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When a Bird Builds Its Nest, It Uses the Feathers of Other Birds

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Welcome to the first issue of volume five of the *Journal of West African History*. I borrow the title of this fifth volume editorial—"When a bird builds its nest, it uses the feathers of other birds"—from an adage of the people of South Africa. This proverb is apt because it speaks to a theme that not only connects the articles in this volume, but also expresses in broader ways this important moment in the life and evolution of the *Journal of West African History*. Regarding the latter connection, with the publication of this volume and issue *JWAH* spreads its wings, in more ways than one, reaching out, and bringing into its nest two outstanding award-winning senior scholars—Trevor Getz, historian of gender and slavery in West Africa; and Saheed Aderinto, historian of childhood, gender, and public order in Nigeria—who have graciously agreed to lend their expertise to *JWAH* as editors. Ndubueze Mbah, a historian of gender, sexuality, and slavery in Nigeria, and Mark Deets, a historian of spatial history and conflict in southern Senegal, are also joining our team as our new book review editors; and our dedicated editor, Harry Odamtten, intellectual historian of Pan-Africanism and the Atlantic World, who has been with us from the beginning, completes the *JWAH* bird nest, breathing new meaning into the wisdom of the proverb, which acknowledges the need for cooperation and collaboration between like minds to get the job done. Our *JWAH* team is stronger because of this melding of minds, this pooling of expertise and energies; we are stronger, because each of us cares deeply about advancing historical knowledge on West Africa and are committed to providing a vehicle for the dissemination of African-centered knowledge. We have now built—by gathering each individual's feathers—the quintessential bird's nest of

West African historical meditations as recorded in the meaningful wisdom of the above-referenced South African proverb.

Now to the articles. In “Performing Trauma: The Ghosts of Slavery in Yoruba Music and Ritual Dance,” Olatunji Ojo highlights the memories and group experiences of slavery and the slave trade embedded in Yoruba ritual performances of music, song, drama, and dance, arguing that slavery has been ritualized in the theatrical and dance performances. Embodied in Yoruba ritual music, including ritual dramas associated with the important deity *obatala*, or the resistance of Princess Moremi against slave raiders, Ojo suggests, are interactive performances and reenactments that in metaphorical form portray the prowess of Yoruba slaver ancestors as well as memories of enslaved Yoruba lives. He further speculates that these performances, witnessed by the community during particular festivals, serve to communicate, from generation to generation, the historical narratives of the community archive (of modes of enslavement, including warfare engaged in by distinct Yoruba communities to capture slaves; master–slave relations; relationships between slave raiders and their victims; resistance to slavery; the ethnicities, ages, sex of the enslaved, etc.), thus providing group awareness and building group or community consciousness around slavery and the slave trade. These festivals of ritual performance are, in a sense, a Yoruba community’s way of resolving complex, charged, traumatic, and often unspeakable memories and expressing them in a more palatable way. They provide spaces for empathy; they are therapeutic, both for the performers and the witnesses. In other words, these ritualized performances can be viewed as an embodiment of the good and bad memories of distinct Yoruba communities, which taken together represent the consciousness of the Yoruba as a whole; they can be likened to the gathering of the feathers of multiple birds to build a solid community bird’s nest of memories.

Henryatta L. Ballah’s “Liberia: A Colonized Nation and the Role of English in that Process,” engages with debates over whether Liberia should be considered a colonized nation. In addition, hers is a political history of the English language in Liberia and how it stimulated the construction of what the author argues was a unique social, cultural, political, and linguistic identity that privileged settlers over the sixteen indigenous nations of people that inhabited the country that would be called Liberia. She argues that English was used as a mechanism of colonial rule: it was the language of the state, educational instruction included, Anglo-Saxon heritage was celebrated, and indigenous languages were denigrated. Ballah further contends that the Americo-Liberian settler population were the “new lords of the settlement.” They functioned as subimperialists serving the interests of the United States. They did not identify with the indigenous “savage” inhabitants, but rather visualized themselves as superior Christian “saviors,” tasked with upholding the “civilizing mission.” By so doing, these new interlopers preserved democratic

power for themselves and excluded indigenous inhabitants from civic institutions. Moreover, the ways in which Americo-Liberians exploited indigenous labor was similar to the ways other European colonizing masters in West Africa did. In 1925, for instance, the Americo-Liberian government signed a far-reaching treaty with Firestone Rubber to facilitate the construction of vehicle tires. They did this by compelling village chiefs to provide indigenous labor—the usurping the feathers of “indigenous Liberian birds” to build the Americo-Liberian nest. Those who resisted faced punishment from the Liberian Frontier Force. This, however, did not quell the resistance of indigenous Liberian nations like the Grebo or the Kru, who declared war on settler communities in 1857 and 1915, respectively.

Tony Yeboah’s “Phoenix Rise: A History of the Architectural Reconstruction of the Burnt City of Kumase, 1874–1960,” offers an important addition to the architectural history of Ghana and the meaning of colonial urban planning. It does this with its emphasis on Kumasi residents’ lived experience and his analysis of British motivations. Situating his contribution against the backdrop of the defeat of Asante forces in the war of Toto, and the resultant destruction of Kumasi by a British expeditionary force, Yeboah argues that the reconstruction of Kumasi represents a “built environment”—a built bird’s nest—of British colonial control over Kumasi inhabitants. British colonizers, he argues, transferred European building designs (read: the feathers of the colonizer’s birds) onto the Kumasi landscape. This, however, did not quell the ingenuity of local residents in expressing their resilience, and refusal to assimilate to the newly established colony and the new British intruders by appropriating the architecture of the colonialists, but only selectively. Furthermore, Yeboah points to the Kumasi housing experiment as an example of a British redesign of the Ghanaian colonial landscape into bungalows that privileged nuclear/single family occupation, rather than structures designed to house bigger extended family structures, as was the norm in pre-British contact Kumasi. Indeed, after Ghana gained its independence, these British-inspired bungalows, which had evolved into two-story buildings, increasing in size, and orientation to accommodate rooms for bigger polygamous Ghanaian families. Indeed, Ghanaians began to develop hybrid Akan courtyard homes that appropriated British design when advantageous, but did away with aspects of British architecture that did not make sense for them. Because of the importance that Ghanaians give to home and hearth, Yeboah concludes that postindependence Ghanaians were prompted to incorporate favorable British building approaches alongside indigenous architecture.

In “The Politics of Property Rights: The Case of Akyem Abuakwa, Ghana (1912–1943),” Emmanuel Ababio Oforu-Mensah extends the scholarly debate over the motivations of a significant historical West African actor. He does this by

challenging the work of Ghana Studies scholars Richard Rathbone, Robert Addo-Fening, and Kathryn Firmin Sellers, who have argued that Okyenehene Nana Ofori Atta I of Akyem Abuakwa enhanced his political power and personal interests by reasserting the “traditional” authority of the paramount chief (or Okyenehene) over revenues derived from land and natural resources. The author instead forcefully contends that Ofori Atta was motivated by less altruistic purposes and concerns—a desire to build a solid foundation, or put differently, a solid bird’s nest, “for the benefit of Abuakwa citizens.” Indeed Ofosu-Mensah suggests that far from concretizing his own standing within the community, the Okyenehene instead redefined property rights in Akyem Abuakwa by using the stool’s share of farm rents, mineral royalties, and proceeds from sale of stool lands—a gathering of other birds’ feathers—to shape the paramount into an exemplar of a modern early twentieth-century state. In addition, Ofosu-Mensah argues that Okyenehene Atta also endorsed and/or contributed stool funds to public projects—like the building of school rooms, market stalls, drains, and creating of scholarships that enabled some Ghanaian students to study in Britain. By wrestling control of stool lands away from corrupt Akyem Abuakwa subchiefs, Ofori Atta, Ofosu-Mensah further contends, was able to construct Akyem Abuakwa into “the most leading and progressive of all native states in the Gold Coast.”

The last set of feathers gathered to build the bird’s nest that is volume 5, issue 1, is Katrin Schulze’s “The Wild Bunch: Cowboy Clubs, Gangs, and Societies in Nigeria.” In it Schulze argues that Nigerian youth fascination with cowboy culture found expression in cowboy clubs, gangs, and societies of the 1940s. In particular, cowboy clubs in Nigeria typified a romanticization of mobility that resonated with broader shifts in Nigerian youth culture, be it an increased engagement with wage labor, urbanization, border population increases, or a globalized exchange of artifacts and goods. Cowboy culture represented the struggles of youth to navigate competing norms in Western and indigenous society. Although there existed a diversity of cowboy experience, cowboy clubs were bound together by the perceived aggression, violence, and crime of their members, as well as the entertainment and spectacle they epitomized. In Lagos, for instance, cowboys crafted a new, masculinized urban identity that reflected the “resilient masculinity and emancipatory mythology of the American dream.” They would march alongside masked spirits during masquerade festivals, and by so doing, ignite violence between masquerade adherents and the cowboy groups. Their presence was a cultural manifestation of young men in motion, striving to recreate their identities in a city where every kind of identity seemed to be in flux. The Kano and Jos cowboys dressed in uniform, wearing trousers and green shirts. They formed a morally ambiguous “gentlemanly” club, with aspirations of foreignness. Finally, in the southeastern town of Calabar, cowboys were

connected to gang violence. They also served as entertainers, making spectacles of themselves by getting into brawls—scattering the bird feathers—with masquerades during festivals.

It is with great pleasure that I present volume 5, issue 1, of the *Journal of West African History*.