Enduring Paths, Crossroads and Intersections: Path-breaking Knowledges in Pede Hollist’s So The Path Does Not Die.

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Introduction
Published in 2012, So The Path Does Not Die is Pede Hollist’s first novel. Before this, Hollist had distinguished himself as a short story writer with four stories to his credit. His first story, “Going to America” (an excerpt of So The Path Does Not Die) appeared in Irinkerindo: A Journal of African Migration in 2002. The second, “BackHomeAbroad,” anthologized in The Price and Other Short Stories From Sierra Leone, came out in 2011. This was quickly followed by his third story, “Foreign Aid” in the Journal of Progressive Human Services in 2012. And his fourth story, “Resettlement” came out in 2013 in Matatu: Journal of African Culture and Society. It is very clear, from Hollist’s œuvre, that his creative vision and output, so far, has been brisk, consistent, and enduring. It therefore comes as no surprise when in May of 2013, Hollist’s short story, “Foreign Aid”, was shortlisted for the prestigious Caine Prize for African Writers. With such an emerging voice and creative vision, Hollist has arguably secured a place among African writers in general, and established himself as a formidable voice in Sierra Leone literary production in particular, putting him in the ranks of famous and accomplished Sierra Leonean writers like Syl Cheney Coker, Aminatta Forna, and Raymond Sarif Easmon.

So The Path Does Not Die has many centers of focus. The legendary African critic, Eldred Durosimi Jones in a comment about the novel says, Hollist “does too much” and could have written four novels with the material contained in the book.” This assessment of the novel is valid, but it is probably these different strands that make it a great piece of work because Hollist has commendably held all of these pieces together through his use of imagery and narrative structure. Among other things, the novel rekindles age-old themes—such as tradition versus change; the individual versus society; ethnicity, racism, sexism and marginal identities; individual and institutional corruption; Diaspora and home; love and sacrifice; civil war and rehabilitation—with fresh insights and focus. But it is the novel’s treatment of Talaba culture in particular—that is, the examination of this culture’s norms of knowledge production and the specific ideologies and realities they engender—that makes it outstanding. The novelist’s investigation also of how this culture is resisted in Talaba (a fictive town in the north of Sierra Leone) is quite admirable.

African writers in the past such as Chinua Achebe in Things Fall Apart, Camara Laye in The African Child, and Ngugi wa Thiong’o in The River Between had written about cultural clashes between Africa and the West, celebrated the mystery of African cultures, and contemplated on female circumcision, respectively. However, it is Hollist’s
ambivalent attitude to the culture he presents—that is, keeping tradition, yet re-writing it to make it better—that earns him a solid place among these writers. So, as he constructs his writerly identity as a social commentator, Hollist is also preoccupied with establishing his commitment to the tradition of both oral and written forms of stories. He traces his creative impetus to the narrative traditions of African cultures. But even as he does so, he is also aware of his ethical responsibility in revising some of those stories—the stories that constitute societal norms, mores, and traditions. Nevertheless, Hollist’s contemplation on his identity as a creative artist includes a desire not only to belong to a cultural past, but also to identify with the community of writers who have upheld that tradition and kept it alive. So The Path Does Not Die is partly an announcement of that commitment, and the novel’s title holds part of that message. In this sense, then, the novel focuses on African traditional modes of storytelling and their narratological effects. This is so because Hollist frames the narrative structure of his novel to explain African norms of storytelling and design. A close look at the Musudugu myth in the novel’s Prologue reveals how Hollist sets the myth as a narrative schema that dominates the rest of the novel.

**The Significance of the Musudugu Myth**

A myth is an idea or a common belief, widely held and at times mostly false, that is linked to a people’s early history or the explanation of some phenomenon—social and natural—involving supernatural beings or events. Usually, myths produce and reinforce social norms and group beliefs. According to Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick in *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts*:

> The importance of the myth lies in the way in which it encapsulates and expresses beliefs and values that are shared by, and definitive of, a particular cultural group. Thus, a myth may explain the origin of the group (or the world in general), the place of that group in the world, and its relationship to other groups, and illustrate or exemplify the moral values that are venerated by the group. (217)

However, such values and beliefs, which usually belong to a remote past, signify a symbolic consciousness that is the foundation of communal ethos. From a poststructuralist perspective, a myth is a kind of language that expresses the way in which society is structured, and structures meaning. Thus, the French Anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss sees a myth as a language which expresses a surface form of a deep cultural system. Like language, a myth, then, is a sign whose referent is a cultural conceptual reality, taken for granted, and normalized by its usage over time. It is in this sense that Roland Barthes sees a myth as “a system of communication, that is…a message” (261). So, what message(s) does the Musudugu myth communicate? The message certainly partly resides in the four-part structure of the story—the norm, resistance to the norm, the journey, and the return—but also in the fact that the myth is a narrative, and narratives construct reality through their internal logic, or how their multiplicities displace, replace, and re-write each other.

The Musudugu myth originates from the eponymous village Musudugu where
only women live. Men are allowed in the village, but they must leave before nightfall. But Musudugu, ironically, is ruled by a male Supreme Being called Atala who is represented in the village by his daughter known as the Virgin Girl. She controls the affairs of Musudugu through a ruling council and a council leader. The village is established on the belief that men are destructive, and their pursuits in life are driven by their ego; that women in Musudugu can do whatever men can do (and even better), and, unlike men, they are united by a communal spirit of empathy and sharing. However, this way of life does not last for too long in Musudugu; it is challenged by one of its inhabitants, Kumba Kargbo who questions why a man must not spend the night in the village, and why the inhabitants of the village must continue to listen to the Virgin Girl. When Kumba does not get satisfactory answers, she leaves the village in search of knowledge. But when she returns to Musudugu, after acquiring this knowledge, she discovers that she cannot fit into the village society any longer. Her search for knowledge outside Musudugu had made her grow big, and, when she returns, her size destroys the village.

This Musudugu myth reinforces the cultural values and beliefs of the Kurankos of Sierra Leone. The historical remoteness of this myth defies time and place, but its reiteration signifies a social consciousness of certain value systems that are definitive of the Kuranko people. Nevertheless, they are value systems that cannot pass muster. First, the myth underlines an endogenous and sexist value system in the sense that Musudugu is “a village in which only women lived” (iii). It is founded on the belief that “[The] women of this village could do everything as well as, if not better, than the men of neighboring villages” (iii). By emphasizing its social distinctiveness from other groups (the men of neighboring villages,) it underscores values of cultural harmony and cohesiveness. Musudugu “was a place of harmony, of singing and dancing, but most of all of sharing and caring” (iii). But such notions of cultural harmony are based on the “knowledge” that everything has its place in life. This idea is foregrounded by the council leader when she says:

> Each plant and animal has its place and follows its own path. Maize grows best in the rainy season but groundnut grows during the dry season because it does not need much water. When you do not follow the path you will get lost in the bush. (iv)

However, such cultural knowledge of the order of things is, at best, ideological, and is used to interpellate the women of Musudugu to produce compliant and passive subjects. The myth hails the women of Musudugu, who voluntarily acknowledge and even accept the validity of the knowledges of the myth’s dominant ideology under which they live and are subjected to. Such knowledges are, however, very repressive because they circulate ideas about the natural, and in essence patriarchal, order of things which must not be challenged or changed. Therefore, the Musudugu myth is an ideological construction meant to further the agendas of the culture’s sexist ideology. The myth is a discursive and social structure that shapes the individual identities of Musudugu women. The hegemonic knowledge the myth contains is reflected in the fact that “women cried when the time came for their sons to leave. Those who could not bear the separation left
Musudugu” (iii). In this sense, the myth highlights not only the discursiveness of ideological constructs, but also their relation to power—that is, what is agreed upon as normal is mostly the beliefs of those in control. And the unanimity of those beliefs is only possible in the absence of resistance and counter discourse.

In Musudugu, however, there is resistance, and it comes in the person of Kumba Kargbo, who questions the myths and value systems of her society. The abnormal circumstances of her birth foreshadow her anti-normative temperament. We are told that “she was no ordinary child, for she forced her way out of her mother’s belly, feet first” (iii). She represents desired change within Musudugu—a change that is repressed and silenced by authority. When she expresses her desire in front of the ruling council to let darkness cover a man in Musudugu, “Kumba could see from the looks in [the women’s] eyes that some agreed with her” (iv). Her message is one of change and growth; it is one of alternative knowledge production and experimentation. With this desire frustrated and thwarted in Musudugu, Kumba embarks on a journey to the outside world to find out “why darkness should not cover a man in Musudugu and why women should continue to follow the ways of the Virgin Girl” (v).

Kumba’s journey represents a search for knowledge, and it is knowledge that engenders personal growth and self-discovery. These acquisitions are reflected by the fact that she literally grows taller and bigger. But when she encounters Atala, the Supreme Being, two questions come up in their dialogue: First, what is knowledge? Second, what is home? According to Atala, knowledge is not the sensory perception of external reality—in other words, knowledge is not external, but internal. It does not represent a journey to far-away lands in search of it; it is, rather, a “journey into the self [sic] to see what fruit it bears. Only then will you know who you are” (vi). This place within the self that yields knowledge of self is home. In other words, home is not a place, or even an imagined past; it is the ability to come to terms with oneself. Armed with this notion of what constitutes “true” knowledge, and home, Kumba returns to Musudugu to realize that she cannot fit into the society. The narrator states: “Her feet trampled the homes, plants, animals and women of Musudugu. Those who did not perish underneath the weight of Kumba’s enormity fled” (vi). The destructiveness of Kumba’s acquired “self-knowledge” to the people of Musudugu also highlights another dimension of knowledge—it should be proportionate, and take cognizance of others’ positions in relation to oneself. However, in its traditional iteration of knowledge as immanent, the myth reiterates and reinforces the Platonic maxim, “know thyself,” and the Cartesian unitary, pre-linguistic subject. That is, from one perspective, Kumba’s subjectivity is self-constitutive, and has nothing to do with language, and external forces. This position situates the subject as the source of knowledge. From another perspective, however, Kumba’s subjectivity emerges from language, the hailing, or calling, of the myth—thus her interpellation. It is for this reason that one must note that Atala’s view of knowledge is unquestionably patriarchal. It is enunciated to ensure that his control—his interpellation—of the women of the village is not challenged by “external” knowledge. By calling attention to knowledge as immanent while Kumba’s subjectivity is already hailed by the Musudugu myth, Atala paradoxically seeks to direct attention away from the patriarchal ideology of the myth while at the same time reinforcing it. But Hollist revises these contradictions later in the novel.

As I have mentioned above, this four-part narrative structure of the myth frames
the rest of the novel. In this sense, the Musudugu myth parallels the story of the novel in many ways. But in such a parallel, Hollist does not replicate the myth; rather, in significant ways, he revises, and even re-writes, it in the novel. By doing so, he not only foregrounds his ethical responsibility as a storyteller, but also highlights almost a postmodern notion of narrative as an assemblage of language, incidents, and characters. The message of the Musudugu myth does not only reside in its narrative content, but also in its narratological effect. It reinforces the belief that the blatant defiance of traditional norms, for example the search of other knowledges, will destroy the social fabric of a harmonious society. Musudugu’s demonization of Kumba Kargbo as a transgressor and destroyer of the society’s cultural norms reinforces this message in the novel. Later, Baramusu (Finaba’s grandmother) uses this message to indoctrinate Finaba (Baramusu’s grandchild) when she says: “You are not a drifter and troublemaker like Kumba Kargbo” (4). Furthermore, the effect of this message is felt by Finaba’s daughter, Dimusu-Celeste (before her later retelling of the myth), when, after listening to the dirge that ends the myth, “she would feel sad and promise her mom that she would never leave her and never destroy their home” (281). However, imagery is one of the framing devices that Hollist uses to tell and retell, as well as to link and de-link, the Musudugu myth.

**Images of Paths & Ropes**

Images of paths and ropes form clusters that inform Hollist’s creative vision in *So The Path Does Not Die*. The image of path is first introduced in the Musudugu myth when the council leader says: “When you do not follow the path, you will end up lost in the bush” (iv). In this myth, the path is linked to the cultural norm of endogenic existence. It is represented here as monolithic, leaving only one option for the dissenting subject: being lost in the bush. So, the path image, here, introduces the conflict between the individual and society, and the univocality of the traditional notion of path. This image is re-introduced in Baramusu’s admonition to Nabou and Amadu (Finaba’s parents) over the issue of female circumcision:

> **Si-kool** turns our children’s head away from home. The path you and Amadu have chosen for [Finaba] will lead to nothing but trouble. A wise woman walks through the high grass where the elephant has already trod, so she does not get soaked with dew.
> So the path does not die, do not follow footprints in the sand. (3)

Again, as in Musudugu, the traditional norm of female circumcision becomes the path reinforced here by Baramusu. But it highlights a significant feature of traditional knowledge production: it is based on a communal ethos that compels submission, otherwise the dissenting voice faces the possibility of exclusion with all its dire consequences. It sets up an us/them binary which leaves no room for a middle ground for the female subject in Musudugu. So what Hollist does in this novel is to upset this binary by inscribing other kinds of “paths”. In a Foucauldian sense, he ruptures the traditional one-dimensional notion of knowledge available in *Talaba* by providing a multi-dimensional conception, inherent in the other paths, which, in the novel, are literal, metaphorical, and narrative. For instance, when the purification ceremony following
Amadu’s desecration of the fafei (initiation bush) ends in confusion, and Amadu and his family are forced to leave Talaba, we are told that “Finaba and her parents left the village that very afternoon, via a little used footpath behind Amadu’s compound” (13). The path here is literal, and it is through such paths that characters move from place to place. Such paths also represent alternative knowledges or the route to other ways of knowing.

But paths are also metaphorical for Hollist, because they constitute the moral choices, decisions, and human interactions of the characters. This metaphorical notion of paths is highlighted in the following examples. When Amadu and his family move to Freetown and encounter a more liberal culture, the narrator comments that “Freedom to choose one’s path was the anodyne [Finaba’s] parents used in times of difficulty—Nabou’s pregnancy, Isa’s birth, Amadu’s run-ins with his boss—and the mantra they instilled in [her] when she complained that her school mates teased her” (16). In one of her parental pieces of advice to Finaba, Nabou tells her that Dimusu (Finaba’s sister) “died to show us that the cutting is wrong. Now you must show that a woman can drive her own car and build her own house. That is your path” (30). Furthermore, in a vision encountered on her way to Hezekiah Bacchus’ (aka Kizzy—her lab technician) flat at Crowther College to exchange sexual favors for exam questions, Finaba sees herself in a dialogue with her deceased father and Baramusu, her grandmother:

“Finaba, what path is this you have taken?”
“It is the path Si-kool cut for her,” said a voice Finaba recognized.
Her heart skipped when she turned to her other side and saw Baramusu, sitting on a cane bed. She was wearing an indigo tie-dyed camisole with a matching head wrap.
“She is on the path you carved for her the night you snatched her from the fafei,” Baramusu added, whisking her chewing stick to and fro in her mouth.
“I have to pass the exam, papa. I have to.”
“But why do you want to take the easy way?”
“You ask now that you see the rotten fruit you and Nabou have sown,” said Baramusu, who took the chewing stick from her mouth and spat.
“It’s the only way father.”
“No! The only way is to submit to Allah’s will. Come with me. Let us follow in His path.” (46)

The significance of paths as moral choices and decisions underlines the fact that the resistance to traditional paths, in pursuit of other paths, does not imply the absence of conflicts, moral dilemmas, and value-laden tensions. Rather, it does call for moral obligations, clarity of moral vision and values, and an unwavering commitment to those values. Finaba’s vision, quoted above, and its rich evocation of multiple paths re-inscribes and re-enacts the moral tensions inherent in decisions and choices, and the need to follow through with moral conviction. However, the moral-choice path that Finaba follows also signifies her moral growth and journey towards self-discovery. Later, in her life-lessons about paths, she reaches the realization that “while each decision closed some
paths, it also opened others, and she had come to understand that the trick in life was not to become complacent in one’s situation but to seek out its opportunities” (50). This knowledge establishes the complexity and multiplicity of paths—that is, a rejection of a path leads to several other paths; and a decision on any of those multiple paths further leads yet to the creation of other paths.

Another metaphorical dimension of the image of paths resides in its conception as the tie that binds human relationships. Such a conceptualization highlights not only the multiplicity of paths, but also the fact that paths can cross, intersect, and produce life-changing knowledges. This is evidenced in Finaba’s path-crossing experiences with the Heddles, Kizzy, Meredith, Jemal, Aman, and Cammy. Two specific examples that come to mind in Finaba and Cammy’s relationship that reinforce the path image are their reunion after their aborted marriage, and Cammy’s thoughts as he boards the plane from Freetown to the United States of America. In the first, we are told that Cammy “felt happy that he and Finaba were back on track” (189). In the second, Cammy turns around and looks at Finaba and his daughter and decides to return to Sierra Leone later because “this was a path he could not let die” (280). The use of the word track in reference to Cammy and Finaba’s relationship is suggestive of the fact that the knowledges produced through our human relationships are hard earned. As implied in the roughness that denotes a track, the relationship between Cammy and Finaba is fraught with misunderstandings, break-ups, and reunion, which simultaneously threaten and enrich their romance. Through the complex association of the path image with moral choices, decisions, and human relationships Hollist revises, questions, and even disapproves the notion of knowledge as innate and foregrounds a multidimensional version of it. In other words, Finaba’s knowledge emerges from following multiple paths. A single path forecloses her sense of self—as well as the women of Musudugu.

Closely related to metaphorical paths are narrative paths. In the novel, traditional norms and values come as stories that must be told from one generation to the other in order to keep them alive—so their paths do not die. In this sense, then, the Musudugu myth occupies a significant position in the novel’s narrative trajectory. It symbolizes a story of the past that must be told, and retold, to succeeding generations. Baramusu tells Finaba that her “mother sends [her] to si-kool to learn the white man’s stories, but she does not tell [her theirs], the ones that make [them] women” (4). And Baramusu tells Finaba the story of Musudugu, thereby establishing a path from the past, through her generation, to Finaba’s generation. Finaba, in turn, tells this same story to Dimusu-Celeste, her daughter, who re-tells the dirge at the end of the story into a happy song. It is interesting to note that Kumba, Baramusu, Finaba, and Dimusu-Celeste constitute a trajectory of women who, in various ways, tell and re-tell the Musudugu myth, and uphold as well as subvert the tradition of (life) stories surrounding it. This continuum from one generation to the other signifies a narrative path through which stories are transferred and (re)transcribed. However, such a cross-generational path also implies progression away from the past, and changes in socio-cultural realities that warrant a re-examination of the relevance of stories transmitted. The name Finaba means “the storyteller”—that is, someone who is born “to show [Talaba] people the way because [they] had strayed from the path” (4). As a denkileni (someone born with a mission) Finaba “teach[es] through the example of [her] life” (11).
But beyond these characters is the omniscient third person narrator who tells a story about the people’s culture and storytelling traditions. That omniscient narrator is Hollist himself. So, by showing how culture in Talaba circulates through stories, Hollist not only reveals the narrative power of stories to interpellate cultural subjects, but also how by re-writing or retelling traditional stories, Talaba society can reshape its culture without losing the path of storytelling. The title of the novel, therefore, gives an ironic twist to Baramusu’s statement to Finaba that she must be initiated so that the path of circumcision does not die. For Hollist, it is not the path of circumcision that must be kept alive, but rather that of storytelling. In this sense, *So The Path Does Not Die* experiments with the art and act of storytelling to show, not only how cultural traditions—including myths—are mediated by stories, but also how alternative narratives re-write and retell inherited cultural myths and the stories they tell. For Hollist, it is only through such rewriting and retelling that the path will not die, an undertaking that affirms and upholds the tradition and community of storytelling.

A typical example of how the multiple retelling of stories mediates the social and cultural reality of some of the characters in the novel is revealed in the accident narrative of Cammy (Finaba’s boyfriend). This story has three different versions—Cammy’s, Scrap’s, and Anushka’s (two of Cammy’s friends). Each version proffers a different representation of the accident. According to Cammy, on his way home with Scrap and other friends from hanging out on the beach—drinking alcohol and smoking weed—their car hits and kills a little girl. Being too drunk and/or drugged at the time, he does not know who was driving the car before the accident. He wakes up from his drunken/doped stupor and sees himself on the driver’s seat, surrounded by policemen. This narrative clearly constructs Cammy as the driver who hits and kills the girl. Scrap’s narrative states that in order to secure Cammy’s freedom after the accident, Cammy’s father and lawyer friend construct a different narrative about the accident—they “told him what to say,”—and bribe the police to silence (220). Anushka’s narrative puts Chaplin, another friend, on the driver’s seat when the accident occurred. But in his version, Cammy is framed because his father’s position as a judge will make it very difficult to prosecute him. These different narratives of the accident story show how language is used to represent reality. While Cammy and Scrap’s narratives make Cammy the guilty driver, Anushka’s represents him as innocent. Anushka’s narrative frees Cammy’s sense of guilt, and provides refreshing insights into a past of clouded and confusing details. This possibility of counter narratives, and the ability to re-write and retell the past, frees these characters from the constraints of constructed realities through stories. This is Cammy’s response to Anushka’s narrative:

> He felt relieved that an alternative narrative to the accident existed. He wanted to share it – particularly with Fina, whom he realized he had not heard from for two days. He wanted her to see him in another storyline, as a different character, with a different past, and, therefore, with a different future. He wanted to step out of the limitations that the story of the accident had imposed on his life. (225)

The passage illustrates the multiples narratives that sometimes compete to blur, or clarify,
the reality the accident scene portrays. Cammy’s reaction, as revealed in the excerpt, exemplifies his psychological desires to be free from the personal narratives that lock his subjectivity, fix his identity, and cast him in roles of subordination to stories that construct him as a guilty person. Indeed, like the accident stories, our traditional stories have rhetorical force—they become the means by which our identities are shaped. Therefore, alternative narratives should equally be the means by which those identities are unlocked, and re-presented in a new light. It is, perhaps, in this sense that the path-crossing relationship of Finaba and Cammy should serve as a source of knowledge for Finaba to understand her past at Talaba. But even before Cammy could share this piece of information with Finaba, she leaves for Sierra Leone.

Images of ropes function to reinforce communal ethos and connection to traditional norms. Baramusu introduces this image in an admonition to Finaba:

“And that is why we say life is like the bird-scaring rope. The big and little ropes work together to protect the farm from the birds.”

Baramusu halted their stroll, stooped so that she breathed her words directly into her granddaughter’s face. “Remember this: life is when people work together. Alone you are just an animal. So, do not cut the rope. Do you hear me? Never cut the rope!” (5)

Apart from its prescription that Finaba’s identity is only complete through her identification with cultural norms and values, the rope image, like that of path, also specifies circumcision as one of those values that Finaba must identify with. And the efficacy of this overarching cultural voice is immediately manifested on the impressionable mind of the young Finaba, when on her way back home after this warning, she thinks “she heard the forest boom: REMEMBER: DO NOT CUT THE ROPE” (5). Later in America (after having being helped by Sidibe Kakay, a Madingo diamond merchant in Koidu, who is crazily in love with Finaba), when her life is beset by all kinds of problems—immigration, racism, aborted marriage, work challenges—she attributes them to her having cut the rope. She confesses to Aman (her African-American friend): “Baramusu said I should never cut the rope and that alone I was just an animal. Did I listen? No! I have spent most of my life living alone, cut off from or running away from my people” (153). This sense of guilt is not only self-induced, but it also shows how the stories of the past can affect our interpretation of present realities. It further explains Finaba’s unwavering desire to return “home” to reconnect with her people. Images of ropes reinforce connections, but also disconnections, to African traditional norms in the novel. It is through this imagery that Hollist directs the reader’s attention to the issue of circumcision in the novel.

Connecting Images of Paths and Ropes to Circumcision

At the center of the novel’s discourse of paths and ropes is the issue of female circumcision. This subject has taken center stage in feminist, cultural, human rights, and medical discourses around the world. The African feminist, Obioma Nnaemeka, sums up the debate surrounding it in the following words:
The polemic at the heart of the debates about female circumcision revolve around the questions of rights, culture, and civilization – individual versus communal rights, cultural relativism versus universalism, and barbarism versus civilization. (28)

She further notes that there is no disagreement over its practice but over the way at which Western feminists, and human rights activists approach the issue. Indeed, almost everyone (including African feminists) agrees that the practice is bad. The point of disagreement between Western critiques and African feminists often involves the representation of African cultures which practice female circumcision as barbaric, backward, and uncivilized, and the appropriation of non-Western female bodies by Western media as spectacles of mutilation, and gross human rights violation. But the debate itself is more complex than the practice/method argument. As noted by Karen Engle “the complexity arises in part from the fact that women perform the operation on other females and that girls, if old enough to consider it, often claim to desire the procedure. That the practice is deeply rooted in culture also poses difficulties” (1151). Furthermore, as noted by Chima Korieh, the fact that Western societies (England and America, for example) from the mid-1800s to the 1900s had practiced female circumcision reveals the double standards and hypocrisy of the West. Indeed, more contemporary surgical procedures in the West such as vagina reconstruction have led feminists like Engle to ask whether female circumcision in the non-West would be deemed right if the surgery were made more hygienic and medically safe.

Hollist has resituated this debate in *So The Path Does Not Die* by examining its centrality in the traditional culture of Talaba, resistance to it within that culture, and its representation in imperialist discourses. Female circumcision is the path that Baramusu says must not die because it represents rebirth, bonding with others, and a sense of belonging to a cultural community. It is “a journey into the unknown,” says Baramusu, and “you survive best when you can give strength to others and draw some from them when you need it. That is why no one is initiated alone” (6). Baramusu represents women who defend female circumcision. But resistance to the practice is already signified by institutions of change (the school and the hospital) in Talaba, and the presence of city women like Nabou who are opposed to it. The narrator tells us that “Nabou’s city background, particularly that she was not a *musuba*, an initiated woman, irked Baramusu, the most well known *digba* in Koinadugu” (1). Furthermore, the death of Dimusu, shortly after her initiation, blights the practice, and calls attention to the complications that can result from its unhygienic surgical procedures. It is interesting to note that while Talaba traditional culture (in the person of Pa Yatta, the village medicine man) interprets Dimusu’s death as a fulfillment of her mission as a *Denkileni* – to show that “her people were straying from the old ways,” – Amadu and Nabou interpret it as a “warning that initiation was harmful” (11). Such a divide in opinion already signifies resistance, as well as an alternative narrative, to the practice. But Amadu’s desecration of the *fafei*, and blatant violation of Talaba culture in forcefully snatching Finaba from her initiation ceremony, symbolizes the ultimate form of resistance. However, from another perspective, Finaba represents teenage desire for the practice in order to identify with her culture in which she does not want to be considered an outsider. She says, “My age mates
will never trust me. I will be the one who does not belong, who is not a woman. Why is mama doing this to me?” (4).

Like female circumcision, which marginalizes the uninitiated as outsiders, the purification ceremony and curse that follow Amadu’s desecration of the fâfei signifies this society’s way of propitiating for those kinds of taboos, and punishing those who transgress its cultural mores. Indeed, the pronouncement of a curse inspires a sense of guilt, instills fear, and overwhelsms the transgressor with the psychological and cultural burdens of imminent troubles. We see how Barmusu’s words—“if Amadu, Nabou and the child Finaba do not ask your forgiveness…may they never find peace. May they never know the comfort of home! May their inside wither so that no fruit may come from anything they touch and do,”—torment Finaba, even in America (13). She feels cursed by this pronouncement. But this curse is a narrative that merely signifies the role of language in constituting Finaba’s subjectivity, and leading her to a constant sense of guilt. So, even within the traditional setting, Hollist has portrayed a very complex picture of female circumcision. The path of circumcision is difficult to die because it is endorsed by tradition, defended by people like Baramusu, and even desired by teenagers like Finaba who feel excluded from Talaba culture by their identity as non-initiates. But it is a path that is also vehemently resisted by people like Nabou and Amadu.

However, Western imperialist discourses of female circumcision hardly ever portray this complexity of the practice in non-Western cultures. The attitude of Western feminists and human rights activists towards female circumcision has largely been condescending, condemnatory, and colonizing in effect. Finaba’s conversations with Cammy (her boyfriend) over this issue articulate the differing attitudes between the West and African feminists. The television news that provokes the conversation between Cammy and Finaba highlights the role of the Western media in constructing defamatory and negative images about the practice. The TV program carries the news item of a Togolese woman and her two daughters who are granted asylum in America because she fears that “her daughters would be forced to undergo female genital mutilation if she was deported to her homeland” (98). In this broadcast, America is represented as a safe haven for people fleeing from the barbaric act of female circumcision. Also, the granting of asylum is itself seen as an act of “White men saving brown women from brown men” (to borrow the words of Gayatri Spivak)—meaning, rescuing these women from a patriarchal culture that endorses female circumcision (297). The imperialist discourse in the granting of asylum cannot be missed here, but it also highlights the gullibility of the West whose colonizing (a desire to control women of other cultures) tendencies sometimes blind them to the untruthfulness of such stories: in other words, and in some instances, some African women seeking citizenship status in the West have often concocted such stories to gain that status. And the fact that this Togolese woman’s story is in response to a deportation anxiety leaves room for anybody’s guess about the validity of her story.

The discourse about female circumcision in the West reverses the notion of path in the novel. While in Talaba, Finaba’s identity as a woman is only secure when she becomes an initiate of the fâfei; in America, her selfhood and sense of worth are guaranteed by her inalienable human rights, and the free choices she makes in pursuit of her personal happiness. Such liberal humanism not only looks at paths as free, personal choices, but it also pities those who are coerced to follow paths, for example that of
female circumcision. This cultural relativity and perception of selfhood complicates Baramusu’s notion of path (singular), and makes Finaba doubly alienated in both cultures. It is this sense of alienation, captured in the imperialist discourse of Cammy, that ignites Finaba’s resistance to his perspective on circumcision. Cammy represents the Western medical perspective of circumcision. He says, “FGM is not about culture. It’s about medicine – about whether the mutilation is necessary…FGM can cause serious medical problems” (99). Finaba’s counter arguments in this conversation with Cammy are very compelling and indicative of her path towards self-redemption. She advances the arguments of cultural relativism, patriarchal ambivalence, and identity politics to counter Cammy’s medical argument. In the first instance, she opines: “You respect the rights of adults in America and Europe to practice circumcision in the name of religion and personal freedom, but it doesn’t cross your mind that Africans are entitled to the same respect” (101). Furthermore, she cynically states that “the [men] who support circumcision do so to control women’s sexuality. The ones who oppose it do so because they want the woman to be able to give them pleasure” (102). In this sense, the fight over female circumcision, in both ways, is to satisfy male sexual desire while controlling women’s sexuality. Finally, she critiques the ways in which society determines what is normal. She says, “The circumcised, the blind, the deaf, the dumb, and the gay? Yeah, we all know our lives are not as meaningful, satisfying, or as pleasurable as you normals” (104). In a very sarcastic manner, Finaba suggests that the construction of otherness in society is mostly based on identity differences, and what is deemed normal is mostly dictated by power. This observation is sufficiently redemptive for Finaba if also applied in the Talaba context. In other words, she could use this same argument to understand that those in power in this traditional setting basically enforce the practice of female circumcision. However, Finaba’s story and arguments represent the views of African feminists in its articulation of the practice/method debate. Her case in Talaba is suggestive of the fact that the practice is condemned even back home, but Cammy’s method of representation lacks understanding of the cultural practice, and it is completely bereft of any solution to the problem.

African feminists have suggested that the solution to the problem of circumcision resides in reaching a compromise. Even though female circumcision is a path insisted upon by tradition, some aspects of it can be re-oriented to accommodate contemporary realities. Nnamaeka highlights some of the positive values of circumcision such as the teaching of “hygiene, sex education, and other lessons of life,” but she also opines: “One can abandon one aspect (female circumcision) of the context without eradicating the entire context” (36). Views like Nnameka’s open rich possibilities for narratives and discourses about female circumcision. And the individual, such as Finaba, can benefit from this perspective. However, the inconsistencies in Finaba’s behavior—that is, her well articulated arguments with Cammy on the one hand, and her persistent feelings of guilt on the other—leaves the reader baffled. One would have expected her to use these arguments, and the insights provided by her circle of friends, to deal more maturely with her past. This inability on her part to translate her lucidity on the question of cultural agency into self-liberating action leads one to raise significant questions about the meaningfulness of her journey—questions to be quelled only by her later resolve to return to Sierra Leone to face her demons head-on.
The Journey – Diaspora & Notions of Home

What is the significance of Finaba’s journeys? How do they account for her growth in self-knowledge? Finaba’s journeys are marked by self-discovery and recovery; they expose her to not only knowledges about the self, but also about the socio-economic, cultural forces that shape, and are shaped by, the self. Moreover, such knowledges educate her about the social formations of marginal identities on the basis of difference—in other words, the production of otherness in different socio-cultural settings. Throughout her journeys, Finaba finds herself at the fringes of society, and she is constantly reminded of her otherness. In the different identity positions she occupies in different places—woman and non-initiate in Talaba, foster child and Fulani in Freetown, and African (woman) in America—she finds it difficult to belong to those societies. Her experiences in these different communities constitute her paths towards the knowledge that every society produces and determines ‘others’ on the basis of difference in race, color, ethnicity, gender, sexuality etc., consequently legitimizing what is ‘normal’. And what is deemed normal changes from society to society, a realization she comes to learn based on her multiple journeys. For instance, in Talaba, circumcision is normal, but in America, it is seen as barbaric. And Finaba’s self-recovery from the tensions of her past and the complexity of her diasporan identity largely depends on this knowledge. She sums up her marginal identity in the following words to Edna (Finaba’s foster sister):

I love Baramusu, but looking back, she took advantage of my youthful desire to belong, to not be the odd one out. At [the Heddle’s] house, your parents, especially your mom, made me feel like the odd one out. And don’t deny it. At CC, the so-called citadel of learning, I was the Fula girl. Had to endure all those stupid Fulamusu jokes and comments about our teeth. Yeah, some people tried to hide their real feelings, but every so often that sense of superiority and lack of respect would slip out. I didn’t choose to be a Fula or a foster sister. (152)

But her marginality does not only belong to her past. Even in America she is faced with racism, sexism, and other forms of discriminations that force her into the margins of society. She is sexually and financially exploited by Jemal (the man Finaba marries to get her status as an American citizen); she becomes a victim of negative stereotypes about Africans, and her nonimmigrant status forces her into all kinds of shady deals and maneuvers to gain legal status. These experiences impose upon her a borderland existence, and America becomes a liminal space, which she cannot call home away from home (Talaba). This state of in-betweeness is a source of great frustration for Finaba. Her feeling of alienation is what partly causes her to desire her home in Talaba as the place where she truly belongs.

However, the notion of home is a complex one for the diasporan subject, which Finaba becomes in her journeys. The lack of a past and present place that one can call home doubly alienates migrant subjects, and usually compels a cultural hybridity and mixing resulting in the formation of home in diasporan communities that Homi Bhabha calls a third space. But faced with her perennial status of otherness, Finaba imagines a
home in Africa where she thinks she can easily integrate and belong. However, this desire to return home is underpinned by the status of marginality Baramusu’s curse manifests in her life. She reveals this in a dialogue with Aman:

“I [had] wanted to go back to the village to talk to the old folks who knew my father.”

“why?”

Fina hesitated for a moment. “Because my father snatched me from the initiation bush. That’s taboo.”

“You mean FGM?” Aman held her hand to her mouth.

“Circumcision, belonging, society. Not FGM, but my point is that my Family has never been back to Talaba, and we have never made amends for My father’s action. Now’s a good time for me to go and set things straight.” (169)

Finaba’s feeling of guilt not only exemplifies the power of Baramusu’s interpellative curse that constantly constructs her subjectivity. A question that naturally comes to mind as Finaba seeks to connect her bad experiences to Baramusu’s curse is whether her situation in Freetown and America would have been anything different without the curse. Indeed, the complexity of Finaba’s situation resides in the fact that she is constantly pulled back by her experience in Talaba in spite of her best efforts to forge ahead. Edna realizes the traumatic effect of this past in Finaba’s life, and the latter’s resultant feeling of self-pity, when she tells her “Fina, you’re really upset” (152). And Aman, on several occasions, tells her she needs rest. Cammy also tries to jolt her to face reality when he tells her the past that she longs for is only imaginary. He says: “There is not and never has been a “back home” to go to. It’s all in yur heads, a fiction, like tradition and culture, which controls and keeps yur tied to one country, one way of seeing and doing things” (211). For Cammy, the notion of back home is “nothing but seeking refuge in nostalgia” (211). Cammy’s point is valid, especially given the fact that the obscurity of home is brought about by the journeys we make away from home. As diasporan subjects, we assume a hybrid identity (Asian-American, African-American, or even more complex combinations) that makes us different from our original identities; we blend cultures, acquire new knowledges and experiences that blur our vision of home. As noted by Cammy, we outgrow “home, just like we outgrow our childhood clothes and toys” (210). This is the reality Finaba must face in order to redeem herself from her feelings of guilt and self-pity. But Finaba’s path towards self-knowledge is slow and complicated, and sometimes she is confused by the overwhelming sense of her traumatic past. Nevertheless, the significance of these journeys resides in the multiple experiences they provide for Finaba’ self-constitution, -discovery, and -recovery.

The Return

Finaba’s return to Sierra Leone, for the reasons highlighted above, illustrates that her journeys towards self-constitution and -recovery, though enriched by her experiences in Freetown and America, are still incomplete. This return leads her to encounter Mama Yegbe (the old woman Finaba thinks is Baramusu)—the apotheosis of Baramusu—,
listen to the story of Mawaf (the small girl victimized by the civil war and moving along with the blind Yegbe), and give birth to Dimusu-Celeste (a symbolic act of regeneration, but also a manifestation of the cultural hybridity she has been through, a fact reflected in the combination of the child’s African and Western names). By her return, Finaba gets to prove Cammy right: there is no past to return to. She finds the social and cultural fabric of Talaba in ruins, completely shattered by the civil war. Peoples’ lives are broken, and survivors’ stories reveal a unique pattern of violence against female bodies. This is how her search for her former hamlet in Talaba is narrated:

She looked around the compound where it had all started. But all she could see was the scorched earth – charred pieces of timber and metal; crushed and rusted aluminum cans, cooking pots and pans; torn and bloodstained clothes, odd sandals and gaping shoes; a thinned and browned forest submitting to her gaze; a rice farm disfigured by craters and trenches, yielding a harvest of skeletons, overturned trucks, their wheels in the air, and other broken and rusted machines of war. The remnants of a place where home once stood and lives flourished. (228)

This complete destruction of what was once home also symbolizes a disconnection to a cultural past. As Finaba rightly acknowledges in a statement that is loaded with rich metaphorical associations, “She could not retrieve the rope. There was no place and no one to atone to for her father’s desecration. No Talaba to come back to” (228). Her next attempt to re-connect to her past—by her frantic search for Baramusu—also proves futile. With this reality of a lost past now facing her squarely, she decides to “invest her time and energy on the present and future—Mama Yegbe, Mawaf, the children of the Center and Dimusu-Celeste” (255). This resolution finally frees her from the burden of the past. But that past is recast in a new light in the stories of Mama Yegbe and Mawaf.

Mama Yegbe is the symbolic representation of Baramusu in the novel. Both Baramusu and Yegbe are custodians of Talaba culture, but through their iteration of the same message of female communal bonding in different contexts—circumcision in Baramusu’s case and war in Yegbe’s case—Hollist enlarges the notion of female solidarity beyond the cutting (circumcision). Thus, the statement “Life is when people work together” iterated by Baramusu earlier in the novel (6), and reiterated by Yegbe as “life is when we work together” (250), not only significantly connects the two, but also assumes a deeper meaning. It opens up the possibilities of female solidarity and agency in a culture that objectifies and violates female bodies. It is in this sense that Yegbe’s blindness at the hands of rebels and Mawaf’s story of multiple rapes, forced pregnancy and the death of her baby and drug abuse, and Captain’s incestuous sexual acts with her and her sister, connect and resonate with Finaba’s experiences of otherness. Finaba finally reaches the knowledge that her situation is not unique. Although this path of violence against women does not seem to die, she can find personal fulfillment by dedicating her life to the course of women and their liberation, and working to unite broken families. By revising and enlarging Baramusu’s notion of female bonding beyond issues of sexuality (in this case female circumcision,) Hollist examines other forms of female oppression in Sierra Leone, and calls for social and political activism that
address those issues. In this sense, the novel is liberatory in its vision of women. It is in the symbolic significance of the birth of Dimusu-Celeste, and her re-telling of the Musudugu myth, that Hollist seems to couch this vision. Through her birth and naming ceremony in Sierra Leone, Dimusu-Celeste connects and shares in the cultural past that defines and characterizes her mother’s life as well as the possibilities of female liberation and empowerment that their present (and future) holds. Quite significantly, the child’s naming ceremony is performed by Yegbe, the reincarnation of Baramusu, and the African component of her name signifies the rebirth of Finaba’s dead sister, Dimusu. By this name, Dimusu-Celeste also becomes a Denkileni, and a storyteller. As noted by Finaba, “Names define and shape who we become” (89). But Dimusu-Celeste’s brand of storytelling significantly deviates from that of her predecessors. She does not merely reiterate traditional narratives, or even reproduce traditional knowledges; instead, she re-tells those narratives and undermines their ideological underpinnings that hold our subjectivities captive. This is the new end of the Musudugu myth that Dimusu-Celeste proffers as an alternative to the dirge that ends Kumba’s journey:

“And when the women, men, and animals from the outside world heard Kumba’s song,” she adopted a storyteller’s tone, “they all came to Musudugu.”

“Why are you crying,” they asked.

“Because I have destroyed Musudugu.”

“They laughed.

“Why are you laughing?” Kumba Kargbo asked them.

“Because we can build a new Musudugu,” they answered.

“And so Kumba Kargbo stopped crying and the women and the men worked together to build a new Musudugu and lived together happily ever after. The End”. (282)

By re-telling the Musudugu myth, Dimusu-Celeste highlights a significant feature of cultural myths as texts that can be revised, retold, and re-written. Indeed, Talaba culture and its myth become a narrative that is amenable to different and differing perspectives. In this new ending of the myth, certain significant changes are made to the story. First, Dimusu-Celeste’s version transforms the myth from a sad into a happy ending. The destruction of Musudugu is no cause for tears; it provides, instead, an opportunity to rebuild the village anew. Second, in this rebuilding process, the men and women, not only work together, but they also live happily ever after. This means that the norms of endogenicity and sexism that characterized the old Musudugu have been abandoned and rejected. A new vision of social formation in Talaba based on the mutual importance of and cooperation between men and women is established. Third, in rethinking and reinventing this myth, Dimusu-Celeste redeems and recovers the demonized image of Kumba Kargbo as a destroyer of Talaba culture: Kumba’s resistance to certain cultural norms in Talaba does not mean she destroys her culture; rather, her action calls attention to the fact that the cultural traditions that sometimes give rise to norms in any culture change over time, and, therefore, such norms need revision in order to adjust to current realities. Hollist’s message here is clear. Culture in general, and Talaba culture in
particular, is not a mystical, inviolable entity; it is, rather, a human construct, an inherited text whose narrative strands are reflective, not only of the way human reality is structured in specific time, but also how power structures within cultures shape those realities. Therefore, myths as texts mean that their narratives can be altered, revised, retold, and rewritten to conform to contemporary realities. Nnamaeka makes a similar point when she says:

Tradition is not about a reified past; it is about a dynamic present – a present into which the past is projected, and to which other traditions (with their pasts and presents) are linked. It is to the present, and to how we as members of local and global communities are implicated in creating and maintaining traditions, that we must respond. (37)

This view about tradition is the path-breaking knowledge that finally liberates Finaba and Dimusu-Celeste. Thus, the traditional path of storytelling does not die, but the content of stories becomes open for revision.

Conclusion

So The Path Does Not Die speaks to diverse issues. However, Hollist’s engagement with culture in general and Talaba culture in particular, especially in the representation of cultural traditions through myths as language phenomenon, is quite admirable. The representation of myths as language, not only makes human cultures discursive, but also negotiable, and amenable to multiple perspectives. Hollist examines Talaba culture as a temporal text that opens itself to retelling and revising, allowing for multiple voices that provide divergent perspectives on the society’s cultural traditions and myths. His brilliant handling of the images of paths and ropes—as ever expanding and stretching into different directions—also corroborates this vision. The narrative framing of the novel—between the Musudugu myth and the story of Finaba—illuminates, in fact, how the stories that constitute our myths about heritage and tradition can be retold and re-written. It is, perhaps, this fresh engagement with a fictionalized Talaba culture in Sierra Leone by Hollist that will give this novel its enduring significance.
Works Cited


“Sierra Leonean Up For Caine Prize.” *Politico Sierra Leone*. May 2013. 


Notes

2 See Politico Sierra Leone at politicosl.com/2013/05/sierra-leonean-up-for-caine-prize
4 The Kurankos are an ethnic group in Sierra Leone mostly found in the Northern part of that country. They are a minority group, forming about 7.4% of the population, who also speak a language that is eponymous to their name.
5 Interpellation is a concept coined by French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. According to Althusser, interpellation describes the process by which ideology addresses the individual. He uses the example of the policeman who shouts “Hey, you there” to which at least one individual will turn around to answer the call to explain how interpellation functions. I am using interpellation here to demonstrate how the Musudugu myth as patriarchal ideology “hails” the women of Musudugu.
6 Cartesian subjectivity is premised on the dictum “I think, therefore I am.” In other words, one’s knowledge of self is based on one’s ability to think. However, poststructuralists and psychoanalysts such as Michel Foucault have disputed that position, and suggested that our identity is constituted in language. Furthermore, in his id, ego, and superego theorization of the human mind, Sigmund Freud has adequately shown how our conscious and unconscious thoughts and the social forces shape our subjectivity that impact on us.
7 See Gayatri Spivak’s essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”
8 See Homi K. Bhabha’s Location of Culture.