

**THE ROLE OF THE AFRICAN ORGANIC INTELLECTUALS IN THE (RE)
CENTERING OF AFRICAN CULTURAL VALUES AND PRACTICES: TOWARDS
THE SANKOFA PARADIGM**

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to identify challenges confronting the post-colonial Africa in the 21st century and the context of globalisation processes, and to locate the role of the African organic intelligentsia in reclamation and revitalization processes of the African culture, values and practices over against the domination of the European perspective and mind set. Here the main task is to highlight the significance of the appropriation of indigenous cultural values, traditions, knowledges and innovations in the reconstruction and socio-political and economic development of African communities.

Introduction

The new millennium with its challenges has come with a new world order (or disorder?), which require Africans to define themselves in their relationship to other people in time and space, and above all, to shake off the shackles of intellectual servitude and work towards becoming masters and architects of their own destiny. The term intelligentsia, as it is used here, is inclusive and refers to the African organic intellectuals, meaning those who use their intellectual prowess to further the interests of their people, and are committed to the struggle to create a living socio-cultural and liberating hegemony (Mthembu 1999: 15).

Through long periods of racial dehumanisation and imperialist colonialism Africans have been alienated from indigenous cultural values and spirituality that contribute in shaping a nation. As a result a significant number of African intellectuals tend to find it difficult to think first as Africans whenever they are

confronted by issues that impact directly on the African perspective, mind set and identity. This is precisely because twelve (12) years after the continent's last country has ended white minority and settled for a democratic dispensation; Africa is still grappling with the appropriateness of alien and foreign ideas that still permeate the continent's socio-cultural, political and economic life. As a result Africa continues to be clouded with political copycats of Europe with its Westminster system of governance, with its Eurocentric underpinnings, advocated as the one and only system of governance, presumably for Africa too, without addressing cultural and historical differences. With its policies and principles, this system has greatly contributed to the disregard of minority nations, based on the democracy principle, which espouses domination of the minority, by the majority. Political problems (in a form of power struggle between democratically elected

governments and rebel movements) that continue to plunge the countries of the Great Lakes region into total mayhem need careful, sincere and reality-based analysis of how dogmatic application of Westminster principles has affected our continent. African based *structures and processes of consultation* like indaba (Buthelezi 1998: 16) have been sacrificed at the altar of euro modernizing of political processes with disadvantages whose source we seem not to be able to decode.

Some African leaders are talking about the need to ensure that the 21st century become known as the African century - an era in which everyone in Africa will strive to end poverty, wars and HIV/AIDS. Unfortunately this ideal will not be realised without the very same leadership repenting from behavioural patterns, which render them largely part of the continent's problem. These are manifested in military regimes, dictatorship and corrupt officials, all of which constitutes part and parcel of the socio-political life of some of the countries in the African continent. The ideal of the African century will be a mirage without the meaningful participation and full de-colonisation of the African intelligentsia and addressing its separation from the marginalised majority base defined and despised as the masses. The paradox is that as the world enters the new millennium, Africa is caught in a dilemma as to how to respond to the challenges of the time, which among others include political instability, poverty, wars and HIV/AIDS, precisely because those who drive forward creative thought and frame debate, whether in the arts or culture, whether philosophical or social thought (Mandani 1999: 130) are themselves outposts of other people's solutions rather than organic intellectuals.

Therefore, the aim of this essay is to identify challenges confronting the post-colonial Africa in the 21st century and the context of globalisation process, and to locate the role of the African intelligentsia in reclamation the African culture, values and practices over against the domination of the European perspective and mind set. Here the main task is to highlight the significance of the appropriation of indigenous cultural values, traditions, knowledges and innovations in the reconstruction and socio-political and economic development of African communities.

Some Historical Considerations of the Processes of Alienation and Marginalization

Africa as a continent has been a victim and an experimental ground of forces of colonial exploitation, oppression and human degradation. As a result the misrepresentation of African history after colonialism is clouded with economic, cultural and religious stories that are based on the distortive effect of Eurocentric perspectives.

The Processes of Underdevelopment of Africa

Underdevelopment refers to that relationship of historically exploitative relationship that exists between European/developed and non-European/non-developed countries, the majority of which are from the African continent (Rodney 1972: 22). Through slave trade Africa has been robbed of human and material resources whose development *in situ* could have contributed in the socio-economic development of the continent. Ngugi wa Thiongo accurately observes that the real aim of colonialism was to control the people's wealth: what they produced, how

they produced it, and how it was distributed, to control, in other words, the entire realm of the language of real life. Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship (1986: 16).

Highly skilled men and women of African descent are scattered all over Europe and America, actively involved in the development of foreign countries, some of which are directly responsible for the underdevelopment of Africa. Economically, hegemonic global relations have resulted in Europe's privileged position enabling it to make policies for the underdeveloped/developing world, including African communities, which are then expected to comply, politically and economically, whether those policies fit or not. African economies are integrated into the very structure of the developed capitalist economies; and they are integrated in a manner that is unfavourable to Africa and ensures that Africa is dependent on the big capitalist countries (Rodney 1972: 34). The trading relationship between Europe and Africa has always been one of inequality, a zero-sum relationship of an abnormal nature whereby prices for commodities from Africa are set by Europe, and prices for imports from Europe to Africa are still set by Europe.

Underdevelopment is basically a power relationship, with power indexing relations of dominance and subjugation, which affects the power to make or the powerlessness to receive and comply with those decisions. A lot depends entirely on the opinion-makers of Europe and America, on what its politicians, traders and economists define as beneficial to themselves, to such an extent that the value of currencies are dominated by

Europe or America, as in the case of the South African rand. By controlling the pricing of commodities and economic activities, the value of the dominated countries currencies, is essentially determined by the realities or the frivolities of the European money markets. In addition to the above, the prices of export and import goods, as stated earlier, are determined by buyers outside Africa. Briefly this is the construction of underdevelopment through the undermining of important fiscal decisions by external, powerfully placed countries.

The Onslaught of Colonialism on the Religious and Cultural Heritages of Africa

In as far as religious matters are concerned; the knowledge of Modimo/Nkulunkulu became the monopoly of the Western Christian *definition*, tradition and practice. The various religious aspects, practices and experiences of African people were de-recognised by the new Judeo-Christian religion and colonial legal structures. Socio-cultural concepts of African design, such as badimo/ amadlozi, were decried as superstition, paganism and heathenism, with a hypocrisy, which pretended that saints, European gods and goddesses were more acceptable. There was no public outcry from eurocentrically ordained African reverends/ ministers and intellectuals, about the hegemonic hypocrisy that ignored the fact that *saints* are Judeo-Christian *ancestors*.

Deliberate marginalization and de-sanctification of the organic relationship of African ancestors as saints followed very quickly validated by Biblical texts and doctrines, and the alternative was dictated

and enforced with the silent endorsement of religious intelligentsia. Hence Ngugi wa Thiongo's assertion that ". . . [Colonialism's] . . . most important area of domination was the *mental universe of the colonised, the control through Culture, of how people perceived themselves in their relationship to the world...*(italic emphasis mine, 1986:100) describes the de-empowering psychological effect of marginalized religions culture, belief systems of the colonised, because the onslaught of colonialism is is predicated on the destruction, distortion or marginilization of their religious and cultural heritages. This is the essence of domination, whereby control over their culture becomes a control of their tools of self-definition in relation to others (Ngugi 1986) and to the Gods that they worship.

Corrosion of the leadership role of religious intelligentsia as demonstrated in the above scenario clearly indicates that the colonialist's surrogates, in the form of de-culturised African missionaries staked a false claim of being Africa's saviours, while doing more damage than good to Africa. It was crucial for colonialism to supplant Africa's spirituality and religion in order to reference *the core of their ethics, values and beliefs* in Europe.

Culturally therefore, the superstructure of African socio-religious values and traditions were de-centralised by Western socio-religious as the spiritual eyes of the de-culturised African clergy were cast across the seas for referencing, as they were being trained to "... look on Europe as [the] teacher and the centre of man's civilization, and ...[Africa]... as the pupil. In this event Western culture became the centre of Africa's process of learning... relegated to the background (Ngugi 1986: 100) as all learners are in a miseducational process. The destructive teacher-learner or protégé relationship becomes subsumed under misrepresentation of the distorted socio-religious and cultural identity of the colonised, such that befitting the subjugated role "... the African majority was not only denied to vote, but were systematically subjected to total economic, cultural, and by extension spiritual subordination" (Seepe 1998: 1).

In processes that subjugated Africans in the religious arena, we also saw the linguistic changes enforced on African worshippers under the new faith. Their innermost spiritual needs were to be expressed in the language of the European clergy and their surrogates, a move which successfully endorsed the alienation and marginalization of *the self*, a process which was brutally intrusive requiring that Christianity and proficiency in the colonial language be interfused, except in those churches which steadfastly resisted and

remained African, for example the Zionist Christian Church, the Ethiopian Episcopal Church and others.

The African spiritual past was therefore erased with the marginalization of African ancestors. New European ancestors, canonised by the European church and validated by the European litany followed the African child into the school and into the home. Itumeleng or Monyaziwa were thrown into the school trashcan, exorcised from religious names considered acceptable for baptism into the church and therefore relegated to an uneasy co-existence in the African personality. The apartheid culture, ideologically that is its superstructure, socially economically and politically was hierarchical and therefore unequal in its positioning of the macro and micro platform for own affairs, whereby whites arrogated themselves a central and pivotal role for all intellectual, spiritual, economic and social referencing. Maintenance of the hierarchy was heavily subsidised by the Nationalist government. The foundation of both cultural and religious marginalization was enshrined in the Christian National Education policy documents whereby the culture of the white minority, their monuments, museums, languages, and philosophy promoted their education (Ntuli 1999: 193).

The psychological effect of this dichotomy in the African personality produced the kind of religious, political and economic schizophrenia whereby the rhetoric of Europeanised African elite and their practice produced a Europeanised African child who learnt that Tshepo's ancestors, religious beliefs, and social values were to be discarded or at least not mentioned in the confines of the European church or school. Through Eurocentric Christian education Tshepo, Nonkosi, Monyaziwa and others learnt that official *name, school name and church name* meant civilization, education and progress rather than cultural reference to

an indigenous entity, being and reality. Hence our submission is that "... *the culture of African people, their languages, their world view as well as how they viewed themselves in relation to other people* were distorted or silenced through mechanisms which flanneled their view of self (italics emphasis mine, Bereng 1997). Alien and foreign meaning irrelevant to the African religious experience and culture-based super-structure were boldly superimposed on the African spiritual belief. This position dismissed as primitive and pagan the very essence of African spirituality. Thus many in Africa have experienced alienation in the name of Christianity.

There was therefore no meeting place between Eurocentric and African-centred religious experiences. Were space and time yielded for a well-balanced acculturation process, the whole of humankind would have benefited.

Christianisation involved an element of modernisation and this demanded changes - changes that penetrated to the deepest aspects of African traditional culture. It even affected our eating habits, because keeping to traditional ways was considered pagan and ungodly by Christian preachers (Museveni in New Africa, 1997, p 11). Some of the manifestations of this penetration referred to by Museveni would actually be comical if they did not have such far-reaching social impact on the colonized African. For example, it is common knowledge in the Catholic Church and its flock, that there was a decree that forbade the eating of meat on Fridays. Undoubtedly there could have been a socio-economic reason for this decree in Europe or Italy, but its transposition to Africa had no relevance. In deference to the Capitalist system Sunday was chosen as the only day for worship, in the church that was to be the only location for worship. The Judeo-Christian doctrine rather than adapt to African religious system or allow itself to be

influenced by the African experience replaced it out rightly. Our submission is therefore that the marriage between the super-structure of the capitalist doctrine and the individualistic socio-cultural value system destroyed the possibilities of communal based welfare strategies which honour the African human being and his/her relationship to the Deity. Contesting the attitude of European Christian tradition which negates and denies the African traditional religious system and spirituality, Setiloane maintains that, "whatever the missionaries can say about the pagan state of the . . . [African] . . . people ... [Africans]... certainly had some concept (image) and certainly an experience of God"(1986: 21 - 28).

The tragedy about the history of Africa and colonial contact is that the majority of her intelligentsia, her own children of the soil, abandoned their responsibility to contest Africa's case and resist the continuing degradation of her people even in the neo-colonial era. The African century with its challenges needs the African intelligentsia to be vigilant against the domination of the European perspective and paradigm, and to unashamedly assume their role of reclaiming Africa's dignity.

Towards the Sankofa Paradigm

As we move into the 21st century, for Africa to take its respectable place among the nations of the world it must first be rescued, by Africans themselves, from the dominance by Western cultural hegemony and the continued dependency of independent neo-colonial Africa on oppressive paradigms of colonialist and imperialist domination that marginalised the majority of people while privileging collaborating elites (Micere wa Mugo, African Renaissance / Enterprise, December 1998, p 10).

The basic thesis in this paper is that European cultural imperialism's domination of the world has reached a stage whereby it has

begun to create a crisis of perception (Capra 1983: xviii). For Africa this phenomenon is manifested in the ways in which its traditional intellectuals are epistemologically disorientated and always rely on solutions, which are based on the European perspective and mind set for African problems. What we need, especially for Africa in the new millennium is a new paradigm, based on African-centered perspective.

This means that all the misnomers about Africa as a continent, her indigenous languages, culture and traditional religions must be vigorously re-examined and what is found valuable be contested. This task handled with earnestness, by the African intelligentsia themselves, should bring about a paradigm shift. Which in this exercise is referred to as the Sankofa paradigm and it simply means to go back to the past (City Press 1999, August 1) to reclaim and strengthen that which is valuable and rich in African cultural heritage and move on into the future with it.

The Sankofa paradigm can also be described as a strategy for the reconquest of the African people's optimum cultural space with the intention of relocating the African-centred frame of reference from the periphery to the core of the life and cultural creativity of the African people. This reclamation as Professor Pitika Ntuli explains is "... all embracing and involves the philosophical, political, social, economic, psychological, educational and historical aspects of our lives" (City Press, August 15, 1999: 21). The concept of the Sankofa is geared toward combatting Western cultural paradigm that continues, even in the post-colonial era, to be regarded as a universal frame of reference. One of the aspects of the Sankofa paradigm is to create a space for the collaboration between traditional intellectuals, rural organisers and cadres belonging to the masses, the intellectuals and cultural workers who trained in the modern academic

institutions, for the purpose of promoting and developing African heritages. The essence of this process of is going back to look at ourselves and our progressive indigenous cultural values, precisely because "... for a people to have some control over its present existence and its destiny, it has to know its past and especially establish some continuity with the best value of its history" (Mhlaba 1991; 220). The task of reclaiming Africa's dignity and her destroyed heritages can only be carried out by the African intelligentsia, both men and women - together with their youth, through their respective organisations and forums. It is their cardinal responsibility to go back into the past to re-define and strengthen those fundamental concepts and terms that are found in the African perspective and mindset, which are the best and rich in meaning.

To name but a few of these concepts and terms: (i) Ubuntu concept, which simply means umuntu ngu muntu ngabantu (Teffo 1999: 153), I am, because we are, and since we are therefore I am (Mbiti 1969: 108 - 109). That central communal ethic which places a high premium on human life and human relations must be re-defined and developed by Africans themselves, for the purpose of social development, nation building and spirit of unity among the peoples of the African continent.

(ii) Letsema / Ujima, a concept which is also common throughout Africa which encourages collective work and responsibility, can be re-defined and strengthened, within the world of science and technology, for the purpose of economic empowerment and sustainable development. The concept can contribute socially and economically to the revitalisation of African traditional fellowship and collective life that are aspects that have been eroded by unequal and individualistic Western systems of production and distribution (Mazrui 1980: 65). (iii)

Kgotso, mainly used by the Zionist Christian Church members and indigenous Basotho communities in their greeting, can be used for the purpose of moral renewal and sustenance of peace.

The project of recovering and renewing the destroyed African heritages in pursuit of a paradigm shift would include research programmes, initiated by the African intelligentsia themselves, designed in such a way that they aggressively address the social, economic and intellectual plight of the majority of African communities. The main objective should be to assist the African communities to restore African ethics in order to reconstruct the moral fibre suppressed by Western hegemony through its media and the so called New Culture and to revitalize creativity for sustainable development in the age of science and technology.

Conclusion

The de-legislation of discriminatory policies however does not, in *and of itself*, constitute separation from Europe nor does it ensure an organic relationship between the African organic intelligentsia and population's needs. Well thought-out plans and strategies reflecting unapologetic nationalism are necessary for the purpose of de-constructing the colonial relationship and thus effect a paradigm shift that is informed by the African experience, humanity and spirituality.

For Africans to make a dream of the African century a reality, the African intelligentsia must adopt a "... liberative perspective within which to see ourselves clearly in relationship to ourselves and to other selves in the universe" (Ngugi wa Thiongo 1986: 87). The main objective of the liberative perspective is to create space for the envisaged paradigm shift, within which the rest of the African intelligentsia will consciously, in their search for relevance through self-designed research projects, allow

themselves to be informed by their African thought and behaviour, as first reference. This notion is confirmed by Okot pBitek, (cited in Chinweizu1987: x), when he asserts that, "Africa must re-examine herself critically. She must discover her true self; rid herself of Aapeman ship. For only then can she begin to develop a culture of her own . . . A as she has broken the political bondage of colonialism, she must continue the economic and cultural revolution until she refuses to be led by the nose by foreigners." The paradigm shift will not be realised without the political will or ideological commitment from the Africans themselves, more especially the African intelligentsia.

In conclusion, we submit that the psychological paradigm shift has as its objective the eradication and the elimination of the African-Western cultural imbalances that exist, so as to create space for the realisation of the African century. In a nutshell it is about restoration of African cultural creativity, spiritual consciousness and the retrieval of African humanity and identity in the twenty-first century in order to measure up to all its challenges with a clear identity and self-reconstruction.

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