The Appropriation of African Cultural Values and Practices as a Strategy in True Nation Building in Post-Apartheid South-Africa: Model and Lessons from Lawino and Ochol Relationship

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Abstract: South Africa is a country brimming with potential yet held to ransom by socio-political and morally related challenges. Obviously, a successful response to these challenges that frustrates the socio-cultural transformation processes requires a comprehensive strategy. Then, the aim of this essay is to identify and analyse a few of progressive African idioms, specifically from Sotho languages, that refer to true nation building efforts and equity conscious relations. The main task is to reinforce the notion that prior to an encounter with European cultural imperialism and domination, African indigenous communities had their own cultural values, traditions and institutions, which provided them with "…a confident sense of possessing and exercising a real control over their lives" (Davidson 1994).

Key words: transformation, culture, nation building, idioms, strategy

Stop despising us, my man, don't look down on us,
Africans have traditions that are good
Don't fool yourself that your ways are bad
African cultures are solid, not hollow,
Neither thin, nor weak, nor light and flimsy.

But Ochol, although you have read up to university
You are big for nothing, you have no weight
You cannot guide us, addicted as you are
To copying foreign ways
As if your people have none of their own:
We have nothing to expect from you now
You deserve a beating for your loose tongue.

The cultures of other people I do not despise:
Don't you look down upon your own;
Borrowed stuff can never become your staple food
Don't uproot the culture of your land.

The above-mentioned stanzas are from a book titled, *The Defence of Lawino*, by Okopt 'Bitek, which has been translated from Acholi language spoken in Uganda to English by Taban lo Liyong (2001: 9). In a form of prose, with the council of elders as her audience, Lawino the wife of Ochol the prince of Ocholi people pleads with her husband to refrain from insulting her and his people. The prince possessed by the "demons of colonisation," that has got into him through Western education and religion, turns his back on African indigenous culture and starts to refer to every part of it as stupid and backward. To totally dislocate himself from his cultural heritage, he becomes estranged from the princess and marries a new wife, who like him has imbibed Western school education, has a Christian name, has gone through Catechism, and appreciates the music of foreigners and can also dance like them.

On the other hand, Ochol as a prince in an African village is expected to be the guardian of the shrine, meaning the protector of the African cultural values and practices, the people and its fauna and flora. However, typical of a disorientated and disorganised African persona instead of finding the good and the bad from both cultures, he completely divorces himself from his origins and everything that defines him as a person in time and space. He blindly embraces the whole of Western culture, in a manner that Lawino describes as the worst white apemanship that she has ever come across.

With this background as a point of departure of our submission as it will unfold here-under, it cannot be easily disputed the fact that apartheid is a socio-cultural and political system that was engineered towards the total subjugation and domination of the indigenous people in South Africa. It thrived on its use of culture as a tool of oppression and dehumanisation. As in Ochol's case, through Western religion and education, the colonised became alienated from their indigenous cultural heritage. Worst of all the colonised communities through the acts of the coloniser became polarised into the civilised and the uncivilised. The former being represented by those that became fully immersed in foreign ways and the latter by those that like Lawino remained rooted in their own

indigenous cultural values and practices. As Ngugi wa Thiongo (1986: 16) rightly points out the "economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control ... [precisely because] ... to control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relation to others."

Therefore as an antithesis it should be acceptable that in order to address adequately a situation in which there has been a forceful encouragement of "...a disjunction in cultural continuity as a result of the western presence" (Seda 1994/95: 50) that the assertion and affirmation of the essential elements of African cultural heritage be recognised as an indispensable strategy necessary for the total socio-cultural transformation process in the post-apartheid South Africa.

Then, the aim of this essay is to identify and analyse a few of progressive African idioms, specifically from Sotho languages, that refer to true nation building efforts and equity conscious relations. The main task is to reinforce the notion that prior to an encounter with European cultural imperialism and domination various African indigenous communities had their own cultural values, traditions and institutions, which provided them with "...a confident sense of possessing and exercising a real control over their lives" (Davidson 1994: 223). The ideas in this essay seek to contribute towards constructing a framework for the development of a patriotic national cultural identity.

The Socio-Cultural Transformation Processes in (South) Africa: Deconstructive and Constructive Challenges

The tragedy of Africa in general, which has mainly contributed to the continent's underdevelopment, is that since the first contact with Europe, Africa has been and still continues to be bombarded with some foreign and alien histories and cultures that are held up as the standard. As a result the continent's communities are forced to exist, live and work with two Africa's that are constantly clashing (Ayittey 1999: 14). There is, on the one hand, an indigenous Africa "...within which were contained, [and] are still contained, the essence of the values, the morality, the philosophy, the wisdom, the culture, and political philosophy of African civilization" (Vilakazi 2001: 56). On the other hand, there is the modern Africa, which exist without any link to 'the African village' and its ethos. This view in the South African context if it remains unchallenged it will forever inhibit efforts at nation building and the establishment of a patriotic national cultural identity.

From this it is apparent that in the process to effect total subjugation and domination of African cultural experiences and practices, colonialism and apartheid distorted and destroyed the historical and cultural foundations of the colonised. Through the ideological designs of colonialism and apartheid, indigenous communities became and continues to be alienated from their tools of self-definition, meaning the mechanisms,

which maintained their "belief in their names, in their environment in their capacities and ultimately in themselves" (Ngugi wa Thiongo 1986: 3). In the whole African socio-cultural heritage became marginalized, and in this connection Makgoba (1997: 182) points out that:
The single biggest failure of colonial powers, civilization and education in Africa has been the failure to capture the essence of Africa and its indigenous people, the failure to adapt and integrate Western culture into African culture.

In an endeavour to assert the desire for control and domination, the colonialist imperialism and the apartheid hegemony's subjugation of the historical development of the dominated also meant the suppression and devaluation of their cultural advancement in the human world. It is obvious that the latter has been found to be important in that it forms part of the identity of a people and their place in time and space.

Against this brief background it goes without saying that linked to the social transformation processes and nation building efforts within the post-apartheid South Africa, there are deconstructive and constructive challenges, precisely because the whole process has to do with redressing a situation whereby a great majority of the colonised have had, due to the pressures of European cultural imperialism and apartheid, "...to abandon their social mores, cultural practices and traditional values which are, to a large extent, the defining qualities of African living" (Mashige 2000: 8). In any given African country post-colonialism, to redress the situation of socio-cultural anomaly, and restore Africa to Africa's own history and culture, it has always required the determination and political will to take the bull by its horns.

What the post-apartheid South Africa is going through is not a new phenomenon within the African continent; rather it is a process that the country cannot go without as an African country. As a matter of fact, post independence many African counties have had to go through the processes of socio-cultural, political and economic transformation. This process can be described as another level of the struggle against European cultural domination, and the apartheid legacy that continues to permeate the life and culture of South Africa. Central to this struggle are the challenges, to deconstruct systems and institutions that have served to benefit the coloniser, and "... to construct models and systems which may serve the interests of the African peoples and modernisation" (Smit 1996: 130). In this connection Gyekye (1997: 25) rightly observes that:
The postcolonial era in Africa is the era that follows the regaining of the political independence of African states from the European colonial powers. On the one hand, postcoloniality brings down the curtain on the period of dictation, forcible imposition of a variety of alien values and institutions ... On the other hand, postcoloniality represents ... a period of autonomous self-expression on the part of the formerly colonized peoples, as well as self-assertion, sober reflection on ... values and goals, and the gradual weaning away from self-flagellating aspects of

colonial mentality acquired through the decades of coloniality.

As it is pointed out by Gyekye (1997) postcolonial era in Africa is supposed to be a period of total recovery for the African people. Therefore, for post-1994 South Africa to make great strides in as far as socio-cultural and economic transformation process is concerned, it is essential that its policies that guide sustainable nation building be informed by among others indigenous cultural values and traditions.

A Case for the Appropriation of African Cultural Values through Nation Building Project

African cultural heritage encompasses *the material aspects* or physical objects such as the artefacts and implements, and *non-material aspects* which are often reflected through elements such as religious institutions, values and traditions, produced over time, and utilised by Africans in their relationship, on the one hand, with their material environment, and on the other hand, among individuals, and other selves in the universe (Mthembu 1999).

Based on his critical analysis on the relationship between national liberation, culture and social transformation of a post-colonial society Cabral (1973: 41) defines what constitutes culture as:

> ... simultaneously the fruit of a people's history and a determinant of history, by positive or negative influence which it exerts on the evolution of relationships between man and his environment, among men or groups of men within a society as well as among different societies.

What Cabral (1973) wanted to highlight is the fact that culture plays a major role as a tool of self-definition in the relationships between human beings and their environment, and individuals/groups within a given social strata. Firmly grounded in their cultural heritage and without any disruption of any kind people are able to make progress in terms of their material needs, and also relate with other people in the world with confidence, trust and faith (Ramphele 1995: 212).

Progressive Idioms as a Component of African Socio-Cultural Heritage

As in the case of folktales and proverbs, idioms as part of African socio-cultural heritage are a vehicle through which in many indigenous communities they are used to transmit and inculcate moral and religious values in an enjoyable but instructive manner. Their purpose is to help in shaping character of an individual within a community, and they have their specific role according to need and context.

For true nation building strategies and equity conscious relations in post-1994 South Africa there are relevant idioms, common to all the nine (9) indigenous languages that can help in the formulation of policies that will guide the countries processes of social transformation, and also influence the attitudes of its people. Lo Liong (2001: xiii)

demonstrates the importance of indigenous language as a carrier of culture and a tool for social transformation and nation when he writes that we should return to African languages to use them as paradigms and lenses for seeing much more clearly the inner meaning and strength of African culture. We should, through African languages, explore the old homesteads where the pumpkins are still growing and re-establish or plant or retransplant the cultures of the old homesteads in our new homesteads.

This supports the saying that "...from a word, a group of words, a sentence and even a name in any African language, one can glean the social norms, attitudes and values of a people" (Ngugi wa Thiongo 1986: 8)

Progressive Idioms Related to Nation Building

The following are some of the progressive idioms from Sotho languages that from time immemorial have been appropriated by indigenous communities to infuse the spirit of oneness, maintenance of peace and good human relations.

i) *tau tsa hloka seboka di sitwa ke nare e hlotsa* (literally translated, means lions which do not cooperate in their hunt end up finding it difficult to catch even a limping buffalo). This idiom encourages unity and cooperation in the community or what the Afrikaner will call *saamwerk*. Our differences within a community should not be a liability but an asset that can contribute positively in whatever endeavour.

ii) *tshwele le faola poho* (basically it means a united community can castrate even a raging bull and that unity is strength and that as one). It is only when people are one in purpose that they can achieve a lot and progress.

iii) *kgalapa di a buseletsana* (literally translated, means one good turn deserves another). The idiom encourages cooperative working and mutual assistance between members.

iv) *bafohatse ke makgwaba a methati yohle* (literally translated, means

Subjects are free to part ways with a king or chief who does not treat them well, basically they vote with their feet). The idiom confirms and encourages the fact that leadership needs to be constantly conscious that it has an obligation to serve the interest of the people in society.

The above mentioned idioms were regarded as crucial in most of pre-colonial African communities and are relevant in the situation whereby there is a lot of talk about nation building and the need for the total social transformation of the post-apartheid South Africa – from an "... the exclusive, stagnant apartheid hierarchy of cultures, which was characterised by oppression, domination and exploitation" (Mzamane: 1990: 365) to patriotic national cultural paradigm, that is all-encompassing and grounded in African cultural values and experience)s).

The problem in this regard is the lack of a corresponding philosophical framework, more especially amongst the African organic intellectuals in effecting the envisaged total social transformation of the post-1994 South Africa, using African cultural tools of self-definition and self-assertion.

Progressive idioms related to equity conscious relations
Next are the equity conscious idioms that have also been identified from the Sotho languages:

(i) *botho ba gago bo nne botho setshabeng* (literally translated, means let your welfare be the welfare of the nation. It is one of the idioms that elaborate on the concept of the ubuntu philosophy. This idiom emphasizes some of the key social values of ubuntu, namely, group solidarity, conformity, compassion, respect, human dignity, humanistic orientation and collective unity (Mokgoro 1998: 50).

(ii) *ntlhomphe ke tle ke o hlomphe* (literally translated, means respect me so that I can be able to respect you too). Basically the idiom emphasizes mutual respect in the community, a practice that has as its ultimate goal to foster good relations, regardless of sex, religion, education, race and colour.

Related to the whole aspect of human relations which is captured in the above cited idioms, and since African religious belief system pervade every aspect of African life, hence Teffo writes: Spiritual or social human relations are more essential in the acceptance and practice in an indigenous religion. They are aimed at the preservation of the human race. Relations are based on the hierarchical as well as the clan systems. Each social setting will prescribe a particular way of relating in accordance with prevalent customs, norms and values. Respect for the elders, aged and handicapped underpins indigenous practice (Teffo 2000: 16).

Conclusion
In conclusion, related to the social-cultural transformation processes and nation building efforts in post-apartheid South Africa, this essay have attempted to highlight the abounding possibilities that exist if there was a political will. In a nutshell this essay has demonstrated that for the post-apartheid South Africa, as an African country, to reach a state of sound unity among its people it must rid itself of European cultural values and practices that have and still continue to alienate the indigenous people from their Ubuntu philosophy as people in relation to others in time and space. The only way to arrive at this will include among other strategies, the reclamation and revitalization of the progressive and essential elements of the African socio-cultural heritage.

In fact, for too long African ancestors have been insulted through processes that had as their purpose the undermining, shunning and marginalization of their values, morality, wisdom and philosophy. The validation of African socio-cultural heritage is a crucial strategy and with a political will it can be utilised to construct the

philosophical framework upon which the transformation processes in the post-apartheid South Africa can be based. In this essay we are not advocating for the re-creation of the old Africa, but the creation for the new Africa with building blocks from the old Africa.

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