UHURU JOURNAL

Reconceptualizing African Epistemological Relationship with More-than-Human Natures: Exploring Diasporic Unity.

Alexia Santoro

Edited by: Miah Sears & Kadiata Kaba

Kuba textiles, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

D'Avignon argues that the history of mining capitalism has often studied African miners solely as laborers, ignoring their role as intellectual actors (D'Avignon 3). This reflects a broader colonial tendency to commodify and dehumanize both African bodies and the resources they engaged with, severing plants and minerals from the knowledge systems of their cultivators and miners. This alienation obscures the rich epistemological relationships Africans maintained with more-than-human entities grounded in intellectual traditions distinct from colonial exploitation. This understanding becomes particularly evident when viewed through the trans-Atlantic slave trade, in which Africans adapted their embodied epistemologies to reassemble and innovate their relationships with plants and minerals in lowland South America.

Bright Gyamfi's analysis of intellectual activists Afesi, Nketsia, and Dzidzienyo underscores their efforts to position Africa as central to African-American political education and mobilization, moving beyond notions of Africa as mere heritage or inspiration (Gyamfi 684). They emphasized shared struggles, showing African liberation as intertwined with African-American activism. Building on this diasporic unity, I argue that African epistemologies of more-than-human natures can be reimagined through the lens of African experiences in the lowlands of South America. More-than-human natures-emerge as vital mediums connecting these regions, functioning as a lens for expressing the African worldview while directly rejecting colonial and capitalist systems of commodification and control. More so, this study redefines intellectuality beyond traditional settings, emphasizing how such knowledge fosters resilience and emancipation. By engaging deeply with their environments, enslaved Africans in Latin America developed distinct political imaginations that not only enabled survival but inspired visions of liberation within oppressive colonial systems—insights that also illuminate West African experiences.

This essay weaves together D'Avignon and Osseo-Asare's chapters with Leal's account of African enslaved peoples in what is now known as Colombia's Chocó region. Ana Luisa's oral history of her experiences as an African descendant in Chocó provides a contemporary perspective on these historical narratives. Additionally, the theoretical frameworks of Offen and Voeks further illuminate African epistemologies of more-than-human nature in the "New World".

Rooted in Relation: More-Than-Human Natures in African Communal Life

D'Avignon draws a compelling connection to Osseo-Asare's work, highlighting how both healing plants and knowledge of gold arise from collective and collaborative efforts (D'Avignon 15). Indeed, the transmission of knowledge is deeply rooted in African oral traditions. Illustrating this, Osseo-Asare notes how therapies were inherited within families and shared through commercial interactions and friendly conversations (Osseo-Asare 90). Similarly, Maninka people transmitted gold prospecting techniques to their children by embedding them in narratives tied to the landscape and family genealogies (D'Avignon 11). These bits of knowledge not only exist in collective and communal contexts, but also become embedded in the individual. As individuals move, their knowledge travels with them. Exemplary to this are the ships of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which carried epistemologies embodied in young women and men who still remembered the uses of the plant (Osseo-Asare 83). It is through this embodied knowledge that Africans were able to adapt anew to the cultural, natural, and political landscapes of low-land South America. Indeed, the embeddedness of knowledge is central to understanding its mobility too. However, both D'Avignon and Osseo-Asare illustrate how knowledge moves not only geographically but also evolves through the inclusion of new actors in its space. For instance, Mandem or Mande people are recognized for disseminating technological innovations during their migration (D'Avignon 49). The role of nature is fundamental in this exchange: landscapes familiar to migrants, such as the Birimian rocks, acted as touchstones for transferring mining knowledge to regions like Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. These landscapes fostered a sense of connection, offering spaces that felt familiar and supportive, allowing established practices to thrive in new settings. Migration dynamics further underscore how knowledge of nature serves as a key element in fostering exchange and integration. As Osseo-Asare notes, sharing seeds and cultivation techniques was a means of building community in unfamiliar landscapes (Osseo-Asare 70).

Admittedly, knowledge of plants, gold, and more-than-human natures plays a crucial role in shaping communal identities, practices, and connections. Osseo-Asare highlights how knowledge production on grains of paradise, although widespread, varies across regions and social

groups (Osseo-Asare 96), reflecting African innovation and experimentation. Communities adapted inherited recipes to create localized formulas that were centered around their community needs and practices. Subsequently, Leal asserts how environments actively contribute to the types of societies they build. In Nueva Granada's Pacific Coast, the influx of enslaved Africans, alongside the decimation of Indigenous populations, led to the formation of predominantly Black communities, as white masters' presence was weak. This was due both because they physically couldn't endure the harsh environment, and because they could not establish their haciendas in these terrains (Leal 55). Therefore, African experience and knowledge of similar terrains helped them build a society in which they were exclusively surrounded by their kin. On the other hand, despite what Leal notes, Amerindian and Black communities coexisted in the Colombian Choco (Voeks 286), which resulted in the transfer of ethnomedical techniques. These collaborations were an integral part of the building of solidarity networks that challenged colonial oppression. This is further illustrated in how Amerindian and African women, despite facing different cultural and language backgrounds, shared their knowledge on abortifacients to overcome common hardships (Voeks 284). These healing traditions earned respect and became central to the social and cultural life of these communities. In contemporary Choco, this collaboration and coexistence foster a sense of pride. Ana Luisa proudly states how here in Choco "we recognize ourselves as Afro-descendants, and to this day, ninety-five percent of the people in Choco are Afro-Indigenous"(Ramírez Flórez 3:15-25). This identity further extends to the more-than-human natures. She notes: "We are riverain people, the towns and villages that are built are located next to the river, and more often than not, the towns take the name of the rivers they are located next to. "We belong to a river, more than a town" (Ramírez Flórez 2:50-3:06). Hence, the role of nature is conceptualized as central to their communal identity. On another note, D'Avignon emphasizes the "hospitality" of the mines, where gold was accessible to anyone willing to mine, and where "strangers are welcome" (D'Avignon 49), during times of hardship. This communal ethos extended beyond social interaction, influencing the formation of mining camps that integrated with local villages. The boundary between the camp and the village is fluid. Women come to wash laundry for a wage and return home to nurse children, and exploration teams work to

insert themselves into the social fabric of the villages surrounding their camp (D'Avignon 35). However, as capitalist firms took over, they introduced rigid politics and divisions, disrupting the fluid, communal relationships fostered by more-than-human interactions. Finally, drawing on Catherine Bell's understanding of ritual, D'Avignon suggests that mining practices are not merely economic or technical but culturally and symbolically rich (D'Avignon 11). Rituals in the goldfields involve organized expressions, gestures, and codes of communication that tie activities to cultural practices, human interactions, and shared sacred symbolism. In this context, "digging for gold" was not just an interaction with humans and material nature but with the "unseen world."

The links to the divine and subaltern ways of relating to the natural material are embedded in African epistemological relationships with more-than-human natures. Offen notes that Afro-Latin American ideas of "Neotropical" nature were guided by religious beliefs and cosmologies, suggesting a worldview where earthly events were closely tied to the divine (Offen 499). For Africans, this connection involved a hierarchy of deities, ancestors, territorial and lesser entities who influenced life on Earth, offering explanations, predictions, and control over worldly events. These natural elements were central to broader religious ceremonies. For instance, in Northeast Brazil, grains of paradise were used in animist religious practices; during Candomblé ceremonies, priests and priestesses would sprinkle powdered grains of paradise, pimenta da costa, during their intercessions with spirits (Osseo-Asare 84). More so, each of the Yoruba deities that survived in Candomblé temples was associated with a specific natural and cultural environment, and knowledge of this god–leaf correspondence was critical to solving health difficulties in this community (Voeks 288). Additionally, Igbo communities also used grains of paradise in healing rituals, chewed with kola nuts, and spat onto the ground around statues of gods and ancestors (Osse-Asare 90). These examples demonstrate how more-than-human natures serve as integral actors in the relationships between Africans, African descendants, and their respective divinities. Furthermore, as seen in D'Avignon's account, these spirits are seen as the "real autochthones of the land" (D'Avignon 77). Since the medieval period, there is evidence that orpaillage has been based on a sacrificial exchange between miners and territorial spirits, regarded as guardians

of gold (D'Avignon 17). Engaging in orpaillage not only requires knowledge application, but one must also engage with the desires of the subaltern spirit (D'Avignon 39). Hence, mining gold is embedded in an exchange relationship fostered with these spirits.

Gold, contrary to the Arab or Western fascination with it, was seen as "malignant". The establishment of meaningful cultural relationships with their environments deeply influences various aspects of African life. In examining African relationships to more-than-human natures, we see that it is not merely the retention of knowledge but an ongoing, epistemological relationship that sustains and shapes these connections. This relationship lies in sharp contrast to the Western colonial and neo-colonial exploitation of these natural materials. The upcoming section of my essay seeks to examine this contrast. Osseo-Asare notes how, although with little historical attention, the search for new drugs was a central component of colonial expansion in Africa during the late nineteenth century (Osseo-Asare 109). This same dynamic persists in contemporary West Africa, where, as D'Avignon emphasizes, control over knowledge, particularly mineral exploration, structures the relationships between villages and corporate capital (D'Avignon 39). By examining how more-than-human natures are not simply subjects of commodification in the African worldview, this section will highlight how these elements serve as mediums for emancipation, actively rejecting both external control over nature and the people themselves.

The Emancipatory Potential of More-Than-Human Relations

A central theme in D'Avignon's book is how corporate enclosures threaten West Africa's Indigenous mining tradition, two ways of mining that intricately oppose themselves. He notes how the critique of mining capitalist dynamics is rooted in their symbolism of gold (D'Avignon 69), which in West African cultures is viewed as an occult substance associated with malevolent spirits, raising questions on the moral implications of gold-derived wealth (D'Avignon 24). This view lies in stark contrast to its European symbolism tied to greed and luxury. Comparing these two perspectives reveals how more-than-human natures are not simply seen as resources but as integral elements for interpreting the world. D'Avignon emphasizes that gold in West Africa was not monopolized but was part of a decentralized system. It was incorporated into the aesthetics and

cosmologies of diverse West African societies (D'Avignon 13), becoming more than just a tangible resource—it was a key element in their worldview. Conversely, in Europe, aromatic sources were valued as commodities and aphrodisiacs (Osseo Asare 80), emphasizing their tangible and profitable aspects. Ana Luisa explains how the river is not only a transport method but also the heart of her community's life: "Women go there to wash clothes and kitchen utensils, that is where they converse, they give and receive advice, and sing. Children there play, and men fish" (Ramírez Flórez 3:45-54). This is contrasted to when she explains how, "since the sixteenth century, Spanish colonizers and missionaries, English pirates, and European merchants have employed the paths of the Atrato River. What compelled them to come was the gold, platinum, animal fur, wood, and other natural resources from here to produce riches in other parts" (Ramírez Flórez 5:04-37). The contrasting ways in which these natural elements are cultivated further highlight the differences between African and capitalist approaches to the environment. While capitalist extractive economies tend to be intensive and exploitative, West African practices are marked by patience and respect. For instance, farmers in the region cultivate land for several years, but leave it fallow for extended periods, allowing it to regenerate its fertility (D'Avignon 11). D'Avignon also describes the "ritual life of luck" involved in washing rocks during mining (D'Avignon 44). This key aspect of gold extraction proves that one relies on patience, almost giving gold a "free" characteristic, rather than a controlled one. Within these capitalist frameworks, the use and control of natural resources also reveal broader racial and socio-political dynamics. Leal's account portrays how colonial agents were solely interested in the profits that could be gained from gold. Enslaved people were discouraged from cultivating crops because it was seen as unprofitable. The gold removed from the subsoil enriched slave owners who managed their wealth from the Andean region, investing their profits into further exploitation. Mines, on their own, were of little value; it was the labor of enslaved Black people that made them profitable, thereby securing the elites' economic and social positions (Leal 37). D'Avignon further highlights the racialized dynamics within these extractive economies, noting how the camps in Sabodala were stratified by racial and national groups. Senior management was primarily composed of itinerant white workers, illustrating the entrenched racial hierarchies. Historically, mining was

also shaped by socio-political dynamics: elite and Muslims opted out of mining, while it was predominantly 'the poor', practitioners of African religions and formerly enslaved who dominated orpaillage (D'Avignon 11). These dynamics are echoed in Osseo-Asare's account, where the Cameroonian government sought to promote scientific collaboration between traditional healers and conventional medical scientists to develop standardized and quality-controlled medicines from local plants. However, despite the economic potential of this collaboration, the healers—the "holders" of the knowledge—were excluded from receiving the benefits of these efforts (Osseo-Asare 93).

Colonial and neo-colonial forces have disrupted the epistemological relationship between Africans and more-than-human natures. Through colonial policies, or as Osseo-Asare describes them, "paternalistic laws," these colonial authorities sought to legitimize, appropriate, and control these bits of knowledge (Osseo-Asare 129). The introduction of corporate gold mines, foreign to the region, ruptured the "hospitable" and ubiquitous nature of gold in West Africa. D'Avignon highlights how competing historical claims to gold discovery sparked expectations in rural communities about the returns they and their children should receive from these mines (D'Avignon 24). Similarly, Osseo-Asare observes how the longstanding use of local plants in weaponry and healing was disrupted by colonial occupation (Osseo-Asare 27). Strophanthus, used in these poisonous weapons, was outlawed (Osseo-Asare 115), and therefore the very people who might have built on existing knowledge to accurately identify Strophanthus were banned from using it (Osseo-Asare 123). As Europeans violently occupied Africa, European scientists also transferred epistemological authority to the colonial state. Furthermore, in low-land South America, Africans practicing their traditional medical knowledge were described by Bahia's colonial governor in the nineteenth century as "impostors, criminals, using false medicine, uttering fanatical prayers and blessings; they used to rejoice, to eat and indulge themselves, violating all rights, laws, orders, and the public peace" (Offen 483). On another note, linguistics also arises as a tool for colonial epistemological control and legitimation. Ossseo-Asare highlights: "lines of ownership and rights to both plants and related traditional medicines continues to represent a political dilemma that often sacrifices those with less access to the language of the laboratory" (Osseo-Asare 110). D'Avignon il-

lustrates this point by noting that the category of the "artisanal miner" was created through colonial-era laws regulating "customary mining," a racialized legal framework applied exclusively to the extractive activities of African subjects (D'Avignon 7). Colonial law is surpassed not by its complete disappearance but through its transformation and adaptation within contemporary systems of governance that blend Indigenous, corporate, and state authority. The dynamics of Tinkoto, as illustrated by D'Avignon, reveal a legal and social order where colonial frameworks are both present and circumvented. The guest recliner of Bambo Cissokho serves as a space where licit and illicit economies, artisanal and industrial extraction, and communal and corporate interests blur together, defying rigid legal categories established under colonial rule (D'Avignon 46). This fluidity reflects a form of legal pluralism that transcends the boundaries of colonial epistemology.

On a final note, Osseo-Asare highlights how outlawing poisonous arrows also served the interests of colonial officers and local chiefs who sought to suppress resistance (Osseo-Asare 116). This raises the question of how we can reinterpret the role of these more-than-human natures. Rather than simply viewing them as materials that demanded African labor for colonial, capitalist exploitation, these natural elements can be seen as mediums through which Africans in lowland South America found paths to revolt and emancipate themselves. Offen underscores how this epistemological relationship provoked fear among Anglo-American colonies, who saw it as a potential challenge to colonial power. These anxieties fueled the development of systemic and virulent racist policies aimed at suppressing and controlling Afrodescendant populations and their practice, use, and knowledge of these plants (Offen 497). Similarly, members of the Inquisition interpreted Brujería, which relied heavily on natural materials, as more than mere superstition, seeing it as "el cimarronaje simbólico" (symbolic flight–a unique form of resistance to slavery (Offen 500). Slave traders and planters lived in constant anxiety regarding Africans and their diaspora's expertise with poisonous plants. For people with negligible power over their own lives, magic, centered in their knowledge of more-than-human natures, represented one of the fiercest tools of resistance. This theme is also evident in D'Avignon's exploration of the goldfields, as he notes that resistance to Islam was considered grounds for enslavement (D'Avignon 67). The goldfields

became places where Africans could practice their ancestral religious traditions, offering a natural refuge from both slave raiders and Muslim states. (D'Avignon 51). Leal notes that the existence of gold in the Pacific lowlands, which led to slavery in the first place, opened the possibility for slaves to buy their own freedom (Leal 55). Enslaved people had one free day in which they could mine for themselves and save up enough to buy themselves freedom. (Leal 52). Hence, from 1720 through 1800, freedom was paid for rather than granted (Leal 51). For example, one enslaved man, Santa Gertrudis, mined enough gold to purchase freedom for his entire family, choosing to free himself last (Leal 53). Gold, in its paradoxical alchemy, was both the reason for their enslavement and the means by which they attained freedom, transforming from a tool of exploitation into a vessel of liberation, turning the very substance that shackled them into the key to their autonomy. From there on out, free communities of African descendants in the region began to sprout. Ana Luisa states how in the mid-nineteenth century her ancestors recollected natural resources to sustain themselves through trade, but they were also used to build houses and for medical purposes. They became reliant on their knowledge of the jungle, and indeed Ana Luisa powerfully states how the jungle gave them this autonomy. "In my childhood, I lived the freedom that the jungle gifted to us, and there were no whites and mestizos that came to compete with us" (Ramírez Flórez 14:49).

To conclude, through this study, I propose to redefine the conceptual map of African and African-descended knowledge flows, moving away from unidirectional heritage models to a more interactive and reciprocal historical framework that values the contributions of Afro-Latin America to global and African contexts. Through this lens, we see that African knowledge and the application of knowledge on more-than-human natures can be rather reconceptualized as an "epistemological relationship". It foregrounds how embodied and experiential forms of knowledge shape collective identities, solidarity, ecological relations, and even resistance and emancipation. This intellectual understanding extends beyond textual and institutional confines, challenging dominant narratives that often marginalize these forms of knowing. This approach advocates for an expanded understanding of intellectual activity that bridges the natural and the cultural, the human and the non-human. However, as Offen notes, this contribution is not limited

to Afro-Latin American experiences with nature in the hemisphere but also to broader intellectual currents in the Atlantic world (Offen 498), some of which are worth exploring through this lens.

Works Cited

D'Avignon, Robyn. A Ritual Genealogy: Gold and Subterranean Knowledge in Savannah West Africa. Duke University Press, 2022.

Gyamfi, Bright. "From Nkrumah's Black Star to the African Diaspora: Ghanaian Intellectual Activists and the Development of Black Studies in the Americas." The Journal of African American History, vol. 106, no. 4, 2021

Leal, Claudia. Landscapes of Freedom: Building a Postemancipation Society in the Rainforests of Western Colombia. University of Arizona Press, 2019. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1zxsmqx.

Offen, Karl. "Environment, Space, and Place: Cultural Geographies of Colonial Afro-Latin America." Afro-Latin American Studies: An Introduction, edited by Alejandro de la Fuente and George Reid Andrews, Harvard University Press, 2018. Cambridge Core, https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/afrolatin-american-studies/environment-space-and-place-cultural-geographies-of-colonial-afrolatin-america/83C1492A4C551A463FBDAFAADE23E56E.

Osseo-Asare, Abena Dove. Bitter Roots: The Search for Healing Plants in Africa. University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Ramírez Flórez, Ana Luisa. "Nuestra Orilla." Serie Sonora Podcast, episode 1, "VIVIR PARA CONTAR," 28 Oct. 2023, https://nuestraorilla.co/en.

Ramírez Flórez, Ana Luisa. "Nuestra Orilla." Serie Sonora Podcast, episode 2, "DE DÓNDE VENIMOS," 28 Oct. 2023, https://nuestraorilla.co/en.

Voeks, Robert. "Traditions in Transition: African Diaspora Ethnobotany in Lowland South America." Mobility and Migration in Indigenous Amazonia, edited by [add editor name if applicable], Barghan Books, 2009. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qd5hf.17.