

Towards an African Cultural Renaissance

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Abstract

The march towards an African cultural renaissance is not a speculation that should be left hanging on an ivory tower but rather a reality that is praxis oriented. The call for a cultural revolution does not mean a call to primitivism; it is not a call back to cultural practices such as the killing of twins, patriarchy, human sacrifices nor the visualization of western education as taboo or abomination as some groups hold. Also, it is not a call to close the door against cultural. This paper argues that for Africans to be Africans, they must know what makes them Africans with regard to their cultural heritage. This was the point stressed by Socrates when he said “Man know thyself”.

Keywords: African, Culture, Renaissance

Introduction

The history of ancient philosophy reveals that its pioneers were more or less free to swirl wherever the pursuit of truth led them. They confined themselves simply to human reasoning, which allowed philosophy the aperture to feast on subjects of human nature, ethics, the cosmos, God and political authority. At this time, philosophy had a wider cultural extension capacity. However, with the dawn of the Medieval Era and with its ideas shrouded in theocentricism, a close bond between heaven and earth, philosophy and theology was born; although it opened up a new dimension to the study of philosophy, it also limited its swirling capacity. For centuries, philosophy was seen as a slave to theology or

“the handmaid of theology”. The guiding expression in the theological process was “I believe in other to understand”. In this case, philosophy had relevance only when it elaborates theological truths. Philosophy was now doing a task it until hitherto did not set out to do, namely, providing an intellectual and metaphysical foundation for revealed religion. There was never in history when philosophy was restrained and entombed by any institution as was done in the Medieval Age. It was against such institutional interferences with philosophy that Socrates fought and died; for thinkers like Aristotle, this is a sin against philosophy (Stumpf, 1994). However, with the emergence of the Medieval theological pedagogy, the Greek culture, imbedded in Greek philosophy waned.

The 14th, 15th and 16th centuries were the Renaissance Epoch. It was a period of “revival,” “rebirth”, a revival of Greek learning and culture. The writings of many philosophers made irrelevant by the dominance of theology during the Medieval Era were revived and made available for studies. As a consequence, the medieval marriage between religion and philosophy was strained, and there emerged a decisive separation of the two. The extensive diffusion of culture was facilitated by the invention of printing press. The use of vernacular led philosophers to original formulations rather than running commentaries on authoritative figures. In time, the Modern philosophers wrote their treatises in the language of their own people, and thus Locke, and Hume wrote in English, Voltaire and Rousseau in French and Kant in German (Stumpf, 1984).

A discourse on African cultural renaissance is about the reawakening of fellow Africans to the need for a cultural revolution in Africa that would bring about a revival or rebirth of the African culture, which has been

subdued, devalued and bastardized by the European culture. It is a movement for originality, which should involve governments, educationists and the wider society. It is a search for meaning, a search for identity and for culture. It is a search that must lead to the roots of Africa's being. It is therefore a search for Africa's fullness of being. In line with this, the Chairman, African Cultural Renaissance Day 2011, Alpha Omar Konare, former Mali president, expressed the view that, for the African educational system to be meaningful and contribute towards bringing about sustainable development that would change the lives of Africans for the better, there should be a link between culture and education, a mother tongue/multilingual based education, and the rebuilding of the African Education systems so that the curriculum is informed by and based on African culture (Konare, 2011). Lets us see briefly the African culture.

The African Culture

The African like every other human person is shaped by his culture and he contributes in the shaping and transmission of this culture. The African therefore, is a *homo culturalis*. The African culture generally refers to all those things which go to the refining and developing of the African's diverse mental and psychological endowments (Gaudium et Spes, 1965). The word culture is so rich and all encompassing that both sociologists and anthropologists have defined in multifarious ways. Adamson (1972) describes cultures as the integral system of learned behavior patterns which are the characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the result of biological inheritance. In other words, culture does not come from human genes, but rather it is learnt

and taught. This bears with the etymology of the word culture as *colere*, which means “to cultivate” or “to practice”. The human person is therefore the author and architect of culture. He does not participate passively in the shaping and transmitting of culture, it is an active participation.

The African culture would consist of the patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired by the African and transmitted by symbols. It includes the embodiments in African artifacts, the historically derived and selected traditional ideas and values. It is a way of life that is particularly African. The values of the African culture include: honesty and truthfulness, and the Igbo put this ontological principle in the maxim: *Eziokwu bu ndu* (truth is life), hospitality is another value, this is seen the expression that “there is no special rendezvous required to join in meal... on arrival, once there is food, the visitor is invited to eat” (Iroegbu, 1994). Elders in Africa are esteemed as figures of wisdom; as such respect for elders is a tradition. There is respect for sacredness of life; the African believes that life is from God. This manifested in the names that the Igbo people give to their children: *Chiwendu* (God is the owner of life), *Chikerendu* (God made life). Purity of life is also valued and prized as life itself. Communal life is also part of African cultural value, and this is summed up in Mbiti’s popular expression “I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am” (Mbiti, 1969: 104). There is also this deep sense of sensitivity towards the sacred, and expression of the African worldview in music and dance. However, following external influences on the African culture, these values are fast dying. Let us see the European encounter with African culture.

The Encounter between the European and African Culture

The encounter between European and African cultures is better described as a forced acculturation. A word that describes a situation in which a highly developed society impose certain elements of its culture on the other, thereby forcing it to derail from its unique tract of cultural civilization; the observed result is an initial form of resistance and conflict that often leads to a situation of cultural disorder. In the contention of Ekwuru (1999), the first strategy employed by the colonial masters was that of disassemblage, concealed in the exploitative colonial ideology of benevolent paternalism. It was first an ideology of condemnation, which identified everything “good to be white” and everything “bad to be black” (Kwame, 1981). The basic purpose of condemnation was to create a moral ground for the destruction of the traditional society in its various forms and modes. This was followed concurrently by a process of reassemblage, and this involved the reconstruction of the African cultural world in accordance with colonial vision and design (Ekwuru, 1999).

Chinua Achebe in his celebrated classic and epoch-making piece, *Things Fall Apart*, brought out the consequences of the encounter between the European and African cultures. He particularly looks at the Igbo society, specifically at the period when the white man broke into it as a missionary, trader and administrator. This is located in Obierika’s accusation of the white man:

Does the white man understand our custom about land?, asked Okonkwo, “How can he when he does not even speak our tongue?” responded Obierika, and then he continued, “But he

says our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers and our clan can no longer act as one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart” (Achebe, 1958: pp. 124-125).

Europeans in general and European missionaries in particular; with some few exceptions, admitted little if any culture of value in Africa, just as many had denied that Africa really has any religion other than fearful superstitions. They came with their culture (which includes their language, religious customs, morals and ways of praying and acting) which defines their identity and imposed it on Africans. In this way, they killed our culture and denied us of our true identity and uniqueness. The extent of the distortion is however, determined by the extent of European contact and control.

The African culture in any of its manifestations was the bull’s eye for attack. The Christian Church working hand in hand with the colonial masters declared an all out war on African culture, regarding them as primitive, savage, pagan, barbaric and name it. They either forgot or closed their eyes to the fact that man is a cultural being, a *homo culturalis*, and from the moment of birth he enjoys the capacity to form himself so as to realize his being through culture (Mondin, 1999). It is the sum total of a people’s way of life, which embraces their mode of

dressing, talking, the food they eat, and the way they conceive death and welcome life (Rodney, 1972). The European dealt *coup de grace* to the African personality, to his *is-ness*, by destroying the African cultural values (Magesa, 1976), they made no appraisal of our peculiarities, our languages enriched with traditions of centuries, our parables, many of them the quintessence of family and national histories; our modes of thought, influenced more or less by local circumstances our poetry which reveals the profundity of African literary wizardry, this was done against the background that the negro in all his susceptibilities is an inferior race and that it is needful to give him a foreign model beacon to emulate and follow. But Africa is a continent of song, dance and musical instruments. It is a continent of language and languages. And here lies the heart of its artistic communal inheritance and nothing was sadder than the missionary failure to open a door whereby at least some of the wealth might pass across into the worship of the young churches. The drum was not heard in most churches, only the harmonious accompanying carefully translated European hymns sung to the tune of the west. The result was frequently deplorable; African languages cannot be bent to European hymn tunes (Hastings, 1976)

Many missionaries were not well informed about the societies they came to evangelize; an ignorance that is partly blame worthy and partly inevitable. They came with an almost impregnable confidence in the overwhelming superiority of the European west and in all the ways of society and culture which they had taken for granted in their homes, whether Evangelical or Catholic, little wonder then many of them rejected African names for baptism, as a replacement, they encouraged

the adoption of not only Christian names, but also European family names like Dos Santos, Caetano, Johnson, Crowther. This notwithstanding, a handful of missionaries proved themselves outstanding linguist and became deeply appreciative students of African customs. This is partly due to theological rigidity of the church at the time, and more so, it was due to the intrinsic intertwining of religion and social life characteristic of traditional Africa (Hastings, 1976). It is in this regard that Mbiti contends, “Wherever the African is, there is his religion; he carries it to the fields where he sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school in the university; if he is a politician, he takes it to the house of parliament” (Mbiti, 1969: 2).

In our contemporary time, the challenge of sustaining culture is particularly arduous. There is an expansion in human and natural sciences, increase in technology and advance in mass media, there seems to have evolved a “universal culture”, nothing else can be expected of a system that turns the world into a global village and us cosmopolitans on a global conference table. This of course has fostered the unity of mankind. However if it not guarded it undermines the peculiar characteristics of the African culture. In this case, we should be concerned about how we can participate in this exchange of culture without compromising traditional wisdom and the character proper to the African.

Towards an African Cultural Renaissance

Hastings captures the content of an African cultural renaissance when he speaks of it as “rediscovering the wisdom of the ancestors, revaluing their ceremonies, reawakening their names, renewing their languages” (Hastings, 1976: 43). The call for a cultural revolution from the above does not mean a call to primitivism; it is not a call back to cultural practices such as the killing of twins, patriarchy, human sacrifices etc. It is not a call to close the door against cultural interactions, because every culture gives and takes from the other. The move for a cultural renaissance is a reminder to Africans that the Western culture is not a finished product, they must be considered as raw materials still requiring processing and refinement before use. Scholars argue that Africa should define itself in and on its own terms regarding methodologies, subject areas, and issues without reference or deference to any alien culture (Hallen, 2002: 90).

The problem that African cultural renaissance tries to avoid is what Iroegbu (2004) calls “cultural hegemony”. That is, an attempt by some cultures to dominate, to assimilate, or even to totally obliterate another or other cultures. Some cultures including cultural aspects like languages, customs, habits and values have been known to have disappeared or been absorbed other cultures. The culture of the Indians in North America was eliminated by the new American culture; the culture of Egypt was absorbed by that of the Persian Empire; the culture of Arab nomads was absorbed by the conquering Palestinian cultures of ancient times.

We are already deep into westernization, but we can still bale out the water while it is still an ankle’s deep. In the contention of Mugambi,

(1998), the future of Africa can only be forged by accepting and mending the socio-cultural present. Colonialism and westernization have brought a permanent and irreversible change on Africa. African cultural renaissance is not a speculation that should be left hanging on ivory towers, it is a reality that is praxis oriented. Africa can right her present wrongs as a necessary condition for a healthy future, and here again the African must first be in rapport with himself so as to construct the truth of his world and be the controller of his destiny. Our identity must not be sacrificed on the altar of compromise. We must step forward towards restoring our values.

Already, African is beginning to be intensely conscious of the cultural question. In January 1972, a new law was promulgated in Zaire which abolished names that were not African. This decree was the most striking expression of President Mobutu's policy of 'authenticity', the assertion of African cultural value over and against European culture whose standard has been normative throughout the colonial period. Comparatively, the change of name of country by some African countries is also a public announcement that expresses the hunger for authenticity.

In the area of philosophy there has emerged an African philosophy, after several debates as to if there is an African philosophy. Makinde asserts "what is now necessary is, if African philosophy exists, we should show it, do it and write it rather than talk about it" (Mankinde, 2007: 3). In the area theology, an African theology has also emerged. A theology which is African, not just because it is done by an Africans or in Africa, but because it speaks of African problems from African viewpoints. It

represents the African understanding of the mystery of salvation as it applies to an African situation (Metuh, 1987). Africa can now boast of a theology that speaks to the African soul. A theology that expresses the categories of thought which arise out of the philosophy of African people. In the area of Inculturation theology, a lot has been accomplished with great vigor. Local names are beginning to be accepted for baptism, many churches now worship in their local languages and the scripture has been translated into various languages.

This revolution must begin from the smallest sociological unity. The family is the first schools of fundamental anthropology, sociology and dynamics of culture. Particularly in Africa, the family is the maternity home, the nursing home and primordial school of society. The family is the birth place of culture, and at the same time where it is nurtured and developed. As leaders of the family, parents have the duty of making their families the place where culture is taught, transmitted and sustained. Parents should take the teaching of culture as an important duty and primary right. To regard ignorance of one's culture as 'civilization' is at its best misnomer and at its manipulation of ignorance for questionable ends.

In this age of globalization, science and technology, and near invasion of the mass media in our homes, it is incumbent for parents to insist on sound African moral values for their children. Parents must make out time to say with their children to provide them with alternative African perspectives. In an age where 'economism' has become the yardstick, it is crucial to inculcate African values, such as solidarity, sense of ritual

and festivity, sense of the sacred, hospitality and love for life. These values should rather serve as yardstick (Ossai, 2005).

One great instrument for cultural renaissance is language. Irrespective of where parents find themselves with their children they should endeavor to teach their children their native language. Language carries with it the culture and worldview of the people who own it. Some African families can be described as ‘expatriate’ even though they live within Africa. These are the wealthy families who think that it is a sign of prestige to act like and teach their children, everything in the western way.

Learning institutions also have a role to play in this process. It is through education that our values can be restored in the heart of young Africans. For Africans to be Africans they must know what makes them Africans. This was the point stressed by Socrates when he said “Man know thyself” (Omogbe, 1990), self knowledge is the beginning of this revolutionary process. Plato had also pointed out that, “since the mind of the young are very impressionable we must, if we are to educate them properly, make sure that the poetry on which they are brought up is suitable for the purpose” (Hare, 1989). Our system of education needs to have an African dimension. If this is done, the child then grows up to learn the fundamental traditional and cultural values and truth (Adegbola, 2005).

The African law making bodies also have a role to play; if the laws and policies that can safeguard our values are promulgated by the government or enacted by traditional ruling councils, the decay of our values will be impeded and their recovery enhanced. There should be

ensorship of whatever comes from outside before they are allowed for local consumption.

Conclusion

The call for an African cultural renaissance must go far beyond the demands of civil government or the acceptance and rejection of credal formulas to every item of the common life style and draw into its vortex an ever larger proportion of the total population. In this process, three important points must be duly considered:

Firstly, African culture must not be allowed to die on either of two fronts: to be self-enclosed and thereby not dynamic in growth interaction with other cultures or to be so over-open as to have no precious content and value; worthy of note is that culture is relevant only when it is progressive and contains those characteristics that will help its members grow (Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004). Secondly, African culture must see itself, appreciating its own worth and meaning. In this process, it makes its own contribution to the present world-in-globalization. While Africans learn other languages to understand others, they must also learn their own languages so as to understand themselves. And finally, the problem is not to borrow or not to borrow, it is that of what to borrow and what not to borrow, we also have something to lend to others. Our values are formidable in their humanness and immortal in their appeal. If we have understood these, then we are on the path to an African cultural renaissance.

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