

**Matt Bowles:** My guest today is Tayo Rockson. He is a writer, speaker, consultant, podcaster, poet, and professor who specializes in diversity, equity and inclusion. As the son of a diplomat, Tayo grew up understanding the nuances of multicultural diversity while living on four continents. He leveraged his experiences to establish himself as an authority in communicating effectively across cultures and personal branding. He has spoken on stages around the world, ranging from TEDx to the United Nations. He is the author of the book, [Use Your Difference to Make a Difference](#). And he is the host of the top-rated podcast, [As Told by Nomads](#). In 2020, Tayo launched the national anti-racism campaign called [Let's Talk Bias](#). In 2021, Tayo starred in the award-winning movie, Impact and was named one of the 100 most influential remote experts by Remote Weekly.

Tayo, welcome to the show.

**Tayo Rockson:** Thank you, Matt. Thank you. I really appreciate the introduction.

**Matt Bowles:** Brother, I am so excited to have you here. This is going to be such an amazing conversation, but let's just start off by setting the scene and talking about where we are recording from today. Unfortunately, we're not in person.

I am actually in the Blue Ridge mountains of Asheville, North Carolina today. And where are you?

**Tayo Rockson:** I'm in New York City. I am currently in Queens right now. One of the five boroughs.

**Matt Bowles:** Queens. Get the money.

**Tayo Rockson:** Yeah. Queens. Get the money. And Asheville, I've been to Asheville. I remember I had a speaking engagement there. It was one of the universities. I can't remember if it's, is it UNC? Does UNC have Asheville?

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, UNC Asheville. I'm right down the street at the moment. My parents have actually retired here. So, I come through periodically to visit. Definitely a cool spot. So, I think I want to start all the way back. You moved around a lot as a kid. And I know that a lot of your identity was shaped through those experiences. So, I'd like to start all the way back at the very beginning. Can you talk a little bit about growing up in Nigeria and when you were a kid, that was before the transition from the dictatorship to civilian rule in 1999?

So, can you actually take us all the way back to that period as a kid and share a little bit about what that was like for you at that age?

**Tayo Rockson:** You know, I always think about this because it ended up shaping a lot of what I do today, especially with fighting against systems of oppression. But I spent the first decade of my life in and out of three military regimes, and two of them were dictatorships.

And, you know, there was General Ibrahim al Baghdadi's regime, and there was General Sani Abacha's regime, which was, uh, significantly worse, both were horrible, but Abacha was just a terror. And then there was a transition military rule, which was I'm just letting me have a backup. He was transitioning for us to go to civility and rule.

And I remember as a kid, there were a lot of things that were just normalized. You know, you would hear the faint gunshot wounds. We would meet my parents and I would watch a lot of leaders that we admired reporting in exile, they're not in the country, and for some reason they were talking from different countries.

That was because if they were in the country, obviously they would have been jailed or worse. And there were just all these things that we internalized. I knew early on what to do to come back safely, types of conversations to have amongst groups so that you wouldn't say the wrong thing about the government.

And for some reason, you know, when you grew up like that, you just sort of, you just take it in. It's your day to day, but there was always this secret. harboring of hope that I had. I don't know where it came from, but I always had this hope that maybe there would be a chance for us to actually express ourselves.

And I used to always watch the late Nelson Mandela. He's my biggest inspiration. He was combating the apartheid system in South Africa at the time, and he had just come out, of jail. And I remember even before he was in jail, I was just very young. There were all these conversations about getting him out of jail.

And I remember him, you know, having the triumphant walk and then him getting elected. And for some reason, I think seeing him get elected gave me some weird hope. Ours didn't come until five years later, but it was always someone that I had looked up to. It was things like that where I would internalize and create worlds.

I loved a lot of comics that I used to get lost in, in DC and Marvel Superman is my favorite. I follow the X Men and I just used to just go to school, come back and secretly wish for a way for people to embrace his identity. And then, um, May 29, 1999, you know, it happened. That was really the beginning of us traveling and going out to different parts of the world.

**Matt Bowles:** Can you talk a little bit as well about your dad's job, what he did that led you to those other places, and what some of the lessons were that you learned from him in those early years?

**Tayo Rockson:** Well, my dad is a diplomat. So, for anyone listening, if you're a diplomat, you essentially represent the country that you're from to wherever you get posted.

That was what he was, right? He, sometimes when he got posted, he might be doing something with the immigration office. He might do something with the finance office. He might represent that, but they do a lot of things that help foster relationships between the countries that they got posted to. And so, I got to live in Sweden, Vietnam, Burkina Faso, the United States, all these countries.

Different backgrounds, different people. And when you're underage, if you're the son of a diplomat or the kid of a diplomat, as you say, you get posted there, but most likely you're going to an international school as well. In your international school, what will usually happen is the government will provide housing and schooling for you.

But in these schools, you have people from different parts of the world. And I remember, being this 10-year-old kid, you know, I was just a skinny Nigerian kid with a thick Nigerian accent in a French-speaking country in an American international school going through puberty. And it was a fascinating experience because I had just left the dictatorships and we had transitioned to civilian role, right?

It was just like barely a year. And then we got posted. So, in 2000, I was there, and you get thrust into this world. You know, I was this kid full of hope. And there I started to feel some of my hopes get sapped a little bit because as a kid, you're like, whoa, everybody's different. Everybody has their idea of who's the right group or the correct person and the right way to speak.

And, you know, people used to make fun of your names and all these things. In the midst of finding myself, I used to observe a lot of what my dad did, because my dad would try to understand unfamiliar environments in order to find some common ground for the country he got posted to and, you know, our national country.

And so, it was the same sort of thing I would do. Modeling him that way, I would collect and gather information. And for me, I'd always loved sports and I just sort of started to understand the sports language of the schools I was in, and then that was my gateway into really making friends and then, uh, understanding how to bridge divides, but, you know, it was certainly a long windy road though.

**Matt Bowles:** Can you talk in particular about basketball and your experience and your time in Burkina Faso as a kid and the role that basketball played?

**Tayo Rockson:** Basketball for me is, I mean, it's like, it's my first love. I mean, I love my three favorite sports after, you know, first of all, its basketball, then it's what I call football.

I'm sorry, people. It's the only one you use your feet for. What do you call football and tennis? But basketball came to me at such an important time for me because there was a kid that I remember that I just thought was the coolest. His name was Michael Albright, and he was a grade ahead of me. And I remember, you know, in retrospect, I was dealing with a lot of my anxiety and depression, but I didn't know what it was.

I didn't have the language for it. And I just didn't fit in. And, you know, he was always nice to me and, you know, I just wanted to do what he was doing. I went to the library of all places to study the game of basketball. And I just wanted to impress him. And so, I picked up all the books in basketball. I studied. The history, the game, the fundamentals, the same thing with the magazine. So, I could familiarize myself with the current players. Everybody knew Michael Jordan, but I wanted to know the other players that people didn't know as well. And then I eventually went up to him and said, you know, could you teach me the game?

And so, after school, he would, you know, we'll do our one on one. I got to practice some of those things I saw in the books and then eventually expanded to two on twos and threes on three and four on fours and five on fives and Out of that, I really started to find myself and, you know, I wanted to be a basketball player at the time, you know, my parents said no, but that was the goal for a long time.

I think I found confidence through the game, and I really just immersed myself in the community of people I was building by playing almost every day.

**Matt Bowles:** Can you talk a little bit as well about your experience in Vietnam? How old you were when you went to Vietnam and what that experience was like?

**Tayo Rockson:** So, Vietnam was a, it was a complete opposite. I love Vietnam, but I always say this Vietnam was where to understood how big the world is, even though it's small, this complexity of smallness and vastness, because when we landed, my father was already there, I just graduated high school and my father was there. So he went there ahead of us and me, you know, I came with my mom and my two younger brothers and we got to the airport, we waved to him and you know, I'm 6'1 he's 6'2 And you know, for some reason, I guess we were considered tall, but he started screaming, Kobe, Will Smith, Dempsey, you know, any black people.

It didn't register in my head, but I was like, wait, what? And then I was like, oh, we might be the first set of black people that they've seen. And I was like, wow, that's, you know, I see black people all the time, you know, your family, my friends, and all these things. And it's so interesting when people have an experience different from theirs.

And so, we got to our place and me and my brothers will walk to the gym, but we get followed. And you're initially like, you know, especially if you're black, you're like, if you're getting followed, your tendons are up a little bit, but it wasn't that type of following. Right. Cause it was really just curious. These were kids. And, you know, sometimes if we would make conversations through some combination of sign language, you know, it'd be like, can we touch your skin? And I thought, sure, you know or depends on the mood, I guess, you know, because sometimes you're like, that's the last thing you want to happen, especially if you're just tired.

But, you know, in those moments, he was like, oh, they're trying to see if it's going to rub off. That was one experience in Vietnam. And then, of course, there's the other experience in Vietnam, which you've got the different backgrounds, but also the fact that Vietnam is a fast-growing economy. And so different people from different places, and you hear the sentient nature of people.

And so, I got to see that whole range of experience. And it just made me appreciate the type of world we have, where even if something can be exported out from TV, where they can see a Kobe Bryant or a Denzel or, you know, or Will Smith, not everybody gets to actually see that in real life. It made me appreciate the power of media and not take for granted the experience I've had to be able to go to different parts of the world. That's what Vietnam was like for me. It was just a constant reflective moment of how fortunate I was.

**Matt Bowles:** And then when you eventually moved to the United States, can you talk about that experience, initial impressions, and what that transition was like for you?

**Tayo Rockson:** Ironically, it felt like the United States was always a place where it felt almost inevitable. You know, I went to an American international school for my middle school in Burkina Faso. The thing about America is, I always tell a lot of Americans this, is the rest of the world understands their history and their pop culture as well as America's pop culture, right? Like we pay attention to the election cycle, we pay attention to the music, you know, the TV shows.

And so, I had been able to come up with a somewhat American-ish accent. My accent is very different. I guess it comes, whatever my accent is, it mimics, but I had been able to really just play around, with the sounds and the phonics. I knew enough about the culture. I was very into sports. Uh, still am rather.

Fitting into college wasn't hard for me, although I did have a shock knowing that my college environment wasn't quite what I had seen on TV. And so, I came to a town called Lynchburg, Virginia. The name itself was, it was a very, I thought, wait, what's happening dad? If people are familiar with the history of black folks, you never want to put Lynch next to a black person, but it turns out according to them, it's a different history, either way, it was a thing I needed to be aware of because I went to a very, like, very conservative university.

And the story behind that is my parents, they were very nervous about sending me and my middle brother out. This was going to be the first time we were going to be on different continents for an extended period

of time. I was off to college, and they said, my father had asked, my pops had asked around, “Hey, where can I send my kids, so I won't have to worry about them?”

And for some reason, Liberty University kept coming up. And Liberty University is a. It's a very uber-Christian school. And, you know, they had a lot of rules, like curfew, you know, you, you couldn't do certain things. And so that came up and that was the only university I applied to, to make my parents feel comfortable.

And so, I applied there. And even though I'd had dreams of going to like other schools, it just was like, you know, just go here. And so, we did, luckily, I got accepted. And when I got there, I went there to do Obama's campaign year. And you can understand politics in America from afar, but coming into Lynchburg around that time, it was a very interesting experiment because you obviously, I'm, I'm a black person, but you start to see like, they were bringing all these Republican candidates and they're bringing all these things.

And I'm like, okay, this is an election year or close to the election year, this is what it's like. My college experience was not a letterman jacket. It was not sororities and fraternities. It was about trying to build champions for Christ, right? That was the motto of Liberty University. And you hear several things about who's bringing the country down a nation down.

And so, it actually got me to really reflect on my own belief system and what I wanted to accept and for that. And so, that was the majority of my, of my college years, my first four years in Lynchburg, Virginia. While understanding the politics and the nuance of it, I got to really fortify my values, right?

And what do equality and equity mean to me. Yeah, I really got to dance around the place, right? I got to understand how some conservatives think as a progressive myself. And then I got to, you know, really draw boundaries around beliefs I felt were harmful. And it was, it was an interesting time. So that was the, you know, I stayed there for two years after I graduated and then I moved to New York City, in 2014.

**Matt Bowles:** As you've lived in different countries and traveled a lot since then, can you talk about some of your observations about the different types of manifestations of anti-blackness around the world, as well as the way that they're projected differently, perhaps onto African Americans versus immigrants from the continent and so forth?

**Tayo Rockson:** Anti-blackness is something that I've experienced in, you know, every part of the world, right? Four continents for the most part. You know, even that Vietnam story, right? You know, the underside of it is whether this is a real person. Like, are you real? And the dehumanization and a lot of anti-blackness, I would say, is the interesting thing that is central to all of it is it doesn't fit whatever the standard and norm is.

And so even if I, I was going to use the Liberty University example that will be, you know, certain things about my culture where people would call a sin and I'd be like, well, that's just what I grew up with. How does this become a sin if it's just related to a particular cultural expression? And I think that's just a unique way of doing that.

And so, I've seen it used in how people love, for example, you know, in the past when, you know, interracial marriages wasn't, you know, necessarily something that was championed for. I've seen it used in how people pray, you know, some people kneel down and pray in certain ways and like, you know, that's worshipping a certain idol or something like that.

And then just in the way that it's politicized, a lot of times I find that standard and norms when it comes to names sounding English, or when it comes to certain types of foods being served and considered the okay food when it comes to hairstyles being, you know, encouraged to be cut. As opposed to growing naturally because it's 'not professional', right?

All these little nuances that are just normal to certain black experiences being codified against. I've always found those things to be, um, in need of further reflection, but they're all anti blackness. And that happens across continents. I went to boarding school in Nigeria. And one of the interesting things is we were always had to cut our hair.

This is just a complete, we're all Nigerians for the most part, and we had some international students as well, but all Nigerians, but that came from some standard that if you had, if you're a black guy, you have to have a short hair to be considered professional. Um, there are lawyers in several parts of the continent that wear wigs, um, that don't look like anything in their hair texture. I'm always curious about that. And, then the other cousins, the colorism, texturism, right? Color, you know, anything close to whiteness is perceived as the beauty standard. Bleach your skin so that you can look like that. And so there are many ways it shows up, right? In our media, in our beauty, in how we define professionalism, all these ways.

**Matt Bowles:** One of the things that you talked about when I was watching your speech at the United Nations is you talked about the importance of people intentionally putting themselves in situations where they are a minority to really put themselves put themselves out of their comfort zone and so forth to have these different types of experiences. Can you talk a little bit about that concept and why you recommend that?

**Tayo Rockson:** So, when I was, uh, especially this is especially in Burkina Faso when I was in Burkina Faso, I didn't have any choice. You're just in school, right? This is a very small school, maybe about 120 people, pre-K to 12th grade. And you're rapidly learning the ways of survival as a middle schooler.

Middle school years for a lot of people are, you know, usually formative years and you see how people see you and what people consider cool. And so, I just remember really just intimately, there's a moment where my teacher was laughing at my first name. It got me to just tie a shirt back in Taiwan and she was just struggling to pronounce it.

And then she just started chuckling and I just cowered in my chair, and I was just nervous. And then she laughed, and the students laughed. And so, I remember just telling her to call me Rockson. And then I remember feeling thankful that I had an English last name. And I thought, yeah, you know, I just couldn't process what was happening, but putting myself as a minority that I just started to see like this, it wasn't just me, it was the other people that were 'West African' in the culture.

They had to just come up with different names, even people from different countries coming up with an English version of a name and I thought it. You know, live experience in a place where you are, you know, you might not be there. In the majority, in terms of what is considered normal, you have to lose part of yourself. At least that's what I thought.

And then I started to observe how even if you don't feel like it's in the explicit rules system that you have to lose yourself socially, it might be something you feel like you have to do so you can gain entry into a particular group. And then at what expense, I started to wrestle with that type of identity crisis at such a young age.

And I think it's important for other people to do that because sometimes when people hear some of the isms that people are talking about and how it's systemic, they don't know about it until they feel it, or until they they understand that their lived experiences give them certain privileges.

I always talk about how being privileged doesn't mean you can't be marginalized and doesn't mean vice versa, but being able to acknowledge your privilege and then understand how people are marginalized in the community is one of the biggest ways for you to dismantle any system of oppression.

Because I, as a guy, and a straight guy, and even a tall, considered conventionally tall, even though I always wish I was taller, there are certain privileges I understand, right? There, I can walk certain parts of the street at certain, you know, times of the night that I wouldn't have to worry about my safety.

You could be considered conventionally attractive based on certain physical characteristics you have, and all those things you don't have to worry about. And if you're on the other side, you get to see how people treat you differently based on the fact that you don't have what they consider normal. And that's what being in a place where you're in a minority actually allows you to see here those things that we normalize that affect people on an everyday basis.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah. I think that is super important. And I would add one caveat to my own observations. As you know, I've spent a couple of years on the continent. And when I was in Nigeria, for example, I hung out in Lagos for about a month in 2019. And I did not see another white person for the entire month that I was in Lagos. I was there in June, right?

During the rainy season, I was traveling mostly with black folks, but there was one white person that was also. And it was her first time ever being the only white person for an entire month amid all black people. And she was, you know, reflecting on some of it at the end of the trip in terms of exactly the types of things that you're saying in terms of how powerful of an experience this was and how much more of a sort of an insight and understanding that she got as a result of that experience.

But one of the things that we also talked about that I brought up when we were having that conversation towards the end of that month was that we were, as white folks, numerical minorities, but white privileged man was alive and well the entire time we would walk into a restaurant, right? And depending again, who I was with, it was a very interesting experience because I was traveling with black folks who were, uh, there was an African American woman. There was also a Kenyan woman who was a nomad traveling on a Kenyan passport. Then there was like white, I mean, there was like a whole, it was very interesting to see all of these different layers of nuance in terms of how different people are treated and received. And when they're there individually, when they show up somewhere individually, or when they show up with a group, with other people, and so forth, right?

But one of the things that was very clear is the consistency, globally, of white privilege. Because I can walk into a restaurant in Nigeria and get treated differently, better than local folks. And, also, I am not worried about being treated killed by the police as I'm walking around these places.

So, there are a number of very different types of privileges that you have as being a numerical minority, but not a minority globally. Power, structural sense of being the minority. So, I think it is an important experience, but I also think it's important for people from dominant groups to be very aware of how that dominant privilege still manifests. Even if you are in a position where you're in a numerical minority.

**Tayo Rockson:** One hundred percent. I'm glad you shared that because it's, it's the truth, right? I'll share a story. I came back from Burkina Faso. And I had obviously come back with a different accent than I was in high school, and people started treating me differently.

And it wasn't like the bad different I was treated before in middle school. It was like a respect because they would call me American, and I hadn't been to America at that point. And I wrestled with that internally. I'm like, oh gosh, you really think like I'm better now. Just because, you know, cause it's, it's all these things.

And you were asking my auntie Blackness and all these things, and we pick up on effects of, you know, colonization and all these things is what have we normalized, right? How do we expand our palette for much diversity, right? We include and embrace different accents and different styles of communicating and not think one is less than or more than, but that stuff is internalized sometimes.

And then it, you know, when you see someone, you consider, uh, as better when you haven't worked through your bias, it becomes a problem. That's one of the effects of what we call white, you know, white supremacy in that sense. But yes, I'm glad you were able to acknowledge that. Because it's one of the things that I always tell people that, especially when we're having conversations that we can do a lot better than spreading the narratives that we have, you know, and we have to act and acknowledge when we're perpetuating those type of dangerous narratives.

**Matt Bowles:** Another concept that I've heard you talk a lot about is cultural fluency, particularly for world travelers and digital nomads and that kind of stuff. Can you talk a little bit about what cultural fluency is and some techniques, particularly for digital nomads and world travelers for developing that?

**Tayo Rockson:** I mean, it's, to me, competency is like. It is essentially being, it's another language, right? So, culture fluency, it's your ability to understand, uh, adapt to different cultures. And all the key thing in cultural fluency is just being aware of the norms and perspectives and recognizing those cues when people communicate.

And so, when you're thinking about fluency in a different country, it'd be like, you know, what is the normal etiquette there? Are you going in there using your style and not caring about what is considered respectful in another culture? You go in there with an ethnocentric mindset, where you feel like your way is the only way.

And the biggest way to be culturally fluent is to be humble. And to be able to do your research and to be able to say, "Hey, what are the things that are important to you here that I need to understand?". That's the number one question I always tell people to ask themselves and ask people around. What are the things that are important to this country I need to understand?

And so, you're like, okay, these are the things. What are the things that are considered disrespectful? Then you start, you add that to your lexicon. What are some key sayings? All right, you understand that. What are some norms? And you start building on all those things. And then when you do that, you are able to build trust.

And then you're, you're then able to then, you know, gain access to certain groups that you might not have gained access to. And another way to do this is to think like a native, as opposed to a tourist. Where a lot of people travel to different places, and it's always cool to do touristy things. I'm not advocating against that,

but if you want to go to a deeper level, it's really about finding the right local or even starting at the airport and figuring out how to ask questions.

Hey, where are the non-touristy places that I can go to get a real experience of said country? And once you start doing that and asking those types of questions, you find that people are very much more forgiven. They're much more forgiven and open to you making mistakes than the alternative, where if you come in there with an assumed entitlement, you know, there's a barrier there. And so that's, that's the way to build cultural fluency.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, I think that's really important. And I learned also on my Nigeria trip that I started off asking the wrong questions in terms of like, cause I went there mix. I love Afro beats and I love so much stuff about Nigerian culture. I just wanted to go, I wanted to experience it and all that.

And what happened was I started asking people, where do you think that I should go to go out, you know, to a club or this kind of thing? And then they were looking at me. And then they were genuinely trying to make a recommendation that they thought that I would like. And other people that look like me who are probably there, I don't know what, working for oil companies or whatever they're doing over there, probably go to these certain types of places.

And so, they're like, you would probably like to go to this place. And so, then I would go there, and it was entirely not anything like what I was looking for, some bougie bottle service place. Nobody's dancing. And this is where all the expats are. And I'm like, oh man, this is really not it. And so, what I had to do was change the question that I was asking.

So, what I started doing in my Uber rides is I would ask the Uber driver, where do you go out to the club when you go out in the evening? And they'll be like, well, I certainly don't go around here. I was like, fantastic. Can you take us to where you go? And he's like, sure. And so, then it was fantastic. And you just sort of have to, you know, be able to ask the right questions to the right people, show them that you're genuinely actually interested in those things.

And then they can steer you to a much more local experience. So, I have used that in all of my travels in terms of actually trying to, you know, experience things that local people recommend as opposed to the places that, you know, tourists or expats might be pointed at.

**Tayo Rockson:** No, that's a fact. And I'm glad you did that, but that, that's usually what it is. You're going to pick up on something inevitably, right? You pick up on a nod or a way people greet and even you just doing that subtle thing, just differentiates you from any other tourist, and then, you know, there's an invitation that usually comes with that.

**Matt Bowles:** I want to ask you a little bit about some questions I've been thinking about lately, just in terms of the world travel and the nomad movement, if you want to call it that, the surge in remote work, but particularly post COVID and the increase in people that are doing the digital nomad lifestyle, there are a lot of things that are happening as a result of this trend.

One of these is the concept of digital nomad gentrification. If you want to call it that, particularly in some of these nomad hotspots or hubs around the world where rents are soaring, local folks are being pushed out, displaced, and no longer able to afford it. And there's a lot of problems that are happening.

And so, I want to ask if you have thought about some tips maybe, or advice that you have for how we as world travelers can make the most thoughtful decisions to be as ethical and sustainable as possible and do as little harm and bring as much value to the places that we visit.

**Tayo Rockson:** This is such a tricky question because I know a lot of times governments see it as an added bonus to the economy. And having, you know, spent some time, I have huge aspirations to do as many things as I can in the continent of Africa. There's a very complex way of helping governments work with the people. Let me just put it that way. And to me, that problem is a lot deeper than just what you asked. To me, it's more about the intentionality of the governments of said country making provisions for this, right?

We are aware of the rising rent prices and the fact that our tourism is going here, but we are going to have this subsidized this way for locals and for people coming in here who are new natives. These are the ways we want to ensure that, you know, we preserve our culture and do all those things. But that's a very intentional approach that I hope a lot of governments in these countries are participating with the citizens.

And I find a lot of times the citizens don't get a say once these plans are being concocted, right? Once the newest city is being made into a mega city. It's the money that speaks, as opposed to the people. Now, of course, there are problems a lot of nomads can sometimes cause with insensitivity but as someone that studies systems, I like to look at the root cause, right, as opposed to symptoms.

And I feel like if you are the ruler of a country, and some people might get angry at me because I believe in the culture of accountability, you need to be able to foresee these things and then you need to bake it in and have it as a conversation or dialogue, a town hall and say, hey, what are the things I know this is going to impact on your pricing. What can we do to help do that? And honestly, that to me is the most sustainable solution because every other thing that I've seen been worked on is either just a short-term thing, or it just depends on who's in power and then it goes away. And then this stuff is still happening and in the long run.

**Matt Bowles:** I was in Tanzania last year and the government of Tanzania, probably a month before I got there, was violently evicting the Maasai people from their ancestral homeland at the behest of foreign tourist interests and this kind of stuff. And it strikes me that there is a really profound neocolonial component to much of the tourism industry. Can you share a little bit about your reflections on that and how that manifests and what we as travelers can or should be doing in terms of our own decision making in light of that?

**Tayo Rockson:** It is similar to what I was discussing earlier. I mean, the easiest thing would be, if you know that that's happening, not to travel there. Hawaii sometimes is going through this right now. And, you know, it's fueled by the tourist economy. And some people in Hawaii would tell you, we need, you know, like, we love it. And then some people will say vice versa, right?

It's never one size fits all, from my understanding. Yes, the easiest thing would be basically not to go there, but the reason I was answering the previous question that way is because you just gave an example of something that I always lay on the people in charge. There's accountability and awareness that you have to have, right?

If a violent eviction is happening of people from ancestral lands, that problem means you are not serving the people that you're supposed to be serving. And so, you are basically displacing people without creating

a solution. And then there's rarely any solution to something that means something that much, right, cultural heritage and history.

And so, I think the ways to risk, and help would be to do research before going to each country and understand which regions are currently going through things like that. And then making that ethical decision themselves to decide if they want to be part of that, knowing that their presence is going to facilitate further displacement. And then really just try to donate and help as many local businesses as you can when you get there. That is the other way, right? You have got to find a way to fund the local economy. And so, if you are going to live or slow travel to particular places, I would encourage people to create as many local itineraries as they can. And just share amongst them, their friends and say, hey, this is how we can boost the economy here.

These people make the best such and such. That's where you can get the best food. We're creating a network there and that's how they survive in a high economy environment that is boosted two, three times than they used to.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I also want to talk to you about your writing. I know that writing has been a huge part of your life. And I think I want to start just by asking if you can talk about the power of stories. One of the quotes that I have heard from you is “robbing people of their stories is one of the quickest paths to dehumanization”. Can you talk a little bit about So, that and the importance of stories?

**Tayo Rockson:** One of the reasons I'm very intentional about embracing my blackness is because a lot of black stories have been robbed. Even if you want to go back to the scramble for Africa or any moment in history where Europeans convened the Berlin conference in, you know, 1884 to 85, you know, just sometimes known as the Congo conference, but it's the Berlin conference where these countries decided to essentially carve up which parts of Africa, they would be able to take as theirs.

A lot of what they did was rob a lot of people of their stories, stories of their ancestry, you talked about the ancestral lands earlier, stories of their cultures, and then put people that weren't, that would never have been a country if you left it up to themselves to make them countries, so you stoke division.

And a lot of times when you're dividing and conquering, that's what you're focusing on, and you're creating these narratives that these people are your enemies even though they're in reality neighbors and you share more in common, but you know, you're using False narratives to come there. And then if you want to further it, you tell them that this is the moral code that we want everybody to go by.

And if everyone doesn't go by this, they're bad people. And the moral code is based on something that isn't necessarily native to the place that you are colonizing. And so, then you are taking them away from further away from their own story. And then you add your story and then they take on your story and continue to adopt it while going against anyone that dares to revive their story.

It becomes a cycle that is internalized and external. A lot of people, I've done that throughout history, and a lot of people do that today, right? In the United States currently, you have some people going through book bans. You have people trying not to share certain stories of Black history, or Latinx history, or queer history, or any of these things.

And it's always been the way, historically, in moments where divisiveness has existed the most to take away the education of people who were pioneers in there so that they can tell that. And so, to me, writing

has always been an important tool because, you know, you can use it to reinvigorate stories, to retell stories, or to just create a story that isn't there. And I've always wanted to use that and be part of that movement.

And when I was going through my own tough moments in middle school and high school, it was a place of solace for me where I could write down my thoughts. Even Mandela, when he was in prison, wrote as well. And he found solace in books. And so that's what it means to me. And that's why I think storytelling is important because that's how you can see yourself.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I just finished your book, which was fantastic. It's called [Use Your Difference to Make a Difference](#). We're going to link it up in [the show notes](#) so folks can go get it. One of the things that you talk about in the book is the importance of doing education about pre-colonial societies, and I wanted to see if you can talk about that in particular.

When I was on the continent, I was on the continent for about seven months this past year, and one of the books that I read while I was there was Walter Rodney's book on how Europe underdeveloped Africa, which is a really important book. I mean, for folks that don't know Walter Rodney, he's a really famous black Marxist activist and author.

Angela Davis actually did the forward of the latest edition of his book. He was assassinated in a car bomb and people should definitely look him up. But one of the things that he does with this book is a really extensive pre-colonial history of the continent, and then coming up through colonialism and colonial encounters and all of this kind of stuff.

And so, I thought it was a really important book, but then I read your book, and you were also emphasizing the importance of the pre-colonial stories and factoring that into education, not only learning about the colonial processes. Can you talk about that a little bit?

**Tayo Rockson:** Yeah, I think it's so important to do that because in our education systems, a lot of the cases around the world, and it's changing in a lot of environments now, but when I was younger, I went to schools that were prioritized in a lot of European history. A lot of, you know, U.S. history, even if we weren't, you know, in the continent, it was always odd for me because I thought, well, we have such rich, you know, history here as well. And so, you know, eventually, you know, I went to school that prioritized that, but it was so fascinating for me because I would think about people that didn't go to schools like that and then what they would grow up to become because they would think that they were less than.

They would think that they didn't achieve this. And everyone, you know, points out certain heroes, people they admire because, oh, that person, he looked like my uncle. This person looks like me, or I saw myself in this person. And when you take away all those things and start from enslavement and colonization, you're by proxy saying that the only way to teach or think of black people is just as people that were subservient, right? Or people that were just, you know, subhuman.

And that has been something that was systematically done throughout history and is still systematically done today, right? You show people that they can achieve something. They believe they can achieve it. And so, if you show people that they never achieved something, they're going to subconsciously think that.

And so, it's always important to do that because everybody contributed to the world that we have today. Everyone. There's no one from Native Americans to Asians, to Africans, to people across every single continent. They have made contributions that play a role in every single thing we use today.

However, we don't tell the full story. History is often incomplete. And because of how incomplete it is, it is weaponized to make people fight amongst themselves while they tell stories of superiority that are so incomplete. And so that's frustrating when you don't go beyond, you know, pre-colonial times because that gets robbed the most.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, one of the things that you also talked about in your book was the Rwandan genocide. And I thought it was really important the way that you talked about it. I was just in Rwanda last year and I had read a decent amount about the genocide before I went. And then I went to the memorial, which is also a mass grave of 250,000 people, which is incredibly powerful and intense.

But there's also a museum attached to it, which does a really important job of doing exactly what you did in the book, which is tracing the origin of the 1994 genocide back 100 years and going through the different colonial periods of the German and Belgian and French and then documenting the role of the French government in training and arming the genocide dears and then facilitating their safe passage out of the country after the killings.

And there's so much contemporary neocolonial stuff going on the continent that's just so important, I think, for people to understand because you had all these independence movements. And technically these countries have been independent, but there's a massive amount of neo-colonial influence. And we're seeing that in all these different ways and seeing resistance to it now in different ways, right?

Just in 2023, we've seen coups, three coups in West Africa, Burkina Faso and Mali and Niger. And can you share a little bit about how folks should think about the neocolonial arrangements that are currently going on and the resistance to neocolonialism?

**Tayo Rockson:** So, neocolonialism is similar to colonialism in a sense, but it operates under the guise of economic and cultural dominance, right?

So, a lot of West Africa, for example, uses FCA franc, right? But the franc part was initially before, you know, France went to euros. It's the Franks, you know, they, they add Frank as their system, but they're tied economically. It wasn't until recently, some African countries still had to pay certain fees to the, you know, to wherever the colonial masses were.

And those things were all these economic contracts. And it's just this continuation of the imperialist rule. And then the reason I said, and it's often described as economic and cultural dumbness is, always look at different countries. What is that cultural norm that is given priority over, uh, said local thing?

Why is this the case? What, what are the contracts in place? And if those contracts went away, why are they so tied to the country, even the cell phones, cobalt, for example, is found in Africa, but a lot of what happens is these things run all the cell companies and cell phones that we all use. But none of that money or a lot of that money doesn't get sent back to where it's from. It gets mined here and then processed, refined through raw material, sent to the country for cheap, but then sent back to be so much more expensive. And it's to the place where it came from. And there are many subtle things like that.

That former colonies are still, in a way, indebted to the previous colonial masters. And it's all happening based on all these economic arrangements. And so, it's just something that I think people need to really reflect upon. You know, whenever people are going through election cycles, you have to ask your politicians.

Tell me more about this deal. How are we going to get this? Where is this coming from? What is your contribution to this? Are you doing something unethical to lead to such and such? How is this going to benefit the people that you're getting, you know, said whatever from, and it, you know, and it's just happened throughout history, right?

And so those are just some examples and there are many books. If you just type in neocolonialism on Google, you'll be able to see several different ways your policies in Europe basically schemed to maintain control of African and other dependencies. It still happens today.

**Matt Bowles:** I think the cobalt issue is one of the most important things that I think people should bring their attention to. There's actually a really important book that just came out this year by Siddhartha Kara. It's called Cobalt Red, and it is about the extent of number one, cobalt. And how all of us who are using laptops or that kind of stuff are using cobalt and the extent to which it comes from the Congo and is being extracted through some of the most horrific human rights abuses of this era. And there are potential solutions that are not that complex or expensive, but people are not prioritizing this issue.

So, I would really encourage people to check out the book Cobalt Red to learn more about that, especially as digital nomads, because we're all using cell phones and laptops is what powers our entire lives. And it's really important to understand where that stuff comes from.

**Tayo Rockson:** You're going to find a theme in a lot of the questions you're asking me. It's just that we need to create a culture of accountability.

You asked me about what you could do about digital nomads and countries and governments. Everyone has a culture of accountability that we need to make popular that we don't. The Cobalt issue, the diamonds issue, all these things that are happening, it's because it's almost too sexy for people to keep doing it the same way.

People are incentivized to look the other way, and people are so protected and insulated, and not enough people understand how they're part of the problem. Some people are just, willingly or unwillingly, just saying, oh, you know, it's not me, you know, I'm not there. But I'm like, you are participating in this, and they're relying on the fact that you're not going to do anything for this to continue. That's the indirect form of control, essentially. And so, I just really want people to raise the level of awareness and then just dare to do different.

**Matt Bowles:** All right. We're going to pause here and call that the end of [part one](#). I am going to link up everything that we talked about in this episode in [the show notes](#), as well as all the ways to find, connect with, and follow Tayo. That is all going to be at [themaverickshow.com](#), just go there and go to [the show notes](#) for this episode, and be sure to tune in to [the next episode](#) to hear the conclusion of my interview with Tayo Rockson.