

HOMOGENIZING CONTINENTAL AFRICA AND ITS DIASPORA THROUGH LESSONS ON AFRICAN ORAL SOCIAL CULTURE:

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Abstract

From time immemorial the largely orate African society has educated its members through oral literature; teaching society's history and culture: the oral traditions, beliefs and values. The aim of teaching these tenets has to a great extent been to create homogeneity in society while helping the individual to develop a sense of responsibility, self-understanding, identity, and a sense of belonging.¹ These are crucial ingredients of existence for every member of any given society. The question of identity and sense of belonging is particularly important not only for the people of Continental Africa who, over the years suffered internal displacement due to colonialism and subsequent post-colonial misrule, but equally for those in the Diaspora who have often suffered alienation and exclusionary treatment.

This paper underscores the need for Africa to teach her history, culture and values to her people both at home and in the Diaspora as a way of creating some element of homogeneity and maintaining a link. The paper specifically explores what lessons need to be taught to Continental Africa and its Diaspora as a means of fostering cohesion between the two sides thereby creating a common sense of belonging. However, for the said teaching to happen, several questions need to be addressed. Besides the decision on content, a major question has to do with the theory and methodology of teaching the largely oral African culture and traditions.

Key words: Continental Africa, African Diaspora, homogeneity, cultural lessons, Ujamaa.

¹ Muleka, J. 2009, *Images of Women in African Oral Literature*. Germany: VDM Verlag.

Introduction

This paper starts by asking what dream exists between a mother country and its Diaspora. Is it that of independence, dependence or interdependence? Or perhaps all these? Are there, for example, any lessons for the mother country to offer to its Diaspora and vice versa? Is there any relationship in the first place? To answer these questions this paper will want to draw the analogy of the young man who leaves his native country in Africa to go to America to acquire an education for the benefit of his native country which is preparing for self-rule and requires educated citizens. While in the Diaspora the young man sows a seed. The seed so sown, like the proverbial mustard seed, grows and spreads to become a source of hope and pride, not only for the people of his father's native land but also its Diaspora and beyond. Through him the world is reminded that "yes we can" create a world where all valleys can be exalted and all mountains flattened to provide level ground for all men regardless of their color, race, gender or religion.

If this journey taken by Barack Obama Senior² in the early nineteen-sixties is what represents a successful relationship between a country and its Diaspora, then the two are not independent of each other since this would mean they are separate and not connected whatsoever. Similarly dependent would imply one-sidedness where one benefits from the other without reciprocation. On the contrary, the Obama journey implies a cyclic relationship hinged on give and take. It is a relationship that is reciprocal or symbiotic in nature from which both Africa and America have come to affect one another. So interdependence is the right term to define the relationship; meaning that continental Africa and its Diaspora have lessons to share if not teach one another. However, the success of the sharing can only occur where there are shared ideals; which is why this paper intends to root for the teaching of certain aspects of the African culture to continental Africa and its Diaspora.

For both the teacher and pupil, whether in the native land or the Diaspora, a recognition and appreciation of the symbiotic relationship between the two worlds is crucial. This symbiosis may be physical, involving the exchange of human traffic or infrastructure. But it can also be ideological involving the exchange of knowledge, culture and practices. While sustaining the physical symbiosis is easy; only limited by territorial boundaries and logistics, ideological symbiosis is much more complex.

² The father of Barack Obama the President of The United States of America.

Justification

Having adopted the Barack Obama Senior journey as the analogy to explain the relationship between a country and its Diaspora it would be desirable to discuss both the physical and ideological symbiosis. The reason for this is that the Obama journey involves both physical participation and the exchange of knowledge. However, the space of this paper limits me and I will majorly concentrate on ideological symbiosis. The scope of symbiotic ideology; particularly in the space of this paper may not want to be limited to but would wish to include the *sine qua non* human elements of language, region, morals and values, history, leadership systems, rites of passage, gender relations, family welfare and others: the aggregate of which I will call culture. Indeed Mbembe³ argues that cultural education in Africa is necessary for the African people's identity.

The position of this paper is that there is need to teach certain aspects of African values to continental Africa and its Diaspora as a way of maintaining a link between the two worlds. One argument for doing this is that whether in the Diaspora or back at home Africans are one people sharing same origins, and that the differences one may see among them are simply as a result of historical accidents. In fact even the very historical accidents have not really made them different; instead the accidents seem to provide another front for similar if not shared experiences. For instance, colonization back in Africa originates equally bitter memories and experiences as slavery for the Africans who ended up in Europe, America and elsewhere. The only significant difference is that while the Africans back at home were enslaved in their own countries those outside Africa were enslaved in foreign lands. However, the aggregate effect of alienation from what is their own; loss of identity due to displacement; impoverishment by being denied self emancipation; loss of self-esteem as a result of dehumanizing treatment and a myriad other ills are a common denominator which seems to invite common interpretation and therapy.

Indeed I find it logical to argue that anyone, say, a Kenyan who after losing his ancestral land to a British settler and who ends up as a squatter on another white settler's farm will easily identify with the tribulations of an African American with no claim to any land because his slave forefathers got uprooted from their homeland and deposited elsewhere. It, for instance, makes perfect sense to compare the nostalgia in the American Negro spiritual: "Swing low, sweet chariot; **coming for to carry me home**" (emphasis mine) and that in the Kenyan songs by the displaced Mau Mau freedom

³ Mbembe, Achile. 2006. "Afropolitanion", *Africultures*, no. 66, Jan-March, PP 9 – 15.

fighters singing about the fertility of the farms they lost to the British settlers and which they long to repossess.

Being one people whether in Continental Africa or its Diaspora one is tempted to imagine that there should be a strong element of social homogeneity anchored on shared beliefs, values and aspirations. Such homogeneity it seems to me serves important ends that make it obviously desirable. This brings me to the other argument that a homogeneous people, if they share really strong values and aspirations are more likely to develop and enjoy a stronger sense of identity and belonging as compared to those who may not have the advantage of similar social integration. Africa and its Diaspora need this homogeneity as a pillar for the much needed unity that is hoped to bring Africa out of its woes. This I believe is possible with shared lessons and ideals that could be carried in certain African cultures.

I am conscious that someone may want to view my advocacy for African cultural education as a step towards promoting sectarian interests. Cooper,⁴ for example, makes a strong allusion to cosmopolitanism as a trend that is currently in vogue. He may actually be right given the fact that we now refer to the world more and more as a global village and perhaps that we should be talking more of a global culture than the narrower African culture for Africa and its Diaspora. True as this may sound, my view is that cosmopolitanism is like a rainbow which only exists as an aggregate of several colours. Global culture is, therefore, a rainbow that brings together, say, Western culture, Oriental culture, African culture and other cultures. In fact each of these cultures is again a conglomeration of hundreds, perhaps thousands of “friendly” cultures. I would therefore argue that for the cultural colour of continental Africa and its Diaspora to equally shine and contribute to form the “rainbow” or global culture for that matter; it must be firmly grounded and strongly articulated.

I, therefore, end this section by emphasizing the need to dedicate or re-dedicate Africans both at home and the Diaspora to particular strong and acceptable cultural education, knowledge and practices as a means of creating and sustaining identity and a sense of belonging. The justification of this advocacy is the premise that one gains a bargaining platform when they have something to offer. Of course such a platform is only possible for a people who, out of clear self appreciation and understanding, enjoy doubtless identity and a strong sense of belonging; perhaps to resonate with

⁴ Cooper, B. 1998. *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with the Third Eye*. London: Routledge.

the Kenyan Swahili saying: “mwacha mila ni mtumwa” (he is a slave who has no culture of their own).

What can be taught?

More than any other race in the world, Africans suffered and continue to suffer perpetual displacement. The most vivid cause of such displacement was the slave trade of the 17th, 18th and part of the 19th centuries, which created an African Diaspora in millions. This was to be followed by the later 19th century partition and colonization of Africa which also caused internal displacement of millions as European settlers cleared the natives from their farms to create space for plantation farming. More displacement was to follow as a result of misrule by the subsequent governments that took over after the collapse of imperialism.

Besides, the Biafra war of secession in Nigeria in the sixties; the exodus from the Uganda of dictator Idi Amin Dada in the seventies; the political turmoil of Chad in the eighties; the Hutu-Tutsi massacre in Rwanda in the nineties; the current anarchy in Somalia dating from the early nineties; the economic collapse in Zimbabwe and very recently, the 2007/2008 chaos following the disputed presidential election in Kenya, are just but a few of the instances that have caused displacement of persons in their millions in Africa. This is of course not to mention the recent blood-letting in South Sudan, the Central African Republic, the Boko Haramu menace in Nigeria ... the list of activities resulting in displacement is actually endless.

The displacees (to create a term for this purpose) could be put into different categories. Some of the displacees are the ones that form what we shall describe either as internally displaced persons - IDPs (refugees in their own countries); inter-African displacees (refugees from sister countries in Africa) and international African displacees (those who sought asylum in countries overseas).

Considering the kind of instability occasioned by the cited displacements, one starts to ask the question of what lessons are appropriate for people so displaced. What lessons, for example, would create homogeneity among peoples whose genesis and form of displacement are so varied? This question becomes even more crucial when we consider that some African countries have not suffered such displacement. Similarly, some groups of people in the countries that suffered displacement were themselves not affected, some perhaps were the ones who caused the others to

be displaced while others even went ahead to occupy the lands of the displaced. What lessons should these people share?

It is also worth noting that not the entire African Diaspora comprises displaced persons. Some live in the Diaspora of their own volition: this could be for trade, marriage, education, and quite recently the American “green card”. The Obama Senior’s is one of such cases of volitional emigration when he went to America to study. Anyhow the point I am trying to make is that whichever content one intends to teach whether back in Africa or the Diaspora has to bear in mind demographical disparities; not only of socio-political and economic status but also of time and space. Time here considers the duration and chronology of the particular status while space raises the question of context, with the view that an African back at home inhabits a different environment as the one, say, in America, a factor that could demand different lessons for each.

At this point I wish to go back to my earlier question of what lesson(s) to teach. In particular, what aspects of the African culture or ideology should be chosen to familiarize people with? This question still sounds elusive given the multiplicity of cultural “dialects” in Africa. However, it is possible to put one’s finger on an idea that sounds African, apparently born and bred in Africa and even carrying an African name. One such idea or practice is “Ujamaa” (African socialism) as propounded by the late Julius Nyerere of Tanzania. Ujamaa as a philosophy preaches social cohesiveness. In particular it encourages communalism through which people handle their affairs collectively as opposed to the individualistic approach to issues. Supported by the philosophy of “many hands make light work” Ujamaa encourages communal sharing of benefits as well as liabilities.

In the spirit of Ujamaa it would be indecorous even unprocedural to have billionaires and destitutes in the same community. Indeed in an ideal African setting such disparities of billionaires juxtaposed with destitutes would be mitigated by the popular culture of the extended family. Under this system an individual’s good will is expected to go beyond the immediate family to include cousins, aunts, uncles, in-laws, neighbours, to a much wider influence. This way a destitute in the community becomes a community’s responsibility and shame. In practice Ujamaa aptly captures the African philosophy of “I am because we are; and because we are, I am”.

One wants to imagine a situation where “Ujamaa” becomes the accepted culture in Africa and its Diaspora; wouldn’t the multibillion investors in the Nigerian Niger Delta⁵ be more sensitive to those naked and hungry inhabitants of that region? What about the marginalized tribes of North Eastern Kenya or the warring clans of Somalia where social cohesion has been a mirage with the state of anarchy prevailing for nearly twenty years now? Is it also possible that “Ujamaa” would encourage the people in the Diaspora to be more accountable to their motherland? Of course the thinking here would actually be depending on the lessons on communalism and the African extended family systems that Ujamaa propagates.

Even though the space of this paper does not provide for a detailed discussion on what else can be taught, the preceding exposition on “Ujamaa” presupposes the existence of some subjects that can be taught. Indeed “Ujamaa” here only serves as an example of lessons that can be taught on African culture and values. More lessons can be developed on African history, religion, language, morals, family, initiation rites, leadership systems and many more as I will briefly outline.

Indeed one may want to ask what purpose the teaching of African history or religion or language or even initiation rites, for example, may serve. In my view, important lessons can be designed from all these themes. For example, the people in continental Africa – especially the young who may not be conversant with the past of their people may, like those in the Diaspora want to learn this. Knowledge about their history and the achievements of the community’s past heroes, other than creating the confidence of self understanding and self appraisal also sets some bench-marks hinged on the heroes’ achievements. This is in addition to fostering shared pride and patriotism.

Similarly it is possible that the teaching of African religions would contribute to greater understanding of the people’s myths of origin and their relationship with the deities as a step towards a greater sense of spiritually identity. It is true that the Africans both at home and in the Diaspora share various faiths: Christian, Islam and many others, yet in spite of this, it is also true that they often experience that lingering African self that they may aspire to explore and understand. Indeed in itself, even the very appreciation of having a common origin or ancestry can play a major role in solidifying the people’s unity.

Other lessons Africa can share with its Diaspora concern language. While the Diaspora depends much on European languages such as English, French, German and perhaps Spanish, continental

⁵ An immensely rich oil producing region in Nigeria whose locals are extremely poor and discontented.

Africa depends less on these languages but more on African languages. A good example is the extent of Kiswahili in East and Central Africa. It is apparent that a person who learns Kiswahili will easily communicate to people in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Congo and to some extent Burundi, Malawi and Zambia. The sharing of African languages between Africa and its Diaspora can thus be a big booster to linguistic homogeneity and by extension, social cohesion. In fact since language is often a carrier of a people's culture sharing an African language for those at home and the Diaspora is in essence beginning to share culture. Indeed avenues of cultural expression such as songs, riddles, proverbs, myths and legends are aptly taught through the language of oral literature.

On the other hand they are these very avenues of cultural expression through which initiation ceremonies are conducted. A circumcision ceremony in an African community, for example, is extensively accompanied by songs while the social training that precedes or follows the ceremony is done by use of proverbs, riddles and narratives. Initiation ceremonies in Africa are important as a rite of passage during which time young people are tutored into social responsibilities. Perhaps one cannot really dispute the importance of such training for the youth; which training is also worth teaching to both Africa and its Diaspora.

Methodology and the challenges

While the preceding entry demonstrates that lessons that could be taught to Continental Africa and its Diaspora abound, the challenge is how these lessons can be taught, that is, the methodology. The teaching of African concepts, ideas or lessons presents special challenges. One important challenge lies in the very oral nature of African traditions; be it the teaching of culture, values, history or any other. The challenge here arises from the fact that the teaching in an ideal situation is done orally, particularly through oral performances. African orality usually calls for a performer and a participating audience in a face to face interaction. Most often than not, the participating audience learns the performer's lessons by imitating, emulating and simulating. This implies that the teaching of African lessons is largely a live experience, which perhaps explains why oral literature is more popular as a mode of communication in Africa than the written word. The challenge posed by this state of affairs is that, any effective teaching of the selected lessons will require live teaching to live audiences, which obviously raises the question of logistics.

The other challenge lies in the multiplicity of the African culture. What I mean here is that Africa as a continent is not culturally homogeneous. It has over forty countries and every single country has various ethnic communities. The ethnic communities in Nigeria alone, for example, run into hundreds, of course each with its own unique cultural practices that set it aside from the others. Besides, each community may have its own myths of origin and history which only the community subscribes to. And, considering the value each community puts on what it holds as its own, one could anticipate a situation where each community may want to adamantly hold onto their own thereby rejecting what they may want to view as alien. The question then is how does one select the culture to be taught? And how will it be synchronized with the traditional thinking of the other communities. This sets one thinking as to whether there can develop what one can call a homogeneous African culture.

Closely related to the dilemma of cultural multiplicity is that of linguistic diversity. Again each of the communities speaks its own ethnic language. The question of language poses a challenge on two fronts; one is the prospect that the target audience for the selected lessons does not speak the language carrying the lessons. This then calls for teaching the language before the intended lessons can commence, which makes it an elaborate and tedious venture. The only way around this handicap is to prepare the lessons in the language of the learners, meaning the problem is then left to the teacher or performer in the context of oral rendition.

The other challenge is that of linguistic appropriateness. How appropriate, for example, would it be to teach cultural lessons in a language other than the first language? Okombo,⁶ argues that culture is best expressed in its “mother tongue”. The argument here is that language is the basic carrier of culture. Indeed considering that translations barely fully express the original thought, the decision to teach cultural lessons in a different language other than the original will of necessity have to open space for possible distortions.

Also going hand in hand with the challenges of orality, cultural multiplicity and linguistic diversity is the question of theory in the teaching. One may wish to argue that inviting the question of theory into this debate is perhaps being elitist. Far from it, the question of theory is quite relevant here. Theory comes in by virtue of its role as the framework within which an idea is interpreted and

⁶ Okombo, O. and Nandwa, J. (eds) 1992. *Reflections on Theory and Method in Oral Literature*. Nairobi: KOLA.

understood. The view here is that the meaning one gives to an idea largely depends on the perspective from which they look at it. Theory is what provides this perspective. A feminist theorist, for example, will want to view issues from the feminist perspective while a historicist will see a different side of the same and so on.

For the purpose of this paper, one realizes that there exist major contextual differences between continental Africa and its Diaspora. Differences arising from the varied historical experiences, for example, could suggest considerable variance in how people in the two worlds perceive issues. A candidate in the Diaspora could, for example, be a product of three different cultures: the original, acquired and mixed. Such a candidate will perhaps view certain concerns differently from the one back at home in Africa who is less exposed. Theory, therefore, comes into this debate to help bridge these contextual differences.

If theory is relevant in this discussion, the next question is which theory. The challenge this question raises is that there appears to exist a theoretical paucity in the study of African oral traditions. Scholars have suggested ethnomethodology as the sure way of dealing with the highly ethnicized African issues. Ethnomethodology tries to understand issues from the interests, thinking and philosophy of the ethnic community under observation. The problem however is, while ethnography may seem to work in continental Africa, it is unlikely that the people in the Diaspora will also fit comfortably into these ethnic parishes? This may not happen particularly for the cosmopolitan Diaspora; which begins to invite special theoretical approaches.

Suggestions

The justification for Africa to share aspects of its culture with its Diaspora is clear, so are the sample lessons to be shared. The challenges to the teaching of these lessons are also clear. The challenges identified, however, should not be a total impediment to creating homogeneity between the two worlds. Using the Obama Senior's journey as a point of reference, I am of the view that it is possible to address the challenges posed by the oral nature of African traditions. Considering that effective teaching of oral traditions calls for live interaction, the kind of physical and ideological exchange that the Obama experience pioneers could be encouraged for this purpose. I presume that Obama did not only manage to take a physical journey to America; he took an ideological one too

by which he undoubtedly shared some African experiences with his friends in America. He also undoubtedly took back home some lessons from the Diaspora.

If Obama in this case was to act as our cultural ambassador, lessons from Africa would ably be taught to the Diaspora as Africa equally benefits from the lessons from the Diaspora in a practical way. If we were to encourage interaction based on the “Obama model” we would in this case be talking of cultural exchange programs, educational tours, sports, tourism, immigrations based on programs such as the American Green Card, talks such as those presented through the African Leadership Dialogues forum,⁷ and perhaps marriage. All these can effectively enable cultural exchanges with the hope of transcending linguistic and other barriers.

On the question of multiplicity of cultural dialects, the solution may lie in the realization that there are many cultural lessons that transcend ethnic, even territorial boundaries. “Ujamaa” as cited above could be an ideal example of a culture disregarding ethnic and territorial confines. Mostly patronized in Tanzania, “Ujamaa” as an ideology was able to impact on East Africa and beyond. Besides, culture has self-selection mechanisms by which one culture will on its own become dominant over other co-existing cultures. This way there arises no need to practically select the culture to promote. A culture that has universal appeal is always likely to stand on its own thereby answering the question of which culture among the thousands deserves to be promoted.

On language, however, there are few options but to teach or learn it as the medium of teaching culture. But as Achebe in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* says, language though a carrier of culture should not in itself be an impediment in teaching culture. He argues that language can be “tamed” to play an intended role. He, for instance, gives the example of how he managed to “Africanize” English to teach his native Ibo culture. This in effect means that culture exists before language, or that language is simply a medium of expressing culture and that without one language another could still express a given culture.

Perhaps the same discussion on language could be extended to theory. I agree that meaning is greatly influenced by the interpreter’s point of view which theory is about. But it is also true that point of view can be influenced or redefined to find concurrence with an existing situation. My argument then is that an effective teacher or performer of culture is always conscious of the

⁷ A weekly talk show on one Kenyan TV station by prominent personalities from all over Africa.

circumstances inhabited by his/her audience, and considering the regenerative nature of culture, it is expected to easily adjust to accommodate new contexts.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to propagate the need to create homogeneity between Africa and its Diaspora, through the teaching of certain aspects of African culture. If such homogeneity can promote a greater sense of identity and belonging one may estimate closer unity between continental Africa and its Diaspora. Such unity, the paper argues, is crucial in tackling the myriad of problems bedeviling Africa. In the spirit of interdependence between Africa and its Diaspora the argument particularly alludes to the Barrack Obama Senior's journey to America in the early nineteen-sixties as representing that relationship. Obama is considered to have taken both the physical and ideological journey as would be expected of a successful story of the relationship of interdependence. He for instance, leaves home to the Diaspora carrying his African roots and comes back home armed with knowledge from the Diaspora. The success of this exchange, the argument posits, represents the ideal relationship between a native country and its Diaspora.

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