

# Ecolojah: A Tangible Pan-African Ideal

*Ecolojah: un ideal tangible panafricano*

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## RESUMEN

This paper aims to underscore the contribution of an African Diaspora family upon returning to their Motherland-Benin, Africa. The agro-ecological primary school Ecolojah, created by the Returnees -Mère Jah and Père Jah-, is addressed in the context of a new educational system that allows rural Sub-Saharan children to learn self-love through a Pan-African inspired curriculum coupled with learning agroecology. From a vantage point, I argue that Ecolojah represents, in certain way, the realization of what the late Carter G. Woodson labeled *Africentric School*.

*Palabras clave: Back to Africa, Africentric Education, Agroecology, Pan-Africanism.*

## ABSTRACT

Este artículo busca subrayar la contribución de una familia de la diáspora africana al regresar a su patria Benín, África. La escuela primaria agroecológica “Ecolojah”, creada por los retornados -Mère Jah y Père Jah-, está enmarcada en el contexto de un nuevo sistema educativo que permite a los niños subsaharianos rurales aprender a amarse a sí mismos a través del panafricanismo inspirado en un currículum acoplado con el aprendizaje de la agroecología. Desde este punto de vista, argumento que Ecolojah representa, de cierta manera, la realización de lo que Carter G. Woodson calificó como *“Africentric School”*.

*Keywords: Regresar a África, Africentric Education, agroecología, panafricanismo.*

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*[...] The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their [...] environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; [...]. It even plants serious doubts about the moral rightness of struggle. Possibilities of triumph of victory are seen as remote, ridiculous dreams. The intended results are despair, despondency and a collective death-wish. [...]*  
(Wa Thiong'o, 1997: 3)

Dressed always in white kente cloth with a sub-Saharan-like scarf on her head, Mère Jah is an eye-catching personality. Her simplicity in look matches her simplicity in contact with people. I came across Mère Jah -accompanied with her daughter- in the hall of the Institute of African Studies (IAS) at the University of Ghana. The committed Returnee in Benin from Guadeloupe, that she embodies, was in Accra to be involved in the *2nd Kwame Nkrumah Pan-African Intellectual and Cultural Festival*<sup>1</sup> held in Accra (Ghana) from June 25, 2017 to July 1st, 2017. The festival gathered sons and daughters of Africa across the board: from African nations and the Diaspora (Americas and the Caribbean). During the presentation of her school *Ecolojah* to the festival, she attracted the attention of a large number of attendants.

In 1997, Mère Jah and Père Jah returned to their ancestral land: Africa. They decided to leave Guadeloupe to come and settle in Benin on the West coast of Africa. With a Pan-African impetus, they created a primary school *Ecolojah*. This new school, while keeping the classical courses, introduces new vision which keeps the African and Africa, in a certain way, at the center of education. More than a mere primary school, *Ecolojah* embodies a real and tangible social movement that may serve as an example for many sub-Saharan nations. Examining *Ecolojah*, the objective of this article is firstly to point out the role played by *Returnees*<sup>2</sup> in Africa and, secondly, to address the introduction of an African-centered -a non-essentialist Afrocentric- school which aims at breaking the colonial system of education.



Mère Jah (credit: Andréa Bomo)

1 The 2nd Kwame Nkrumah Pan-African Intellectual and Cultural Festival was an event—the 2nd one—organized in Accra (Ghana). It was hosted by the Kwame Nkrumah Chair in African Studies under the auspices of the Institute of African Studies (IAS), College of Humanities, University of Ghana. The central theme of the Festival was: “Global Africa 2063: Education for Reconstruction and Transformation”. The keynote speaker of the festival was the Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies, Professor Hilary McDonald Beckles.

2 By “Returnees”, I mean Africans of the Diaspora—sons and daughters of Africans who have been deported through slavery—who returned in Africa in order to definitely settle.

## 1. Back to Africa: Paying one's dues<sup>3</sup>

To Adjéi Kponon's question (Kponon, 2017) *why she returned to Africa?*, Mère Jah answered that, *it is a family that left Guadeloupe to resettle on the ancestral land in Benin in order to bring [their] contribution to the restoration of Africa's greatness*. Despite the gap between the expected and realities in Benin, the Jah family settled in Benin with the firm idea to contribute to the development of Benin and, at large, their Motherland. Mère Jah and her husband have been involved in the building of the Motherland—through Pan-African and agro-ecological education—for more than twenty years now.

As Mère Jah recalled, on their arrival in Benin, people were surprised to see them coming in to Africa while many sub-Saharan desired to leave. Even the late Mathieu Kérékou, a former President of Benin, was not an exception to be surprised by this move to Benin—Africa. President Kérékou helped the Jah family to get their forest estate in Pahou, 25 kilometers from Cotonou. As a Rastafarian, she is an example of and a devotee to the *Back to Africa* movement preached by the late inspiring orator Marcus Mosiah Garvey<sup>4</sup>.

Mère Jah and Père Jah's agro-ecological education scheme, *Ecolojah*, was established in 1998 in Pahou—in the municipality of Ouidah—Benin. The choice of Ouidah, as a place of settlement, is directly linked to their strong will to nullify what is known as “the door of no return”. In fact, Ouidah was one of the many harbors on the coast of West Africa used to deport African captives into the Americas for slavery. This confrontation with the past is part of the process of identity-building of the sons and daughters of Africans who have been forced into strange lands through slavery.

Beyond Benin's national (classical) school curriculum, *Ecolojah* imparts knowledge to pupils on various subjects such as: Pan-African history, healthy ways of living, ecology, craftsmanship, agriculture and sustainable development. Nurturing such a vision, for Mère Jah, enables children to grow up with a certain consciousness of the importance of the environment. This attachment to Motherland's nature and environment led Mère Jah and Père Jah to, naturally, establish in 2001 other facilities in rural areas: orphanages, gardens, canteens, etc. This decision is not only tied to the centrality of nature to the project, but also as an alternative to the massive exodus that sub-Saharan rural areas face.

Despite various problems—especially the lack of financial support—, Mère Jah, through fundraising, succeeded in building new buildings in August 2012. Globetrotte 4 Peace “G4P”<sup>5</sup> was instrumental in that fundraising. The materials of the construction of the first buildings were within the ecological spirit—with bioclimatic materials: straws, red clay bricks, thatched roofs, woods, etc. Her school received 120 pupils in 2013, 102 pupils in 2014 and over one hundred pupils in 2015. Pupils are trained in ways that, beyond self-love, bring them to be aware of

3 I use “Paying one's dues” in the sense James Baldwin used it when he decided to move back to United States (from exile in France) to be instrumental in African-Americans' movements for civil rights in 1960s. To further understand Baldwin's use of “paying one's dues”, read *No Name in the Street* (James Baldwin, 1973).

4 Marcus Mosiah Garvey was one of the most influential proponents of Black Nationalism. In his endeavors to address the plight of Black people across the board, he founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). To accomplish his “Back to Africa Movement”, Garvey launched the shipping company “The Black Star Line” in 1919 in order to save Blacks in the Americas from oppression and racism.

5 G4P (Globetrotte 4 Peace) is an association founded in December 2011 by Julien Masson and Clément Burelle. G4P aims at helping cultural, educational and solidarity activities. G4P reported that they helped raised funds: six thousands Euros (around 4 Millions CFA Franc).

their environment: nature and animals. The success of this scheme brought Mère Jah and her collaborators to think about enlarging the present project to a higher level i.e. the creation of sections devoted to professional training in accordance with the protection of nature: agro-ecology, natural food industry, craftsmanship, transformation of bamboos, valorization of straws, etc. But, compared to the previous couple of years, *Ecolojah* received fewer pupils in 2016<sup>6</sup>. But that decline in numbers, according to Mère Jah, improves the quality of education at *Ecolojah*.

## 2. *Ecolojah*: a Pan-African<sup>7</sup> ideal

Bearing in mind the late Carter G. Woodson's vision detailed in his well-known book, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Woodson, 2000), *Ecolojah* comes, in some respects, as a realization of what the *Father of Black History Month*<sup>8</sup> expressed in 1933. In that book, Woodson shed lights on the mismatch between Chocolate People's<sup>9</sup> needs and their education. Seen from his point of view, *Ecolojah* is probably one of the most tangible of what the New Canton born termed as *Africentric schools*. As he wrote in the introduction of that book (Woodson, 2000: px):

...Self-hatred can be destroyed with self-love. African people must immerse themselves in their history and culture. They must continue the legacy of CIBI (Council of Independent Black Institutions) and build Africentric schools that teach skills and culture.

Over fifty years ago, many West African nations gained independence from European colonizers, but those independences granted neither an economic independence nor a cultural independence. Back to Africa, Mère Jah is one of Africa's daughters to address that issue. As writers like Albert Memmi pointed out the inability of the colonized to be himself again in his well-known book *Portrait du colonisé, précédé du portrait du colonisateur* (Memmi, 1973), up to nowadays, children born in the Sub-Sahara grow up with less self-confidence. There is a need to redirect school curriculum and pedagogy in many Sub-Saharan rural areas. What Memmi labeled as *trou pédagogique* (pedagogic gap) (Memmi, 1973: 125) is what Mère Jah is addressing with *Ecolojah* in rural Benin (Pahou). Beyond endowing children with means of vegetable productions which provide them with a balanced diet, *Ecolojah* is a historic, agricultural and intellectual site. As intended by the tandem, Mère Jah and Père Jah, *Ecolojah* serves, in many ways, to show a new path toward a new Africa and new Africans—new Africans in harmony with their selves and their environment.

Far from being reactionary or hyper-romantic, *Ecolojah*'s scheme is to create in a way to inform children of their African past in order to help them build their personalities without any inferiority complex or shame linked to their skin color. They are introduced to Pan-Africanism and larger illustrious Chocolate figures such as: Soundjata Keïta, Emperor Menelik II, Tafari Makonnen aka Haïlé

6 Read "*Ecolojah*" on the G4P (Globetrotte 4 Peace: [www.globetrotte4peace.com](http://www.globetrotte4peace.com)) website – link: <http://assog4p.wixsite.com/g4pfr/ecolojah>, consulted on June 27, 2017.

7 By "Pan-African" or "Pan-Africanism", I mean the idea or ideology of Africans and Afro-descendants sharing common histories, struggles and destiny. For a similar approach to "Pan-Africanism", see Toyin Falola & Kwame Essien (2014).

8 "Black History Month", celebrated every February, is a month dedicated to the achievements by African-Americans.

9 By "Chocolate People" or "Chocolate", I mean Africans and Afro-descendants across the board. This choice follows the logic of naming things from an African perspective — and a refusal to see and define the world from an imperialistic western viewpoint.

Sélassié Ier, Cheikh Anta Diop, Carter G. Woodson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King Jr., Thomas Sankara, Kwame Nkrumah, Modibo Keita, Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, and many others.

Introducing children to Chocolate figures and giving equal emphasis to Sub-Saharan history as well as the history of other people, in certain ways, follows the call launched by Carter G. Woodson when he wrote that (Woodson, 2000: 154);

...We should not underrate the achievements of Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome; but we should give equally as much attention to the internal African kingdoms, the Songhay empire, and Ethiopia, which through Egypt decidedly influenced the civilization of the Mediterranean world.

It was within that spirit that Woodson encouraged remembering of figures like Phillis Wheatley and Benjamin Banneker whenever we pay attention to the likes of Thomas Jefferson (Woodson, 2000: 155). Such approach, followed by *Ecolojah*, comes as one of the redirecting factors from seeing Africa as a wasteland and thus recognizes its place in world history.

Years after Woodson's suggestion of the *New Program* in which he called for consideration of Chocolate People's history, the Senegalese historian and anthropologist, Cheikh Anta Diop, made similar notes. In his major and well-known book, *Nations Nègres et culture* he insisted on the significance of a people to know their origins—not in the sense of inventing myths. He wrote (Diop, 1954: 19):

...it is necessary to recall [...] the necessity for a people to know their history and to safeguard their national culture. If these have not been studied yet, it is a duty to do so. It is not a question of inventing, from scratch, a history more beautiful than that of others, so as to morally boost the people during the period of struggle for national independence, but to start from the obvious idea that each people has their history. The essential thing for a people in order to better guide their evolution is to know their origins, whatever they are.

As the American historian, Carl Becker, wrote, *History is what the present chooses to remember about the past*<sup>10</sup>. By choosing to remember Africa's important figures, as named above, *Ecolojah* comes as an alternative to the colonial system of education which tends to teach Sub-Saharan children to remember more European figures than their own figures. Such consideration of Sub-Saharan history and figures comes as one of the ways to prevent children from becoming victims of what the winner of 2002 Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting, Chris Hedges, termed as *Historical Amnesia* (Hedges, 2017). If the aim of teaching one person's history to their children must not follow a chauvinistic logic, it must not deny or forget the past—a balanced one. The choice of a Sub-Saharan school curriculum should not be defined by what the West desires; it should rather match with the aspirations of the people concerned. In a sense, *Ecolojah* follows in that direction—matching education with Sub-Saharan aspirations.

As the name of the school suggests, *Ecolojah* teaches children agroecology classes. These classes train them to rely on their environment and natural (healthy) diet. Agriculture without chemical fertilizer is central to their education. Foods in their canteen come from their own garden. *Ecolojah* produces organic products

10 Quoted in Chris Hedges, "The Abuses of History" in Truthdig, posted on September 24, 2017, accessed on November 15, 2017.



such as: vegetables (eggplants, lettuce, carrots, beets, cabbage, basil, tomatoes, spinach, mint); tubers (yams, sweet potatoes, cassava); fruits (mangoes, coconut, oranges, avocados, lemons, cashews); and cereals (soy, sweet corn) (Bomo, 2017). In addition to feeding *Ecolojah's* pupils, these products are also commercialized in direct associative networks with consumers in order to help in the smooth running of the school.

Furthermore, meeting education with knowledge and love of work of land goes, to a certain degree, with Frederick Douglass's pragmatic vision of being valuable to society. As Carter G. Woodson reminds us Douglass's words, *...when we can produce as well as consume wheat, corn and rye—then we shall become valuable to society*<sup>11</sup>.



Pupils at *Ecolojah* (credit: Julien Masson)

### 3. Conclusion

The late James Baldwin once wrote that (Baldwin, 1998: 173), *Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them*. This statement flows to the direction of Carter G. Woodson's call to replace the talking by the doing (Woodson, 2000: 118) “[Chocolate People] needs workers, not leaders. Such workers will solve the problems which race leaders talk about and raise money to enable them to talk more and more about [...] Oratory and resolutions do not avail much”. Teaching Sub-Saharan children with effective training in fields as important as agriculture -combined with the classical fields of study such as mathematics, philosophy, literature, history, etc.- best prepares them for manhood and womanhood. Children, who would usually have been neglected in the hyper-intellectualized Pan-African debates, will grow with a Pan-African mindset. They will grow with more self-confidence to face the challenges of their environment. And, hopefully, they will not become what the Kenyan writer, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiongo, called *comprador pupils*<sup>12</sup> i.e. pupils trained with the objective to feel the need of imperialist colonizers.

One can hardly deny that Pan-Africanism, in many respects, has been more tied to the intellectual spheres. *Ecolojah* is, by far, one of the translations of

11 Frederick Douglass quoted in *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Chicago, Illinois: African American Images, p110.

12 Read Ngũgĩ Wa Thiongo, *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*, London: Heinemann, 1981, especially p60.

Pan-Africanism in practice. It de-intellectualizes and popularizes, in certain ways, Pan-Africanism and instills in children the love of Chocolate People in a non-essentialist manner. This new school curriculum paves the way for a new African school which may, in a certain manner, break up with the colonial model of education. In this sense, *Ecolojah* comes as one of the alternative responses to the chains tying Sub-Saharanans to the colonial vision of education. The late Dr Osagyefo Kwame Nkrumah rightly developed in 1964 how the colonial system of education affected Sub-Saharanans in ways that they identify more with colonizers than with themselves (Nkrumah, 1970).

This new vision for education, with important consideration of agriculture, seems adequate in Benin. Indeed, the economy of most of Sub-Saharan nations rests on agriculture. Such consideration of agriculture restores the essential role of farmers, and should not be overlooked by African leaders. Moreover, coupled with Pan-African and *Négritude* atmosphere, this educational system addresses one of the urgent contemporary issues—global warming, climate change (even impending ecological catastrophe)—that the protection of nature represents.

From the other side of the Atlantic, Mère Jah and Père Jah, are taking further the tradition—returning home (Africa)—undertaken by the late Dr W.E.B. Du Bois who returned to Africa (Ghana) in 1961. Like the living Seestah Imahküs who relocated from the United States to the Motherland (Ghana) to contribute, in various ways, to its uplifting with the scheme *One Africa*<sup>13</sup>, Mère Jah is offering a real alternative educational system to Africa with *Ecolojah*.

13 “*One Africa*” is a Health Resort created in Cape Coast (Ghana) by the Returnee Seestah Imahküs. Seestah Imahküs is one of the leading figures of contemporary Back to Africa Movement. Nullifying “the door of no return”, she left the United States of America in the late 1980s and settled in Ghana where she is contributing in various ways to the development of the Motherland. I met Seestah Imahküs in Cape Coast on June 4th, 2017 during my field studies in Ghana. The parallel between Seestah Imahküs and Mère Jah is striking.

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