A brother can also be found in a foreign land.

African Proverb

Dr. Stanley Diamond was an enigmatic and provocative scholar, poet, ethnolinguist, and anthropologist. A genuinely concerned universalist, though unorthodox, he reached into the lives of nations and peoples from Native American Iroquois, on to Arab villagers, Jews of an Israeli Kibbutz, and numerous ethnic groups within the African continent, such as the Anagutas, the Yorubas and especially the Ibos of Nigeria. One wonders what drove this anthropologist. What did he find special and irresistible about Africa and its peoples? Sharp witted, charismatic and penetrating, Diamond answered many questions on cultural divergences, primitivism, civilization, and racial differences. He also provoked many other unanswered questions which continue to gnaw at each one of us.

In his various writings Diamond raised questions concerning issues of civilization and culture, language and literature, especially poetry and its functions in both traditional and industrial societies, concepts of the sacred, human existence and individuation and the drama of life and death. The crisis of civilization catalyzed by fascism and the horrors of the Second World War informed his anthropology and his active support of oppressed peoples. He supported the African cause when Africa was still divided among colonial regimes and very few scholars dared oppose the status quo of world political and military order. Before any African countries gained political independence, he
spoke out against colonial deceptions and atrocities and against the British imperial plan for Africa, especially Nigeria.

In the West at the time interest in the "Negro" centered around the cult of the primitive, often reduced to a "rationalization of sexual primitivism" and the "Negro Fad," which fuelled Western interest in jazz, African art, and sculpture when more and more people longed for a return to preindustrial values. However, these trends did not change representations of Africans as inferior beings. Diamond, on the contrary, used the word "primitive" to characterize traditional societies in which human potential could be expressed in complex and creative forms barely imaginable in oppressive state and bureaucratic societies. His dissertation, *Dahomey: Dynamics of a Proto-State*, which studied the transition from kinship to kingship in Dahomey as a model for state formation, was ground-breaking.

During his travels in West Africa, especially Ghana and Nigeria, he studied the colonial systems of different European countries. In *Nigeria, Model of a Colonial Failure*, a case study of the British colonial system, he illustrates the colonizing process and predicts the socioeconomic and political turmoil that were to engulf Africa after independence.

Intensely aware of the continual encroachments of colonizing civilizations on traditional cultures, Diamond was active both in defining the primitive/civilized opposition and in his political support of marginalized peoples, such as the Iroquois of North America, in their struggles with the government. He spent two years living among the Anagutas of the Middle Belt of Nigeria, the Anagutas, absorbing their sacred sense of the universe and their conception of the cycle of life and death. This experience profoundly affected his own poetry. In his poem "Encounter," he talks passionately of these people who "die singing." It also informed his definition of the primitive in his classic work, *In Search of the Primitive: A Critique of Civilization*, first published in 1974.

Diamond passionately followed the unhappy events of Biafra's secession from Nigeria in 1967. He saw the Nigerian civil war as another sad result of the British colonial policies toward its territories even then independent. Britain had used different and differing ethnic groups in Nigeria to promote and propagate its interest and continue
its hold on its former possession. For the British it has always been divide and rule in order to ignite the fires of civil wars and perpetuate neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism. Once again, in the face of a great deal of opposition, Diamond took sides, spoke out against what he perceived as ethnocide, rallied to the aid of the secessionists, and, despite obvious dangers, traveled several times to the war ravaged enclave in search of answers. He wrote widely and appealed to a largely indifferent world to reconsider options on Biafra.

The following interview, an informal tête-à-tête with Stanley Diamond, took place just before his death in 1991. It focuses upon the major concerns of his life and work.

**Dialogue with Diamond**

MBABUIKE: Professor Diamond, people all over the world, many Africans, have heard so much about your work in Africa, about your anthropological interest in Africa. I understand that this interest goes as far back as 1946 or earlier. It started with your dissertation on the Ancient Kingdoms of Dahomey. Would you tell me why and how, such a consuming interest was nurtured in a young Jewish American New Yorker then surrounded by a world of bigotry and cultural prejudice?

DIAMOND: I suppose the interest first developed as more than interest, as a deep involvement. When I was a kid growing up in New York City, I went to a high school which was—today you would call it integrated—a very good high school up in the Bronx, DeWitt Clinton High School. We had blacks and whites and we had some brilliant black writers and artists who were on the Board of the literary magazine, like Jimmy Baldwin and Bob Blackburn and others. I was writing about black life in America beginning at the age of 14. Before then I had a
child's view of Africa and I've always linked African-Americans with Africans. For many years that link was, if not denied, at least assumed to be unimportant and many black Americans, even when I was in graduate school back in the late 1940s, did not want to be associated with Africa because Africans had been slaves; also, the most important thing for many African-Americans at that time was to be as white as possible, to straighten their hair, lighten their skin—all these things.

MBABUIKE: Professor Diamond, you were still very young during the period of the Harlem renaissance. You were still a very young man. Did this movement have any impact on your view of Africa? Your view of Africa in known to be very positive, very objective and practical. If many African-Americans were very reluctant to associate themselves with Africa, how did you become positively interested in Africa? Was it because of your curiosity as an anthropologist?

DIAMOND: Well, I wasn't an anthropologist yet. It began in high school and before through friendships. My oldest friend, whom I've known for 54 years, is an African-American man, a very fine artist. There were many other things. I had, I suppose you would call it, a prematurely, sensitive, social consciousness. Being a Jew I always tie the two things together, that is, the persecution of Jews and the persecution of Africans and African-Americans were twin horrors of civilization. I suppose it goes back, then, to the question of social consciousness and social conscience. And that became tied in when, during the war, I was with the British army in North Africa, and for a while I was stationed with labor battalions from Basutas and Bechuanas from South Africa who had been sold into the army by their chiefs, who had
been bought out by the South African government. Many of those people, the chiefs, came too and they came as warrant officers. The Bechuanas and the Basutas I was stationed with didn't know where they were, had no idea what was going on up there. It was simply a way of substituting African bodies for white bodies in the South African ratio of troops that were sent away. That further increased my social consciousness and conscience, my experience with the British, and my understanding of the mystifications of British colonialism which I really began to understand only when I was in the British army.

MBABUIKE: Yes, I will come back to the British colonial system in Africa but I still want to explore your initial interest in Africa. In the 20s and 30s and even in the 40s, even after the Second World War, American and European interest in Africa had focused on the cult of the primitive. Were you in any way influenced by this general hysteria about African civilization?

DIAMOND: No I don't think so, except in a reverse way. My work—I suppose my central work—*In Search of the Primitive: A Critique of Civilization*, comes from the sense that the ordinary people of Africa living in villages, in savannahs or in the bush or whatever, that these people knew more about life, lived more expressive and creative existences than people who are caught up in large state organizations, fragmented division of labor, deadly class exploitation with no life cycle. When you're old you're finished. When you're old in a local African society you're just beginning to grow up. Entirely different. I was fascinated. Everybody knew the myths and the tales. Everybody could dance. Everybody could play
music. People made their own musical instruments. There was a rhythm in their life, a cultural expressiveness and creativity which I was aware of even before I became an anthropologist.

MBABUIKE: You mentioned the music of the African peoples you've been in contact with. I understand you are very interested in the ethnomusicality of the Africans. Also, in that period your interest in Africa flowered. There was an interest here, in America and Europe, in what we call the Jazz Age, in the joy and abandon of exotic music and dance from Africa. This interest was clouded with the stereotype of primitivity, of primitivism. In your work we see an interest and, in fact, a passion for the music of these people. What really does African music mean to you?

DIAMOND: Let me put it in one short phrase. The complex rhythms of life. It took me a long time before I could even begin to hear some of the complex rhythms of the drummer. Much more complicated than what happens in American Music. About jazz and Africa, I think this turns out to be more an American development of the years of multi-musicology during that period. Many years ago in the late 1950's when I was in Nigeria, I found myself in Ibibio county and there was a funeral procession and I followed it. Everybody was walking behind so I went too. It was in a little bush village. And we entered a compound, of the deceased apparently, and there was a little drum walker. Mostly drum and two little horns, hornlike instruments. I listened very carefully. The music was superb and then I asked them—and you asked me about tape recorders, I had a tiny little one this big (a thumb)—and I asked the man who seemed to be the leading musician there, I said, "could you drop out the drums?" and they did it. It was pure
Duke Ellington but better. And I said to myself, my God, here is a connection which I've never heard about before, although I was connected with the Institute for Jazz Studies, which was the first such institute established in the United States, in the 1950s. And it couldn't have been from radios because there were no radios there, and it couldn't have been from the Coast because the coast was all highland. So I said where does this come from? They answered, "This is traditional music, this is our music."

MBABUIKE: Is it then your training here in America, in the music school, is it from there that you got your love for African music? Many Europeans, many westerners have described African music as boring, monotonous. How do you find it and what do you say to those who describe African music as being monotonous?

DIAMOND: They have no ear. And their bodies have no rhythm. What else can you say to them?

MBABUIKE: Let me go back again to your original interest in Africa. At that particular period in American sociopolitical history, we had the problem of "passing," as you mentioned earlier on; blacks passing as whites and blacks not being very proud to be called Africans. The Negro fad of the 20s survived until the 40s and 50s and even to a part of the 60s. There was that American interest, as I said, in jazz, African art, sculpture, and especially a return to the values of preindustrial society. You give a new meaning to the word primitivism in your works that I have read. For you primitivism is no longer synonymous with degradation. It is no longer synonymous with backwardness. It is a way of life
and you also mentioned, or, in fact, expounded your theories that all societies, ancient or modern, yesterday or today are equally as complex and as sophisticated as any other. Would you elaborate on that in respect to African civilization.

DIAMOND: You omitted African art, which had a tremendous influence on Picasso and many, many others. But it was more impressive than theirs. In 1984 or 1985 there was an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art showing twentieth century modern art alongside tribal artifacts. Most of the critics noted the greater skill and complexity of African "art." Life in tribal society is more complicated than life in contemporary Western civilization. It is incomparably more complicated because each person can do many things instead of one. Life is full, not only because one person does many, many different things but because as they grow older, people become wiser, their life becomes richer, more spiritual. They grow more wise.

MBABUIKE: I want to continue with this discussion on primitivism. There was a popular misinterpretation of the theory of Freud on primitivism, and this misinterpretation contributed to the promotion of primitivism as we knew it in our own twentieth century. Freud used to exalt the instinct over intellect. What do you say about this in respect to African primitivism?

DIAMOND: It differs. Ibo villages are different from Yoruba villages. Yoruba had a state organization, Ibo did not. But life on the local level was a balance between affective expression and cognitive expression, that is, intellectual expression and instrumental activity. There was this balance; the imbalance in civilization
between the emotions and the intellect probably led to Freud's theoretical distinction between ego and id, and instinct and reason, and so forth. It is a reflection of Western culture. It's not a reflection of human nature at all.

MBABUIKE: It is so depressing and so disturbing when we listen to people make the difference between European, Western Judeo-Christian culture and civilization versus African culture and civilization. African culture, African civilization, has been described as natural and instinctive, whereas the Judeo-Christian civilization is constraining, restraining, legislated and regulated. Is there any aspect of this freedom, let's call it freedom or naturalness, in African culture that captured your attention from the beginning in the 40s?

DIAMOND: Yes. First of all, in traditional cultures there are many, many modes of expression for each individual. They don't have fragmented divisions of labor. We already discussed that. Freedom comes out of the development of human skills and reciprocal relations. Attitudes that are not based upon the domination and exploitation of other human beings. Contest and competition, yes. But not exploitation. Also it's based upon the kinship relationships which are always there as a background in so many different kinds of situations, from birth to death. Freedom is the result of certain kinds of cultural integration. Freedom is not anything which an infant has. In fact, an infant is not free at all—freedom is a human right, but its expression requires the work and participation in a culture.

MBABUIKE: Are we going back to primitivism today? Negro primitivism was used, or, in fact, was expected to be
the bulwark against increasing standardization from the West. What can the West—and you—make of African primitivism?

DIAMOND: Practically?

MBABUIKE: Yes.

DIAMOND: Several different things. I have learned, I hope, what "primitives" had to teach me along the lines we've been discussing. As a transformational scholar, or thinker or whatever, I've been a socialist in the open sense of that term. Not in terms of any state organization or any subordinating ideology. Rather, all socialist, real socialist, ideas go back to the so-called primitive societies. That's what Marx wrote about, that's what the Utopian socialists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries wrote about. Engels wrote about it. That we have had the experience in human history, not one that can be repeated but one that could be understood and, therefore, can be replicated with different forms discharging similar functions.

MBABUIKE: So, if for the purposes of this discussion, of this dialogue, primitivism refers to Africanity, or African culture and "civilization" refers to the Judeo-Christian tradition, what chance does one have against the other?

DIAMOND: Two things. On the one hand there's always a dialectical response against any kind of repression. Even the kids uptown who are whacked out on crack most of the time are objecting to the cultural exploitation, to the unfulfilled possibilities that they have with human beings, to the disconnections, severed connections—crack and other drugs, for that
reason, are called the connection. An important word. Other modes of connection, poetry, other forms of literature, graphic or plastic art if it's art and not simply commodified junk, go in the direction which is almost the opposite of the Western definition of progress, technology, the conquest of nature. We can't conquer nature because of the dialectical response there too; and to use a bad figure, nature is now striking back against Western civilization, which is paying no attention to the consequences of certain kinds of activity. The notion of progress and evolution is on one side. On the other side is the mind and the emotions of the artist, poets, painters and so on.

MBABUIKE: You talk about nature striking back against Western civilization, striking back against Western civilization for dominating nature.

DIAMOND: Yes, because nature was something to be hammered at. You put nature on a great pedestal and you ruined it, thinking you were conquering it.

MBABUIKE: That has always been the motive of the West, to conquer nature, to rebuild the universe according to their own specifications. But on the other hand, the African goes according to nature. He is interested in finding his own role, his own place in the cosmos. However, we also know that man and civilizations are not static, they're dynamic. What then do you say about African culture adapting itself to the need of modernism, to the needs of technological advances of the world. Prayer without work will make us starve and too much work without prayer would kill our souls.
DIAMOND: But you see you know that. I am very well aware of the strategy of Ibo speaking people for example, one example. In introducing themselves to the "modern world," they brought the missionaries into the villages and asked them to build the schools. They got together the villagers, in one village after another, and they contributed what they had so they could send one representative out, usually to a college in the United States. They didn't stick around with England very much. This Ibo-British enmity goes way back. The Ibos didn't have the kind of chiefs and kings, and so forth and so on, that the British could use and manipulate against their own people, and when they tried to appoint the warrant officers as chiefs, warrant chiefs, in 1929, there was an enormous uprising against appointing warrant chiefs who would then serve the British. And the British met other kinds of resistance, such as the Abba uprising. The Abba uprising was the first anti-colonial mass uprising in sub-Saharan Africa. The British never forgot it. Ibos took their swords from the hand of the colonial power insofar as they could, and they tried to use it for themselves.

MBABUIKE: You said the Ibos, and I guess many other ethnic groups in Africa, took the sword from the hands of the colonial powers and tried to use it. On that line would you tell me what should change, or what the Africans should use or exploit in order to survive?

DIAMOND: Yes, they have a tremendous opportunity because the productive equipment of the West, particularly in the United States, is falling apart. The United States is now 14th in the world in infant mortality. The automobile and steel industries are falling apart. All they can claim today is an increasingly bad production of a huge number of agricultured products
of low quality and on top of that sheer accumulation of goods. But it is being outbid on the world market by Japan and Germany and other countries. In part, because of its outdated industrial plant. In part because the overwhelming desire for profits at all cost is self destructive.

MBABUIKE: Professor Diamond, we've been talking about civilizations, African civilizations, Western civilizations, wouldn't you say that civilizations are complementary one to the other and, if so, what do you think Africa has to offer to the rest of the world today?

DIAMOND: Well, I'm not sure what you mean by complementary. I'm assuming you mean that they're related in their structures and their cultures. All civilizations have something in common. But I use the term civilization the way it has been established in the anthropological and other literature. That is to say, as representing the society of the state. In that sense there is a broad similarity, but with the advance of mercantile capitalism in the West and in industrial societies, all states became increasingly powerful against their own people too. Now, it wasn't just a question of simple-minded force. It was a question of changing the structure of a society. For example, kinship relations were substituted for by bureaucratic relations and contractual relations. And the kinship organizations shrunk to little nuclear bits. Having lived in America for many years I think you know what I mean. This is no good for human beings. Now, in this way, some civilizations are more so and some civilizations are less so. If you want to call the Yoruba early states or Congo states organizations and civilizations, you go right ahead and do so. However, these states didn't strike right
down to the core of the lives of the people. People paid their tribute—maybe some of the men went into the army of the chiefs or of the kings, or whatever, but on the whole, the life of the villages after they paid out, remained relatively stable. They took European civilization, the imperial civilization with its military equipment, its mechanical means of communication, all this, in order to subordinate these other civilizations. It was easier to do that than to subordinate village by village those people who were not already recruited into some kind of indigenous state organization. Hence, when the French began to invade Dahomey, now Benin, it took them months and months to fight their way up past every village. The mass armies they could defeat easily, but it was hard for them to fight their way through the villages up to Abomey to the king’s compound. Now, because of how I understand civilization, it is coincident with the development of state, class organization, exploitation, fragmented division of labor, commodification of all kinds of goods, the assault on nature, the development of the cash nexus, emphasis on profit, because of all these things, I define civilization as two steps back and one step forward.

MBABUIKE: Would you say that capitalist society and socialistic society are equally guilty of killing Africans and Third World civilizations, while stereotyping them?

DIAMOND: Yes. But I don't think that socialism or communism, for that matter, has ever existed in the modern world. But we're talking about the Soviet Union, which was not socialism or communism. We're talking about modernization, state capitalism and collectivism and militarization. This has as much to do with socialism as the life of Jesus had to do with the present pope.
MBABUIKE: From your interest in Africa as sociologist and anthropologist you became an activist, a practical activist, practically involving yourself in the affairs of the continent. I want to go back to the period of the colonial era. You had a great interest and, in fact, you did a lot of study and research on the British colonial system and you called the British names. I know you did not like the British system and you called them hypocrites, cultural and military and political hypocrites. Would you tell me when this interest in or this concern about the British colonial system in Africa started? How did the British try to destroy Africa?

DIAMOND: Well generally, of course, long before I went to Africa or knew very much about the particulars of African societies and culture, I was already opposed to colonialism. And, in fact, fascism in Europe was hated by Churchill for example, only because the fascists were trying to colonize white people. They killed them, they put them in camps. Of course, they seemed crazier because their oppression was recognizable—the commodification of human beings, slave labor, all these things. The German state, the Nazi state was an intensification of the whole colonial process, but now in Europe. And that's why Churchill went apoplectic, because in the beginning he was favorably inclined towards both Hitler and Mussolini.

MBABUIKE: And coming back again to the British colonial system, what made you start to investigate this system, and what is the difference between the British and the French? Did you find any difference?

DIAMOND: I don't think there's any significant difference; when it comes down to the shedding of blood they are
equivalent. I know the archives of the colonels, the Algerian colonels, who came to conquer the Algerian People. They make your hair stand up. Very frank, and very horrible and beautifully written. And similarly, but not to the same degree of skill, the archives of the work of the residents and the district officers in British colonies are equally frank in memorandum. Equally frank and some of it equally horrible, saying, no we have no right to be here but we have the power and we will stay and we will do as we wish. Now is there a difference? Yes, I think so. The difference is a cultural difference. Not the difference between direct and indirect rule; this is nonsense. The real difference is cultural. Namely, it was possible under the French system actually to create black Frenchmen, who were creative in their sense of being French, such as Aimé Césaire and even those who were bitterly opposed to the French, like Senghor. But under the British system there was no such participation in the whole of English culture. The British upper class said, you go thus far and no further. And then the Queen would send a declaration to some Cameroonian big chief who put it on the wall of his hut. Made him feel good. I’ve seen this.

MBABUIKE: Some great figures in history and even today, including the former Ambassador to the U.N. Andrew Young, have described the Anglo Saxon as the mother of racism, as the most racist of all nations. Do you think that this racism has been right there and has regulated British treatment of its former colonies?

DIAMOND: Well I think that Andrew Young might have turned it around and be closer to the truth. I think that racism became the rationalization of the British desire to subordinate the world.
MBABUIKE: And especially Africa?

DIAMOND: Especially black men and black women.

MBABUIKE: In your book, *Nigeria: Model of a Colonial Failure*, you faulted the British to an extent that one will think that all colonial failures in Africa were modeled after the British program?

DIAMOND: Oh no, not every colonial failure. I mean there were some who were more brutal than the British, the Portuguese for example. Then there were the Belgians and the Germans for a while in East Africa. But the British were the most powerful metropolitan empire south of the Sahara and they were the ones who insisted that Nigeria, the largest population of any territory south of the Sahara, was a model colony. This is the way it should be done. Of course, they were wrong. It was only propaganda. That's why I called that little book, *Nigeria: Model of a Colonial Failure*, not a model colony. From the beginning, these territories were simply staked out. It had nothing to do with anything that happened inside Africa. It had everything to do with how the British and the French parcelled out territories. Nigeria has no coherence. It's one of the reasons that it fell apart. You can't force it into an historical unity, although I think that the Ibo speaking people gave their lives and their energy more than any other people in British-formed Nigeria to become Nigerians, to give it substance, and they had their throats cut as a reward.

MBABUIKE: You followed the ups and downs of colonialism up to independence. You've been an expert on African affairs and political movements. You were in Nigeria right before independence. You've visited Nigeria
many times before independence, after independence and when the civil strife started in Nigeria, you were also there. In fact, you visited Biafra twice without fearing for your life, even though your life could have been in terrible danger. Why? Is it because of your curiosity as an anthropologist or is it the humanist in you?

DIAMOND: Maybe because, in a miniature scale, I have the consciousness of a revolutionary poet. Not because I'm an anthropologist. I do think anthropologists owe something in return for what they take. But they rarely give back. Anthropology is a distant thing, a more or less neutral profession these days.

MBABUIKE: Even before the Civil War in Nigeria you were there as a field worker, as a researcher, investigating anthropological data of the culture of different ethnic groups. What did you find in Africa as a field researcher?

DIAMOND: Well, I found quite a bit. I thought I did anyway. One of the things I found was the beautiful cosmology of a people I knew in the middle belt, a very "primitive" people, who didn't even know what Nigeria was, but they knew all about heaven and earth. A very rich cosmology, rich rituals, and at that time they were dying out because they were hemmed in by the encroachment of minds and settlements, and so forth. So I learned something about human values connected to the bases of all rituals, birth, death and rebirth, because that's the world in which they lived. And they laughed at me when I told them that was something which was dying out, and they said maybe that's the way you look at it. That's one thing I learned. I learned something about the ordinary speech of human beings living in such cultures,
which is what we would consider as the language of poetry.

MBABUIKE: Would you describe any similarities between those ethnic groups you've studied in Africa and Native Americans?

DIAMOND: Oh yes, of course. I mean, the specificity is different but the general character of the societies is very similar. The consciousness of the people is very similar.

MBABUIKE: And then you were involved in, or had commented on, a number of sociopolitical and cultural problems in Africa. You were in the heat of the debate regarding the Awolowo trial in Nigeria and many people condemned your stand. Some of them have come around to apologize, calling you a prophetic writer, a prophetic person. Looking back now to those trials, are there any recollections that might interest us today?

DIAMOND: Perhaps. I think that the major thing was that Azikiwe was a colonial leader who came up during the colonial period. His grasp of the dynamics of all of Nigeria was, I think, inadequate to the time. He was fighting a battle with Awolowo and the west. Still this is a problem with many easterners and westerners I think. I think that if there had been another consciousness and some kind of united front, Nigeria would be a different place today and the Civil War would probably never have happened. Remember that when Biafra went to war, was forced into it, and declared itself as an independent but not fully autonomous country, Awolowo supported it. It was a struggle for power, I think, between Azikiwe with his cohorts representing the east and Awolowo,
who was a threat to the sovereignty of Zik and his company in the south. So Zik made a union with the northerners. He thought he could ride the tiger but he came back in the stomach of the tiger. They swallowed him up as they tried to swallow Nigeria up. So I looked at the trial in this way. I think it was a very sad business, with all the stories about Awolowo's corruption and so on, but for every story about Awolowo's corruption there's a story about Zik's corruption. I don't judge between the two men. I am simply trying to say that Zik was a great hero of the Ibo people everywhere in Nigeria for many years. Zik made a very important and dreadful mistake. He did not stay with his own people. He left them.

MBABUIKE: Which African leaders influenced you, impressed you the most? And what is your assessment of their contributions to the continent of Africa. Azikiwe, Nkrumah, Awolowo, and others have been described as Pan-Africanists. What do you think?

DIAMOND: I think that the true Pan-African was Nkrumah. I think he was a very great man, but he was starved out by the West. Because if he had been able to build that Volta dam the way he wanted to, then Ghana might have emerged as very strong and united. Instead all these different interests came into play—the market women, the so-called intellectuals, the Ashanti chiefs and their folks; and he went to China when he was trying to get some money at regular interest rates. And when he came back they said, we're sorry but the government is no longer yours. And he went to Cape Coast where he was born and he died. But they didn't hurt him. He had great respect of his people, despite detention. I think he was a great man. This was before his time. The best
MBABUIKE: What do you think Africa can contribute today to world civilization?

DIAMOND: There is a tremendous opportunity because, despite the terrible effects of slavery, of colonialism, of the shattering of large portions of rural existence of the slum ridden cities of neo-colonial rulers and bureaucracy, despite all that, there is, I know, a relatively small amount of capitalization on African soil. Therefore it will be possible to bring in light, productive, advanced technology which doesn't require the huge centralization of nineteenth and early twentieth century capitalism, or for that matter, of the early industrialization of the Soviet Union. You don't have to build roads across the southern strip of West Africa. The costs are enormous and they won't last. You can build monorails, things like this, that need some imagination on the part of the ruling class. In Nigeria they bathe in oil. They know nothing else. Oil, oil, oil. A few are filthy rich. The people are in terrible condition.

MBABUIKE: Since we're talking about problems in Africa, there have been a lot of problems within the continent of Africa that you are aware of. One of the greatest problems, and one of the most inhuman problems or atrocities, would be Apartheid in South Africa. What
do you think is the fate of this horrible system in South Africa today?

DIAMOND: I think there will be token changes more or less within the command of the somewhat liberalized South Africa regime. But I can't imagine it will be completely wiped out. In the first place, there's a huge labor force involved which the whites use because of its subordination of the Africans. Second place, the armaments available to the White South African regime, including nuclear bombs, is frightening. They also have all kinds of other missiles. They have every conceivable kind of weapon which they buy on the world market. They are supplied by all the major countries, sometimes underground, sometimes legally. So I don't think that moral pressure is going to destroy the apartheid system. Economic pressure might.

MBABUIKE: We know that the Western Five, USA, Canada, Britain, France and Germany, and Japan to a certain extent . . .

DIAMOND: Japan is now a Western country . . .

MBABUIKE: are very strong supporters of South Africa, that without these countries South Africa cannot exist. However, recently many people have been pointing fingers towards Israel for their economic and military relationship with South Africa.

DIAMOND: That's right.

MBABUIKE: What do you think about the situation between Israel and South Africa. I would imagine that Israel would be very sensitive to the problems of being displaced . . .
DIAMOND: I think there's a confusion between Jews in other parts of the world and the Israeli Nationalist Zionists because, like all states that come into existence by force and occupation of other people's land, they are only interested in furthering their own political and economic power and will use almost any means to do so. Just the way the United States did, the way Britain did, the way France did, the way the Soviet Union did.

MBABUIKE: I want to come to your literary interests. You've written quite a lot. Poetry and stories. Why do you write? Especially, why do you write poetry?

DIAMOND: Because it's there.

MBABUIKE: In "Encounter" you talked about these people of Africa, the Africans, those people you loved so much. You said that they "die singing." Are you also in agreement with Langston Hughes who called the blacks a people of "a world where to be happy is not to commit a sin." A people who laugh when they want to laugh, laughter reaching both their ears. Is that what intrigues you with Africans, that love of life, that hilarity, triviality and that abandon?

DIAMOND: Yes, but that abandon is a disciplined, cultural expression. The dancers relate to each other through very intricate steps and movements. The opposite of the mechanized, militarized routines of the Rockettes, for example. African dancers dance together but differently. Not everyone does exactly the same thing. So it's a disciplined abandon. I feel that they are like my brothers, and since I have no brothers, even more so.
MBABUIKE: Professor Diamond, many Africans that know you and know your work, and your genuine interest in Africa have described you as and crowned you a chief, a titled man, as a sign of love and respect. Are you entitled to that honor?

DIAMOND: No. But if you're using the term "chief" in the way I think you are, in the way in which Ibo speaking people and others use the term "chief," something which is achieved in the eyes of others, I suppose I can understand it. But this doesn't mean that I deserve it. This is very hard for me to respond to. All I can say is that this is their view of things. I can't explain why, as you say, they perceive me in a certain way as some people do perceive me. If I were to try to give an explanation, it would be along the lines that they know what I have attempted to do in my life in reference to many things, in Africa in particular. It was not for my own glory and benefit and maybe that's what deserves a title in the eyes of these people. But I cannot say. Maybe.

MBABUIKE: Would you say that the dialectics of your African encounter was an exercise in romanticism and a satisfaction of a need for the exotic?

DIAMOND: No. Quite the contrary. If you want to call it an exercise, you would call it an exercise in transcendence, not in romanticism. Now there's nothing wrong with the notion of romantic. It's only that many Westerners invest the notion of romantic with sentimentality. Initially in the relatively modern Western definition, romantic means empathy with the inwardness of the other. That's a romantic idea. It means to appreciate the independence and autonomy of the other. Just as the other is. But the poem "Encounter," although it has that element, I think
deals with transcendence. The way in which such people are able to face and transcend what Westerners would consider their own misery, even their own extinction.

MBABUIKE: You are a renowned poet. You are also a griot and you sing Africa, would you tell us again why you find Africa so fascinating?

DIAMOND: Because it was there that, perhaps for the first time in my life, I found very profound humanity. Not perfection. That's a Western idea, perfection. But humanity, full of conflict and transcendence, struggle and achievement, birth and death and rebirth and life. That's why. I would say it is my sense of that reality, compressed with white heat, that defines a lyric poem. The language of the lyric poem becomes the path to its own transcendence, so that when you read it you encounter all of a sudden a shock because it goes beyond its own language into another realm that's called the sacred realm. The other kind of poetry is narrative poetry. Narrative poetry, penetrating the facts of the case, is the creation of history as a human myth.

MBABUIKE: You are a poet. What does poetry have to do with anthropology?

DIAMOND: That's a very long story, so let me summarize it very quickly. Anthropology is not poetry. On the other hand, it is not possible, in my judgment and the opinions of other people, to understand much of what happens in indigenous societies, in the absence of poetic insight. How can you understand myth or rituals or chanting, or the meaning of dances, unless you have some sense, or the language for that matter, some sense of poetry. Pritchard, the British social
anthropologist, surprisingly wrote that to understand the Nuer religion requires a poet.

MBABUIKE: Among some African ethnic groups, especially among the Ashanti, a poem is a person, therefore poetry is life. Is this correct?

DIAMOND: Yes, it is correct. And that's why there's a developing consciousness among some anthropologists of this truth of existence, which is why poets are able to unite with Eskimo people, Ibo people, they share a common understanding. But poets have been suppressed within this society where they are marginalized, whereas the ordinary poetry of daily life exists, or existed, within indigenous society.

MBABUIKE: Have you been influenced by or have you read transcriptions of African oral literature, African oral storytelling, and to what extent do you subscribe to the tenets of this oral literature? In other words, what do you find significant in African oral literature?

DIAMOND: It's very varied. The wisdom, the really deep morality. In a very complicated way, the cosmology which is real, sensuous and exists. The universe is not an abstraction. The beauty of its rhythms. I know the Ashanti trickster tales. They begin with mantis, the trickster figure, saying what we are going to tell you is not true but you must believe it, or something like that. The understanding of the ambiguity, the ambivalence of human consciousness creating, and at the same time transcending.

MBABUIKE: Since we're talking about civilization, oral tradition, especially oral storytelling is dying away, because of the radio, television, newspapers. An African
philosopher, Hampata Ba of Mali, once lamented that "an old man that dies in Africa today is a whole library that is down by fire," a library contains irreplaceable books. What can we do about it?

DIAMOND: Hampata Ba said that beautifully and it is true. Now books will come, I think, from the African people themselves over a period of time. Maybe as the Ibo-speaking people have done by reaching out and redefining the past.

MBABUIKE: On the subject of poetry, you've read many African poems and many African novels and you are friendly with many African writers, like Chinua Achebe, but what about the problem of language. There has been a debate, an extended debate among African intelligentsia, on the language that should be used by Africans to write. Do you think European languages that are inherited by Africans from their colonial past that can really express African feeling, the African soul?

DIAMOND: Only in poetry.

MBABUIKE: Why only in poetry?

DIAMOND: Because there's a union of poetic consciousness. Let us take Chinua Achebe. Chinua writes poetry in English but he writes in African English, full of irony, insight, and tragedy mixed with comedy. Tragedy and comedy are linked and Africans and all other indigenous peoples know this, just as the pre-classic Greeks knew it.

MBABUIKE: But it is question of comprehension of the written matter. Benjamin Lee Whorf subscribed to the idea that the language we speak at birth is what shapes the
way we view reality, the way we understand the world, and if African writers have to write in a foreign language, are they able to express that African view of the world, African structure of reality, African notion of good and evil?

DIAMOND: Christopher Okigbo wrote in English but he was a great African poet. Achebe knows the colonial milieu as well as any writer in Africa and better than most of them, and he writes about it with great strength. And he understands the shortcomings of anthropology too. Very much so. Well, I'd have to say that poetry comes closer to the African experience. To translate a poem from the Ibo into English means you'd have to rewrite it in English because you cannot do it word for word, but you can test your spirit and rewrite it. That's what a great translation is. Beyond that I can't say anything. But the link is poetry.

MBABUIKE: Would you tell me what you think are the similarities, the common denominators between the Africans and the Jews in their sociocultural and global experiences?

DIAMOND: Well that's a long complicated story. The only consciousness, I think, they share would be on the part of the Jews who understand what has happened to Jews in the world. Otherwise there's very little. No more so than any other white group, but the opportunity, the occasion to understand is there, because of the persecution of Jews.

MBABUIKE: The last question I'm going to ask you is about racism. There are so many racial problems that are related, from the Bensonhurst riots, the Howard Beach racist attacks, the killings of blacks and others
in South Africa, the treatment of Jews in America and elsewhere. How do you as poet and anthropologist concerned with the world order assess all these problems, bring them together into a common perspective?

DIAMOND: Only in one way. As long as we have the kind of social system and culture, such as it is in the Western world, with America being a kind of model for the world. As long as we have such a system, we will have millions of frustrated people, millions and millions and millions. And, where they are not able to penetrate their own mystifications, they will express their impotence and their powerlessness in great rage against groups that are powerless.

MBABUIKE: Do you have any regrets when you think about Africa and your experience there? Do you have any academic or political claims on Africa?

DIAMOND: No, because I have to understand that I am not an African and I even stopped calling myself an Africanist. I think this is a Western kind of intellectual imperialism. But to love is not to become the other. Not to incorporate the other, but to appreciate the independence and creativity of the other. In this way I love Africans but I cannot lie about being an African.