

**BETWEEN ROOT AND ROUTES: UNDERSTANDING AFRICANNESS AND AFROPOLITANISM IN
“SO THE PATH DOES NOT DIE” BY PEDE HOLLIST**

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Abstract

This paper explores the concepts of Africanness and Afropolitanism as represented in “*So The Path does not Die*” (2012) by Pedo Hollist, a diasporic narrative that engages with issues of identity, migration, and cultural negotiation. The novel chronicles the experiences of Finaba Marah, a Sierra Leonean woman whose journey from Freetown to the United States foregrounds the tensions between traditional African values and modern transnational identities. Hollist situates Africanness within the framework of communal belonging, indigenous customs, and gendered social expectations epitomized by the female initiation ritual that marks Finaba’s passage into womanhood. Conversely, Afropolitanism emerges through Finaba’s encounter with cosmopolitan spaces that challenge fixed notions of identity and enable new forms of hybridity and self-definition. The paper argues that Hollist’s narrative resists monolithic constructions of African identity by presenting Africanness and Afropolitanism being fluid and intersecting than mutually exclusive. Drawing on the theoretical insights from Achille Mbembe, Simon Gikandi, and Taiye Selasi, the study situates the text within broader debates on African modernity, diaspora and postcolonial subjectivity. Ultimately, Hollist’s text reimagines the African woman’s journey not as a linear movement from tradition to modernity, but as a complex negotiation between rootedness and global mobility—a testament to the evolving meanings of being African in the twenty-first century.

Keywords Afropolitanism, Africanness, diasporic, hybridity

Introduction

For many Africans, their experiences today are increasingly reshaped by transnational migration, forced displacement and connective influence of a digitized world. In this the challenge of identity crisis is taking toll on the personality of migrating Africans. Being faced with having a root in Africa while navigating globally entails embracing their African heritage while interacting and still contributing to the global community. What does it mean to be African? To be rooted deep in one’s culture having a proverb that “when the roots of a tree are deep, there is no reason to fear the wind”. This implies that a strong foundation provides the strength to face challenges. Afropolitanism which was coined and birthed by Taiye Selasi and Achille Mbembe came into existence in 2005. Mbembe defines it relation to African Continent while Selasi’s position revolves around african diaspora. Afropolitanism has elicited a lot of valid criticism from scholars all over the world. Achille Mbembe’s essay on Afropolitanism titled *African Remix* – Contemporary art of a continent depicts Africans way of being in the world as being marked by cultural mixing and interweaving (Vera Gronvold, 2022). Mbembe sees Afropolitanism as an “awareness of the interweaving of the here and there”. Thus, to Mbembe, Afropolitanism deals with transition and being on transit. Gronvold emphasized that Mbembe related it to the importance of global convergence. Thus using the phrase “embracing, and strangeness”. Taiye Selasi’s explicit interest on cosmopolitan idea of blackness (Bordin 2). Gikandi and Odinye see it as a reaction to Afropessimism – accepting their fate as a never-do well people. Can tradition and cosmopolitan co-exist in a single narrative self? Pedo Hollist’s Novel “*So the Path does not Die*” (2012) tries to tell a transnational story that explores the journey of a young Sierra Leonean woman navigating cultural expectations, diasporic life and personal reinvention. Through the protagonist Finaba Marah. Hollist stages a picture of confrontation between two poles of identity: Africanness, rooted in heritage and homeland, and Afropolitanism, shaped by movement, hybridity, and global consciousness.

This paper explores how Pedo Hollist arbitrates between “roots” and “routes”- between the pull of cultural tradition and the push of cosmopolitan true being and individuality. Drawing from theories of cultural identity by Stuart Hall, Afropolitanism (Taiye Selasi, Achille Mbembe), and diasporic African literature, the paper argues that Hollist’s novel does not merely depict a conflict between opposing identities but offers a nuanced narrative of synthesis, resistance, and self-authorship. Finaba’s story reveals how Africanness and Afropolitanism are not mutually exclusive but entangled – each reshaping the other in the diasporic imagination.

By examining the aesthetic and thematic preoccupation of the novel particularly, its treatment of gender, exile, cultural trauma, and return. Pedo Hollist intricately weaves a narrative that captures the evolving dimensions of identity, belonging and cultural continuity within the African diaspora. Central to the novel is the exploration

of Africanness – deeply rooted connection to cultural heritage, traditions, and ancestral ties – and Afropolitanism, a more fluid and cosmopolitan sense of African identity shaped by transnational experiences, hybridity and modernity. Through the journey of the protagonist, Hollist navigates the tension between tradition and modernity, the local and the global, home and diaspora. Fina's personal struggles – ranging from familial obligations and cultural expectations in Sierra Leone to professional ambitions and romantic entanglements in the United States. This highlights the complex intersections of identity that define many contemporary African lives. The novel becomes a compelling site for interrogating how Africanness is preserved, redefined or contested in diaspora, and how Afropolitanism offers a lens through which to view African identity not as fixed or monolithic, but as dynamic, plural and deeply contested. In this way Hollist's work contributes meaningfully to ongoing conversations about what it means to be African in a globalised world. This article examines the representations of Africanness and Afropolitanism in Hollist's novel, arguing that the narrative advocates for a pluralistic and evolving conception of African identity.

The Theoretical Framework

Scholars like Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Paul Tiyambe Zeleza have approached Africanness in diverse ways for Ngugi, Africanness is rooted in the lived experiences, histories, and indigenous languages of African people. In *Decolonising the Mind : The politics of language in African Literature*, he argues that the loss of African Languages through colonial education and culture alienates Africans from their own identity "language, any language has dual character: it both a means of communication and a carrier of culture"(Ngugi, 13). Ngugi contends that true Africanness must reclaim African language and worldview. This embodies cultural commitment to African perspectives, language, and historical memory.

In addition, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza in his influential essay "*Rewriting the African Diaspora : Beyond the Black Atlantic*", posits that African identity is both constructed and performed, not inherited in a static form, Africanness for Zeleza is shaped by colonial histories, migration, globalization, and ongoing cultural exchanges. "Africanness is neither immutable nor essential, but a historical construct". He argues that Africanness changes over time adding that African identity is made through culture, memory and connection.

Afropolitanism which is conceptualized as a new, global and hybrid African identity highlights Africans who move between cultures, especially those in the diaspora, and who embrace both African roots and cosmopolitan experiences. Taiye Selasi coined and birthed "Afropolitan" in her 2005 essay "Bye- Bye Babar". She describes Afropolitan as young urban, multilingual well – travelled Africans who feel a strong connection to the continent but live globally "not citizens, but Africans of the world (Selasi, 2005)

Mbembe in his perspective sees Afropolitanism as an openness to difference and diversity rooted in Africa's complex colonial and postcolonial history. He believes it celebrates cultural mixing. in his view "Afropolitanism is a way of being African in the world, open to difference, blending cultures and embracing multiplicity (Mbembe 2007). He believes it is not about rejecting African roots but about embracing multiple cultural influence and crossing boundaries. He argues that Afropolitanism challenges narrow fixed ideas of African identity, and instead promotes hybridity, complexity, and complexity.

The Relationship Between Africanness and Afropolitanism

Africanness and Afropolitanism are intertwined and related in the fact that both reveal the idea of African identity in varied or sundry ways and from different historical and cultural viewpoints. Africanness traditionally is deduced to be cultural, historical and political identities associated with being African, portraying and emphasizing belonging to Africa on the ideas of roots and tradition.

In the same vein, Afropolitanism is a more contemporary, cosmopolitan approach to African identity. It embraces a newer model of Africanness that adopts mobility, hybridity and global citizenship. It reflects the identity of Africans who live across different cultures and continents that embody multiple affiliations – Africans and otherwise. However, Afropolitans can be seen as an extension of Africanness – one that acknowledges the diverse and changing experiences of Africans in a globalized world. That is the ability of Africans to navigate multiple worlds while maintaining a sense of African rootedness.

The Embodiments of Africanness in Pede Hollist's *So the Path Does Not Die*

Hollist situates the novel within the dynamic discourse of contemporary African literature that explores the intersection of tradition, modernity, and cultural identity. The novel's opening scene, where Finaba Marah's grandmother, Baramusu, insists that the girl must undergo initiation into womanhood through female genital mutilation(FGM), sets the tone for a narrative deeply invested in examining the essence of Africanness- the

moral, social, and spiritual frameworks that define belonging in traditional African communities. The novel opens in Sierra Leonean village of Talaba, Baramusu, announces that Finaba has come of age and must be initiated. Hollist writes “the initiation will make her a woman”(3), encapsulating the cultural logic behind the practice. In this statement lies the core of African communal identity: womanhood is not an individual achievement but a social recognition. Within this traditional framework, female initiation serves as a rite of passage marking the transition from childhood to social maturity. The elders’ conviction that uninitiated women are incomplete reflects what Mbiti terms “African ontology” in which personhood is achieved only through community participation (Mbiti 108).

Baramusu’s insistence on Fina’s initiation demonstrates the older generation’s role as custodian of culture. She views the ritual not as cruelty but as moral duty – an act that affirms lineage and identity. Her conviction, “the initiation will make her a woman,”(3) underscores how Africanness is inscribed in the body and performed through communal rituals. In Talaba, an uninitiated girl is ostracized, considered “half –made”. However, Finaba’s father’s refusal to allow her initiation disrupts the social cohesion, positioning her between cultural loyalty and personal freedom.

As Finaba grows, she embodies the contradictions of a changing Africa- caught between reverence for tradition and the awakening of critical consciousness. Her father’s resistance to FGM, motivated by education and exposure to modern ideals, marks the first rupture in the generational transmission of culture. Through the lens of Finaba’s experience, critiques how gender defines the contours of Africanness. The initiation ritual, while symbolically sacred, is a means of enforcing gender conformity. Women are taught endurance, silence, and respect for authority- virtues central to the moral imagination of traditional African societies

Yet, as the narrative unfolds, Finaba’s ambivalence towards initiation and her later exposure to global feminist discourses in America reveal that Africanness, as traditionally gendered, is both empowering and limiting. In this respect, Finaba’s identity crisis reflects what Elleke Boehmer calls the “double consciousness of the postcolonial subject,” where inherited African values coexist uneasily with modern self –awareness (Boehmer 99). Her struggle is not a rejection of Africanness but an effort to redefine it in more humane terms. As Finaba migrates to the United States, she remains haunted by dreams and memories of home- a symbolic reminder that spiritual belonging transcends geography. Hollist uses these motifs to suggest that African identity is metaphysical as well as cultural. The ancestors’ unseen presence affirms what Mbembe describes as “the living archive of Africa’s moral imagination” (Mbembe 33). Thus, the grandmother’s voice in the opening chapters is not just the echo of conservatism but the embodiment of Africa’s living memory- the voice that insists that “the path does not die.”

Africanness in Transition: The Dialogue between Tradition and Modernity

By Finaba migrating to the United States, her identity has been shaped by the cultural contradictions of her upbringing. She carries with her both the wisdom and the wounds of her African past. Her struggle in America – to assert autonomy, to marry, to belong- becomes an allegory for the broader African encounter with modernity. Through Finaba, Hollist illustrates that Africanness is portable and adaptable. Even as she navigates foreign spaces, she retains the morals and Africanness instilled in her childhood. The “path” that must not die, therefore, symbolizes cultural endurance- the persistence of African values of kinship, morality, and resilience amid global change. Hollist’s portrayal resonates with Simon Gikandi’s idea that modern African identity “exists in translation- between ancestral memory and global modernity”(Gikandi 9). Finaba’s life embodies this translation: she becomes the bridge between Africa’s traditional past and its globalized present.

Afropolitanism in *So the Path Does Not Die*

Finaba’s movement from Talaba to Freetown and eventually to America dramatizes the search for a coherent identity amid cultural plurality. Her journey embodies the Afropolitan ethos – a negotiation between global exposure and the pull of ancestral belonging. The most visible feature of Afropolitanism in Hollist’s novel is transnational mobility. Finaba’s emigration to the United States marks the beginning of her transformation into a global subject. Her decision to leave Sierra Leone is fueled by frustration with traditional expectations and the lure of education and independence. As Hollist writes “less than two months after her arrival, Fina was essentially independent, on the American path to success, going to school during the day and working at night. Free at last” (74).

In America, Finaba’s adaptive intelligence enables her to navigate complex racial and cultural terrains. She learns to “code-switch,” to belong and yet remain distinct embodying Selasi’s description of Afropolitan who “belongs everywhere and nowhere” (Selasi 529). Her ability to live between languages and customs and

customs, to adopt American efficiency without surrendering African identity, signifies the hybrid consciousness that defines Afropolitan identity. Finaba's life in the United States reveals the tension between assimilation and authenticity. She is being addressed as an African in her place of work "what the fuck are you doing, African? Juanita the owner of the Academy spoke." The interesting story of how Amanzinga was proud of her African heritage, being an African for all season, devoting herself to Africana and her obsession and love with African dresses, this was exactly what happened to Fina. (82-83) as observed by the writer. There is also an intriguing relationship that existed between Aman and Fina having both migrated from African origin. Though she gains economic and intellectual freedom, she remains haunted by the memory of home- the path that formed her. She is enveloped by nostalgic feelings as Hollist writes "I wish I could go back to my village and sit in the shade of the baobab tree...I want to smell ogiri and palm oil" (176). Finaba continues to reminisce on her past encounter with her grandmother wishing she had the chance to bid her goodbye, she doggedly fights to stand her ground on never to cut the rope to avoid being an animal (158). Finaba's story unfolds within what Homi Bhabha terms the "third space" of cultural in-betweenness. The interrupted ritual of her initiation as a girl -her father's refusal to allow her circumcision becomes an early symbol of her liminal identity. She belongs neither to the fully traditional world of her ancestors nor to the liberated cosmopolitanism that she later seeks. This spiritual dislocation persists even in America, where she feels both visible and invisible.

Hollist reimagines Afropolitanism through a feminine lens, using Finaba's experiences to critique both African patriarchy and Western gender politics. Her migration to America initially appears liberating: she gains an education, secures employment, and marries an African - American man, embodying what Ashleigh Harris calls "the feminine articulation of Afropolitan agency" (Harris 52). However the marriage exposes the fragility of her newfound freedom. Her husband's betrayal and her ensuing divorce remind her that Western spaces do not guarantee gender equality, even in America, she found freedom without belonging. Through these experiences, Hollist underscores that the Afropolitan woman's struggle transcends geography -it is a confrontation with systemic patriarchies that transcends borders.

The title *So the Path Does Not Die* encapsulates Hollist's Afropolitan philosophy. The "path" represents cultural memory, ancestral continuity, and moral grounding. Finaba's global journey -departure, displacement, and return symbolizes the circular pattern of Afropolitan consciousness: movement that preserves connection. When Finaba returns to Sierra Leone, she is transformed yet rooted. Her return affirms Selasi's insistence that to be Afropolitan is to "remember and remake home" (529). Hollist's metaphor of the enduring path thus expresses the moral essence of Afropolitanism: continuity through change, remembrance through renewal.

Conclusion

Hollist presents a vivid portrayal of Africanness and Afropolitanism demonstrating how cultural roots and tradition can be retained while embracing global mobility. Through Finaba's transnational journey, He explores both the possibilities and challenges of global African identity as well as the ongoing negotiation between home and exile. By depicting a woman who moves across continents yet remain deeply connected to her origin, Hollist affirms the resilience of the African spirit in an increasingly globalised world. The novel insists on the imperative to remember, preserve and renew the cultural trajectories that define Africa's place in the world.

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