

African Tradition: Review on its Pre and Post Colonial Culture

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ABSTRACT

A tradition is a belief or behavior passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past. In this article, I propose to review on ways in which the issue of post and pre-colonial modernism in the context of neoliberal capitalism has impacted on the traditional cultures and economic life of Africa's new classes. These include the bureaucratic and professional classes and the materially less fortunate members of the other post-colonial classes. In this regard I choose to examine, specifically, the way in which cultural traditions and modernity exist in an uneasy symbiosis under the powerful influences of contemporary political economy and traditions. The result of this class egotism is the open face of an Africa plagued by cultural collapse in key areas such as its vaunted communitarianism, only to be replaced by the false consciousness of corrosive self-interest, consumer greed, and eruptive xenophobia as in the cases of South Africa and Ivory Coast and political corruption.

Keywords: pre-colonial, Post-colonial, African tradition

INTRODUCTION

A tradition is a belief or behavior passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past [1]. Common examples include holidays or impractical but socially meaningful clothes (like lawyers' wigs or military officers' spurs), but the idea has also been applied to social norms such as greetings. Traditions can persist and evolve for thousands of years the word tradition itself derives from the Latin tradere literally meaning to transmit, to hand over, to give for safekeeping. While it is commonly assumed that traditions have ancient history, many traditions have been invented on purpose, whether that be political or cultural, over short periods of time. Various academic disciplines also use the word in a variety of ways [1].

The Africa Tradition is varied and manifold, consisting of a mixture of countries with various tribes that each has their own unique characteristic from

the continent of Africa. It is a product of the diverse populations that today inhabit the continent of Africa and the African Diaspora. African culture is expressed in its arts and crafts, folklore and religion, clothing, cuisine, music and languages [1]. Expressions of culture are abundant within Africa, with large amounts of cultural diversity being found not only across different countries but also within single countries. Even though African cultures are widely diverse, they are also, when closely studied, seen to have many similarities; for example, the morals they uphold, their love and respect for their culture as well as the strong respect they hold for the aged and the important, i.e. kings and chiefs [2]. Africa has influenced and been influenced by other continents. This can be portrayed in the willingness to adapt to the ever-changing modern world rather than staying rooted to their static culture. The Westernized few, persuaded by European culture and

Christianity, first denied African traditional culture, but with the increase of African nationalism, a cultural recovery occurred. The governments of most African nations encourage national dance and music groups, museums, and to a lower degree, artists and writers. Africa is divided into a great number of ethnic cultures.[2] The continent's cultural regeneration has also been an integral aspect of post-independence nation-building on the continent, with a recognition of the need to harness the cultural resources of Africa to enrich the process of education, requiring the creation of an enabling environment in a number of ways. In recent times, the call for a much greater emphasis on the cultural dimension in all aspects of development has become increasingly vocal [3]. During the Roman colonization of North Africa,(parts of Algeria, Libya, Egypt and the whole of Tunisia) provinces

such as Tripolitania became major producers of food for the republic and the empire, this generated much wealth in these places for their 400 years of occupation.[5] During colonialism in Africa, Europeans possessed attitudes of superiority and a sense of mission [6]. The French were able to accept an African as French if that person gave up their African culture and adopted French ways. Knowledge of the Portuguese language and culture and abandonment of traditional African ways defined one as civilized [7]. Kenyan social commentator Mwiti Mugambi argues that the future of Africa can only be forged from accepting and mending the sociocultural present. For Mugambi, colonial cultural hangovers, pervasive Western cultural inundation, and aid-giving arm-twisting donors are, he argues, here to stay and no amount of looking into Africa's past will make them go away.

Composition of African tradition

African Tradition is expressed through many different art forms, such as music, dance, art, sculpture and beadwork [8]. These traditions are deeply ingrained into the whole African culture. Many African languages are "tone languages," meaning that pitch level determines meaning. Identification of African tradition is shown below:

Oral Tradition

Oral tradition is very important in African culture, as it insures the passage of cultural practices from one generation to another. Listening is an equally important skill, which has been perfected by the traditional oral practices. Numerous songs and dances have been transmitted by word of mouth [8].

Music and Poetry in African Traditions

Naturally, singing is very important to the African society because the melody and rhythm follow the intonation of the song text. The songs are often sung in call-and-

response form. In West Africa, a griot is a praise singer or poet who possesses a repository of oral tradition passed down from generation to generation [8]. They must know the traditional songs and must also be able to improvise songs about current events and chance incidents. Music is a form of communication and it plays a functional role in African society. Songs accompany marriage, birth, rites of passage, hunting and even political activities. Music is often used in different African cultures to ward off evil spirits and to pay respects to good spirits, the dead and ancestors. Although the musical styles and instruments vary from region to region, there are some common forms of musical expression [9]. The most significant instrument in African music is the African drum. It expresses the mood of the people and evokes emotion. The beat of the African drum is the "heartbeat of the community" and its rhythm is what

holds the dancers together. Dance is an integral part of the African culture, and it utilizes symbolic gestures, masks, costumes, body painting and props to communicate. The dance movements can be simple or complex with intricate actions including fast rotation, ripples of the body and contraction and release. Dance is used to express emotion, whether joyful or sorrowful and it is not limited to just the dancers. Often spectators will be encouraged to join in.

Traditional African Masks

The African masks that are used in dances have religious, ceremonial and functional origins. The artist who carves the mask will ceremonially purify himself and offer prayers to his ancestors for guidance before he begins the actual carving of the mask [9]. The African mask represents a spirit and it is believed that the spirit possesses the dancer as they wear the mask. The chosen dancer goes into a trance-like state in order to receive guidance and wisdom from the ancestors. The dancer will utter and moan the messages received and a wise man, who accompanies the dancer will translate the message.

Art

Although music and dance are extremely important African traditions and are very common forms of communication, many African people express themselves in other art forms as well. The Zulu people

Pre-colonial Societies

Though people have lived in Africa quite some time, the use of iron tools marks the significant moment of African civilization. Iron tools enhanced weaponry, allowed groups to clear and manage dense forests, plow fields for farming, and basically better everyday lives. Ultimately, iron tools allowed Africans to flourish in every environment, and thus they could live in larger communities which led to the formation of states and kingdoms [11].

are well known for their intricate beadwork. The colour of each bead carries a specific meaning [9]. The beads have been used to carry messages known as “ucu,” a Zulu term loosely translated as “love letters”. It is an African tradition for young girls to send a boy a beaded bracelet of different colours. The boy will court her for a while and at the appropriate time, he will ask her the meaning of the beads. Art and sculpture are prevalent in African culture, and the most common themes depict a couple, a woman and child, a male with a weapon or animal, or a “stranger.” Couples are usually freestanding figures of the same size, representing the importance of “two as one.” A male and female couple in African art usually depicts strength and honour rather than love and intimacy, as it is uncommon for African men and women to publicly display their affection. A mother and child couple can represent “mother earth” and her people or the strong bond between mother and child [10]. The male figure with a weapon or animal, represent honour to departed ancestors. African men are often honoured in warfare and there is a great emphasis on weaponry in African art, as it depicts survival and power. When the stranger is represented in African art, it usually depicts someone from a foreign country or tribe that is not welcomed.

problematic in documenting Africa's pre-colonial past, as many of these oral histories have either been forgotten or distorted after being retold by each passing generation. Without the luxury of written sources, Africanist scholars of this era have had to be creative in discovering new sources to document the continent's precolonial past. As research in genetics, archaeology and linguistics increases, we will know more about early African civilizations [11]. This is not to say, however, that we know little. Linguists have used similarities in language structures to formulate the directional flow of pre-colonial migrations. There are four African linguistic groups (Khoisan, Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan and Niger-Congo (commonly referred to as Bantu). Linguistic similarities exist in Bantu languages from Nigeria to Mozambique. Peoples, such as the Zulu, Fang, Shona, Kikuyu, Swahili, Tswana, Herero, and Kongo, all are Bantu-language speakers and their languages share similarities in structure, grammar, and key words. In Africa today there are more than 400 Bantu languages all linked together, similar to the number of European languages derived from Latin. This has led most scholars to conclude that most sub-Saharan Africans came from the same ancestors that migrated throughout the continent from the Niger-Congo area. Prominent pre-colonial African civilizations were Egypt, Nubia, Ghana, Mali, Carthage, Zimbabwe, and Kongo [12]. In West Africa, the empires of Sudan, Ghana, Mali, and Songhai all flourished. In Southern Africa, Great Zimbabwe emerged as the most complex civilization throughout Southern Africa. In East Africa, plateau regions were suitable for cattle grazing. The dense forests of the Congo Basin, on the other hand, made herding nearly impossible. Other states, empires, and kingdoms dissolved

throughout the era. In Central Africa, the Kongo, Loango, Ndongo, and Tio states dissolved by the mid-seventeenth century as economic, military and political systems shifted due to the slave trade's impact [12]. Ancient Egypt though was the first major African civilization. By 4000 BCE, Egyptians had begun cultivating crops. Five hundred years later, these peoples evolved into the early Egyptian states, and formed the great Egyptian civilization (with the unifying of Lower and Upper Egypt) in 3200 BCE. Egyptian society was complex. From the building of massive pyramids that still stand today to the development of hieroglyphics (a complex written language), to the creation of the plow, it profoundly shaped world civilization. Despite Egypt's early success, it was not until after 700 CE that sub-Saharan African empires could emerge and exist for longer periods of time [13]. With no society or civilization possessing a greater technological advantage, Africa's greatest empires fizzled and ultimately fell apart, often being replaced by another. Mali succeeded Ghana, and the Songhai followed Mali. Usually each empire improved upon the social, political, commercial, and military organization established by their predecessors, albeit in sometimes very different ways and over various parts of West Africa. By 1000 CE, states and civilizations emerged and thrived throughout the continent. These societies varied in structure as they evolved to suit local environmental, political and social situations. As time went on, West African societies grew into organized states that encompassed more of the area and its peoples [14]. A map of Lower Guinea coastline (modern Ghana) from the early seventeenth century details close to forty different nation-states or kingdoms existing in the area. Roughly 120 years later, however, these states had merged to

form one state, the Asante empire. In Southern Africa, the peoples of modern day Zimbabwe and Zambia created elaborate civilizations. Exploiting the mineral wealth of their land, these peoples traded with their neighbors and ultimately established a large network through the area. These societies built permanent stone structures and houses over all of Africa. Great Zimbabwe was established around 1250 CE [14]. Unique from other continents, some parts of Africa do not receive enough rainfall to grow large surpluses of domesticated crops, and population densities remained low as land could not produce enough food to support larger populations. As a result, precolonial civilizations were often more mobile societies that could move to more fertile land or closer to water supplies when needed [14]. This was particularly true in the Eastern and Southern regions of the continent as well as in the Sahel and desert regions of West Africa. Pre-colonial communities were never completely isolated. Interaction between neighbors, across regions, and even outside of the continent were common. Societies interacted with one another through commerce, marriage, migration, diplomacy and warfare. Their fertile land, trade routes, or cattle forced interaction with other communities. East Africa was in contact with Chinese, Middle Eastern, and Indian traders. Portugal established Elmina (in modern day Ghana), its first African trading outpost, in 1482. Commerce was instrumental in state formation. Trade offered the ability to exchange local surpluses for rare foods and goods [15]. Across the Saharan desert and along the Swahili coastline of East Africa, vast trade networks developed. World renowned marketplaces and massive cities emerged at trade crossroads, such as Zanzibar and Timbuktu. For instance, it is estimated

that Kumbi, a large city in the Western Sudan, possessed a population of 15 000 to 20 000 by the eleventh century. Kings and leaders, such as those of Ghana, controlled their areas' local markets and received tributes from traders [15]. Camels and donkeys connected distant societies, and allowed trade to occur across the Sahara. Areas with mineral wealth, such as Great Zimbabwe, developed mining capabilities and traded these for manufactured goods from overseas. With this said, there were more than 10 000 states and kingdoms before the arrival of the Europeans, and African civilizations varied greatly in size and structure. The structure can be divided into centralized and decentralized societies. In centralized societies often run by monarchs or rulers, authority was in the hands of an elite few that decided laws, collected taxes, etc. These societies tended to develop in areas conducive to agriculture or trade. The degree of power possessed by the emperor or monarch varied from group to group with some societies bestowing over-riding decision making responsibilities to the monarch while other leaders possessed more of a symbolic status [15]. The creation of divine rulers did not lead to the formation of structured states, but instead it was often the establishment of strong states that craved stronger governmental structures that necessitated the use of monarchs as leaders. In decentralized civilizations, such as the Igbo of modern day Nigeria and Kikuyu of Kenya, these societies were often broken up into age group systems, and power was dispersed throughout the entire community with local elders providing leadership but with input from the population at large. Some groups, such as the San of Southern Africa and the Pygmy of Central Africa, formed small, mobile groups of hunter-gathers that rarely ever grew larger than a handful

of families. Hunting and gathering, herding cattle and goats, and agriculture were the primary means of food production throughout pre-colonial Africa. The earliest societies were hunter-gatherers. These groups often consisted of small kinship units that moved to follow animal herds or search for sources of water. However, with advancements in technology, civilizations developed ways to domesticate both animals and crops, and these advancements produced more regular levels of food. Food surpluses were more common, larger populations could be better supported, and thus, agriculture and herding soon became the dominant means of food production [15]. As arable land came at a premium, farming or herding societies often pushed hunter-gatherers off of their land. Consequently, hunter-gatherers lost out on the best land, and such lifestyles became more difficult to maintain as time wore on. Even though agricultural societies could produce greater surpluses of food, farming was far from simple in most regions. These civilizations usually relied heavily on human manpower and metal tools. In many parts of Africa plow animals were susceptible to the tsetse fly, and thus it was nearly impossible for farmers to maintain needed numbers of plow animals. As in most societies throughout the world, African diets centered around a staple crop, such as maize, yams or bananas. Certain foods, such as cassava and banana, were not

Post colonial African Society

The new post-colonial African was African in the traditional culture but a modern bureaucrat in the service of Western capital. The pay-off was to be parasitical on state resources, thereby hindering the possibility of the state accumulation of capital, and permission to use those same state resources in pure consumption of the goods and baubles of Western

native to Africa but instead were introduced by European and Asian traders, flourished in Africa, and even replaced local foodstuffs as the staple of local diets in some cultures. In most African societies, all of the people were looked after and taken care of in some manner. Unemployment and homelessness were rare [16]. Successful families traditionally allowed poorer ones to use portions of their land or lent them cattle in exchange for a portion of a crop or other goods. Concepts of wealth and entitlement, however, varied a great deal. In West and Central Africa, it was not uncommon for nobles, royalty, and political leaders to amass great fortunes, own slaves, and live in large family compounds. The Dinka of today's Southern Sudan, on the other hand, functioned in a society that held little regard for personal ownership over land or material things [16]. They lived a lifestyle where flooding prevented wealth from being transferred from generation to generation, and thus the accumulation of wealth was unimportant. By 1500, essentially all of Africa was controlled by indigenous inhabitants. Later European explorers and settlers often argued that territories were unsettled upon their arrival and thus were ripe for the taking, but these assumptions were misguided. Often land had been abandoned due to poor soil quality, infrequent rainfall, or had been claimed for future use [16].

capitalism. This is the major contradiction and betrayal foisted on Africa's peoples by the postcolonial African comprador classes [17]. The result, of course, is a maximal Gini coefficient for Africa's post-colonial populations. Africa's governmental ministers and those others appendaged to the all-powerful state apparatus such as

bankers, military commanders, etc. all enjoy a quality of life that rivals the wealthiest individuals in the West. This pillaging of the resources of the state by the neocolonial bourgeoisie leaves nothing for the toiling masses who are victimised by the lowest salaries in the world. Under these circumstances, whatever communitarian elements existed in traditional Africa have all fallen by the wayside in the ongoing worship of the products of neo-liberal capitalism [17]. All of this is captured in vivid terms by the vast literature produced by Africa's intellectuals and writers in the ongoing post-colonial era. Thus, starting in the early 1970s, a new body of creative writings began appearing with a slew of African writers publishing works that highlighted the disillusionment with the aftermath of the political independences of the late 1950s and early 1960s. This new situation was presaged by the insights of [17] in his *Wretched of the Earth* and [18] *L'Afrique noire est mal partie* (translated in English as: *False Start in Africa*). But it is the genre of the novel that truly heralded the wrong direction that the new independent African nations embarked upon. Thus, *Suns of Independences* (1968, French edition) by Ahmadou Kourouma, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* (1968, French edition) were

Historical Prelude to Post-Colonial Africa

It is often posited that the entry door to any culture or civilization is its imaginative and creative literature. If we pursue that line of reasoning, modern African literature, in particular the novel, provides us with crucial and insightful pointers in our attempt at understanding the dilemma posed by the conceptualisation of tradition by the African elites as well as its translation into concrete proposals for behavior [6].

critical in no uncertain terms, albeit in a fictional manner, the bad choices made by the new African elites and very often under the direct influence of the former colonial power [18]. In these narratives, greed, graft, corruption, nepotism, and ethnocentrism, etc, were shown as being some of the cultural culprits responsible for destroying the people's postcolonial hopes. Ouologuem and Kourouma, for example, each in his own way, untied the knots around life and culture in Africa [18]. First, Kourouma paints the realities of daily life in urban and rural post-colonial Africa by showing how tradition survives in the city and also how that tradition is fading away or, at least, being slowly replaced by the culture and economics of the neo-colonial state. For most, it is a life of material penury, unemployment, and blocked aspirations mainly because of lack of modern education. As for Ouologuem, his theme fits this paper in that it alerts the modernising African classes that there is always the risk that post-colonial Africa could be once again undergoing the cultural and sociological malaise that it experienced in pre-colonial times. Finally, I end this paper by looking at the impact that neoliberal capitalism has had on the way the material products of this economic system have become almost like fetishes for the economic elites of Africa [19].

Thus, it is fair to say that modern African literature offers the best insights into the ills which bedevil Africa. It is writers such as Armah, Ouologuem and Sembene who started warning that after all the hopes brought about by the political independence of the early 1960s, these were being dashed because of the wrong orientation that the elites had given to the new nations. These novelists did so through fiction which often mirrors

reality. What would be helpful for the analysis of the new African cultures developing synthetically out of a post-Enlightenment Europe's encounter with Africa is a statement on the historical forces that produced this encounter [10]. The European Enlightenment is characterised by a qualitative transformation from the past in that it ushered in the age of secular reason that manifested itself in new scientific and technological expression. This eventually meant new forms of production under the rubric of the developing economic system now known as capitalism. Adam Smith became the totemic god of this new system. Under such new circumstances ethical systems were also bound to change [12]. The pursuit of wealth and the accumulation of material goods became the new measure of a person. The Christian religion whose worldly function was to prepare souls for the afterlife now saw itself falling under the sway of science, technology and capitalism [2]. The goal humans were to pursue was to seek a material paradise on earth rather than a spiritual paradise in heaven. The new Europe armed with the trio of science, technology and capitalism set out to conquer the world in the 15th century and on the way encountered the African. The West Europeans had the capital and the technology. All they needed now was the labour. So they created the circumstances where the African was made to oblige them. The result was the infamous Atlantic slave trade and the development of the Americas along European lines. Capitalist accumulation with its increasingly effective technological innovations eventually led to Europe's second encounter with Africa [9]. This time the Europeans came as colonials and settlers. The goal was access to more resources in the form of minerals, agricultural produce, and land.

The Africans were inveighed against and they eventually yielded. The result was that new structures and institutions of European provenance were imposed with the result being novel hybridized cultures in the form of African tradition and European modernity. This invariably led to the schizoid personality of the African: on the one hand modernising but on the other hand culturally beholden to tradition. Is it that the two modes of the modern African personality are incompatible? Given the psychological assault on the African psyche by cultural Eurocentrism, the African mind in the form of its writers sought to defend itself by appealing to concepts such as Negritude and 'the African Personality' [4]. But they lived lives of the modernising African bourgeoisie increasingly got captured and enraptured by capitalism and its products. If a genuinely modernising Africa were to follow the model of capitalism, would develop a productive capital-owning class that would in turn consume its own products and sell the rest. This is the case of countries like Japan, Korea, Taiwan, etc. Instead we have an African bourgeoisie that consumes excessively but does not produce. It serves at the pleasure of a neo-colonising Euro-America. The results are that practically all of modernizing and culturally hybridised Africa lives a life of discontentment at being victims of modern-day capitalism [9]. The African bourgeoisie seeks to soothe its psychic discontentment through the obsessively compulsive behaviour of accumulating the products of market capitalism [5]. The truth is that this form of 'cargo cultism' is just an illusion. In the following section I propose to show how they lived lives of the post-colonial African bourgeoisie or economic elites are reflected effectively in literature [13].

CONCLUSION

It is imperative that the ubiquity (or even dominance) of "imperial" culture and language may provoke reactions of nationalism but it does not constitute subjugation per se. The modern concept and role of African literature must be founded on the solid rock of universal patrimony so that we can begin to see its linguistic medium and themes as part of a global heritage. This will belong to a humanism which eschews the Manichean perception that whatever language or culture is introduced into Africa by the "oppressive institution of colonialism" must be opposed and rejected in favor of pre-colonial ones. Such advocacy is patently misleading because it divides the partners of cultural exchange in Africa into makers and imitators rather than parties engaged in an exchange in which all are both makers and imitators, drawing vision and change from a common source that belongs to humanity as a whole. The choice to imitate foreign languages and cultures in African literature will continue to provide a unifying center for the myriad of African

languages and cultures for which the political and legal implications of a return to pre-colonial multilingualism and culture diversity are neither desirable nor possible. The immediate post-colonial period was one of optimism in which the new African modernising classes had the opportunity to pick and choose the optimal modalities for development. But they failed to deliver, mesmerised as they were by the material dazzle of the products of modern market capitalism. But modern market capitalism needs and wants those products which in their raw forms serve as the basis for the production of those goods coveted by the post-colonial African bourgeoisie. The result of this class egotism is the open face of an Africa plagued by cultural collapse in key areas such as its vaunted communitarianism, only to be replaced by the false consciousness of corrosive self-interest, consumer greed, and eruptive xenophobia - as in the cases of South Africa and Ivory Coast and political corruption.

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