a professionalized corpus of knowledge and practice (Abimbola 1994). And yet the operation of each event is unique to time, place, person and issue, as is symbolized in the iconography of the divining tray on which is carved, to face the diviner, the face of Esu: trickster god and messenger to the pantheon. The concepts of order, confusion, restitution and agency are quite different from the Abrahamic religions whose rituals inform Van Gennep's seminal work on the structuring power of rites of passage and liminality relative to communities.¹ Much of divinatory ritual relates to personal pathways of life, which in Yoruba cosmology are governed by *Ori*, the god of the head, the instantiation of one's pre-birth choice for an orientation or destiny. In my recent comparative exploration of the notion of "confusion" (Guyer 2005), the varied sources on Yoruba thought and practice suggested that Esu was amongst the most widely recognized of gods (Peel 2000: 108), the guardian of crossroads and thresholds and the god of confusion. Esu was an ever-present source of "indeterminacy and the inexplicable" (Hallen 2000: 73). And yet one source went deeper, to argue that "Esu seems to provoke trouble deliberately and to take delight in disorder, but he only brings things to a crisis that can be resolved by means of sacrifice. Without Esu the cosmos would be a battlefield of blind aggression" (Witte 1984:14). So divination was exercised in those many recurrent moments when the inevitable indeterminacy of the world and of the human lifepath demanded expert diagnosis for particular instance and their remedies. Restitution of a generalized order was not possible: just time-place-person specific intervention.

As a short-cut to what ought to be a much longer analysis of the escape of these modes of praxis from the categories of structural analytics, let me just quote an interchange between a missionary and a *babalawo* (literally, father of secrets) in 1852 about Ifa, the deity of divination, from John Peel's (2000) historical work on Yoruba conversion to Christianity. The interchange is followed by Peel's commentary:

Missionary: Ifa cannot speak.

Babalawo: How do you understand from your book what God says?

Missionary: Why, the words are plain before us.

Babalawo: We are likewise acquainted with (Ifa) that we know immediately what he means by consulting him.

Missionary: But your Ifa is always changing. If he says a thing just now and you were to consult him upon the same thing a few minutes after that he will say quite another thing altogether. But our book never changes. Open the same place a hundred times and you will find the same thing. This shows that God and his works are true and Ifa and his words false. But I am inclined to believe the words are your own and not Ifa's.

Babalawo: Well, Ifa gives a distinct prophecy every time he is consulted.

Where the indigenous wisdom of Ifa was secret, pragmatically oriented, flexible, specific in its application, and linked to status, the Word of God as presented by the missionaries was open, ethically oriented, fixed, universal in application, and in principle independent of status." (Peel 2000: 225).

This incommensurability of a philosophy that foregrounds the sameness and difference and a philosophy that foregrounds uniqueness is precisely the analytical challenge with respect to "the economy". The very same Yoruba argument – that each event is *both* unique *and* referential/recursive - could be made about quantification in monetary transactions and the "division of labor". In a non-capitalist commercial economy, labor can be considered in all its local as well as generalizable characteristics: as comprising time, skill and personal predilections as well as the classic criteria of category/type, class membership and productivity/income level by which industrial labor is formally measured. Kinds of work are both different (by occupation, tool, commodity) and also very similar in that the concepts of selfhood and social organization for different

occupations are straightforward transpositions of each other. Over time, the “occupational repertoire seems to change range and composition...” without changing much in organizational form and philosophical basis. It is a society and economy in which change is constant and “a parsimonious economy of terms and organizational rubrics (enables) profusion and invention” (Guyer 1997: 223, 224).

It is from this space of potentiality, several works infer, that the dynamic we call “resilience” emanates. There are always spaces, and people are tropic towards them. They combine the novel vision involved in moving into a space with the replicative imagination of knowing how to do so without, at the same time, prejudging any specific outcome. This kind of process is recognized as fundamental even to the social dynamics of the peopling of Africa itself. Kopytoff’s (1987) now classic depiction of Africa as a frontier continent rests on a perception of this kind. According to him, small societies did not evolve into more complex ones by internal invention. Social forms shifted from center to frontier by replication in new spaces: “what we see are building blocks of different sizes, and chips off the blocks, and the moving kaleidoscope of their grouping and regrouping. This process has been steady and constant and consequently its products - small polities and societies – ubiquitous” (1987: 78).

I could see much of my own thinking about social organization as working towards a somewhat different version of this same perception. Kopytoff tended to see the reproduction of social forms as conservative: the frontier was an “institutional vacuum” (1987:25) into which moved “pre-existing models of the social order and its cultural reproduction” (1987: 33). At the time when I reviewed this book, I was enthusiastic but also diffident about the idea of replicating models, with its implication of conservatism. It took a while to see why. The discipline’s concepts of model were quite deficient, and their structuralist foundations tended to get in the way of the deeper historical and philosophical imagination that the ethnography provoked. Careful historical ethnography, such as the work of Georges Dupre (1982) and Marie-Claude Dupre (1995) in the Congo, was discerning cycles in sociality and in ecology, and charismatic moments of change, that stretched the meaning of replication, without necessarily resulting in abandonment of the whole idea of a “tradition”, as Vansina (1990) had developed it. I tried developing a concept of another social form in Equatorial Africa, under the title “Traditions of

Invention” (Guyer 1996). If social orders were made up by a composition of skilled adepts in different domains of life - blacksmiths, hunters, dancers, spiritual virtuosos, wood carvers etc. - rather than incumbents of the social roles of kinship and chieftaincy then the whole import of rites of passage, liminality and anticipation would be different and more open. Composition into ephemeral but powerful social movements (cults, war parties, communities of “big men”), I argued, was a parallel and different social process than demographic accumulation through kinship and clientage. The “creative space” still opened up, but in a different place: displaced from a geo-political collective frontier to the personal-intellectual one as each person oriented themselves towards their own frontiers of knowledge in a process I referred to as “self-realization”. “Resilience” springs eternal, then, not because people aim for restitution or social reproduction, as a structuralist position would imply, but because spaces themselves are a primary and eternal component of both ontology and context. The realization of human potential involves moving into them.²

The above however is a *gestalt*, not a theory. And it flirts rather dangerously with cultural essentialism. Perception of patterns is a crucial stage in thinking, but as a general theory the idea that space is at least as compelling a presence as constraint needs developing. How is this kind of creative power to be understood in a more close-grained fashion? Can we identify the push of intention, the pull of the future, or are those altogether wrong terms? Should we turn to Deleuze (*Difference and Repetition*) or to various different versions of performance theory (Turner; Fabian) or to Yoruba philosopher Akiwowo (1986)? It must be obvious by now how helpful a new analytic of “hope” would be in returning to the ethnography and trying again to think about the implications of divinatory cultures.

Moving into the Spaces

Several scholars of Western Nigeria have moved part way in this direction, so let me give three sketches of ethnographic treatments of cognate dynamics, to which “hope” might apply as an analytic for the “tropic spaces”.

My own argument (Guyer 1997) about social and economic life in Western Nigeria was that products and occupations follow a “niche” logic within regional and intercontinental markets. The establishment of anything new is highly competitive. A

new product, a new skill, a new artisanal phase of production first of all has to be successfully named to differentiate it conceptually from the existing repertoire. There are hundreds and hundreds of named occupations: tractor tire repairer is different from car tire repairer; fan repairer; panel beater (automobile body repairer); different kinds of house painter; battery recharger; genres of musical performance and different kinds of drummer; and so on. The horizon is an endless vista. Any word can be prefixed by *oni-*, *ala-* or *ele-*, all referring to “ownership of” or “identity with”, or perhaps best, “animator of”. A new Christianity was *aladura*: owners of prayer; harvest laborers for the melon-seed (*egusi*) harvest are *elegusi*; the chairperson of a meeting is *alaga* (literally, owner of the chair). Once named, there is an entire configuration of forms of sociality that can be tailored to the operation of that niche: occupational association membership (meetings, dues, regulatory frameworks, offices), terms of training in apprenticeship and employment, price mediation, forms of competition and collaboration, market promotion, and relations with linked occupations in the commercial chain. The position of an occupational niche is always fragile: small shifts can take away the clientele, cut off supplies, reduce the price, foster a competing product or skill, expand or contract the need for workers. And yet new ones will struggle into existence: different grades of tractor driver/operator; different kinds of harvest laborer, by crop; new kinds of money lender. Or particular occupations move into new geographical areas. In January 2005 I was in the countryside in Western Nigeria for the first time in two years, to witness a stunning presence of a highly organized charcoal business where it had hardly existed before: large storage yards beside the road, transport vehicles, teams of workers, techniques for approaching landowners, a regional organization, and so on (Brieger and Salami 2004). More specifically to our point here, people see the possibility of moving from one occupational/niche to another with an alacrity very different from the guild/apprenticeship model of medieval and early modern Europe. A successful musician talks about his work in niche terms, and then suggests that perhaps he’s going to give it up and go into construction instead (Waterman 1990: 156). A successful yam seller turns entirely to trade in beer (Trager 1985).

Similar, I would suggest, is the lability and optionality in the transactional dynamics I identify in *Marginal Gains* (2004). Techniques of counting evade the

absolutism of modern reductive numbers. Each transaction is both uniquely tailored to context and also a replication. Helen Verran (2001) has gone deeper than myself into this domain. She has used Yoruba numbering to define the formal qualities of emergent worlds. Number in Yoruba language and practice can link unity to plurality as *either* one/many *or* as part/whole. Actual calculative acts in the here-and-now can evoke one or the other (or a history of both). Indeed, the *things* counted can also, like the numbering conventions, be thought in either the one/many or the part/whole modes, giving rise then to an endless regression into particularity rather than generality. The history and potential of both things and numbers are kept at play. Hence the contingency of the moment, as a punctuation point, where “objects/subjects (are narrated) as outcomes of past collective goings-on and recognize their participation in remaking particular times and places as (re)generating worlds.” (2001: 94). Verran makes a strong point that what emerges is not “novelty” in any absolute sense, because resolutions are only possible through “a set of routine and repetitious practices” that re-instates at each point the deictic quality of the repertoire of concepts for materials and for numbers. But the result is not sameness and the process is therefore not predictable. Here again, the ethnography and logical analysis are telling us that replication is the means through which newness is created. Routine should not be understood as a repetition of outcome but as a reprise of method. It is an unending reapplication of past realizations to present potentials for theoretically limitless permutation and combination.

Verran’s work thus gives us the evidence and the logic, but it doesn’t look fully and systematically at the performance. All resolution in such a system of numbering practice must be arrived at performatively, that is, in specific contexts, rather than in the abstract or objective mode. After Turner’s seminal work on liminality, we know that the “space between” can be shorter or longer, instantaneous or internally richly phased. Indeed, Miyazaki (2004) includes examples of shorter term gift transactions alongside the long drawn out historical process of resolution of claims to land. Short “spaces”, in contained social contexts, can also be part of a series, like beads on a necklace, or more like rehearsals or incitations for cumulative momentum across a longer and more socially inclusive temporal “space”.

Karin Barber places a very similar cultural process within a performative theoretical context. In *The Generation of Plays*, she sees every step as improvisational, from the creation of a theatrical company, through the choice of a theme, the development of character to each and every unique performance before a singular audience at a particular time. Writing of the Yoruba popular theater of the decades between the mid-1970s and the late 1980s, she concludes:

“Potential is what is as yet undecided. ..the actors and audiences of the popular theater understand the whole of experience as imbued with potentiality: everything is continually emergent, continually requiring to be worked out afresh...The concepts of experience, example and potential work together to suggest how people continually generate their moral environment. They give a handle on characteristic features of performance and moral discourse in West African popular culture: prime among which are the tendency to multiplication and proliferation; the analogical mode; and the method of composition by assemblage.” (Barber 2000: 431).

The theater troupe itself was formed like a group of artisans, working their market niche. And their plays exemplified the themes of competing, assembling supporters, clients and colleagues, shifting modes, and discovering each character’s path forward. “People do not regard themselves as being actuated by rules and norms: destiny itself is emergent, only disclosing itself as a result of the individual’s self-motivated original activity, his *ese* (feet) purposefully taking him along the path where his *ori* (chosen “head” or destiny) is headed.” There is a moral here, “Do not write people off: no one knows what someone may become tomorrow.” (2000: 430).

The empirical domains addressed by these works are so different, and the detail so assiduously assembled, that we might at least entertain the idea that in seeing their conceptual convergence we are being directly instructed by the practices of everyday life and common views of the openness of the future rather than imposing a[our own] theoretical grid. Scholars in regional fields do, however, read one another’s work to find analytical inspiration, so of course the consonance amongst the accounts is not entirely independent. Does such “pattern recognition” risk essentialism, flattening out the historical and imaginative dynamics of the pattern’s production and migration across

domains? It would, if we simply assimilated this propensity to some kind of ethnic particularity, without historical and theoretical framing. Each of us has done this in different ways: Verran through links to a theory of logic; Barber through theories of language; myself through macro-historical contextualization. But coming back to the micro-analytical challenge, I think Karin Barber has taken us all a step further in her use of the concept of “example”. One can profit over and over gain, in hope of re-applicability to one’s own work, from the three pages she devotes to this concept (2000: 427-30). Let me quote one passage:

“Through their particularity, examples enable you to seize upon a phenomenon as if intuitively...” “Give me an example” I say as I struggle to comprehend your point. You give me an example but I still don’t understand, so you give me another example. The second example will be different from the first, and it is in the difference – a fresh angle, a new start – that illumination resides....(T)he general cannot be conceptualized or stated *except* through example: and its dimensions are never fully known, only partially indicated by a multiplication of illustrations. You work back and forth from examples to what is exemplified, never arriving at a final stable “model” but rather refreshing your conceptualization of what is being exemplified by every additional example.” (2000: 428)

There is an implicit theory of knowledge here - of the world’s knowability, the pathways to knowledge, the form it takes and the human capacity to grasp and apply it – as well as a social theory of communication. There is selectivity and option at every stage, as people’s lives intersect tangentially.

There is a certain parallelism here between Yoruba philosophy and current approaches to ethnographic work, of the kind Miyazaki also aspires to: selective deference to (salvation of) the past; the denial of closure or finality; the forward momentum; and even the seemingly boundless optimism about potential that would return us to the hackneyed concept of “resilience”. The idea of hope is one “next step” beyond Victor Turner (1987), who also, nevertheless, called for such a parallel. “The Anthropology of Performance” and “Performing Ethnography” are chapter titles in his posthumously published book *The Anthropology of Performance*.

The reasons given for holding such parallels between the people’s endeavors and our own firmly in mind, no matter what tensions are generated, have included a political-

moral commitment to co-evalness (Fabian 1983). But I find the classic intellectual reasons at least as compelling. It allows one to ask whether the conceptual specificity of each casts light on the other. The theory of hope, as a descendant of a particular intellectual genealogy, is more or less explicitly grounded in a messianic temporal matrix which differs from the secular determinisms of modernist theory that inform both popular culture and modernist social science in western social contexts. Maccoby writes, in his *Philosophy of the Talmud*, “Certain features of biblical and rabbinic morality could be characterized as ‘messianic-anticipatory’. They form a way of living appropriate to a messianic era regarded as far ahead...it is possible and mandatory for an anticipatory community to embark on this way of life now, so that mankind can send an expedition into the future.” (2002: 75). Miyazaki (2004: 20-23). draws explicitly on the messianic intimations in the works of both Bloch and Benjamin All the descendant religions of the Abrahamic legacy proclaim “we ever hope in Thee” and practice a prospective openness that may have a quite different sense of personal and collective *telos* than Yoruba philosophical orientations. Yoruba exemplary performances may embody another cosmological configuration altogether.³

So the key thing that holding the tension in mind can achieve is a much greater attention to the “timescape” itself (rather than the structuring question and resolution), and to the replication of those features from one instance to another. This question opens up ethnographic work to a whole domain of scholarship that needs combing, and that I do not know well enough yet to apply. For example, there are all the varied works on repetition that derive from Benjamin’s (1967) seminal paper on The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, the philosophy of repetition in the work of Deleuze (1993), and so on. One should revisit the form and substance of Weber’s (1905/1930) argument in the *Protestant Ethic*, and particularly the concept of “discipline” as repetition or recapitulation. In searching for imagery and inspiration, I have also thought of the artistic concept of “negative space”: of the absences without which the phenomenal world that we experience directly would have no power or meaning. How long can a suspension be maintained before it loses aesthetic and spiritual tension? How frequent and of what sort are replications (singular? sequential? nested)? Are there “owners/animators of space” (in the Yoruba sense), experts who tutor the senses and the intellect of others as

they navigate free fall into an anticipatory mode? Finally there are questions about affect (holding in abeyance for the moment any ultimate grounding of all temporal affect in messianism). Can the very replication itself, and the frequency of an opportunity to consult and redress, be seen as the implicit evidence for a “hopeful” affect, a “prospective momentum” (Miyazaki 2004: 135)? Where else might one recognize the quality of momentum? Posing a contrast can help. T.S. Eliot had a grimmer view of action: that the indeterminate space within “The Hollow Men” is invaded by doubt and fear, what he calls “the shadow”:

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow ⁴

But in that case, perhaps replication becomes increasingly impossible to bear and therefore attenuates altogether, leaving “hope” as an inference drawn entirely from the very fact of persistence. In pondering the conundrum of how to think through these questions ethnographically, I had the mundane thought that no progress could be made on any of the deeper questions unless we paid much closer attention to the inter-temporal process of exemplary action itself. “Resilience” of “hope” can only be a dispensation in the present when the present instance is a recognizable point in an open series, over time.

Example and Replication, across Time

Barber’s exploration of examples in her Conclusion is thought out through theories of understanding. Her own cases, however, are initially described in existential terms as part of instigations to action, as inspirations to “Work, Destiny, and Self-Making” (Title of Chapter 11). The members of the audiences for the plays “pick a lesson... (and they) actively sought to extract these examples in order to profit from them.” (2000:427). How this works in life cannot be explored from her own vantage point of the stage and the play. One would have to inhabit the audiences’ ongoing allusions and applications of the lessons chosen. So what would be a plausible ethnographic corpus on such a process, that is, on the recurrent spaces into which such lessons are inserted?

I think there are two, which could be cross-checked with each other. The most obvious, because the most intellectually amenable/accessible, is the recurrent ritual moment. Prayer and divination are symbolically marked as repetitive actions, usually on a set calendar, created expressly to open up a channel for metaphysical communication. One would need to understand the open-endedness in such series, as their implications become compounded over time. So far (as I know), the processual approach to divination has been applied within *individual seances* (Zeitlyn 2001). Turner's (1974) classic work on sequences of healing ritual with the same protagonist, and Moore's (1986) extension to sequences of law cases with the same parties, do explore the cumulative power of serial replication to produce, in these cases, progressive exclusion.⁵ In general, however, the process of living an ordinary life and making an ordinary living have not figured prominently in the study of inter-temporal series of consultations. The sheer mundaneness of oracular consultation means that it hardly appears in personal or even community-level historical accounts. And yet Yoruba were said to consult Ifa every four days for guidance about the course of action to be taken, the nature of sacrifices to be made, and the direction of productive thought to be pursued. Four day intervals are just one day shorter than the classic market week, so in principle consultations were made on an even tighter rhythm than commerce. One must assume that people did ask for mundane guidance, that kept them oriented towards the fulfillment of what was posited as their *ori* (head, personal chosen destiny), which included crucially their occupations in a commercial artisanal economy. I remember an elder telling me in 1968 that he had migrated to start a cocoa farm after consultation with the diviner, and that he had returned many years later when divination suggested return home as the right course to take.

In principle a series of successive mundane divinations refers back and forth, from one moment of hope, abeyance, intention, dedication (obedience?) and outcome to another. The form is repetitive but each instance is reflexive and recursive, creating the kind of step-wise narrative form so characteristic of some early Yoruba literature such as Tutuola's (1953/1970) *The Palm Wine Drinkard*. Ideally, one could trace out life-careers by focusing on these punctuation points, when several possibilities were considered and chance burst forth, instead of the intervening phases of routine functioning in a single occupation. In brief, there is a divinatory or prayerful.⁶ version one could tell of the

signal moments in a personal work history that may be far more important to the protagonist than the content of the work itself or the retrospective summary one might construct. With a “method of hope” the tropic points of change would figure more prominently than the classifications of the time between the hope-inspiring performances.

An expanded focus on explicitly *metaphysical* intervention during performance, however, raises a question and a potential distinction. In ritual practice in the European/Van Gennep tradition, the intervention in the moment of abeyance is presumed authoritative. Weber hardly explores the actual content of prayer and answer for the Calvinists, and especially around business issues. He looks at what the ritual practices disciplined them to do in the world. I was struck by this: what did Calvinists pray for and anticipate during their regular sessions with God? For them, presumably there was the single authoritative Voice to which they tuned their perception. One wonders whether this receptivity to authoritative instruction should be differentiated from the kind of spaces and agencies indicated by Barber for the Yoruba, where *multiple* examples may flood the mind during moments of hopeful abeyance. The subtle arguments-from-example and allegorical texts invoked by the diviners on the basis of the Ifa corpus pose more room for an acknowledgement of human agency and perhaps thereby to a range of more secular extensions of the divinatory logic.

The dynamic of multiple examples, tailored to the moment and the situation, can be illustrated from a small book by J.O. Aluko on the *osomalo*, early twentieth century Yoruba traders on credit. It offers graphic instances of the specificity of each and every transaction in the *osomalo*'s portfolio. There were some rules of thumb for general social relations with clients but there was no single way to set up and enforce the credit commitment because there was no authoritative legal definition and sanction, and because no two cases were the same. The *osomalo* had to know how to extrapolate and invent from case to case, by example, as he turned his money rapidly from one transaction to another.⁷ Everything was negotiable and therefore singularized. I link several key passages together:

“The typical items of trade hawked by the itinerant Osomalo traders included cloth, caps, arms and ammunition. The women sold items like cigarettes, kolanuts, headties and women's clothes. Their money was invested in buying and storing local

items that could be exported to other parts of the country... The Osomalo sold cloth either in bundles or in single yards depending on the requirements of his client. The head of the compound or the community leader was usually asked to stand surety... Sometimes a chalk mark on the wall at the back of the debtor's house would indicate the terms of the agreement.... Prominent Osomalo traders used two methods to buy their goods. They either bought cash down, using their personal savings or loans from neighbours, or on credit... The Osomalo's method of debt recovery usually depended on the social position of the debtor. The Osomalo normally used the taboos of the debtor's society in the handling of any uncooperative or habitual debtors... (As a result) The modern Sales Day Book and the Osomalo's Sales Account differ completely. (The latter) might not contain dates of sales, the type of material sold, the measure of length, or the rate. Quite often the correct names of debtors were not recorded... (They) could calculate how many market days at intervals of 5, 9 or 17 days, there were between the 1st of January of any given years and the 31st of December of the same year... (T)raders often depended on memory... (and) the ability to recognize people easily either by their facial marks, colour, appearance or family connections." (Aluko 1993). After 1960, when the national law precluded certain modes of credit practice, first of all the Osomalo stopped serving everyone across the spectrum of society, and this heralded the moment when "the system had begun to decline" (Aluko 1993: 55). The whole practice depended on the ability of the trader to replicate the debt relationship but in a ramifying range of possible forms, in the hope and expectation of gain in each of them, albeit by different means.

The *osomalo* lived in a context of proliferation, for which he was author, beneficiary and observing participant. Everything that happened was an example, not a model. Every situation called for new extrapolation, a "learning in the mean time" (Miyazaki 2004: 129). Every space at the center of a business deal held the specific outcome in abeyance for the right/acceptable configuration of terms to emerge.

Parenthetically, Aluko also describes the same replicative associational dynamics for their occupation as I alluded to earlier: "An association of all Osomalo traders and their apprentices was usually set up in a particular area... Such an association had the duty of protecting the interests of its members. Its officials settled disputes... The traders cooperated... they assisted one another financially, physically and morally.... It was

impossible for anybody to trade in any trading zone without joining the association” (Aluko 1993: 30).

Perhaps we see in divination and proliferation two micro-dynamics of replicative processes rather similar to the one addressed by Miyazaki, and called for by Bloch, that go beyond the messianic temporal matrix. In the Yoruba case, spaces opened up all the time, in all kinds of surprising places. Anticipation and resolution were writ very small as well as very large. The eternal was made up of thousands of inter-nested temporalities, each of which contained the prospective momentum of replication of event, example and experience. Surely what we have called resilience owed something to these processes.

The “Eternal”: A thousand moments or an endless vista?

Can we see the thousand-moments dynamics in our own context, or does messianic time “run interference” on it? What sort of a mix is there now, with Pentecostal Christianity and a changing Islam in Nigeria, and many struggles here? When I submitted my title, I thought the parallels and convergences across the popular economies of the “neoliberal” world would be different from what I now consider them to be. In fact, I thought this paper would be a version of another paper which is more focused on the U.S.: “Between Rationality and Prophecy”. The “thousand moment” version of the future has occupied a very specific cultural and organizational space in western Protestant culture, perhaps associated with entrepreneurialism; it has never been as pervasive as it is in Yoruba society and culture in the era before Pentecostalism. And I think it may even be further retreat here. The frequent opening up of life to consideration of multiple exemplary possibilities evokes a specific form of reasoning and affect, a kind of expectation that is precisely *not* a calculated probability from past experience. There is now, in mainstream western public discourse, a different set of institutions and ideas from the divinatory mode for anticipating the near future, based on a probability theoretical orientation that extrapolates from the past. Certain aspects of people’s economic lives are disciplined by instruments designed according to these calculated risk models and that exert powerful authority and penalty on the daily, weekly, annual and life cycle punctuation of time. Even now, I am not yet sure how to characterize what is happening, but I feel convinced that the more literal phenomenology that Miyazaki is advocating, especially of sequences over time, would help clarify the temporal

relationship between the eternal and the near future, the vista one sees when one asks “what comes next?” (Verdery 1996). All the African sources seem to imply that the unknown nature of the future is a wellspring of hope to many people in a whole variety of circumstances, in the positive substantive sense. Between the idea and the reality fall several possibilities; between the emotion and the response fall a quickening of the intellect, an anticipation of the heart and the expectation of change, rather than the “shadow” of despair or the obligation to the next payment in the financial regimen.

An analysis of divination, the application of examples (as distinct from imperatives) to one’s own life dilemmas, suggests a certain hopeful logic that is consonant with dynamics in the popular economy. But I finish with some caveats. My exploration is entirely preliminary, worked out from published sources. No-one has ever done field research using “the method of hope” on the economic life of (for example) the wholesale electronics market in Lagos. And I am still uncertain that, having followed the “method of hope” in all its exemplary reorientation of framing and description, that one would necessarily end up wanting to use “hope” in its substantive meaning to depict all anticipatory orientations. There is an extensive library on divination and prayer in archaic and modern informal economies that beckons, and an even more extensive reality of their mutual implication in the 21st century world.

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¹ Divination did exist in Ancient Israel (Cryer 1994). Arguably the practices we group into “divination” form one of the most universal components of religious and secular culture (Vernant et al. 1974). It lies beyond my essay to carry out the comparative review that an expanded effort on “hope” worldwide would certainly demand. I feel convinced that the temporalities and modalities of divination, prayer and consultation are fundamental to the phenomena we are addressing here, not only in West Africa.

² I hesitate to refer to this quality as entrepreneurship, in part because it does not differentiate one type of actor from another, and it’s difficult to distinguish between “expansion within an existing practice” (adaptive response) and “do(ing) something else...that is outside the range of existing practice” (creative response). (Schumpeter in Swedberg 1991: 411). The theorization of non-capitalist markets seems to me very weak, in spite of historical, archeological and anthropological studies. This vast era and geography of economic life was momentarily brought together by Karl Polanyi and collaborators in *Trade and Markets in the Early Empires*. Many of its terms were immediately critiqued (formal and substantive economy, administered trade, idealism in the presentation of the caste system, and so on). But the theoretical gap remains. The concept of “the market” tacitly refers to capitalism in most writing about the neo-liberal world economy.

³ Barber does make the point several times over that these plays are historically specific to the post-conversion era. About half of the Yoruba population is Christian and half Muslim. The degree to which,

and the ways in which, religious thinking about The Example (capitalized) give new vibrancy to what is clearly a much older set of ideas, and which I think should be folded into the questions asked about the temporal features of exemplary reference in the lived life, as distinct from the play, the book or the theory.

⁴ And continuing, as a repetition-with-difference,
Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow.....

Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And the existence
Between the essence
And the descent
Falls the Shadow

⁵ Perhaps this was hopeful for some and not others. One has to entertain the possibility that one person's hope entails another's despair.

⁶ I imagine that prayer is conceptualized in a similar way, but have no idea whether there are systematic studies of the recurrent guidance given to careers and professional behavior in the recurrent practice of prayer, even in the famous prosperity churches. It could be very important to do such work.

⁷ "The Osomalo traders did not tie down their capital for long, therefore, in whatever form they saved their money. They preferred to buy and sell goods as many times as possible in a given year, since they were interested in quick returns on their capital." (Aluko 1993: 48).