

African Culture and the West

I—Protest and Self-Discovery

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Now that almost every African country north of Angola and Moçambique is independent, there may be a temptation in Western countries to shrug off entirely the cultural responsibility once held by Britain and France, and to limit Western action in Africa to Oxfam, economic assistance and technical co-operation. With the end of the colonial era, there is an understandable reluctance to create the impression in African countries that they are still in any sense under tutelage to the West, or even that they are undergraduates to be guided by Western dons. Yet there is a danger in leaning over too far backwards. The danger is that fastidiousness in trying to avoid giving the impression of interference may be understood by African minds as evidence that the West, in its unconfessed thoughts, still regards African countries as not mature enough to stand the ordinary rough-and-tumble of international exchange. Their reading of Western delicacy of manner may at bottom be right.

These two articles on the role of the West towards culture in Africa begin with the assumption that any culture has something of value to offer to another culture. Western culture is not valueless for Africa, nor is African culture without its lessons for the West. The relationship between cultures should rest on a basis of information and understanding, and their engagement in each other should be forthright enough to make motives clear, and humble enough to accept criticism. This article will try to sketch out some important features of the modern African cultural setting. A second will discuss some of the ways in which the West both is and should be culturally engaged in Africa.

Sub-Saharan Africa is a continent of villages. 'Village', in most of this huge territory, does not mean a cluster of huts or houses around a church or group of shops, but an area of land of a few square miles, authority over which is exercised, with diminishing power and effectivity, by a sub-chief. The people live in this area on scattered small-holdings which they work for some years until the goodness has been taken from the soil. Then they move elsewhere, usually to some other

village, while the smallholding reverts to bush and the white ants take over the abandoned, roofless hut; in a few months it is no more than a low mound of red earth, partly overgrown with weeds. In the villages, culture is an uneasy mingling of clan obligation, tribal ethos and witchcraft on the one hand, with imported religion, materialism and educational ladder-climbing on the other. The coherence of pre-colonial village life has in the main gone. The tribal organisation which it rested on has given way to national government. Through the radio, but most of all through conversation, the people living in an African village have become aware of wider issues both within their own country and abroad. They realize that there is a common pattern of liberation from foreign rule throughout sub-Saharan Africa. There exists among them a sense of continental identity; they are Africans first. But tribal, national or denominational bonds may come a strong second, and call forth the immediate loyalty.

While Africans are convinced of the broad unity of their shared experience and common vision, the difficulty of translating this into practical legislation brings out the three greatest obstacles Africa has to overcome: poverty, ignorance and fear. These cultural dearths are spread over the whole sub-Saharan area. African states are too poor to have anything to spare to help a needy neighbour. Ignorance and fear go hand in hand to make co-operation difficult and compromise almost impossible. There can be no co-operation unless there is general agreement on aims and methods; the chief barrier here is ignorance. Compromise depends on trusting the other man, on believing that he will come halfway to meet you; but mutual suspicion thrives in a soil of fear.

It is ironic to reflect that the Western colonial impact has, in a sense, made African peoples poorer, more ignorant and more fearful than they were before. Poverty, to the individual, is being poorer than you think you ought to be; and ignorance is not knowing what you think you ought to know. In pre-colonial days, sufficiency of possessions and adequacy of wisdom and knowledge were measured by other standards; and it is foolish to write those standards off as primitive, without examining the values upon which that society based them. Fear certainly existed in the old days, amply and variously; but magic and ceremony were able to contain it. Today, depersonalized and unspirited, fear roams unchecked.

The ancient structure of African village life has been weakened by the church, the school, the hospital and money. Life still retains some features from the past, which invest it with a kind of steadiness; these are

the features of peasant life anywhere, of toil in the fields, of good seasons and bad, of birth, laughter, sorrow and death. But the sense of disintegration prevails. There is a church up on that hill, and another over there. Some villagers go to one, some to the other; some go to neither. Divisions between denominations lead to suspicion, friction, rivalry and even open hostility. There are primary schools within reach, but they do not seem able to educate children in behaviour and understanding; they appear to be scarcely interested in this, but consider it very important to teach children the power of knowledge and of a strange language, and to pass him through a kind of foreign initiation rite called an examination. There is a hospital, with potent medicines, the strongest of which is the needle; but even if you succeed in travelling the ten or fifteen miles there when you are ill, you may, after waiting for six hours, be told to come again the following day by the doctor, who has far too many patients to see. And all of it requires money, money and more money: for church dues, school fees, medicine and hospital charges, and taxes. These new things have come to the village, but life there has lost in coherence and significance.

Amongst Africans with a secondary school education, who hold most of the middle posts in government, commerce, industry and the social services, the cultural setting is simpler but tenser. Clan is of very limited importance; tribal loyalties are, in general, waning fast; witchcraft is a source of anxiety rather than of fear, and magic is occasionally used, but both are largely discredited or ignored. A Christian religion is frequently professed, more out of social conformity than personal conviction, and indifferently practised. The main forces acting on the cultural situation of Africans in this group are probably materialism, educational self-advancement, and community service. Materialism, understood as the pursuit of more money and more possessions, arises mainly from a sense of insecurity; which is a form of fear. The insecurity is both economic and social. The cost of simple household needs spirals up: soap, tea, sugar, matches, paraffin. Taxes leap alarmingly. Bride-price soars; in some areas it is impossible to get married unless you have more than one thousand shillings in cash, and a long list of goods too, to hand over to the girl's father as an earnest of the seriousness of your intentions. Materialism, under these circumstances, is almost a misnomer. There is little greed in this hunt for money and possessions; much more of panic.

The motives for educational self-advancement are both negative and positive. On the one hand, the student is driven on by the fear of the

prevailing economic insecurity, as well as by the knowledge that he will have to return to the poverty of the smallholder's life if he does not succeed in pushing on his education far enough. On the other hand he is drawn by the wider prospects in the life of an educated man. The African schoolboy's struggle to complete his education must not be thought of in British terms, where one quarter of the children in an age group enter grammar schools, and other avenues are open that lead to 'O' level, 'A' level and beyond. The percentage of African children from any potential intake-group that reaches secondary school is between one and four; and usually closer to one than to four. Education is not merely sought; it is fought and suffered for.

A considerable proportion, but probably rather less than half, of the Africans completing a secondary school education will declare, to a careers master they trust, their desire to serve the community. The community may be variously understood as a local body or organisation, as the rural areas, as a district (sometimes conterminous with a tribal area), the new nation or the continent. The way in which a student intends to serve the community is often very vague in his mind. Often he will say that he wishes to become a doctor or a teacher; much less commonly an agriculturalist or an engineer. People matter more than things. The desire may be extinguished later on, when he has left school and entered the individualistic, competitive social organisation that westernization has brought, where it is so difficult to help others in a satisfying and effective way. But the desire was once there and, under a different social dispensation, might be re-awakened.

The observations made so far about the cultural forces acting on and through the African villager and on the person with a secondary school education concern those sections of the population which are culturally passive. The growing points within any culture are mainly to be found amongst writers, artists and thinkers. Is it possible to discern any views held in common by the large majority of culturally creative persons in sub-Saharan Africa? The answer is that it is, but that the views are too broad and general to constitute the beginnings of a new African cultural pattern. They give an orientation, but little more.

The first commonly held view is, not surprisingly, a negative one: a detestation of colonialism. Writers from all over sub-Saharan Africa join in their condemnation of the effects of colonialism on the individual, and of the social disintegration that colonial governments have in various ways produced. The condemnation does not take into account improvements in medicine and communications; these they recognize,

but, rightly, do not count as culture, for they belong only to the machinery of one kind of civilization. These writers are profoundly concerned with the way the imposition of Western civilisation under colonial governments has prised apart and disrupted personal and social coherence. The objection that westernization is inevitable, and that colonial governments should not be blamed for what would have happened in any case, does not really meet the point. For an individual, and hence for society, there is a very great difference between making one's own decision in favour of social change, at an appropriate rate, and having the change suddenly thrust on one. Some of the earlier writings in English or French by Africans at the time of the beginning of national consciousness in their countries have an air of bewilderment that suggests slow recovery from a condition of deep shock. Comparisons with African countries that did not come under colonial rule, or not for any appreciable time, may be made but do not appear to be significant. Only Liberia and Ethiopia fall within this category. Liberia is a special case, power being still held largely by the descendants of re-settled slaves, now inhabiting Monrovia and a strip of coast. Ethiopia is, culturally, an island, unlike any other part of sub-Saharan Africa in history, customs and religion.

The second commonly held view amongst African writers is positive, and perhaps related to the colonial experience which their countries share. It is the desire for association with all persons interested in culture in Africa south of the Sahara. Politically this expresses itself in various forms of Pan-Africanism, but at a cultural level it is seen more readily in individual and social terms. The vague sense of identity felt throughout sub-Saharan Africa drives writers, artists and thinkers towards the re-discovery of a heritage which in many fundamental respects is felt to be common. This sense of Africanness is real. The fact that African governments find it difficult to federate does not mean that Pan-Africanism is merely a movement towards which it is expedient to proclaim a warm adherence in principle, while recognizing quietly that in practice it is impossible to achieve. The strength of the desire for federation springs from a deeply and widely felt sense of identity, whatever the local, tribal or national disagreements may be.

The main cultural quest is for a re-discovery of personal and social identity. Who am I, and who are we? To this double question, three main answers, inevitably partial and little more than first camps along the road of the quest, have been given. The first answer claims to reject Western culture; the second recognizes the impossibility of rejecting it

and wishes to transform it; the third is national in orientation, but syncretistic in method, and is prepared to accept suitable Western modes.

Rejection of Western culture is one of the main characteristics of the movement known as *négritude*. The movement itself began with a West Indian from Martinique, Aimé Césaire, and was taken up principally by Senegalese from French-speaking West Africa. The most famous of them is Léopold Senghor, now President of Senegal. *Négritude* has never found a foothold in English-speaking Africa and it is sometimes claimed that a total rejection of Western culture was the only possible appropriate answer to the total assimilation attempted by French colonial policy. This gesture, especially when made in poetry, had freshness and panache; but its ecstatic flights and rhetorical incantations prove difficult to live up to in the long run and there appear to be signs that, as a literary movement, *négritude* has served its purpose, and that the search is on its way elsewhere, partly through satire, and partly through a more thoughtful facing of the bi-cultural problem of modern Africa, such as in 'L'Aventure Ambiguë', by Sheikh Hamidou Kane, also a Senegalese.

A critical acceptance of the fact of Western culture in Africa, combined with the desire to change and reform it, is found at its strongest in writers born in South Africa, now many of them exiles. Westernization has moved further in South Africa than in any other African country where the British once ruled. Migrant labour and the immense African townships of Durban, Johannesburg and Cape Town have produced a tribal situation so confused that the attempts of the South African government to foster tribal states in Bantustan by tribal segregation even at the university level are bound to fail as a social and political measure, though it will help to direct the attention of Africans to the cultural heritage which they once possessed and which is now in decay. Many South African writers grew up in places like Sophiatown and Cato Manor; for them it is completely unreal to think of solutions along the lines of *négritude*, of traditional ways in a settled rural society. Many of the tribes in southern Africa have in any case a recent history of turbulence, set off as much by mutual friction as by the voortrekkers moving in over the veld or the British farming settlements creeping up from the coast into the higher parts of Natal and the Eastern Cape Province.

The writing in English or Afrikaans done by Africans or Coloureds born within the Republic of South Africa is still principally a literature of protest: sometimes wry; sometimes heavily charged with resent-

ment; sometimes stoical and magnanimous, perhaps the most effective mode of all. One of the paradoxes these writers have to face is that it is difficult to find suitable material conditions for writing in South Africa, and dangerous to publish anything critical. Yet if they succeed in escaping, it becomes increasingly artificial to go on writing protest literature without having the permanent and real stimulus of South African conditions around them. This is well brought out by Ezekiel Mphahlele in 'The African Image', a study of writers and writing from within Africa, including, characteristically, such white writers as Nadine Gordimer and Doris Lessing, since they must be accepted as part of the total Southern African cultural scene.

The overriding social ill that this protest writing is concerned to reform is of course racial discrimination. This term has been used so often in the past decade that it now may fail to convey any more real meaning than a mathematical symbol. It is dangerous to pass over a term of this kind as if it were no more than a computer click. People who have not lived in multi-racial areas need to make a mighty effort of imagination to appreciate the insidious power that racial thinking has in the minds and hearts of men, women and children in these areas. This pre-occupation with race can of course easily be observed outwardly by visitors, but the enormity and corruption of its effects cannot be gauged until racial thinking has been experienced as an inescapable element of the world one lives in, both socially and in the most secret parts of one's being. Only then does the full extent of its horror strike chillingly home. Until racial discrimination is ended in South Africa, writing from there will be unable to do much more than protest against a social pestilence so debilitating that profound creation on any other theme is almost impossible.

Outside South Africa, the English-speaking area which seems to be culturally most creative is Nigeria. This large country is fortunate in having no settler problem, an established pre-European town life and a tradition of ancient cultures. Nigeria is varied, vivid and urgent, and so are its writers. Being free from the diseased situation that all South African writers find themselves in, they are able to explore their personal and social condition more directly and to express it variously through novels, plays and poetry: Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark, Gabriel Okara and Christopher Okigbo have, taken together, produced a great deal of published writing in the past five years. None of these writers holds with *négritude*, and probably none of them considers that he has to accept

Western culture as finally as South African writers have to admit the permanence of Western civilization in their world. Nigerian writing is national in the sense that it springs from the Nigerian cultural setting, from personal or group experiences within this; it is not nationalistic. Its forms of artistic expression are syncretistic, drawing from Nigerian as well as from other sources and making of them an original and frequently exciting blend. Other English-speaking areas in Africa have already produced a few artists and writers who show the same national orientation and syncretistic treatment; they will, as they recover from the trauma of colonial civilization, be able to match individual Nigerian achievement.

Many of the writers in this group deal with the personal and social problems of living in a dual culture. Neither a return to the past, nor ignoring it, will do as a solution; a more differentiated pattern will have to be discovered. They are not the first to make the search. The same kind of dilemma has been faced by many Indian writers, artists and thinkers. They are blessed with a rich store of culture to draw from, especially that written in Sanskrit, a language accessible in structure and thought to many Indians through their own vernaculars. The African linguistic situation is much less rewarding. No written records of wisdom or imagination were made in the few areas of sub-Saharan Africa which evolved a script. African languages do not spring from one main parent stock. The linguistic geography of Africa is bewilderingly complex, and very few African writers choose to create principally in a vernacular, for in doing so they would risk isolating themselves from cultural interchange with fellow craftsmen. English and French will be the main cultural vehicles of African writing; languages such as Yoruba, Hausa, Amharic, Swahili, Portuguese, Bemba, Sotho and Afrikaans are of limited cultural significance already and will continue to dwindle in importance. Cultures are organically related to the languages in which they are expressed; Homer in English and Shakespeare in German are very far from the real thing. The fact that African writers will have to think and feel in English and French will greatly influence the development of culture in Africa. It is already possible to discern a difference in the manner of thinking between educated French-speaking West Africans or Malagasies and their English-speaking counterparts. At international conferences, the delegate from Mauritania may enter the lists against the delegate from Upper Volta upon the right choice of a word in framing the agenda, let alone a declaration, and other French-speaking delegates will join in the verbal fray with

enthusiasm, while the English-speaking delegates look on, puzzled or bored.

The field of philosophical and metaphysical thinking in Africa is just being opened up and may prove to be the most interesting of all. One of the most important books in this difficult area of study is Janheinz Jahn's 'Muntu', and in particular the chapters entitled *Ntu* (Being) and *Nommo* (Logos). *Ntu*, it claims, is force, not substance. It manifests itself through four categories: *Muntu*, force possessing intelligence; *Kintu*, force not possessing intelligence; *Hantu*, space-time; and *Kuntu*, modality. The activating principles are *Buzima*, giving biological life, and *Magara*, giving spiritual life and endowing man with the power of the word, *Nommo*. The thesis teems, of course, with metaphysical problems, but it rests on wide acquaintance with the arts in Africa and on some close experience of African life. It is, as the German sub-title suggests, no more than a preliminary sketch in this field, in which so much more remains to be discovered.

The Vanishing Diary of Anne Frank

MARTIN DWORKIN

Men of my unit went into two of those places the Nazis had efficiently called 'concentration camps', but for which there are other names: Buchenwald, near Weimar, and Ohrdruf, near Gotha. What struck the mind, and remained, was the unbelievable. The greater the horror, the more it was necessary to select details to make the whole have some reality. At Buchenwald, amid the fantastic complex of gas chambers and furnaces, the great sheds filled with human debris piled to the roofs, what seemed to affect the men most of all were some strange decorative plaques. A day or so afterwards, when an article in the service newspaper *Stars and Stripes* identified the objects as mounted pieces of tattooed human skin, the reaction was not quite melodramatic revulsion,