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Culture, African Languages, Renaissance and Development

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Introduction

The notion of culture means different things to different people. Broadly, we can say that, two types of meaning are prevalent. Firstly, there is the popular understanding and usage of the term to imply habits, customs and legacies, which have a folkloristic feature to them; like traditional dances and music, traditional clothes and other features of the given group, which have exotic characteristics, particularly attractive to voyeuristic minds and tourists. Typically, such features generally find place and are linked more to museums than living or current representations of life. They are indeed selected exoticisms; reified habits and artefacts; the designation of culture to mean fossilized and time-warped institutions and cultural attributes. These selected exotica become ways of inventing “the other”. This “street-level” understanding of the notion is conceptually restrictive and it, as it were, projects “the trivial side-show as the main show.”

The other set of meanings tend to be closer in appreciation and understanding to scientific usage, and is more common to cognoscenti. For these latter, culture is the sum total of all that is the heritage of human creativity. It is dynamic and inclusive of both tangibles and intangibles; material and immaterial representations of human ingenuity. Tylor's 1871 definition with which he starts his volume on *Primitive Culture* still enjoys favour for its succinctness. Culture is "... that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."¹ It is therefore an instrument of society to achieve adaptation to nature. This instrumentation comprises concrete and tangible physical tools, but also intangibles in the form of knowledge, learned skills and forms of social organization. Sometimes, the idea of "culture" emphasizes the communicative and overtly meaningful aspects of social life; ranging from language, both oral and literate, to the collectively shared meanings conveyed by symbols, tangible and intangible notations, persons, events and social activities. Effectively it is a historically transmitted pattern of meanings and practices encoded in societally perceivable significations; it is a system of generationally transmitted conceptions expressed in symbolic and institutionalized forms by means of which men communicate and routinize their knowledge, assumptions and attitudes towards their social existence.

Cultures are not sealed entities or closed systems. They diffuse, interface and interpenetrate; mixing, adapting and altering according to their situational and historical contexts. Thus as dynamic phenomena they are constantly in flux. They grow and diminish in response to social conditions. Distinction or extinction are historical realities which prospectively face all cultures, but either

1 Edward Tylor. *Primitive Culture*. *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*. John Murray. London. Vol.1. 1871. P.1.

possibility would be dependent on how cultural constituencies put premium on their cultures and also the commission or submission to the hegemony of other cultures. Overlordship and imperialism very often bestows cultural dominance over others. The dominated cultures relatively diminish and eventually may vanish into extinction if the effects of imperialism at the cultural level are not counteracted or checked.

One of the most profound results of the Western encounter in Africa has been what I would describe as the *cultural denationalization of African societies*. By this, I mean the creeping recession or effacement of historically indigenous cultural traits, values and institutions, and their replacement by substitutes derived from historically non-African hegemonic cultures and societies of the world. For Africans, this process can be traced to the beginning of the Arab conquest of North Africa starting with Egypt.² Over the centuries, the process of Arabization has continued uninterruptedly in the northern areas of the continent. It is a process which in the past has tended to be overlooked and underestimated by some

2 The Arabic language became more widespread in Egypt with the introduction of Islam, especially since there was no single Egyptian language. The Coptic language was limited and unofficial, followed by the official Greek language, and then the Arabic language entered Egypt starting in the seventh century AD/ first Century AH. Arabic is a rich and complete language and the people were able to express everything using it. Arabic became the language of the diwan, or council of ministers, and the language of instruction. With the advent of the tenth century AD, fourth century AH, Coptic scholars started to compose theological works in Arabic, which indicates that Arabic had become the prevalent language of scholarship. The Coptic language lost its importance totally during the fourth century AH (tenth century AD), as we find the Coptic books by Said Ibn Al-Batreek and Sawerace Al Ashmoniny were written in the Arabic language although they were intended for a Coptic audience. The spread of Islam and the Arabic language in Egypt was helped by Caliph Abd al-Malik Ibn Marawan's "Arabization of the Mint and Diwans in the government offices in year 78 AH (697 AD)." The Copts were forced to learn the Arabic language to keep their jobs in the government offices. Then Abbasid Caliph Al-Mustasim decided to drop Arabization from the government offices. The Arabs and the Copts became equal and the obstacles between the two sides were removed. The Arabs then spread among the Egyptians. Within 400 years, from the Arab conquest of Egypt, Egypt abandoned its national language totally and adopted the Arabic language, while other Muslim countries such as Iran did not give up their national language. See, Spread of the Arabic Language. www.eternalegypt.org/EternalEgyptWebsiteWeb/HomeServlet?ee_website_action_key=action.display.module&story_id=&module_id=234&language_id=1&text=text

observers and many students of African history. With regards to the Sudan Mohammed Jalal Hashim writes that; “independence, Islamization and Arabization have been shared in common by successive governments as state-dictated policies. Taking for granted that the middle of Sudan represents the whole country prompted this. The post-Independence governments dealt with the Sudan as consisting of (a) the noble Arabs of the middle, (b) the Muslim Africans in the periphery, who, with possible Arab blood, are supposed to undergo very quickly the process of Arabization so as to be honoured with Arabism, and (c) the slaves, who have not yet undone their black Africanism with Islam and a drop of noble Arab blood and who have no place so far in the bench of power. If allowed, the prestigma would have created an institutional apartheid state.”³ This reality has in no small measure been responsible for much of the current tensions and conflicts which have beset the Sudanese state since 1955. *Afrik-News* of the 13th April, 2010, in an article headed; *Mauritania: Arabization has nothing to do with Islam* divulged that; “The Mauritanian government, spoke out on the burning issue of Arabization, which was raised by the Prime Minister and Minister of Youth and Culture on March 1st. Arabization in Mauritania has whipped up a massive hue and cry among Negro-Mauritanians, who have expressed concerns over cultural, political, economic and social oppression from the ruling Arabo-Berbers. Mauritania, a generous cultural and linguistic patchwork has, since March, fallen prey to the discontentment of a key section of its Black Mauritanian populations, who have demonstrated their displeasure against their government’s intention to Arabize the administrative and educational sectors. Those arguments were strongly denied ‘Nothing has changed, Mauritania before 1st March remains the same, the government has not opted for a complete Arabization,’ the Minister of Higher Education, Ahmed Ould Bahya told a large

3 Muhammad Jalal Hashim. Islamization and Arabization of Africans as a Means to Political Power in the Sudan. Mimeo. July, 2009. <http://mjhashim.blogspot.com/2009/05/islamization-and-arabization-of.html>

number of students gathered at the University of Nouakchott. His statement comes after two controversial speeches made by the Prime Minister, Mohamed Ould Moulaye Laghdaf and Minister of Youth and Culture, Cissé Mint Boide, March 1st, a day set aside to commemorate the promotion of the Arabic language, under the theme; 'Arabic language is the language of our religion and our identity'. 'Mauritanian civilization is Arabo-Islamic!' the minister of youth and culture had added. These comments, deemed segregationist, shocked and sent emotions among Black Mauritians running amok. Placards read; 'No to complete Arabization', 'No discrimination!', 'We are all equal!', as students demonstrated on March 25th and April 6th.' " Mauritania's peaceful future can hardly be reassured if these contradictions are not satisfactorily resolved. Furthermore, given the dimensions of the inherent tensions, consequent conflicts cannot be contained within the borders of the country.

In the whole latitudinal area running from Mauritania to the Sudan, Arabization has continued for centuries to erode the African cultural and social attributes of the native peoples. The Berber were in this part the first to be Arabized. They subsequently in part became instruments for the further Arabization of other groups in the region. In the whole region resistance to Arabization continues. The later arrival of the West effectively superseded Arab influence, but never completely halted the expansion of Arabism.

Western conquest and the establishment of western power opened the door to the institution of western administration, western education, the introduction of western christianity and the imposition of colonial languages as elite reference group attributes. In our times, this process is captured in the notion of globalization in a cultural sense, and is at least in Africa, accelerating at a pace

which would suggest that unless the process is checked, so that Africans regain the core features of their languages, cultures and histories, the cultural effacement of Africans may reach a point of no return. This denationalization process has affected all areas of social life, including, the religious life and lore of Africans, languages, modes of livelihood, consumptive patterns, values and normative structures. Today, its main agents on the ground are the African elites.

Since Thabo Mbeki pronounced on the vision of an African Renaissance, the imagination of Africans in general and South Africans in particular has been fired. The charm of the idea is that it lies so close to the hearts of most Africans who, realising the stagnation and in some cases retrogression of the past decades of post-independence, wish and hold a faith of wanting to see a turn for the better in the lot of Africa and Africans. The experience of the post-colonial era started with a surge of high and bristling hopes of societal advancement. This has not materialized and as the situation deteriorates, the mood of gloom, hopelessness and dejection has become like a pervasive blanket of doom hanging over Africa and Africans. Outsiders call it 'Afro-pessimism'. Looking back, I would argue that we were excessively and unjustifiably optimistic. The transition of African political order from colonialism to post-colonialism was in fact a transition from colonialism to neo-colonialism. While some had thought that post-colonialism would represent a basis for freer, more autonomous and more unfettered development, close examination of the post-colonial state reveals that it was flawed from the start. It was never from the beginning intended to allow Africans total political and economic freedom; using elites created in the cultural image of the colonial masters the dominance of erstwhile masters was intended for a longer lease on life. These culturally enslaved elites which continue to reproduce themselves ensure the persistence of Western dominance largely

by “remote control.”

Post-colonialism thus opened the way to the emergence of new native elites, generally drawn more consistently from the masses (in contrast to the native elites under colonialism). These new elites of the post-colonial era were generally larger in numbers but have tended to lack the degree of resource independence which the earlier elites of mainly professional types had. In a sense their credentials were more distinctly petty bourgeois than their predecessors. In Ghana, they were called *Veranda Boys*, alluding to the semi-illiterate urban masses who lingered around shop-fronts and verandas in the towns. Their equivalents were to be found throughout the continent. As inheritors of a colonial state many attempted to reach too quickly for the emblems of prosperity. This disposed them to the dangers and temptations of corruption and graft, and in time, in the face of shrinking trophies and resources to mark their social elevation corruption became rampant and culturally entrenched. They were also anxious to flaunt their acquisitions in ostentatious lifestyles which were not matched by the sort of productivity necessary to economically justify the voraciousness of their consumptive habits.

The metropolitan powers have also been relentless in their continued siphoning of profits from their erstwhile colonial backyards. Unfavourable terms of trade, restrictive capital investments in purely extractive primary product industries, the opening up through unbridled privatization of nascent industry which has constantly led to economic denationalization of African countries in a process orchestrated by the Bretton Woods Institutions; the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). African countries have, particularly in recent years, been

under increasing pressure to remove all tariffs and protection in their local markets, to allow metropolitan products, which are often subsidised at source, to penetrate and flood the local market. This has brought further damage to the small industrial bases which many of the African countries have cultivated over the years. On the other hand, African produce in agriculture which could sell competitively in the metropolitan markets are restricted or barred through protectionist measures of these metropolitan economies. A persistent message for debt relief for poor countries has remained unimplemented. Years ago, the then German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder is quoted to have observed that, "It makes no sense just to offer debt relief - these countries have to be able to sell their products"⁴. The G8 nations observed that "In particular, many developing countries, notably in Africa, are growing too slowly. The HIV/Aids pandemic aggravates the situation. ... We are particularly concerned about the severity of the challenges facing the least developed countries, particularly those in Africa"⁵. Remarkably, during the meeting, US President Bill Clinton refused to commit the G8 powers to a deadline to open their markets to the world's poorest nations. Some of the G8 nations had suggested, unsuccessfully, for 25 agricultural goods produced by the developing world to be cited as priority market-opening commodities. These included items sensitive to agricultural lobbies both in the US and Europe, such as bananas, citrus fruit, olive oil and beef⁶. It was observed that; "Ms Ann Pettifor, UK Director for Jubilee 2000, said a lack of fresh initiatives for poor-country debt relief means a meeting of powerful nations' leaders here this weekend was a bust. 'This will be known as the squandered summit,' she said, adding that frustration of groups such as Jubilee will lead to protests 'that will eclipse the events in Seattle'. Last year's Seattle protests, marked with frequent violent outbursts, disrupted a meeting on global trade

4 See, 'Give poor nations duty-free access'. Business Day. Monday, July 24, 2000. P. 8.

5 See, 'Share the wealth' is call of G8 nations. Business Day (Business Report South Africa). Monday, July 24, 2000. P. 1

6 See, Clinton scuppers developing nations' hopes. Business Day (Business Report South Africa). Monday, July 24, 2000. P. 8.

and tarnished the city's green and pleasant image. 'I think that the G8's inactions this week by its refusal to lead its determination to turn its back on the poor will have grave consequences'.⁷" Agbohohou has demonstrated convincingly that the rules and modes of operation of the Francophone CFA structure and the Franc zone ensure primarily benefits to France and the European Community. Fundamentally it serves Africa no useful purpose⁸.

A decade into the 21st century, we notice that, these factors which militate against African advancement show very little sign of relenting. There are about 30 serious conflicts in the contemporary world; about half of this number can be found on the African continent. War and conflict always create conditions of forced migration and refugees. Of the estimated 37 million refugees in the world today, over half are to be found on the African continent. The prospect of African development has therefore remained constantly elusive and mirage-like. It would seem that, because present circumstances are unable to shake off the crippling political, cultural and economic shackles of the past, a prosperous future for Africans appears to be endlessly postponed.

The economic obstacles have been constructed on a socio-cultural structure which does not permit development. A structure, which alienates the languages and cultures of mass society, and which imposes a weak copy of western culture on the masses, through the agency of submissive elites inordinately imitative of western values and assumptions.

7 See, G8 talks may spark grief. *The Citizen*. Monday, 24 July 2000. P. 15.

8 Nicolas Agbohohou. *Le Franc CFA et L'Euro Contre L'Afrique*. Editions Solidarite Mondiale. A.S. Paris. 1999.

The Roots of the Renaissance Idea

There are some, today, who treat the idea of an African awakening or reawakening with contempt and derision. Anthony Holiday described Mbeki's idea as the "President's clairvoyance"⁹. The clawing and gnawing failures of the present appear to them to almost permanently defy hope. There is even the occasional sound of the pits of abject dejection articulated with "we are cursed". Indeed, this view is not new. It was in response to such sentiments that Alexander Crummell wrote his, *The Negro Race is not Under a Curse (1861)*. The idea that Africans are cursed is also a lingering image from the biblical idea in the Old Testament of Ham's descendants being cursed. In South Africa, I have heard the observation made that, well, Pliny may have made the historically reverberating, and often quoted point that *ex Africa semper aliquid novi*, but that the new that almost always comes out of Africa is invariably a new instalment of tragedy of increasing proportions. Closer reading and understanding of African society and history provides more subtle and a less perpetually doomed manifestation. For a start, over ninety *per cent* of the history of *homo sapiens sapiens* is African history. Until about eight hundred years ago, large parts of Africa were socio-structurally and culturally ahead of much of what is present-day western society. What is eight hundred years in African history?

The idea of African revival, rebirth, or renaissance, as I have elsewhere said, is not new¹⁰. What with each generation or thinker has been sometimes new is the term or word, employed to capture and reflect the idea. The idea litters the literature of African nationalism since the mid-nineteenth century, in the work of Martin

9 See, Anthony Holiday. Are we a nation hopelessly addicted to visions? Saturday Argus. 12/13 August. 2000. P.21.

10 See, K.K. Prah. African Renaissance or Warlordism? In Malegapuru William Makgoba (ed). African Renaissance: The New Struggle. Mafube and Tafelberg. Jo,burg. 1999. P. 37-62.

Delany, Robert Campbell, Alexander Crummell, Edward Blyden, Africanus Horton, Mensah Sarbah, Attoh Ahuma, Mojola Agbebi, Bandele Omoniyi, Orishatuke Faduma, Pixley Seme, Marcus Garvey, Dube, Jabavu and others nearer our times. It arose as a modern African reaction to emergent western power on the continent. Mbeki has been its important recent voice. The roots of its intellectual inspiration can be traced to a confluence of African diaspora sources and continental westernized African reaction to the crushing success of western power and technique in Africa and the world. There is also recognizably another source for this inspiration, derived from the more traditional circles of African chiefs and notables who seeing and experiencing the overwhelming character of western ideas, technology and organizational power were fired by a wish to emulate the westerner. The concomitant ideas for a renaissance varied from person to person, and included views which were culturally, preeminently western-oriented to those that were more preponderantly nativist. However, they were all directed towards the goals of African development, African freedom and emancipation. In sum, it panned out as a wish to see African society move out of the conditions of backwardness which had made it easy prey to exploitative western intentions and actions on the continent.

It is important to note that, from the start, there has always been a linkage between the African diaspora as a source for the ideas of an African renaissance and thinkers based on the continent. This Pan-Africanist dimension to the idea of an African renaissance is central to any attempt to understand its political and philosophical bearings, and comes to us as a programme for the economic and political unity of Africa in the work of Cheikh Anta Diop and Kwame Nkrumah. However, what is remarkable is that, the continentally-based thinkers like Sarbah, Omoniyi, Casely Hayford and Sekyi tended to be more forcefully nativist than Crummell or Delany.

Thus while for Crummell, African languages, have “definite marks of inferiority connected with them all, which place them at the widest distance from civilized languages”¹¹ ; for Casely Hayford they were languages deserving to be taught at university level.

Running themes in the confluence of ideas from Africa and its diaspora which undergird the idea of an African renaissance include African unity, political freedom, the right of repatriation of the diaspora and cultural self-assertion. Over the past, almost two centuries, at different stages these issues have come to the fore with differing emphasis and implementation, and differing degrees of success. The settlement of Liberia and Sierra Leone represented attempts to implement the repatriation idea. Between 1912 and 1914, Chief Sam of the Gold Coast pushed an abortive idea for African-American repatriation¹². During the 1920s, Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in further pursuit of the repatriation idea created the unfortunate Black Star Line project¹³. The tradition has lived to the present in the philosophy of the Rastafarian movement. The right of the diaspora to African citizenship would need to be addressed, if the African renaissance project is to make headway.

Perhaps most significant amongst these running themes has been the movement for colonial freedom. Between 1955 and 1994, from the Sudan to South Africa, colonial freedom was secured by most of the African countries created under colonial tutelage. What the experience of the half-century of colonial freedom has however demonstrated is that colonial freedom has bequeathed only partial

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- 11 See, Alexander Crummell. *The English Language in Liberia*. 1861. Quoted here from J. Ayo Langley. *Ideologies of Liberation in Black Africa*. Rex Collings. London. 1979. P.357.
 - 12 J. Ayo Langley. Chief Sam’s African Movement and Race Consciousness in West Africa. *Phylon*. Vol.32. No.2. 2nd Quarterly, 1971. Pp. 164 – 178.
 - 13 David E. Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association*. London: The University of Wisconsin. 1969.

political independence. In almost all instances, colonial freedom was more given on the terms of the colonial masters than taken or unconditionally won by Africans. Thus neocolonialism largely replaced the colonial order. Some progress has been made under neo-colonialism, but effectively much of this is very limited.

African unity which was a much vaunted project during the early post-colonial period has been able only to achieve weak economic, political and cultural institutional form in the Organization for African Unity (OAU), and more lately the African Union (AU). This institution in its past and present forms is more a geographical and continental arrangement, than a historical and cultural recognition of the wish of people of African historical and cultural descent to unify their lot and historical efforts. As such, the OAU or AU has been an arrangement which lumps together two of the principal nationalities based on the continent, the Arab and African peoples. Thus whereas the Arab nationalities have an institutional framework for the unity of the “Arab nation”, the Arab League, the African nationalities lack a similar structure which recognizes their nationhood. This is a leading political challenge which will need to be addressed in the context of the African renaissance project¹⁴.

Culture and Language: The Key

While the other above mentioned running themes have been to differing degrees of partiality been addressed, the issues of culture and languages in particular have been not only grossly underestimated, but also seriously neglected. In Wilson’s *Origins of West African Nationalism*, he makes the following very useful observation drawn from the logic of Casely Hayford;

“Throughout history many peoples have been forced to yield

14 See K.K. Prah. *The African Nation; The State of the Nation*. CASAS Book Series. No.44. Cape Town. 2006.

to superior power, but none had succumbed while retaining its own values and the logic of its own ideas. If only the African could follow his own genius, he could sooner or later prevail. Like Blyden, of whom he was proud to be a disciple, Casely Hayford believed that for the time being the western-educated African must play the role of a sophisticated conservative, expounding and preserving the ideas of traditional Africa."¹⁵ Reading Sun Yat Sen, one stumbles upon the same idea, that is, "modernization without westernization"¹⁶. This message is, in the consideration of the present author, incontrovertible. Indeed, I would suggest that the key reason why the idea of an African awakening has been so elusive is directly tied to the erosion of the cultural basis of African society; the emergence of elites which have consistently become culturally captured by westernism in an unbounded and unrestrained fashion. Central to this is what can be described as the "heathenisation" of African religious systems and ritual. But even more fundamental, is the cultural and societal devaluation of the role of African languages.

In an earlier paper, I made the point that;

.... all the principal historico-cultural groupings in the world are heedful and esteem their heritage. Remarkably, with the exception of Africans, none of the peoples colonized by Europe culturally caved-in to colonialism to the point of conceptually heathenizing their traditional religious beliefs and rituals; in short declaring the religious traditions of their ancestors loathsome. They have invariably at the worst valued their traditional practices as equal to the received and imported religious confessions. In a number of cases, such

15 See K.K. Prah. *The African Nation; The State of the Nation*. CASAS Book Series. No.44. Cape Town. 2006.

16 See, Sun Yat Sen. *The Teachings of Sun Yat Sen*. Compiled and introduced by; N. Gangulee. The Sylvan Press. London. 1945. P.xxxviii.

imported religious practices have been roundly indigenised and reformed to match local cultural systems. Without the recognition and usage of our historical and cultural baggage, we are no people. Evidence suggests that, all peoples in the world develop and advance on the basis of their culture and history, while absorbing whatever can be absorbed from outside which improves what they already have, without abandoning their own. We can hardly earn self-respect and equality in the eyes of other peoples in the human community, if we consistently demonstrate ourselves to be people without any historical or cultural reference points we are proud of, affirm or willing to keep. In short, we cannot develop, if we treat ourselves as people who have no respect for their own, but respect for the cultural belongings and values of others¹⁷.

The foundation on which culture is built and transacted is language. Language captures the experience of its users, and serves as the key depository of the collective experience of its producers. It is in language that the creativity and innovative traditions of its creators and users are institutionalised, and it is within language that the processes of the production and reproduction of knowledge are effected.

The development and usage of African languages for all social transactions including education are the only way of ensuring the cultural empowerment of mass society in Africa. It is only through the usage of African languages that knowledge can be channelled into the cultures of the overwhelming majorities of Africa, in ways which will ensure their confident usage and understanding by Africans. An enabling condition is that African languages need to be literate and intellectualized. The upshot of the logic of this

¹⁷ See, K.K. Prah. *Beyond the Color Line: Pan-Africanist Disputations*. Africa World Press Inc. Trenton, New Jersey. 1998. P.34.

argument is that, an African renaissance will be only possible if the processes for this are premised on the untrammelled usage of African culture, more specifically African languages.