

‘Is There such Thing as African Culture in the 21st Century? A Philosophical Appraisal

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Abstract

This paper attempts to demonstrate that currently, there is nothing like African culture in the real sense of the word. If culture is understood as the sum total of a way of life of a particular set of people, it is unfortunate but obvious that modern Africa cannot pretend to have one. It is the opinion of this paper that colonialism and imperialism destroyed what was originally African. Talking of a genuine African culture in this twenty first century is a sham. It is shocking to realize that till date, most Africans still rely on the ‘Other’ [that is, the Western world] to name, qualify, define, and even classify them. This paper then concludes that Africans must regain themselves, that is; they must remain authentic through the revival and imposition of their genuine and unique personality if they really want to contribute to world history.

Keywords: Africa, Culture, Colonialism, Race and 21st century

Introduction

Philosophers, anthropologists and sociologists have put forward over two Hundred definitions of culture throughout centuries. However, Edward Taylor’s definition since 1871 appears to be the most plausible and encompassing. According to him, culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as member of society”. The originality of the above definition lies on its ability to accommodate the most basic elements of culture which are the material aspect [e.g.: art, implements and buildings] and the non-material aspect [e.g.: beliefs, moral and attitude]. For the purpose of this paper emphasis will be more on the non-material aspect of culture. From that perspective, culture can be understood or defined as the sum total of a way of life of a particular set of people; especially their customs, manners, ethics, morals etc. this also implies that there are as many cultures as there are many sets of people. Thus, the fundamental questions of this paper are as follows: do postcolonial African people still have unique/original customs, manners, ethics and morals? In other words, colonialism being the political and economic dependence of one people on the other, can we still talk with confidence of a genuine way of life proper to African people in this twenty first century? As culture is concerned, is present day Africa not a mere construction, imposition and classification by the “other” that is, the Western world? Is there any way African people can regain their originality and there after contribute genuinely to world history?

The answers to the above questions will help the author of this paper to articulate the problem of African people and their cultural identity. The author will look at colonialism being understood by white men as “God-given” mission. This will be an opportunity to know what white men had in their mind while coming to Africa. The issue of race/ cultural identity vis-à-vis personality will be discussed. This will be an opportunity to know if black men can regain their originality/ identity through the revival and imposition of their genuine personality and effectively contribute to world history.

The cultural context of racism, colonization and imperialism

Basically, colonialism is best understood as the political and economic dependence of one people on another. It is on record that Westerners came to Africa with the mandate to completely annex the mentality and concepts of the black people. In their own opinion, African people were under-developed and defenceless. They were people of different race and culture. They were ugly and “primitive” (Ngamen, 2010:192). Therefore, it was necessary for Westerners to expose black men to progress, development and to the light of civilization because according to them, progress, development and civilization were their exclusive rights. White men refused to study and understand the blacks. Instead, they categorically and blindly condemned everything black.

One of the lines that the conquerors/ white men drew is that between reason and unreason (Mogobe, 2003). White men borrowed Aristotle’s definition of man to justify their evil mission in Africa. Aristotle, one of the major figures in ancient Western philosophy, defined man as “a rational animal”. This implies that any animal whose being or nature includes reason as his/her distinctive characteristic is a human being or a “man”. Any other animal which might look like a human being but without reason does not qualify as a human being. Rather it is simply an animal with unreason.

In white men understanding and interpretation of Aristotle’s definition of man, black men were mere animals with unreason. So the line between reason and unreason was drawn to differentiate between white and black. White men became animals with reason while black men remained animals with unreason. This line

indicated not only the boundary between reason and unreason but it also assigned competences, rights and obligations in agreement with reason and unreason respectively. In this way, it also established the nature of the relationship between those inside the line of reason.

It is on record that the right to freedom and the competence to exercise one's will became the exclusive right of rational animals that is, the white men. In their relationship with one another rational animals/ white men had the obligation to recognize, respect and protect the right to freedom and freedom of the will. However, it was out of place for animals with unreason that is, black men to claim the competences or the right that did not belong to them by nature. Therefore, in their relationship with animals, the animals with unreason that is, black people were disallowed in advance to demand obligations that befit only rational animals/ white men.

According to the white men, Aristotle's definition that man is a rational animal excluded the Africans. In essence, this philosophy denied humanity to all animals with unreason. By definition such animals-black men included could not and did not qualify to be humans. Therefore, the black man was to be treated only as an animal because by nature the black man was an animal with unreason. Accordingly, it was necessary and proper to conquer and enslave the black man. The conquerors or white men saw no distinction between the Cartesian Cogito and their so-called God-given mandate or mission in Africa. In other words, "I think, therefore, I conquer and enslave" became the practical application by the conqueror/ white man of Rene Descartes' "I think, therefore, I exist".

From their interpretation of Aristotle's definition of man to justify their conquest, white men also took particular interest in African religion, music, medicine and even African's proper names. White men dismissed all African indigenous beliefs as heathen. In their attempt to impose their culture on Africans, white men succeeded in dividing parents from children, villages from villages, tribes from tribes and to a large extent, countries from countries. (Ngamen, 2010). White men wanted to make sure that all evidence of African culture was gradually suppressed or eradicated from living memory. This is evidenced in the following; African proper names, church music, African medicine, African dress codes and manners.

African proper names

In line with their mission to dominate and colonize the blacks European missionaries purposely Anglicized African proper names in order to indicate that the bearers had become Christians and therefore "civilized" or "cultured" as well. In his *Africa Unbound* (1963), Alex, Quaison-Sackey gives an account of what actually happened in Ghana. According to him, when European missionaries arrived Ghana they changed "Seki" to "Sackey", "Obu" became "Racson", "Kuntu" became "Blackson" and "Dadzie" became "Steele Dadzie" and so on and so forth. There is no doubt that apart from Ghana, many other African countries witnessed the same scenario. It is unfortunate that black men unwillingly saw their names and their own individuality being obliterated with a quality that was distinctly not African. [Ngamen, 2010].

African Religion

From name changing white men also criticized African religion, they condemned African music. Playing drum in African churches for instance, was sacrilegious and heathen. In fact black men were infidels and knew nothing about the true "God" that is, the God of Jesus Christ. Black men did not know God because through their irrationally or unreason they believed in the mythic gods. According to white men, the gods of black men were at best the highest form of aesthetic expression and, at worst mere objects of superstition. Reason therefore, justified distraction from them. They had to be abandoned. This was strengthened by the claim that God had now revealed himself through Jesus. Since this provided certainty about the being and the destiny of humanity, it was no longer necessary to have faith in the mythic gods. The conviction here was that the God of Jesus was the one and only true God and this justified the burial of all other gods and their replacement by the God of Jesus. Black men, being animals with unreason lacked the ability to know the true God and therefore had no religion in a white man's sense of the word. Consequently, African Christians were at once deprived of the wellsprings of their own culture.

African medicine

White men had no doubt in their mind that African medicine was inferior, primitive and savage. It is on record that any African Christian under the dictate of European missionaries was expected to seek help from the doctor at the hospital, not from the African herbalist. (Ngamen, 2012). It is unfortunate that white men purposely ignored the African distinction between an herbalist and a trickster or juju-man. White men called all of them "witch doctors" or "medicine men".

African dress code and manners

As animals with unreason, black men knew nothing about good or bad manners. In fact, wearing European clothes, eating with knife and fork was a mark of civilization and development. Every black man was expected

and is still expected to say “Sir” to a white man. Even romance between a white man and black woman and vice-versa was sacrilegious. (Ngamen, 2010). The educated Africans, particularly in the French and Portuguese speaking territories, ceased to be regarded as Africans. They became either French or Portuguese.

In line with the above, along with what is going on in present day Africa, it is obvious that psychologically and culturally, the colonizer has succeeded in convincing the colonized that is, the black man, that he is lazy, good for nothing, unintelligent, wicked, inferior, backward or under developed. That he lacks personality and he is not checked by any inhibition of civilization.(Ngamen, 2010).So, constantly confronted with this image of him, set forth and imposed on all institutions and in every human contact, the black man ends up recognizing it as one would a detested nick name which has become a familiar description.

Unfortunately, this wilful creation and spread of this mythical and degrading portrait of the colonized/ black man by the colonizer ends up by being accepted and lived by the colonized/ black man. It thus acquires a certain amount of reality and contributes to the true portrait of the colonized. This constitutes one of the most serious blows suffered by the black man in present day Africa because he is being separated from his original culture and history. According to Albert Memi (1965), we have no idea of what the colonized would have been without colonization but we certainly see what has happened as a result of it. To subdue and exploit, the colonizer pushed the colonized out of his historical and social, cultural and technical current. Today what is real and verifiable is that the black man culture, society, and technology are seriously adulterated if not damaged. Again, what is pathetic is that even in this twenty first century the standing order seems to remain: the black man must resemble the white man. And, this becomes dramatic when the black man realizes that he has assumed all the accusations and condemnations of the white man; that he is becoming accustomed at looking at his own people through the eyes of their procurer or destroyer that is, the white man. Almost everything in the black man is out of style, inefficient and derisory. The fellow black man has ceased to be one of his people at heart. He is now ashamed of what is most real in him, of the only thing not borrowed that is, his identity. (Ngamen 2010).

African Personality and the search for Common Humanity: the Way Forward

The major business of this section is to demonstrate that culture is dynamic and therefore, there is nothing like cultural hereditary. More so, human beings are one irrespective of their skin colour or geographical location; or to paraphrase an Akan proverb: in human flesh there is no edge of cultivation-no boundary that is, all human flesh is of one kind; all mankind is one species [Busia, 1962]. The consequence of the foregoing is that there is a ‘common humanity’ and as long as black men are human beings, they cannot be excluded. In fact, we shall see in the following pages that despite the efforts to prove that black man belonged to a lower species than the white man, it was too much of a man to be an ape. So the evidence that the black man belonged to the one species of man, that is; *Homo sapiens* was too over-whelming to be stopped. For the purpose of this paper, the author is of the opinion that what present day Africans need is to decolonize their current cultural mentality. This is to be done through the self-actualization of Africans and the promotion of African personality. Africans need to regain and impose themselves if they genuinely and effectively want to contribute to world history.

On the search for common humanity:

Many theories have been framed by Westerners in order to validate white man superiority over the black man. Slavery, colonial subjection, the colour bar, second-class citizenship, segregation, discrimination, apartheid, that has been the black man’s lot.

Shakespeare in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, Act iv, Sc.3, describes the black man as follows:

“black is the badge of hell, The hue of dungeons and
the scowl of night, Black seems to be savage towards
the object of their fear.

There is no doubt that slavery is a very old institution. It is also not news that whites have enslaved whites and blacks have enslaved blacks, but when a black man becomes the slave of a white man, added to the difference in status between slave and master is the difference in colour between white and black. The dark-skinned man becomes the subordinate of the pale skinned man, and black becomes the “badge of hell”, of all that is dark, inferior and contemptible (Busia, 1962).

In addition to slavery, came the colonization of Africa and the subjection of its blacks to European rule. This again implied the domination of blacks by whites, and one in which political and social policies were based on the premise that blacks are inferior to whites. White men tried anything they could to justify colonialism and establish the supposed innate inferiority of the black man. For instance, they invoked the biological theory of the survival of the fitter race; they embarked on the measurements of craniums which they beautifully called dolichocephalism. But the good news is that despite all efforts to prove that the black man belonged to a lower species than the white, it was too much of a man to be an ape. The evidence that the black man belonged to the one species of man, that is; *Homo sapiens* was too overwhelming to be stopped.

It is on record those latter anthropologists with more sophisticated empirical methods of research,

convincingly demonstrated that some of the earlier writings about the black were based on incorrect or insufficient data and that there were respectable and intelligible elements in the beliefs, worship, and rituals of African peoples (Busia, 1962). White men alleged that the black man intelligence quotient was low, his vocabulary had no abstract nouns; he was incapable of abstract thinking; he had no philosophy; he did not understand natural phenomena; he had no idea of causality. His mind was full of magical notions. Throughout the ages, evidence has been built up to show that the cultures of African peoples are inferior to those of the whites; and this must be because Africans belong to an inferior race. No wonder General Norton de Matos, former Governor of the Portuguese territory of Angola in 1953 has this to say about his mission in Africa:

In Africa our objective has been to convert the blacks,
to lift them from the moral and material misery they
were in when we encountered them, to clothe them,
to give them human habitation, to make them
rural proprietors, or to transform them into artisans.

However, as earlier mentioned, there have been works by anthropologists, archaeologists, sociologists-scientists of all races-controverting and disproving some of the many theories, opinions, and misconception about Africans (Busia, 1962). For instance, no scientist has been able to convincingly prove the link between culture and race. It has been established that there is nothing such as cultural hereditary. In other words, there is no correlation between cultures and genetic qualities of racial types. Cultures are learned and therefore, they can change according to circumstances. In present day Africa for instance, there are converts to Christianity and to Islam. This was not the case in pre-colonial Africa. To paraphrase K. A. Busia, there are trade unions and parliamentary institutions in Africa today, new techniques are being learned. Industrialization has begun. Illiteracy rates are high, but there is a growing body of literate Africans; schools, colleges, and Universities are increasing in number. All of this is taking place without any changes in the biological or genetic constitution of African peoples. The implication here is that, all human cultures and institutions undergo change. So there is no scientific fact to prove the innate inferiority of the blacks vis-à-vis the whites.

It is also on record that in 1953 under the auspices of UNESCO, anthropologists, archaeologists and sociologists gathered to discuss the question of race and they all consented that no race was inferior or superior to another. Lieris Michel, one of the eminent anthropologists put it this way. "it is fruitless to seek in the biology of race an explanation of the difference observable between the cultural achievements of the various peoples". Lieris further posited that cultural development is not uniform even within a single country. As a matter of fact, the cultural achievements of any country represent the combined efforts of many peoples. Commenting on the current position of Europe. Michel Lieris wrote as follows:

The peoples of Europe-whose overseas expansion,
be it remembered, is of very recent date, today
restricted by the evolution of the very peoples they
formerly surpassed in techniques-owed their cultural lead
to the opportunities they have long had of frequent contacts
among themselves and with contrasting peoples.... The truth
is all cultures have their successes and failures, their faults and
virtues.

In *Race and History*, Claude Levis-Strauss agrees with Lieris, for he too, makes the point that the culture of any one country at any given time is the result of countless inter actions, countless interchanges of ideas, and the cumulative experience of generations. The implication of the above arguments is the confirmation of the fact that when it comes to the issue of race relations, particularly as between black and white, it is not what science has to say that matters. To paraphrase K. A. Busia, raceattitudes are not determined by the validity, or lack of validity of scientific data. This is evidenced in the fact that "men did not stop to find a causal relation between cultural phenomena and biological or genetic data before they embarked on slavery or colonization or segregation. The race attitudes were arrived at before proper consideration of the facts. They are prejudices (Busia, 1962).

What the blacks, particularly the twenty first century Africans want from the whites is to set aside their pride, their erroneous and biased scientific discoveries and genuinely acknowledge the humanity of the blacks. Or, to paraphrase John Masefield, one of the poet laureates of England, it is time for blacks and whites to "laugh and be merry together, like brothers akin, Guesting a while in the rooms of a beautiful inn". It is a fact that the majority of white people do not wish to accept the blacks "like brothers akin" unfortunately; there is no other option for those seeking for global peace. For happy race relations can be achieved only when mutual sympathy and respect are given expression in service to others. Sincerely offered, gratefully accepted, and when possible, reciprocated. Whites and blacks must work together to make harmonious human relations possible. It is more a matter of the heart than genetics (Busia, 1962).

The ball is on the court of white men, because through out the ages African peoples have been known

for the acknowledgement and great respect for the common humanity. The analysis of the Akan peoples of Ghana by K.A. Busia to illustrate Africans attitude towards humanity is very educative and inspiring. According to K.A. Busia, the Akan people say; *Honammunninhanao* that is, in human flesh there is no edge of cultivation-no boundary. This simply means that all human flesh is of one kind; all mankind is one species.

An Akan child and by implication an African child is taught to greet all whom he meets; even the stranger whom he may never meet again. It is more than courtesy. The greeting is considered to be an acknowledgement, recognition of the other person as a fellow human being. If you passed him by without greeting him, you would be treating him as a thing- you would be implying that he did not share your humanity. (Busia, 1962). History tells us that in pre-colonial Africa, a high value was placed on human relations. It was compulsory to recognize one whom you passed as a fellow human being. That is why according to K.A. Busia, an Akan person is deeply hurt when he is given cause to say: "He behaved towards me as though I were not a human being". This simply shows how the basic equality of mankind, of the membership of men, all men, in just one species, is deeply rooted in the heart of an Akan person and by extension to all Africans. The most important and urgent thing to do now is the recognition that each race is like the other-that all men are equal in their humanity. The time has come, to paraphrase Dr. Kwegyir Aggrey (1875-1927): you can play a tune of sorts on the white keys and you can play a tune of sorts on the black keys, but for harmony you must use both the black and the white. [Ngamen, 2010]

African Personality: The Way Forward

Since it is a fact that all the technical theories, all the analyses of culture and race, all the attempts to establish innate inferiority of the African are vain efforts, what is urgently needed is for present day Africans to decolonize their current mentality. This is to be done through the self actualization of Africans and the promotion of African personality.

What is African personality? According to Alex Quaison-Sackey (1963), "the African personality... is the cultural expression of what is common to all peoples whose home is on the continent of Africa. It is both a concept and a force. As a concept, it is defined by those very cultural movements in which, as a force, it is embodied. It is a revolution, philosophical concept, an ideal and it is best realized in action".

Kwame Nkrumah appears to be the first African scholar to have given a modern connotation to the concept [Ngamen, 2010]. It is on record that during the first conference of independent African states held in Accra in April 1958, he stated as follows: "For too long in our history, Africa has spoken through the voices of others. Now, what I have called an African personality in international affairs will have a chance of making its proper impact and will let the world know it through the voices of Africa's own sons. Besides, African personality is an ideal and being an ideal, it becomes difficult both to define and realize because it is subject to various interpretations [Ngamen, 2010]. Sometimes the meaning of African personality is extended to Pan-Africanism, positive action and non-alignment. For Alex Quaison-Sackey (1963), the African personality is to be defined not only by what it is in the process of becoming. But also by what it was not permitted to become during the century or more of colonial domination, oppression and exploitation.

In his book captioned, *Ethiopia Unbound* Casely Hayford states that African personality will have its full meaning only and only if Africans are themselves, become themselves. He warned Africans not to imitate or follow the Europeans. Instead, they should preserve their African culture, the tradition and customs handed down to them by their ancestors. Hayford maintains that African personality was in action in the great empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai; also in the powerful kingdoms of Ashanti, Ife and Benin; all of which flourished centuries before the Europeans arrived in Africa. Contrastingly, these empires and the leaders who ruled them were relegated, by the colonial powers, to the realm of those things best forgotten. The Europeans said to one another, after all, why let the African learn anything of his past, he might glorify in it and reject our God-given duty to civilize and culture him. [Ngamen 2010].

According to Ngamen [2010], it is very urgent for the present day African to rediscover, recreate, in order to understand who he is, whence he came; and since he knows that no personality can be fully and effectively realized except in the open air of freedom and independence; he must not only obtain these conditions for himself but must recover what his ancestors once had achieved before they finally succumbed, through conquest, bribery, treachery and bad faith, to European power. The implication of the above arguments is that, the present-day African is condemned to emerge not only culturally, but politically and psychologically as well.

Promisingly, with independence, the colonial mould is cracking and falling apart-although very slowly. In its place, African leaders and educators must propose new rules, establishing a new social framework, in which there will be room for the traditional values, for assimilated values, and for new aspirations. [Ngamen 2010]. More so, the concept of African personality will help Africans to secure a rightful place in the harmony of all nations; it will make the world realize that it will not find its true balance, will not become what it aspires to become until the African affirmation has been made and the countries of Africa assure their rightful place among other nations of the world [Ngamen, 2010]. For this is a new age, an age in which, as some say, there must be

one world or none, unity or destruction.

There is no doubt that the realization of the African personality is not an easy task because the affirmation of the African personality, especially by its modern standard bearers promises the dawn of a new era of peace in which power may be measured not by the quantities of armaments but by the quality of morality. It is therefore, for African leaders to realize the great responsibilities they are carrying on behalf of Africa. And in this twenty first century there is no other option than to face reality.

Conclusion:

This work has attempted to demonstrate that it is very difficult if not impossible to talk of a genuine African culture in the twenty first century. Colonialism and imperialism destroyed what was originally and genuinely African. However, the good news is that many anthropologists, archeologists, sociologists-scientists of all races have proven that all the technical theories, all the analyses of culture and race, all attempts to establish the innate inferiority of the African are vain efforts. Human beings are one irrespective of their skin colour; or to paraphrase an Akan proverb: in human flesh there is no edge of cultivation – no boundary that is, all human flesh is of one kind, all mankind is one species. In other words, there is a “**common humanity**”. Therefore, this paper is of the opinion that what present day Africans need is to decolonize their current cultural mentality. This is to be done through the self-actualization of Africans and the promotion of African personality. Twenty first century Africans need to regain and impose themselves if they genuinely and actually want to contribute to world history.

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