

Cultural Nostalgia: A Philosophical Critique of Appeals to the Past in Theories of Re-Making Africa

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ABSTRACT

The present African situation can best be described as the crisis of post-colonial Africa. Lagging behind, as it were, on all developmental fronts, Africa is regarded by many as the world's tragedy. A common explanation for this situation is that the indigenous social culture was superimposed upon by alien colonialist cultures leading to a confused cultural amalgam in which Western conceptions of the good have been imposed upon African thought and conduct.

In response to the grim contemporary realities, many African leaders and theorists have advocated a return to 'African roots' and indigenous cultures of Africans for new social and political theories and practices to solve Africa's problems.

This paper proffers a theoretical refutation of the validity of such appeals to the past, and rejects a return to certain traditional African structures and institutions as advocated in some contemporary theories of re-making Africa.

Keywords: Re-making Africa, Postcolonial, Deculturation, 'Demonitization', Cultural Re-appropriation

1. THE NATURE OF THINGS

Inherent in the nature of things is the tendency to deteriorate. In particular, the human situation has the inherent tendency to progress negatively. We may thus say at every point in time that the human situation could have been worse, and surely would be, if left to its self. In the view of Obi Oguejiofor (2001: 7), referring to G. J. Warnock, this inherent tendency for things to flounder and thereby make life more uncomfortable "is due to both natural and human factors" which include "limited knowledge, limited resources, limited rationality, (and, *sic*) limited sympathy". The human response to this situation and in realization of humankind's predicament is the conscious design of cultures, i.e. peoples' ways of social life. Culture, we may say, then is a device to contain, or at least cope with the tendency of the human situation in the scheme of nature to go badly. In this regard, it is common for cultures to fade away and be replaced by new or old ones, and for cultures to vary from society to society and from age to age.

It is also commonplace for the older generations in many places to value the cultural patterns of their own times better than the succeeding patterns. The longing for the return to such supplanted cultures or cultural patterns is what is here being referred to as 'cultural nostalgia'. Also, in times of social difficulties, people often tend to look back to the past for solutions to their social problems, believing that the past was better than the present.

2. THE AFRICAN SITUATION

In either relative or absolute terms, i.e., whether we compare Africa with other continents or we take the African situation on its own, the tendency to degenerate has already become a reality in the human situation in the continent. The situation is such that no one is in doubt that generally, and in particular on the human level, "much of Africa is in a precarious state" (Oguejiofor 2001: 7). Most Africans are very deeply concerned about how to halt the fast degeneration of the human condition and how to bring about some worthwhile improvement. The shared sense of feeling for the African predicament is not in doubt; the difference lies only in ideas of how best to understand and deal with the situation.

It has been generally observed, that Africa "has never lived up to its true potential, with post-colonial legacy, cross-tribal boundaries and illiteracy providing for a mix that produced years of conflict, economic decline, corruption and mismanagement"(SuperMemoResearch 2002). In Niyi Osundare's (1998: 231) summation of "the African predicament", "Africa is the most humiliated, most dehumanized continent in the world. Her history is a depressing tale of dispossession and impoverishment." The situation can best be described as the crisis of post-colonial Africa, which no sane person can contemplate today without despair.

3. THEORIES OF RE-MAKING AFRICA

One of the general points that may be drawn from discussions of the African predicament is that the root cause of the postcolonial continental failure is the erosion of basic African values that have helped to promote stable social existence over the ages. This erosion is then traced to the advent of colonialism and the consequent introduction of European socio-political systems, values and structures of capitalist economy. The net effect of all these cultural incursions, it is suggested, is that while emphasis was placed on political and economic developments to the detriment of social development, Africans' basic human values were suppressed or totally obliterated by the largely 'inhuman' Western values. Ironically, Africa, as things have turned out, has lost on all fronts of development – political, economic, social, psychological and social –

presumably because the indigenous social culture was superimposed upon by the alien colonialist social cultures. In this regard, Oladipo (1998: 111) avers: “the inherited colonial institutions have been inadequate for the achievement of the goals of postcolonial development.”

In a critical discussion of the problem, one approach advocated by Gbadegesin (1991: 161) “to the question of ultimate reality is the cultural approach”. On this view, the explanation for contemporary African reality can be traced to the fact that majority of Africans have either forgotten or ignored their cultural roots and have assimilated foreign cultures and ideas. These foreign cultures and ideas are said to have done an incalculable damage to the social and economic reality of Africa and is responsible for the experience of the moment. The longing for the lost “cultural roots” is thus made central in some of the theories of re-making Africa. The question is: What are these cultural roots? How relevant and effective are they, or could they be, in addressing the present predicament of Africa?

In the view of Basil Davidson (1993: 73), while on the one hand the emerging political elites were not properly prepared – theoretically or practically – to manage the affairs of their respective countries at independence on the existing colonial structures, they had become equally alienated from their indigenous African political institutions, some features of which they could have incorporated into the colonial legacy of independent African government. The ultimate solution to the African crisis that Davidson, as well as George Ayittey (1993: 70–76), advocates, therefore, is the return to African traditional institutions and ways of life. In his view on the matter Wiredu (1995: 33), many of the instabilities of contemporary African society could be rightly traced to the circumstance in which “The African today, as a rule, lives in a cultural flux characterized by a confused interplay between an indigenous cultural heritage and a foreign cultural legacy of a colonial origin”, leading to a cultural amalgam in which Western conceptions of the good have been imposed upon African thought and conduct. With specific reference to politics and governance, Wiredu (1995: 51) prescribes a return to the indigenous method of decision-making in traditional African life in which, rather than by the methods of Western or other alien forms of democracy, “governance was, as a rule, by consensus”.

Peter Kanyandago (2003: 30–50) discusses in detail another strand of the theory that the colonial past is responsible for the present sorry state of Africa. In his view, the root cause of the present crisis is the colonialists’ rejection or denial of the African’s humanity. He observes that in the last 50 years of post-independence, the denial of ‘the African Humanity’ in terms of “the relationship between people and the material need for sustaining their lives” has been more rapid and pronounced than in all the previous centuries (Kanyandago 2003: 30). This denial is viewed as reaching its peak in the slave trade that lasted till the first half of the 19th century.

Toyin Falola (1996: 3) argues strongly for the position that the event of the slave trade continues to have a direct bearing on African history as it does on world history. The argument here boils down to saying that the four centuries of

slave trade have indelible social and economic damage on the current development potentials of Africans. This denial of African humanity is claimed to have been used to justify “the so-called civilizing and colonising undertakings of the West” on the African continent (Kayandago 2003: 38). In Kanyandago’s further view, this phenomenon of dehumanizing Africans and the attitudes that go with it are not limited to history; “they persist in the way the West is relating to Africa”. In his view (Kayandago 2003: 41), this “negation of the African humanity and its accompanying cultural identity is seen in general terms in the imposition of economic and political systems on Africa which are foreign to the African socio-cultural and historical experiences.” This situation is extended to the religious level, and to the use of African land as dumping ground for products that are found dangerous for being disposed in the West. All these are said to be so just because “Africa is denied the right to be itself.” The effects of the long process of “deculturation”, distortion or denial of one’s culture are, according to Kayandago (2003: 44), general to all Africans – on their “soul, body and social life”. Africans have thus eventually internalized the inferior position to which they are constantly reduced. This theory of internalized inferiority feeling is used by Kayandago (2003: 45) to “explain why the African elite in the political, religious and economic areas, who are supposed to have risen against these humiliations and negations, are now perpetuating them against their own people.” On the ground of this common feeling, Kalyegira (1997: 3), and Rwampigi (1990) claim, “some Africans are convinced that we need White people to remain in control of all key institutions in Africa.”

The remedy advocated by Kanyandago for the ills of Africa caused by its history characterized by centuries of humiliation, dehumanization and ‘deculturation’, and manifesting in the current economic and socio-political crises is ‘Cultural Re-appropriation’. This, Kayandago (2003: 45) says, is a programme “for Africans to re-appropriate, revalorize, learn about and love their cultures... some kind of cultural therapy.” In recognition of the fact that Africans have been made “to abandon their cultures to embrace the virtues of modernity”, Kayandago recommended that Africans “need to go back to the ‘experts’ in their culture, namely the elders”, while “the education and religious systems will have to be reformed to take into account the facts that culture is a basis for one’s existence and survival.”

To solve the economic problem, Kayandago’s recommendation (2003: 45) is that “the management, production and distribution/sharing of resources will have to be based on African values by referring to some of the endogenous aspects like the fact that resources are produced or are there to be shared out so as to satisfy the needs of everybody.” In this regard, according to Kayandago (2003: 44), in order for African cultures “to help us in bringing about the eradication of poverty, there must be a global cooperation to ‘demonetise’ exchange systems, and rediscover the sense of gratuitousness and solidarity which have so far ensured the survival of the African.”

Politically, in the view of Basil Davidson (1993: 46), the creation of the African state is a curse. To remove the curse, “African ways of managing and

sharing power” especially decentralization and the search for consensus should be used “to reform our political systems and structures.” In the view of Tunde Adeniran (2002 (one time Nigeria’s Federal Minister of Education), the solution to the multifaceted African crisis lies in a cultural return. Talking about Nigeria, he says:

The time has come for Nigeria to go beyond ethical appeals, drop our anchor into the depths of our cultural heritage and draw from the pool of brotherhood, communion, community and other virtues and values that make man human. By the time these are made to condition intra and inter-party activities and inter-personal interactions across ethno-linguistic and geographical zones, as well as determine the dynamics of our political system and the process of governance, we would have effectively eliminated the raging poverty which presently characterizes the practice of democracy and threatens its survival in Nigeria. The Nigerian people would also have been drawn away from an atrophying culture that unlinks them from their aspirations and mocks their efforts at self-actualisation.

Also, once musing about the Nigerian situation, one time military Head of State and now constitutional President of Nigeria, then General, now Chief Olusegun Obasanjo¹ (1980) asked rhetorically out of despair:

Should we not in our own interest and in the interest of humanity, hack back to our tradition of ‘esprit de corps’ and communalism and build an economy and a society of our own?

This may be safely extended to the whole of Africa. Other views that are not as insistent, but which nonetheless advocate some kind of ‘re-appropriation’ of past African cultural roots include those of Charles-Robert Dimi (1998: 252–275) and Udo Etuk (1998: 276–291).

On this note we may start to evaluate the solutions to the chaos of post-colonial Africa based on an appeal to the past, as outlined above.

4. CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THEORIES OF RE-MAKING AFRICA BASED ON TRADITIONAL PARADIGMS

In the face of Africa’s grim contemporary realities, many well-meaning persons and groups of persons have tended to become apathetic about the African situation. Given that the African predicament continues to deteriorate by the day and apparently defying all rational solutions, it cannot but appear that the situation is beyond conventional remedy. In the last half a century of self-

¹ Obasanjo was Nigeria’s Military Head of State (1976–79), and that country’s first post-military two-term democratically elected civilian President (1999–2007). Today, he does not appear to have deviated from his view of 1980.

governance, Africa has been engulfed in turmoil of unprecedented nature and dimensions. As at now, Africa is the tragedy of the world. At a time the woes of the continent used to be blamed almost exclusively on colonialism and its disruptive effects on the socio-political development of the people. In response to the situation, many African leaders and theorists in the early days of political independence fervently advocated a return to the African roots, to base social and political theories and practices on the indigenous cultures of Africans. The belief was that only such indigenous culture-compliant theories and practices could bring about progress and development in the continent. Reminiscent of such theories are Nyerere's 'Ujamaa', Senghor's 'Negritude', Nkrumah's 'Consciencism' and Sekou Toure's 'Re-Africanisation'. As history has shown, these attempts did not solve Africa's problems.

Fifty years after active imperialistic colonialism, Africa is perhaps a hundred times worse off than it was under colonial rule. The seriousness of the situation is most clear when contemporary Africa is compared with other erstwhile colonies and former members of "The Third World" that have since risen above their history of colonization to become key players in contemporary global politics and economics. As at now, the tragedy of Africa is greater than a failure of governance, such as it was in the earlier days of the post-colonial era. Now, the tragedy has expanded to include new socio-economic problems of the populace over which the governments do not have much control. It is therefore exceptionally noteworthy that the past is not only being used to explain the present but also to prescribe for the future of Africa at this point in time by eminent African intellectuals in diverse disciplines. This suggests that there may be something quite important about the past that needs to be given serious attention. On the other hand, given the context of the African present, the past seems to be a wrong direction in which to seek the way forward for Africa, for the following reasons.

- (1) Strains of history and the frictions of intercultural contacts have fatally weakened the traditional culture for which nostalgia is being expressed.
- (2) Following from the foregoing, it follows that there may be nothing that could be called "the indigenous African traditions, values and ways of life" to which we may return.
- (3) The failure of the traditional institutions to withstand the onslaught of slavery and the threat of direct colonialism does not make it appear viable to cope with the extraordinarily complex issues of governance and social co-existence in this age of globalization.
- (4) The 'de-monitisation'(trade by barter?) of exchange that is recommended to solve Africa's economic problems is totally out of tune with current realities.
- (5) The paradigms on which the demolished traditional institutions stood are no longer compatible with the new world order: they are thus best abandoned.

- (6) Continued entertainment of the past as a viable path to the solution of contemporary problems can do nothing but keep us away from realistically confronting our historical duty of salvaging our continent from further deterioration. As was rightly perceived by Osundare (1998: 234), “There is a lot to be done in giving Africa a new lease on life. Nothing can be achieved by papering over her cracks or by pretending (as is customary in sickening diplomatic circles) that the problems do not exist.”
- (7) It is an escapist approach to the problem. Rather than realize that our problems are caused directly by our own actions and inactions, we are being urged to look away from reality to some obscure sources of redemption. The approach is nothing but an undesirable diversion from the serious task of re-making Africa.
- (8) Given the failure of our indigenous cultural arrangements and institutions to repel the attack of other cultures in the past, there is no reason what so ever to think that they will be able to bail the continent out of its present predicament. As the Yoruba people say, “What makes the lazy man’s farm to be small is the same thing that makes it to be overgrown with weeds.”
- (9) The flowery descriptions of the African past cannot be sustained in empirical facts. There appears to be nothing so much to valorize in the African past relative to the contemporary realities. The communalism that is often so much praised in that past also harbored practices and principles that cannot move contemporary Africa further in the path of growth, progress and development.
- (10) It is also doubtful if there are any existing ‘experts’ (or elders) from who lessons about the traditional institutions could be taken. Assuming that there still exist some persons who were once such experts, the experiences of colonialism and its aftermath must have changed them radically that they can no longer be taken to still be grounded in the ‘good’ old cultures. Besides, how are they to be introduced into the current non-traditional educational and socio-political arrangements?
- (11) The same traditional principles to which we are being urged to return have been used by many African rulers in the past, and even now, to oppress their peoples and to rob their countries. This is especially very prominent in the self-perpetuation syndrome that is prevalent among Africa’s ruling elites – traditional and contemporary. In a tone of lamentation, Osundare (1998: 234) asks: “why are patriotic, purposeful, honest and visionary leaders in Africa always so short-lived? What or who is responsible for the murderous longevity of sit-tight despots and dictators with their corrupt, corrupting courtiers and depraved dynasties?”

5. CONCLUSION

What we have sought to do above is to show that although post-colonial Africa is in a very deplorable state on all fronts, the remedy for its recovery does not lie in its past traditional cultures. In essence, the point being made is that the solution must be consciously sought in the present. Africans must stop bemoaning their historical past. Blaming slavery or colonialism cannot solve the problem. Assuming that the continent did not experience the horrors of slavery and was not colonized, would the situation have been any different, given the way the continent had been drifting in the past fifty years of political independence? In the correct view of Osundare (1998: 234), the solution to the present predicament of Africa “involves throwing off the yoke of History, turning that prison into a palace of hope, understanding Africa, denouncing her vices, nursing her virtues. Above all, it means believing in ourselves.”

It may not be idle speculation to say that without slavery and colonialism, the Europeans through normal cultural interactions would still have dominated Africa. The basis for this view is in the regular ways of Africans as demonstrated in the greed of the leaders and the led over the ages. Prior to the European incursion, Africans were already enslaving and dehumanizing themselves. The foreigners only came to find an environment conducive to serve their own interests, with the active cooperation of the people.

As Theophilus Okere (2002: 7) rightly noted: “The hidden hand manipulating the destinies of African countries has not been the hidden hand of God.” It has not been the hidden or exposed hand of colonialism, either. Our destinies have always been in our own hands all the while. We have to examine ourselves more carefully to have a correct understanding of our present in order to be able to envision, work for, and achieve a desirable future. The current practice of always struggling to ape and copy every innovation, device and programmes from Europe and North America is nothing but self-enslavement, lending gratuitous credence to the foreigners’ age-old perception of the Blackman as an ape, inferior in both body and mind. Copying always from others is a serious weakness of personality that Africa had demonstrated so copiously, but must now strive to depart from and become more innovative and imaginative in developmentally tapping from the world’s stock of information and devices.

Given that in the context of our historical past things have not worked out favourably, the rational thing to do is to step back from routine activities and try to fashion out a genuinely African blueprint of social, political and economic life. Such a blueprint will be largely analytical of our experiences. It will also have to be sufficiently comprehensive to take cognizance of the various cultural influences that have now become integral parts of the African life.

Finally, it is to be noted that we should not define Africa by the present quagmire in which it finds itself. The situation is so; but it needed not have been so, had a different set of accidents happened to the continent. We should also

note that Africa is not destined to perish in its present predicament, especially when we remember that Africa once contributed greatly to the origin and development of the world's great civilizations. It is not logically impossible that this may still turn out to be Africa's millennium, provided we do not succeed in giving our continent up to be colonized again. To avoid re-colonization, we need to be more futuristic than longingly looking back to a largely unhelpful past about which we now barely know the truth. In this regard, it has to be emphasized that nostalgia is always more often than not decadent. A people that continually looks back to its past that failed them then, and could not sustain them for present salvation, must either change their perception of, and attitude to that past or "hold themselves ready for eventual recolonization", or in deed, for imminent extinction.

All said and done, therefore, the only significant lesson that we can take from the foregoing is that we should never allow the past to repeat itself in the continent such that we must ensure that we are never marginalized, enslaved or colonized again. This, however, is precisely what many African leaders have not learnt, going by the way most of them have been conducting themselves and the affairs of their countries over the past fifty years or so.

The banes of the African past were the weak structures and institutions that were the enduring legacies of colonialism and slavery. At the inception of self-rule, African leaders, generally, did not make any tangible efforts to strengthen those structures and institutions. Rather, they successively exploited the structural and institutional weaknesses for selfish private enrichment and base self-aggrandizement. The consequence of the structural and institutional neglect and exploitation is that individual, sectional, private interests and agenda have continued to take precedence over national interests in most of the countries, thirty of which, according to Osundare (1998: 233), quoting Ali Mazrui, are "the world's hungriest nations".

The structures that we have at present, which are products of the amalgam of indigenous African cultures, our colonial experiences and foreign religious impacts, are inherently generative of greed and consumption rather than production, and hence, mass impoverishment and continental recession. Contrary to the idyllic picture of the past that is usually portrayed, the past must have been structurally, more or less, as corruptive and impoverishing as the present. By remaining uncritically attached to these deficient and inefficient economic and socio-political structures and institutions, carried forward from our past, to which we are being urged to return, we would only be perpetuating Africans' underdevelopment of Africa. In Oguejiofor's (2001: 33) correct view:

The hard fact is that in the failure of African political institutions to withstand the threat of direct colonization, and again, by cooperating with the new order (I.E. the colonial order), the paradigm on which the old institutions stood was destroyed for good.

On a final note, it is to be remarked that cultural nostalgia is a universal phenomenon. What differentiates the Africans' from other peoples' cultural

nostalgia, notably Western and Asian, is the attitude towards the past. Unlike those other peoples, Africans are largely uncritical about our traditional ways of life. Rather than being uncompromisingly critical of the past, advocates of appeals to the past are urging an unreflectively patronizing retention of a phase that should be transcended.

Africa cannot afford to be going back in time. To 'return' to the regimes of 'de-centralisation', 'communalism' ('primitive communism') and 'demonitisation' will not only be counter-productive, but will further undermine the already weak and un-sustaining structures and institutions now in place. Such a backward-looking step will amount to swimming against the flow of current global realities. In particular, to return to the past will amount to moving against the massive and fast-moving currents of globalization – a move that will only lead to a further marginalization and pauperization of Africa in the significant productive and progressive activities of the contemporary world.

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