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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Anassa TRAORE, Issa DIALLO, Amadou B DIARRA, PERCEPTION DU DON DE SANG CHEZ LES POPULATIONS DE BAMAKO.....	8-23
Abraham GBOGBOU, L'ECRITURE DE L'HYBRIDITE OU LE PLURALISME LINGUISTIQUE DANS <i>LA CARTE D'IDENTITE</i> DE JEAN-MARIE ADIAFFI.....	24-34
NGODI Etanislàs, CRISES DES PARTIS POLITIQUES ET RECOMPOSITIONS DE L'ESPACE POLITIQUE CONGOLAIS.....	35-56
KODJOVI Kangnivi, ADI Tchilabalo, THE POWER OF EXPECTANCY IN EFE PAUL AZINO'S <i>FOR BROKEN MEN WHO CROSS OFTEN</i> .....	57-70
Fayama Tionyelé, Soulama Kanya, PRATIQUE INITIATIQUE DU "DOGO" EN PAYS GOUIN AU BURKINA FASO : UN FAIT ANTHROPOLOGIQUE EN MUTATION .....	71-85
Adama Samaké THE KURUKAN FUGA CHARTER AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE FORMER MANDINGO SOCIETY: A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S CONDITIONS TODAY .....	86-102
Souleymane TUO, SIMULATING REALITY: MASS MEDIA'S CONSTRUCTION OF SIMULACRA IN BEN OKRI'S <i>IN ARCADIA</i> (2002).....	103-120
Zakaria Coulibaly, REALISTIC PRESENTATION OF AFRICAN SOCIETY AND THE INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY IN <i>THE INTERESTING NARRATIVE BY OLAUDAH EQUIANO</i> .....	121-133
Mohamed MINKAÏLOU, Ibrahim MAÏGA, THE USE OF BAMANANKAN AMONG MALIAN PUBLIC OFFICE WORKERS, A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE ATTITUDES .....	134-147
Kokou APEGNON, LE "ROYAUME" DE LONFO OU LA GENESE DU POUVOIR POLITIQUE EN PAYS AKEBOU.....	148-161
KOUAKOU Yao Marcel, ASSOANGA Kouakou Laurent, L'EVICION D'HENRI KONAN BÉDIÉ : REGARD CROISÉ ENTRE LA PRESSE IVOIRIENNE ET ÉTRANGÈRE.....	162-175
DOUKOURE Madja Odile, LITTERATURE COMPAREE ET IMPERIALISME : QUEL RAPPORT ? .....	176-190
Ibrahima FAYE, RESILIENCE ET CONCILIATION DANS LA POESIE DE M'BAÏE DIAKHATE.....	191-204
KOUADIO Adjoua Philomène, L'ETHOS ET LE PATHOS DANS <i>EXPRESSIONS DE COMBAT</i> DE LAZARE KOFFI KOFFI : UNE ARGUMENTATION MILITANTE OU INDEPENDANTISTE.....	205-216
Konin Sévérin, Nougou M'domou Eric, L'IMPERIALISME ARABE ET LA QUESTION IDENTITAIRE BERBERE AU MAGHREB DANS LES SOURCES NARRATIVES ARABO-MUSULMANES (720-745) .....	217-230

<b>Belco TOGO,</b> <b>LA PROBLEMATIQUE DE LA LUTTE CONTRE L'ENRICHISSEMENT ILLICITE AU MALI DE</b> <b>2014 A NOS JOURS : FORCES ET FAIBLESSES.....</b>	<b>231-256</b>
<b>Sory DOUMBIA,</b> <b>REVISITING THE STRUGGLE OF AFRICAN AMERICANS FOR THEIR ECONOMIC FREEDOM</b> <b>AFTER SLAVERY .....</b>	<b>257-270</b>
<b>Aminata KASSAMBARA, Lèfara SILUE,</b> <b>SYMBOLS AND MEANINGS IN BESSIE HEAD'S <i>WHEN RAIN CLOUDS GATHER</i> .....</b>	<b>271-284</b>
<b>HIEN Sourbar Justin Wenceslas</b> <b>THE RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR OILS AND OILSEEDS (IRHO): A MECHANISM FOR THE</b> <b>EXPLOITATION OF OILSEEDS IN UPPER VOLTA .....</b>	<b>285-301</b>
<b>YA Komenan Raphael, COULIBALY Souleymane,</b> <b>LA MISNUSMA FACE A L'HOSTILITE DES POPULATIONS DE GAO : ENJEUX ET</b> <b>PERSPECTIVES.....</b>	<b>302-316</b>
<b>DIERMA Ousséni,</b> <b>CONTRIBUTION DU PERSONNALISME D'EMMANUEL MOUNIER A L'ESSOR DU</b> <b>CHRISTIANISME EN AFRIQUE A L'ERE DE LA MONDIALISATION .....</b>	<b>317-329</b>
<b>Ibrahima TRAORE, Youssoufou Omorou MAIGA, Abdramane KONE,</b> <b>CRISE SECURITAIRE ET DEPERDITION SCOLAIRE DES FILLES DANS LE CERCLE</b> <b>D'ANSONGO (MALI).....</b>	<b>330-343</b>
<b>Arnaud Romaric Tenkieu Tenkieu,</b> <b>EL CONCEPTO DE CONJUNCIÓN Y CONJUNCIÓN DE SUBORDINACIÓN ADVERBIAL EN LA</b> <b>GRAMÁTICA ESPAÑOLA DESDE LA PERSPECTIVA FUNCIONALISTA.....</b>	<b>344-353</b>
<b>Issiaka DIARRA,</b> <b>DECOLONIZING THE POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN EDUCATION SYSTEMS AND POLITICAL</b> <b>LEADERSHIP BASED ON THE KURUKAN FUGA CHARTER'S ARTICLES .....</b>	<b>354-366</b>
<b>ISSA COULIBALY,</b> <b>EXPLORING WEATHER IDIOMS IN BAMANANKAN .....</b>	<b>367-380</b>
<b>El Hadji Ousmane BORE</b> <b>LA PUISSANCE PATERNELLE : LEVIER DE REGULATION SOCIALE ET DU SENTIMENT</b> <b>NATIONAL DANS L'EMPIRE DU MANDEN.....</b>	<b>381-397</b>
<b>Karim KOMA</b> <b>ANALYSE DU TENDANCIEUX DANS LE DISCOURS MEDIATIQUE : CAS SPECIFIQUE DES «</b> <b>TITRE-CHAPEAUX » DES JOURNAUX RADIOPHONIQUES DE - RFI/BBC -(RADIO FRANCE</b> <b>INTERNATIONALE/BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION).....</b>	<b>398-415</b>
<b>Ali TIMBINE,</b> <b>DOGON RITUALS AS A CONGRUOUS CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND PREVENTION</b> <b>MECHANISM .....</b>	<b>416-432</b>





## REVISITING THE STRUGGLE OF AFRICAN AMERICANS FOR THEIR ECONOMIC FREEDOM AFTER SLAVERY

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### Résumé

Les jours ayant suivi la fin de l'esclavage aux Etats Unis d'Amérique furent plus difficiles pour les anciens esclaves et leurs descendants sur plan économique. Ils devraient se battre ardemment pour obtenir leur liberté économique à travers des systèmes variés pour les fondements économiques. Le présent article vise à décrire le chemin épineux emprunté par les noirs Américains. Pour atteindre cet objectif, la méthode qualitative, plus précisément la technique de l'analyse de contenu, est utilisée pour collecter les données à partir de certains livres, magazines, articles et d'autres sources. Les résultats de l'étude indiquent qu'il y a diverses solutions qui s'offrent aux noirs Américains de notre époque dans leur quête d'une indépendance économique tout en s'inspirant des modèles de luttes gagnantes des Noirs dans le passé. A la fin, l'étude recommande à la génération actuelle qu'elle doit être assez animée de motivation afin de pouvoir se battre pour une meilleure situation économique.

**Mot clés :** amélioration, économie, métayer, migration, noir Américain.

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### Abstract

The days following the Emancipation Proclamation were very tough for the former slaves and their descendants economically. Having been free with almost nothing, they had to strive in order to set up their economic background. This paper therefore aims at describing the very difficult path they have gone through to reach that target despite the various obstacles. To attain the foregoing objective, the qualitative method, mainly the technique of content analysis design, is used to collect data from books, articles, magazines, and other sources. The results of the study reveal that there are diverse solutions for contemporary African Americans to ensure a better economic independence by taking their inspirations from past successful Blacks' struggles. At the end, the study recommends that the current generation should be motivated to fight for a better economic stand point.

**Keywords:** Blacks, Economy, Improvement, Migration, Sharecropper..

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## Introduction

**A**frican Americans are descendants of the former slaves and the free Blacks who lived in America during the period of slavery. Their history is deeply grounded in that of the former slaves. As slaves, Blacks did not own anything from the beginning to a very long time during the practice of slavery even after. Being a belonging in the eyes of the white masters, they were prevented from owning anything as property. The end of that cruel situation put the former slaves and their descendents into a serious economic trouble very hard to get out of. As a matter of fact, they had to experience different strategies in order to set an economic background for the improvement of their living condition.

Since the majority of them worked on the plantations in the South, they tried in that field to earn some money by continuing to work there. They struggled to find a way to progress at the outset of their arrival in the New World. Their numerous attempts in cultivating were fruitless since they had kept on depending on the land owners. For some of them to reach their economic autonomy, they had to leave the rural South for the industrial areas of the North or West. That migration had not only been marked as the

starting point of the economic development of many African Americans but also suggests a very important period in the African American history.

The objective of this study is to revisit the struggle of African Americans for their economic freedom after slavery. This topic has been chosen to describe the difficult conditions African Americans faced at the dawn of their freedom and how they have managed to alter that situation. Another justification is that the aforementioned topic would contribute to enrich the literature on the diverse African Americans' struggles for their freedom in the post-slavery American society. It would also enable Malian students and other readers, interested in American studies, particularly American civilization, to enhance their knowledge regarding African Americans' economic careers.

To be able to attain the foregoing objective, the following questions are thus formulated to ensure the smooth implementation of the current study: What did Blacks do when slavery was abolished? How have they improved that bad economic situation? what is their current position? And what should they do in order to get better? To find answers to these questions, we read and analyzed books, articles, magazines, and

other sources by using the technique of content analysis to interpret the collected data. The sum total of all this has been done in the qualitative methodological framework.

Methodologically, the paper is divided into three major sections. The first section talks about sharecropping and tenant farming, the second one tackles the issue of the Great Migration of African Americans and the last one deals with the political involvement of African Americans as they struggle to improve their life socially and economically.

### **1. Sharecropping and Tenant farming**

At the outset of their freedom many former slaves almost regretted the end of the bondage because they did not know what to do to better their new status. They were puzzled about the style of life to start with. They were proposed new conditions by their former masters. Those conditions, they believed would take them out of misery, proved to be often harsher than the former ones in which they were during slavery. That situation was caused by the large loss of money resulting from the Civil War. After the war, many former masters lost a great deal of their slaves and their materials. Some of them wanted their former slaves to remain with them and work for wages and others just told theirs that they could go wherever they desired. That way, in order to profit

from their freedom, many African Americans thought that they could not feel their freedom as long as they remained at the same place. Parts of them moved and others decided to stay. Among those who left, some returned because they did not get a better situation where they went. Those who stayed did not have all the satisfaction about their new life.

Since they did not have and did not know any other alternative, many of them finished by accepting what was known as sharecropping or tenant farming. They were victims of their lack of materials such as farmland, seeds, livestock, and equipment they needed in their new situation. In an article of “Digital History” by Thomas Ladenburg (2007) a case between a white man, L.P. Thomson and his former slave Luther Mills is explicated:

Why did Luther Mills agree to work for his former master under conditions so similar to his servitude? The main reason is that he could not find work anywhere else, and could not buy a farm himself. Fifty years later, neither Luther Mills nor his descendants were able to own farms, and for that matter, neither were 90 per cent of all African Americans who were either sharecroppers or tenant farmers. (p.31)

The above passage therefore confirms the sad conditions that enticed African Americans to sign trap contracts without really being aware of it. At the same time the amount of debt the white ex masters had to

pay was a handicap for hiring workers to pay normally. But they needed workers who would not have to be paid until they harvested a crop; one of the two labor-intensive cash crops that still promised to make money: cotton or tobacco. Many of those landowners divided their lands into smaller plots and turned to a tenant system. They could get more persons working on those different plots.

The two groups did not have the same system. Tenant farmers had little more means because they usually paid the landowner rent for farmland and a house. They owned the crops they planted and made their own decisions about them. After harvesting the crop, the tenant sold it and received income from it. From that income, he paid the landowner the amount of rent owed.

As to the sharecroppers, they often owned nothing. Instead, they borrowed practically everything: not only the land and a house but also supplies, draft animals, tools, equipment, and seeds. The sharecropper contributed to his and his family's labor. Sharecroppers had no control over which crops were planted or how they were sold. After harvesting the crop, the landowner sold it and applied its income toward settling the sharecropper's account. Most tenant farmers and sharecroppers

bought everything they needed on credit from local merchants, hoping to make enough money at harvest time to pay their debts. That situation pushed a large number of the newly freed people into another undesirable one. They spent a very long time of their lives under the burdens of debts caused by sharecropping and tenant farming which did not make life easy for them. Almost all of their yearly products returned to the white landlords. From year to year, they witnessed an increase of their bad economic living condition.

Despite this bad condition the number of tenant farmers increased since they had nothing else to do. That is why in an article entitled "Sharecropping and tenant farming" provided by North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources/Office of Archives and History indicated us that from 1880 to 1900 there were 53,000 and 93,000 respectively. There were more Blacks than Whites as detailed by the same source. Though many new freed Blacks thought they would reach a better condition, most of them did not reach that goal. The case of Tom, a young black man of 12 years old in 1932 who would have been 80 in 2000, removes darkness to that situation as described by Thomas Ladenburg (2007):

Tom is black sharecropper's child in Alabama. His family (father, mother, and for children) all work for the

landowner. They are all in debt to him (they get \$75 worth of supplies for the growing season, but keeps the books), and they all live in a two-room cabin supplied by the landowner. (p.32)

The excerpt reveals that they did not see the new moon they thought would shine for them. To make the matter worse, new decisions (Black Codes) were taken by some white men to restrict their liberty and make them more dependent on them. Another aspect was either the bad result after harvest or the decrease in the price of the yield. None of those cases inspired the landlords to diminish their share so that tenants or the sharecroppers could get a little.

Those two systems did not make life easier for the former slaves as far as the economic advancement was concerned. Black tenants and sharecroppers had very few opportunities to make their economic dream come true. They just looked for it, but they had been handicapped by their white counterparts who delayed the farm accounts until the next crop had been planted late in spring. At that time, it was too late for both groups to move to another farm. Since the practice kept on till the period after the First World War, the majority of the victims had to look for other ways which they found in moving to other areas where they could have varieties of jobs.

## **2.Impact of the Great Migration**

As far as the impact of the Great Migration was concerned, Richard B. Baker and Stewart E. Tolnay (2015) explained in their respective articles that the Great Migration was the movement of millions of African Americans who left the South for the North and West in order to have a better living condition. This movement was considered as one of the most important demographic events in American history. Northern industries sought a domestic source to fill their labor demands, and found it in southern Blacks. Northern factories flooded the South with labor recruiters to entice workers away. In the article: “The Great Migration of Afro-Americans, 1915-40” Spencer R. Crew (1987) explains the situation that way:

Desperately in need of additional workers, northern businesses looked southward for new sources of labor. Because Afro-Americans made up a large portion of the unskilled work force in the South and because of social conditions there, they became the targets of aggressive recruitment campaigns. Northern companies offered well-paying jobs, free transportation, and low-cost housing as inducements to Afro-Americans to move North. They also sent labor recruiters into the South who received a fee for every recruit they provided for the company they represented. (p.34)

In addition to filling labor shortages, Blacks were frequently brought to the North by the thousands to serve as strike breakers. These industrial jobs, which paid weekly or monthly wages, provided an attractive

alternative contrary to tenant farming and sharecropping.

Nobody can ignore the role played by the Great Migration at the social, economic, demographic, and cultural levels in the northern cities. As far as the economic field was concerned, numerous African American migrants earned a lot at the beginning of the movement. It was noticed in the North that some factory workers could earn wages as high as \$3.00 or \$4.00 a day (FloretteHenri1976 p.54). Living in that “luxurious” condition, some African Americans urged others in the South to move to the North in order to improve their living condition. With what the different members of certain families got at the end of the month around \$103.60 every ten days (FloretteHenri1976 p.55)., they could easily pay the rent and afford some commodities which were out of reach in the South. Those people who were fortunate to be hired to work in factories felt that it was a considerable improvement over other forms of menial labor, even at the expense of crossing picket lines during strikes. Consequently, more Blacks could obtain jobs that were highly paid contrary to what used to happen to most of them in the South. A remarkable evidence of such a situation was the opportunity, first, to rent a house of their choice wherever they wanted. Then,

they could purchase their own houses, mainly in black neighborhoods.

It was noticed that, thanks to the great and strong industrialization, even unskilled workers could find jobs which could permit them to live a better life because of the acceptable wage resulting in them. Those unskilled Blacks contributed to the improvement of their individuals and at the same time they helped their community and the whole nation to be developed. The improved life allowed a large number of them to return to the South when the Great Migration ended. In the South they changed, to a certain extent, their community by bringing some activities which did not exist there. The menial jobs they did in the North or West were things they kept on doing at their native place. After the Great Migration, some Blacks continued to move in search of opportunity as some returned to the South. They discovered how they could use their skill to develop themselves. On the other hand, many others moved to suburbs or better neighborhoods within the North.

One may therefore assume that African Americans obtained a lot from the Great Migration even if they encountered problems in the process. That great movement of Blacks out of the South was a turning point in their experience. The Great Migration led to the establishment of large

black communities throughout the North which paved ways to positive changes. Those Northern communities would later set up the basis for black economic development, political power, and a cultural development.

### **3. Political Positions for more Improvements**

The Reconstruction Era witnessed the granting of crucial rights that were thought to make the former slaves forget, in a way, some of the bad conditions of slavery. Those rights were the three amendments added to the Constitution. Unfortunately, things did not occur as expected because the contents of some of those legal rights (equality, right to vote, etc.) did not please some white conservatives. They opposed to those advantages as much as they could and, at a time, they were helped by the legal body that passed the so called laws because they did not do anything to protect them and did not do or tell anything to those who started to disobey them. That way some conservative whites took measures (the Jim Crow Laws) to separate them from their former slaves with ideas that stood on nothing scientifically proved: the white supremacy. In an article of the Smithsonian American Art Museum (2014) entitled “The Jim Crow South” we can read:

The Supreme Court’s decision created a ripple effect across the South. State legislatures began enacting laws legalizing segregation in public places. Those Jim Crow laws imposed segregation and denied African Americans equality and political rights. The Supreme Court upheld these Jim Crow laws in the 1896 landmark case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which maintained the constitutionality of the “separate but equal” doctrine. (p.2)

What made the matter worse happened when, Booker T. Washington, the most famous Black of that time and the representative of his race, accepted this point of view defended by some Whites in 1896.

After his Atlanta Exposition address, W.E.B. Du Bois and other black intellectuals decided to deny what Mr. Washington explained as to the Black surrender of the civil rights. From that time on, Du Bois urged his race to never give up these rights as long as they planned to reach socioeconomic development while in America because all the citizens of the same nation should benefit from the advantages offered by that nation. An evidence of that was the fact they agreed that they should have college or university training which did not aim at teaching only since their number increased. With that training they could look for other opportunities, though some Whites were against it.

Since the political position is paramount for the economic advancement of any people or race or group of people, Du Bois emphasized it in his daily fights because it was something they already started to occupy long before 1896. As he defended it in his quest for real democracy relating to the situation of the minorities, nobody can know and solve the problems of another person or group or race than those who are the most concerned or interested. By getting access to the political position, Blacks could first express their mind, let people know what their problems were, make people interested in their issues and by the same token they could propose their own solutions or struggled to find them by themselves. These solutions would, for sure, permit them to have a better living condition. For instance, when a black neighborhood had a bad sanitary condition like no running water or lack of drinkable water or had electricity troubles, solving these different problems may affect positively their living conditions.

Another advantage could be the improvement of their living conditions through the positions occupied since they got paid for what they would be doing. Taking for example the positions of mayor, everybody knows that in the municipality he or she has an important role for which remuneration is given which could have an impact on both the social and economic

positions. If we consider our case here, we notice that most of the time if someone occupies this position, before the end of the term an improvement is noticed in their living conditions. Some happen to have one or more houses, car(s) and other things they did not have before in addition to the positive change they bring in their community. Even if the same thing does not happen in America, one may assert that it may lead to self reliance despite the community underdevelopment.

Some examples to illustrate the aforementioned stance may be the case of Robert Wood who was elected as mayor in Natchez, Mississippi by the beginning of the 1870's. He built the first school of the city for his people because of the importance of education in his community. There was also Isaiah T. Montgomery another mayor in the state of Mound Bayou. He served in for several years as mayor. Montgomery recommended self help and education and established technical schools in his town. He reinforced moral codes as did his friend Booker T. Washington.

Talking about the representatives and senators, it is doubtless that they have a very important role for the betterment of their cities and states. This example only is



enough as an evidence of the possibility of empowerment they bring. A representative and a senator knowing the situation of their area may advocate for the improvement knowing that there are possibilities and sometimes knowing where the solution can be found. Going back to the different troubles Blacks faced: legal segregation and discrimination, they were possible with the blessing of the political leaders. They occurred because the congress accepted to defend the separation of facilities, the difference in pay for the same job, the disenfranchisement of Blacks. We all know that all those decisions were taken to handicap African Americans' improvement after slavery. Had this Congress been composed of the Blacks in majority, such decisions would have never been passed. Being aware of the fact that the legal decisions that established white domination; we need not doubt about the importance of the political positions as another means for economic improvement. It goes without saying that some Whites solely wanted to block Black's economic progress that they reacted through similar way.

African American senators contributed differently in assisting their community as illustrated by senators like Edward Brooke (Massachusetts) who served two full terms, from 1967 to 1979. During his Senate career he championed the causes of low-income housing and an increased minimum wage and promoted commuter rail and mass

transit systems. He also worked tirelessly to promote racial equality in the South. We found [at https://history.house.gov/baic/](https://history.house.gov/baic/): Office of the Historian that in late 1934, the *Atlanta Daily World* memorialized De Priest, who lost re-election in his Chicago-centered district to [Arthur W. Mitchell](#), the first black Democrat to serve in Congress. The magazine boosted De Priest as follows:

De Priest, the editors wrote, lifted his "voice in defense of those forgotten people he represented" in Chicago and nationally. Lionizing De Priest as a "gallant statesman and fearless defender" of black Americans everywhere, the editors expressed frustration with Mitchell, who explicitly noted during a speech to an Atlanta church congregation that he did not intend to represent "black interests" per se. Mitchell, the editors noted, "dashed the hopes of every Negro who sat within hearing of his voice, most of whom looked to him as their personal representative in the federal government." (Retrieved January, 19<sup>th</sup> 2022, 8h 30mn)

Another example is the opportunities that were allotted to Blacks. The end of slavery was first a political decision for after the Civil War an amendment was passed to abolish slavery. Then some years later they obtained the status of American citizenship before being granted a so called right to vote. Who gave Blacks these rights the value of which cannot be neglected by anybody? Considering the effects that each of those rights may have normally, if they were done that way no one would talk now about Black poverty or say that Blacks are the poorest in America and face discrimination, segregation, bad schooling, poor economy, etc.

A third instance may be the large number of African Americans who were able to get considerable positions in different offices at the local and federal levels. Through their administrative history we noticed that from emancipation a great number of them occupied positions ranking from U.S. Minister Plenipotentiary to U.S. Consul, U.S. Deputy Collector, U.S. Gauger, City Civil Servant, and so on. Each one of these is a source of economic development in addition to the work done for the city, the state and the entire nation. They were able to obtain these places thanks to their political activism or contributions.

In the light of the aforesaid elements, we may conclude that because of its socioeconomic importance the political position played and still plays an important role in the Black community. It becomes necessary to grant worthy credit to the fight W.E.B. Du Bois and other black intellectuals undertook to bring their people in American political arena. One of the outstanding results of this political position is what we all witnessed, that is the election of Barrack H. Obama as the President of the United States of America. We wonder if this would happen if they did not fight for it. Even if it did not solve all the problems African Americans face, it gave them more consideration. But after the physical emancipation, the economic one that they looked for was not

completely obtained, though. This also depended on the fact that the great majority of Negroes were still serfs bond to the soil or house-servants' positions that did not make so easy the economic independence most of them wanted to reach.

Though the access to political position was considered as an important element in Blacks' economic increase as asserted in some situations and examples explained previously, Du Bois thought of other aspects that could strengthen the results previously mentioned for everybody cannot be involved in politics and all the trainings and skills do not also lead to it. The next and last thing is that everybody does not like it no matter what importance it can lead to. The current segregation and discrimination prevented numerous Blacks from getting access to many advantages. The different trainings that Black students received at the various schools attended permitted to others to undertake activities which lifted them up at both the social and economic levels.

Fields like sports, finance, technology and entertainment were economic keys for numerous African Americans the open doors so long closed to them not only in America, but also in the international scene. From emancipation to nowadays Blacks have been resisting to the different acts of segregation and discrimination. As a result, they

represented and honored their nation at various international sport competitions. That occurred in a lot of Olympic Games since the dark moment of segregation. Others proved at the national and universal levels that their color can never be a hamper to their success. That is why the American basketball, football and hockey have known prominent black competitors who were able, through sports, to improve their living condition and even that of their community.

For example, Michael Jordan is the fourth (4<sup>th</sup>) richest African American with a net worth of \$1.6 billion according to [Taylor Nicole Rogers](#) in “There are 614 billionaires in the United States, and only 7 of them are Blacks”. That is around 1.14%. His wealth comes from sports and endorsements. These are detailed in *Forbes' 2019 Billionaires List*.

Other businesses and music have been ways for another group of African Americans to progress in life. Nowadays lots of them deal with these businesses and they are making enormous progress by showing not only their talent, but boosting their economy as well. At this level we refer to famous African American personalities like: Robert F. Smith the richest black man in the country, David Steward who built his fortune running an IT service provider that counts Citi, Verizon, and the federal government as

clients. Oprah Winfrey made a multimillion-dollar fortune from her media empire. Kanye West may be best known as a musician; Jay-Z grew the proceeds from his music career into a billion-dollar fortune with smart investments. Finally, Tyler Perry is America's newest black billionaire through film and television. These people are among the richest Americans of 2020. They are joined by others working small businesses such as managers of barbing shops, assurances, mortuaries, etc. Office work is another economic means helping African Americans to live their dream of economic success in a land of various opportunities.

## **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that African Americans have been able to reach a certain economic level through their different commitments. Du Bois related that the assessed value of property of black people in Georgia increased from \$14,118,720 in 1900 to \$27,042,672 in 1908. The assessed value of property of black people in North Carolina increased from \$9,478, 899 in 1900 to \$21,258,581 in 1908; and the assessed value of property of black people in Virginia increased from \$15,856,570 in 1900 to \$25,628,836 in 1908. For the black population in the USA as a whole, Du Bois estimated that the assessed value of property

was \$560,000,000. In less than ten years all these results were obtained. That result was improved with the advantages obtained by the Great migration and educational opportunity that followed.

This may not make us forget that the gap is still very wide and even getting wider if we consider the difference in income and the decrease of the number African American billionaires from 2011 to 2020. According to Forbes' Billionaire list, only 13 of the 2,153 people on *Forbes' 2019 Billionaires List* were Blacks. In 2018, that number was 11. Last year, out of 614 billionaires in the United States only 7 of them are African Americans as reported by [Taylor Nicole Rogers](#) on September 4, 2020 in an article entitled: "There are 614 billionaires in the United States, and only 7 of them are Blacks." The worst is that among those 7 the top occupies 125<sup>th</sup> position.

Furthermore, African Americans are still not safe from obstacles that can delay or hamper their economic improvement despite the good results of the Great Migration, the political positions and the other fields. There is an insistent need to continue the fight started by WEB Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Rosa Park, Martin Luther King Jr., etc. The good results in different competitions, the talented musicians and actors in films and television are good things. We may now suggest that there is a serious need of a charismatic leader to manage the community so that the products of the different civil rights movements can be well preserved for the benefit of all the minorities in general and particularly African Americans.

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