

Development and the African Culture

Olumide Abimbola

Culture has often been implicated in discussions on development, especially as it concerns the African continent. This paper tries to apprehend the debate on culture and development by making a reading that stems from discussions on the African identity. The two major views on culture and development are considered: the first considers the African culture as an impediment to development, while the other sees the blind implementation of policies as the culprit.

That culture is important in any consideration of development almost deserves no debate; there seems to be a consensus – among multilateral development organisations and academics – on the importance of positioning culture as a very important element in the development debate. How important culture is has been underscored by a number of conferences that have had as their theme the nexus between culture and development. A reading of most of the proceedings of these conferences simply reveals the fact that everybody pays tribute to the importance of culture to development. They all jointly conclude on the importance of either integrating culture into the development process or contextualising development in specific cultures, taking into account cultural topographies, differences, and situating the entire complex so that it fits into the values of each given society. Implicit in these assertions is the notion that the failure of development workers to consider culture has led to, at best, a miscarriage of the development expectations of recommended policies - which in itself suggests, although not necessarily so, that cultural practices could limit the impact of policies – and at worst, blatant failure of the policies.

The debate on culture and development as it concerns Africa can be broadly divided into two camps. On one side are those who view the African culture itself as an impediment to development. A quotation from Ali Mazrui (in Kiltgaard, 1994: 80) would suffice in positioning the argument of this group:

Africa as a whole has borrowed the wrong things from the west, even the wrong components of capitalism. We borrowed the profit motive but not the entrepreneurial spirit. We borrowed the acquisitive appetites of capitalism but not the creative risk-taking. We are at home with western gadgets but are bewildered by western workshops. We wear the wristwatches but refuse to watch it for the culture of punctuality. We have learnt to parade in display, but not to drill in discipline. The west's consumption patterns have arrived, but not necessarily the west's techniques of production.

He calls African cultures 'cultures of nostalgia rather than of anticipation', 'cultures that are impressive when judged by standards of charity and solidarity', cultures where 'productivity and effectiveness are less than optimal'. Still further, Mazrui (1994: 129) proposes that the debate on development should be refocused to put emphasis not on either political or economic liberalisation but on cultural development. Drawing examples from the Russian experiences of Perestroika (political liberalisation) and glasnost (economic liberalisation), and the experiences of countries that chose to transform the economy before liberalising the political sphere, countries like South Korea, and the 'Asian Tigers', the Southeast Asian countries (we might also add China to the list now), he proposes that we need to move to a third sphere in the case of Africa: the sphere of culture. He calls this 'actually pursuing cultural development as a foundation of other

forms of development – long-term policies of cultural integration, for example, the fostering of a common language, the imperative of language policy.’

Mazrui writes in really strong terms when he calls African cultures nostalgic, something that calls to mind Asante’s attack on Appiah (Asante, 2005). It is true that it would smack of racism for anyone apart from an African to speak in those terms about the African culture. Axelle kabou has been quoted to refer to this as ‘an intellectual conspiracy’ which precludes the attempt at seeing African cultures for what they are: the main obstacle to development (in Kiltgaard, 1994: 81).

On the other side are scholars who believe that development policies have to be adapted to African cultures. An example of this argument is Claude Ake’s statement (in Kiltgaard 1994: 78) that “...[B]uilding on the indigenous is the necessary condition for self-reliant development to which there is no alternative.” And he goes on to elaborate thus: “we build on the indigenous by making it determine the form and the content of development strategy, by ensuring that developmental change accommodates itself to these things, be they values, interests, aspirations and or social institutions which are important in the life of the people. It is only when developmental change comes to terms with them that it can become sustainable”. For scholars of this stripe the culprit is not culture, but the blind application of policies to cultures that may be hostile to them.

An attempt to understand the discussion on culture and development would inevitably lead to issues of identity. For if one is to understand what factors of the African culture need to be changed, or what factors policy formulators need to consider while designing policies, one would need to first understand what is African. This in itself is not without its difficulties; in fact, one could say that this is the problematic. Mbembe (2001: 1) observes that ‘speaking rationally about Africa is not something that has ever come naturally.’ How does one describe what the African culture is? How does one conceptualise the *African*?

Africa has been variously described as the Other¹, the embodiment of what the West is not, the legitimising prop for the self of the West. According to Mbembe, the African is imbued with ‘signs of the strange and monstrous’, so strange that he keeps eluding our gaze. He is a person who lives in a world with characteristics that are only specific to itself; and the African is seen as the intimate being, a product of a discourse of affection that tries to describe the African from a near-human perspective, a ‘beast’ that can be brought to human level with some training, and a viable specimen for experimentation, since he possesses rather familiar traits to the human, reminding us of what we are not, something we might have been, but certainly *are* not (Mbembe, 2001: 1, 2). Little wonder then that in the years leading to independence, and the immediate post-independence years, the focus of African intellectuals was on writing the history of Africa, a history Mbembe describes as an ‘apologetic discourse based on rediscovery of what was supposed to be the essence, the distinctive genius of the black “race”’ (Mbembe, 2001: 12). Seeking to legitimise their ‘race’, Africans of that generation tried as much as they could to distance themselves from what they thought was Western. For instance, negritude described the African ‘in terms of intuitive or tactile spontaneous reason, sensation, sensuousness, instinct, feeling, rhythm, emotions, creativity, imagination and immediacy...’ (Eriksson Baaz, 2001: 10). The pictures produced by these writings were almost the exact replicas of what made the African

¹ In *The Invention of Women* Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997: 3) makes this point in her description of the Western ‘obsession’ with the body. The Westerner is assumed to be ruled by the mind while the Other is ruled by the body, in order words unreason.

the Other to the West, and it seems that it served to legitimise the picture of the Other that was making the rounds in the Western psyche.²

However, these discourses are not limited to that era. Discourses of authenticity are still produced in the writings of African educated elite who have experienced racism in their contacts with Europeans. The distancing from the European still makes them assert that there is something innately African, something authentically African, which is typified in rural Africa, 'while urban popular culture has ... been used as an example of a degenerate westernisation...' (Eriksson Baaz, 2001: 12).

In resolving this crisis, Homi Bhabha has proposed the idea of the Hybrid. This is the idea that cultural contacts do not lead to the annihilation of one and the victory of the other, but to a state that belongs to neither of the two, a third space, which is a product of the interaction between the two. In this view, the African culture of today is not degenerate westernisation, but a space of its own – a third space that is neither western nor African, and is not a corruption of either. Also, Africans have been said to be constantly contesting and reinventing their identities in the face of new developments. African urban cultures that are described as 'degenerate westernisation' are just a show of the contestation that goes on in cultural adaptation, integration and hybridisation. As Binsbergen et al. (2004: 42) argue, the globalisation of culture does not produce cultural homogenisation (or cultural westernisation, to the cynical). 'Objects of globalisation are locally co-opted to constitute new resources and ammunition in pre-existing local struggles about material and/or symbolic issues.' Therefore, Mazrui might have been availing himself of an exaggeration when he said that Africans have borrowed the wrong things from the West, for the verb 'borrow' is a *very* active one. Of course, Africans have been influenced by the West, just like every culture has been influenced by others, but to say that they have borrowed the wrong things is a rather harsh way of putting the realities of the lived experiences of Africans, as if they actively and deliberately selected the components of the Western culture that they are accused of possessing. African cultures are shifting, and are being currently reproduced. One has to realise that culture is not the end product of a process but the process itself; it is a historical process that is not bound in any time frame. Culture converses with the past, the autochthonous, and permits influences, thereby constantly reinventing itself.

What then are the elements of African cultures that are supposed to hinder development? I am considering this particular one of the two sides of the debate on culture and development because its recurrence in popular debate cannot but be vexatious. Nyasani implicates the upbringing of the African child in the creation of African passivity, an attribute that is often described as a cause of persistent poverty and lack of economic development. There is an

'endemic and congenial trait of what could be described as a natural docility generally brought about by years of blind social submission and unquestioning compliance to the mystique of higher authority that reigns surreptitiously yet effectively in all black African societies in varying degrees. This benign natural docility is generally regarded as positive, legitimate and virtuous strictly within the context of a traditional social regime.' (In Lassiter 1999)

This docility, with its attendant discourse of reliance and laziness, is what has often been referred to in popular debate about African cultures and development as an attribute that does not

² On the same page as quoted earlier Eriksson-Baaz goes further to say these views 'were already contested by [many writers] who pointed out that "the sum of the cultural values of the black world" were curiously similar to the sum of the non-virtues of African culture in the colonial discourse.'

encourage development. For instance, consider another quotation from Lassiter: '[a] passive attitude to life is common in many parts of Africa, where most people are satisfied with the minimum. Many Africans prefer to engage in subsistence farming rather than farming for profit and even then, they wait for some bureaucrat to tell them about food security to save them from starvation when drought strikes (in Lassiter, 1999).' Also, African values 'are merely received but never subjected to the scrutiny of reason to establish their viability and practicability in the society....' The African, in this discourse, is thus sealed in docility and dependence, in feelings and unreason, in obedience and the uncritical. Contesting this view is a daunting task. For this discourse is situated within a framework that renders any critical review almost impossible.

Lumping peoples of different cultures and orientations, peoples who may not share more than the colour of their skin and 'underdevelopment', under one umbrella of 'African culture' is a little in the distasteful camp. It is quite tiresome to keep reminding people of this fact, especially Africans. The fallacy of a common identity for Africans could be likened to the claim that there is only one culture in Europe. There is a multiplicity of identities for each person, and identities change according to context; referring to *the* African in discussions about Africa then goes beyond a mere fallacy. Africa is not one homogenous Other to any part of the world; there are different Others in Africa itself. Proximate contact among different cultures does not stop the construction of otherness between them.

Compared to the rest of the world Africa has been described as the atypical, both economically and politically. The relationship of dependence that exists between the aid donors and Africa also fuels the discourse of docility, laziness and dependence. For instance, Joseph Hanlon (2004: 382) raises, '... the fundamental question that has dogged charity and aid in the West for more than a century: are the poor poor simply because they lack money, or are they poor because of their own stupidity and cupidity?' However, as I said earlier, the way these discourses are structured almost make them immune to critical reviews. I will toe the trail of Mbembe on this point. These studies of Africa have been in relation to what is lacking in Africa, and this in itself is a product of the comparison of Africa to the West, using paradigms that are products of Western modernisation. As Mbembe (2001: 9) writes, this has led to the paradoxes that 'we know nearly everything that African states, societies, and economies are not, we still know absolutely nothing about what they actually are.' I will join my voice to that of Mbembe for the call for studies of Africa that do not pitch her against the west, and do not use western paradigms; studies that consider the realities of Africans, their experiences and interactions with globalisation and 'westernisation'; studies that do not take Africa as a single culture but look at the nuances in the identity of Africans and their constant negotiation of a place for themselves. Until African studies are approached in this way certain formulations will keep showing that the *African* is 'docile', 'passive' and 'lazy'.

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