

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND THE FUTURE OF AFRICA

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Introduction

The major challenge facing the development of the African culture today cannot be easily deciphered without unearthing the problems encountered by the exposure of traditional cultures to the beliefs and practices of other forms of life. Colonialism, capitalism and of recent, globalization are international trends that have called into question the views ideas and thoughts of traditional African culture. The result of this encounter with these international trends has forced us to reflect on the African project and thus embark on the quest for a paradigm that would best account for the needs and interests of Africans in a more satisfactory manner.

The search for this paradigm has generated heated debate in contemporary discourse. Some have argued that the paradigm that best suits the African condition must be that which emphasizes and promotes traditional African ideas on man, society and nature. Others see the project as that of “enlarging our conception of the universe and provide a clearer understanding of the fabric of our concepts and a critical appraisal of our basic and sometimes intuitive beliefs”¹. For this group, “enlarging our conception of the universe” involves the “distillation and integration of many cultural streams...sorted and sifted and added to until it can answer more completely than any other man’s deepest needs in the technological present of the

twenty-first century.² This therefore is a challenge of the first group hereafter referred to as the traditionalist. That is, those who see in traditional culture the foundation and pathway to social reconstruction and cultural renewal. My goal in this chapter is not the glorification of traditional culture. In fact, I have very little to say about this. My primary concern is to appraise and reconstruct African culture, using the theoretic and intellectual skills of philosophy, to elicit changes both in the physical and mental outlook of Africans; manifested in their explicit beliefs, customs and their ordinary daily, habits and pursuits.

The Task of Philosophy

Let us begin here by examining the nature of African culture both traditional and contemporary. Before this, it is imperative that we quickly look at the task of philosophy as a theoretic discipline. Although the question what is the task of philosophy is not easy to give a precise answer as it depends on the standpoint of the scholar in question. More often than not, when we ask such questions, the answer that easily comes to mind is that philosophy is reflective and critical enterprise about the concepts and principles we use in the organization of our experiences in moral, religion, social and political life, law, history and in the natural sciences³. In fact, as H.S Staniland says in his essay *'what is philosophy?'* 'Philosophy is the *criticism of the ideas we live by*'⁴. And by this, he meant appraising positively the ideas that guide our daily human operations. We find example of this in freedom, justice, equality, development etc. In this sense, as Sodipo says the man who succeeds in identifying the structure and components of his conceptual system is therefore released from bondage to it⁵. This release, in Marxian term could be described as a movement from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom. This critical task can proceed in the Socratic way whereby the opinions and beliefs of people are held up to the searching light of criticism and questioned rigorously to see if they

are sound. The point of this is to reveal and test those things which we generally take for granted, the assumptions of which we scarcely are aware, but which underline our supposed knowledge. Everything we do is controlled by, or at least affected by our assumptions even though we are most of the time unconscious of them. The task of philosophy is to seek out these assumptions and endeavor to examine their soundness or otherwise. Socrates did this in ancient Greece and incurred the wrath of the authorities. These days, the task of philosophy is not directed at individuals. In fact, as one commentator says, the task of philosophy is directed not against *flesh and blood*, but against principles and policies. As Sodipo noted in his Inaugural lecture “ an important advantage accrues to a discipline when its practitioners know explicitly what assumptions are involved in the language and model it uses. For, if the assumptions are known they can be changed systematically, explicitly and controllably...⁶. We can also see the task of philosophy as the critical evaluation of belief, the attempt to give rational grounds for justification. Or what else do we mean when we say, for example, that some aspect of our traditional beliefs are anachronistic? This is to say that those aspects after thorough examination are no longer adequate for the needs and demands of our contemporary society. For example, how do we reconcile the African conception of woman as irrational, inferior and lazy with the concept of political and gender equality that the idea of democracy entails? Our failure to reconcile these concepts is partly responsible for Abiola Irele's claim when he says that “the resources in ideas, techniques, and in certain respects, values offered by our traditional cultures are simply not adequate for our contemporary needs and interests.”⁷ The point then is to adequately analyse our conceptual schemes in the direction of the challenges of our needs and interests. For, as Sodipo further avers, it is the man who cannot isolate the conceptual framework embedded in his practice who is kept in greatest bondage to it, and who attempts to impose it on materials that are entirely unsuitable. What then is the nature of this bondage and how can we overcome it in a world that

is fast becoming a global village?

The Nature Of African Culture

In answering the above question we need to note that contemporary African culture is a closed belief system. This closeness is related to the communal form of existence that characterise social relation in Africa. Although this communal mode of social organization is caving in to the barrage of forces of colonialism and other international trends in the direction of modernization, certain traditional habits of thought and practices still serves as limitation to its realization. This hindrance or so to say tension, as Oladipo calls it⁸, arising therein is responsible for the conflict between the new imported social structures from colonialism and the habits and thoughts associated with traditional structures of leadership and authority.

The imported social structures associated with colonialism have to do essentially with democracy. The idea of democracy entails the right to make a choice between two contending opinions, allows dissenting opinions on matters of public importance, including the opportunity to demand from the authority or government the justification of any government policy options or decisions. If you examine contemporary African societies, you will find that very little is left for alternative opinion, dissent, critical questioning and the need for justification. In this circumstance, freedom is the obedience of the wishes of the leaders. And to question any government policy options, is to be branded as an opposition and would be treated as such. This is how B.J. Dudley puts it:

Even in Tanzania, which many hold out as the near-ideal paradigm, can introduce a policy of villagisation in which more than a million peasants within the last six months (oct.1974-march 1975) have been forcibly collectivized and yet insist that no question be asked.⁹

The above is a clear report of the dictatorial nature of contemporary African state. The reason for this can be seen from the communal form of life that characterizes African societies. Africans do not see themselves as isolated individuals but as beings embedded in a context of social relationships and interdependence. And so when decisions are taken it is usually with the assumption that it is for the well being of the community. No wonder President Obasanjo of Nigeria and his Vice Alhaji Atiku Abubakar could say that these was no going back on the increase in the prices of petroleum products in Nigeria, even in the face of the near collapse of the state.

The ethical implication we can draw from the above reasoning is the habit of accepting whatever is from the elders without regards to the issues of their justification. The thinking here is that elders in traditional African setting are usually seen as the custodian of tradition and the repositories knowledge and wisdom, and so cannot be wrong. This same "know all syndrome" is common to many African leaders. They put themselves in the position of elders and so should not be questioned in whatever policy options they are presenting. In this situation, there is no regard to the issue of accountability and justification of government policy options. As a matter of fact, they frown seriously against any dissenting opinion in any matter of public importance.

We therefore can see that the confusion in the post-independence Africa can be linked to the unfolding crisis arising from the imported social and political ideas and the dominance of authoritarian/dictatorial habits of thought and social practices in our contemporary society.

This same authoritarian calculation of traditional culture in modern Africa also caused problems for the promotion of human development in Africa. The recognition of science and technology as an important factor of modern development notwithstanding, the continued dominance of the authoritarian orientation is definitely a limiting factor to its realization. It is a clear fact that an authoritarian regime cannot harbour the habits of thoughts (toleration of

alternative ideas, curiosity, analytic spirit etc) that are important instrument of scientific development. In other words, what is left in Africa is the prevalence of the “intuitive, essentially unanalytic and unscientific mode of understanding and interpreting nature and the place of man in it”.

The problem now is this: since Africa is still at the beginning of the ladder of development, we are confronted with the challenge of two social orientations on model that suits the African condition. The first is that of those whose orientation in contemporary African thought is committed to the “discovery of genuine African ideas and thought systems free from foreign values. This group is preoccupied as earlier highlighted with the promotion of the peculiarities of African culture. They reject attempts to examine aspects of their culture in terms of certain logical or scientific criteria, which they associate with the Western Societies.

The assumption here is that the prevailing cultural values in Africa are tied to other presuppositions in the society, which can only be *understood and measured* after we lay bare the system of knowledge values and symbols that structure the minds of Africans. The point here is the promotion of the understanding of African belief systems through the exposition of their logical structures and the assumptions on which they stand. What is beginning to appear is that cultural values depend on certain beliefs and practices of the society that provide the framework within which human experience is interpreted in its social and cultural setting. In view of this, and in particular, because of the role of culture in the life of a people, it is claimed that it will be counter-productive to be committed to or be influenced by alien accretions.

The Future Of African Culture

The question is this: does the call for proper understanding of cultural values imply that such cultures are free from critical appraisals? For example, the fact that for some reasons, it is necessary to tolerate a given cultural practice or belief, it does not result in the calculation

that those who abstain from forbidding or condemning it must regard it as morally right¹⁰. In fact, what tolerance requires is not that we endorse all actions or social practices however repugnant they may be, but that we see our cultural practices and beliefs as being open to revision. In other words, we should, in the words of Oladipo "... see our conceptions of reality, modes of knowing etc., as presuppositions whose limitations can be reviewed when compared with the presuppositions of other forms of life in terms of the extent of their adequacy as means of realizing our objectives"¹¹

The point here is not that reappraising cultural beliefs and practices is to do away with them. Rather, the belief is that through critical analysis, we are able to subject the beliefs and social practices to the searching light of criticism and thus "likely able to promote the kind of self-understanding that would provide some basis for determining the kind of socio-cultural reconstructions that would be required to attune the African to changes in his environment and their existential demands"¹². But if the above is all that reappraising our cultural beliefs and practices is about then it is difficult to achieve this through an orientation that is unnecessarily insular. For, given the fact that "the basic and fundamental fact in Africa today is the misery the continent is immersed in and the varied struggles..."¹³ therein, and the fact that the world today is connected in a network of interlocking relationship, then Africa's development cannot be achieved by the reliance on what we believe, thought or practiced. The kind of critical engagement that is being urged as an alternative to mere reliance on traditional culture is that which does not disregard traditional culture as such but rather sees culture as a dynamic phenomenon. This is to say that culture is "constantly in the making in consonance with the dynamics of human struggles."¹⁴ As a result, it is subject to constant re-evaluation depending, of course, on the nature of our socio-economic realities and the goals that we have set for ourselves.¹⁵ In other words, it is only by "adaptation and adjustment of its culture is a society able to satisfy its changing needs within the context of its physical human

environment.”¹⁶

In this way, reappraising our traditional culture allows us, as John Lewis Gaddis wisely observed, to see where we are, and where we may be going.”¹⁷ And in doing this, we would, like Thomas Kuhn showed in his classic *The structure of scientific Revolution*, tolerate the displacement of old paradigm, which has become incapable of explaining or meeting the challenges pose by our contemporary needs and interest, by a new one which does accounts for these needs and interest in a more satisfactory manner¹⁸. The shift in paradigm that is being urged here does not necessarily mean the total annihilation of traditional cultural values, but that we should go beyond emphasizing the peculiarities of what Africans believed, thought or practiced to what will lead us out of the woods, to a critical reflection of our thought and practices which will enable us separate the good from the bad aspects of our cultural lives. And by so doing “strive to see the kind of modifications, in our culture or aspects of it that are required as part of efforts to promote modern ways of thinking on man, society and nature in Africa”¹⁹.

But will this shift arising from a critical engagement with traditional culture not undermine local narratives? Or to put it differently, will it not lead us into the acceptance of western culture and civilization? For, it has been argued that the way out of the woods for Africans is the “willful movement out of the self and a purposive quest for new horizon of life and experience”²⁰, in the direction of western culture and civilization. Although Oladipo has seriously repudiated this position when he says that to accept Irele’s position is to accept the view that the goals of western culture and civilization are (or ought to be) our own²¹. Thereby endangering our cultural identity and denying ourselves the opportunity of making our own specific contribution to the chorus generated by the multiple discourse of mankind”²².

Perhaps it is important to emphasis here that when we talk of critical engagement with our culture we are operating with the

assumption that cultures are receptive to new ideas. Part of this dynamism is the view that cultural boundaries are not cast in iron. Because we live in a world of interlocking relationship, cultures do interact with one another and thus borrow from each other. This is a regular fact of human history. But this does not necessarily mean the acceptance of the total values of the foreign culture. When cultures interact, the reception or rejection of cultural items depends largely on the need felt by the given society, on its suitability or otherwise to the already existing cultural organism. What this implies is that the borrowing culture is only receptive to the positive values in the other culture that suits its condition. This is to say that, although a borrowed cultural item is often itself modified to fit the local situation, all borrowing involves some reshaping of some aspect or aspects of the recipient culture²³. When this happens, as Oladipo rightly avers, the recipient culture “strive to see the kind of modifications in its culture... that can promote modern ways of thinking on man, society and nature²⁴. Thompson describes the case of Japan in this way: “In modern times the Japanese borrowed western technology while disregarding as ‘inferior’ the spiritual culture of the West and taking trouble to study the latter (from its Greeco-Roman roots) merely as a means of achieving greater understanding of the hows and whys of Western strength²⁵.”

What the above boils down to is that we can as a matter of fact, borrow the technical aspects of Western civilization that will help us in eliminating the misery, poverty and disease Africa is immersed in today without necessarily having anything to do with the aspects of the culture that is unsuitable to the Africa condition. Seen in this perspective, we neither need nor move willfully in the direction of Western culture, as Abiola Irele is wont to believe. And, most importantly it makes professor Okolo’s submission in his monograph: *What is to be African? Essay in African identity* insignificant when he writes that:

Culture being what it is, something dynamic and fleeting, the qualities of "being with" can be lost with time, with incursion of alien cultures and values, for instance, or the interplay of industrialization and urbanization.²⁶

He argues that "being with" (that is the communal spirit) as a form of life peculiar to Africans should continuously be cultivated if Africans must "win his current battle for progress and development or hopes to overcome his psychological, social and political predicament ... he must equip himself with genuine self-knowledge and self-understanding"²⁷ This genuine self-knowledge or self-understanding or what he says in the concluding section, African identity, is in danger of being totally lost by the present day Africans due to the net-effects of the so-called "modern civilization," the invasion of alien cultures and values, industrialization, urbanization, the acquisition of all sorts of scientific and technical skills and knowledge and the values which result from this acquisition²⁸. He goes further to say that it is this communal spirit or the humane cooperative living that is Africa's contribution to the world and its civilization.

First, I must say that if the communal form of social organization is Africa's contribution to the world and its civilization in an era of globalization, then it is unfortunate. In reading Okolo's monograph, what readily comes to mind is this: since African's consciousness is associated with their non-atomized social structures and mechanical solidarity; that is, since their social consciousness is limited to their ethnic groupings or identity, the incursion of alien cultures or values will be irrelevant to their existential conditions.

Let us recognize here that Okolo's position has some merits. It is a fact, for example, that to participate meaningfully in a world order, Africans must first put their "house" in order. We must not run away from our experiences by trying to explicate the reality of our situation. This is so because; "it is our experiences that must provide the standpoint from which we make our contribution to the

world".²⁹ The trouble with this view however is not the obvious fact that charity begins at home. The trouble rather, is with the mistaken assumption that the incursion of alien values or cultures is irrelevant to the existential conditions of Africans. Africans no doubt do not exist in isolation. To exist here, mean more than just *being there*. It means standing in a particular relationship with others. In this sense, it will be out of order to be provincial in the explanation of what concerns one's society. In fact, as Siegel rightly argues:

Sometimes local cultural practices impinge upon and restrict the freedom of members of other cultures; sometimes local cultures have obligations to members of others cultures. There is a sense in which cultures are local and separate; there is an equally important sense in which we are all members of the overlapping (set of) culture (s) and in which we not only may, but must, be concerned with cultural activities afar...³⁰

On this showing, Africa cannot afford to be provincial in their explication of social action. This is so because societies operate, in some kind of a network of inter-locking relationships the existence of which create room for the comparison of alternative social schemes in terms of the extent to which they aid or hinder the realization of goals and the fulfillment of human aspirations.

In this sense, we can see that self-knowledge is a crucial factor in the determination of the place of Africa in the cultural dialogue, to use Oladipo's phrase, brought about by the network of interlocking relationship of the multiple systems that constitute the world order. This will enable us know, as we said earlier, where we are and where we are going and the aspects of other people's culture that we need to borrow to lead us to where we are going.

Now, for the borrowed cultural item to be fully significant in the recipient culture requires the reshaping of some aspects of our

culture, especially the mental outlook of the people manifested both in their explicit beliefs and in their customs and habits. This brings us to the question of what philosophy can do to make the reshaping of African culture a reality. We have said earlier that the task of philosophers in contributing to self-knowledge and human development in Africa is the critical examination of the ideas we live by, part of which is the appraisal of the conceptual schemes that we use in organizing our daily human experience, for example, equality and justice³¹. Here, we need to critically examine these concepts in line with the assumptions of our world-view. For to say that everybody has right to vote and be voted for, and women are denied the right to decisional representation in the political sphere, is a contradiction in term³². In other words; the task before philosophers is to provide the basis for determining the kind of socio-cultural and political reconstructions that would be required to attune to changes in his environment and their existential demands³³. But, mere criticism of socio-cultural and political systems is not enough. To be significant we need as Oladipo avers: to project alternative social theories, which will reflect our aspirations and the values inherent in them. Elsewhere, I have argued that wholesale importation of Western values does not square properly with African aspirations because it will obviously be different from Africa's specific historical institutional forms of social practice³⁴. The point of saying this is to be sure that in providing solutions to Africa's multiple problems care should be taken not to undermine the set of values, which inform the expressions of contemporary African interests and future goals. The attempt here should not be seen as a slip into provincialism or the glorification of traditional African cultural values. In fact, our call for a proper understanding of African's socio-historical situations in appraising Africa's conceptual schemes, is predicated on the assumption that it is only by so doing that we can know where we are, where we are going, and how to get to where we are going, in the ladder of development.

Thus far, we have argued that the model that best accounts

for the interests and aspirations cannot be that which promote and emphasize traditional African ideas. This no doubt, we contend will be unnecessarily insular. We therefore argue that the model, which suits Africa's efforts to cope with the forces that are detrimental to his survival, is that which enlarge our conception of the universe and provide a clearer understanding of our concepts and a critical appraisal of our basic beliefs. Here, the critical engagement with our culture does not mean the subscription to a metanarrative. If for anything, it means that we examine our culture in comparism with what obtains elsewhere to see area (s) that needed to be adjusted in line with man's efforts to cope with the challenges of nature both physical and social. To undermine this, is to create an illusion to use Professor Lawuyi's phrase that "we know everything about man and his environment from the knowledge of ourselves"²⁷.

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