



AFRICA'S IDENTITY CRISIS: PATRIOTIC ROMANTICISM AS A FALSE ROUTE

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ABSTRACT

It is appalling that Africa is still bedevilled by identity crisis. That the crisis originated in the cultural shock of Africa's forced contact with the Western world is hardly excusable. This explains the belief of many African philosophers that the only way of redefining the current false African identity is a backward march into the traditional African society. This is propped on the assumption that the true African identity is in the traditional African society that was so glorious. This is patriotic romanticism, a belief in superiority of one's traditional beliefs, values and customs and a concrete move towards recapturing them. A thorough analysis of the ideology and values of traditional African society carried out in this text punctures this ego and argues that traditional African society was not so beautiful and many of its values ill-fit for contemporary life. Thus any proposal for a return to traditional Africa society is a false route to authentic African identity. The text concludes that authentic African identity lies in refining the good values of the African past to suit contemporary society, conscious adoption of some foreign values where necessary, and passionate protection of the irrational aspects of African culture.

Keywords: *Patriotic Romanticism, Traditional African, Africa Identity and Society*

INTRODUCTION

Identity simply denotes what a thing is. However, in philosophy identity is a normative problem in that here the problem of identity is not whether a thing is what it is but rather whether a thing is what it ought to be. It is in the light of this that African identity becomes a philosophical problem. Thus the question is not whether the African is what he is. It is whether the African is what he ought to be. If the African is not what or who he ought to be, why is he other than he ought? If what he is is not what he ought to be, what is he ought to be? It is a general belief of most African scholars that African identity crisis arose from the negation of what the African is as what he ought to be.



African social thinkers have contributed much in attempts to decipher the causes and origin of African identity crisis which stems from the consciousness of the fact that the African is other than what he ought to be. The commonly identify root is the contact with the Western world which brought myriads of changes to the culture of the traditional African society. Agbakoba refers to African identity crisis as the aftermath of the culture shock in Africa, “[...] that is the powerful intrusion of foreign (particularly Western) culture in African via the agency of colonization and imperialism (in the political sphere); capitalism (in the economic sphere); Christianization and Westernization (in the ideological sphere)”¹. The aftermath of this culture-shock, according to him, refers to the more or less indelible deposits of beliefs, values, organizational patterns, contacts, knowledge and other major cultural elements left by the West in Africa which have become fundamental factors in the development or otherwise of African societies and Africans’ efforts to grapple with, adapt to and adopt these deposits.

In line with the above contention, Frantz Fanon submits that Africa’s identity crisis has origin in colonialism. He identifies colonialism with violence and goes on to analyze the different spheres of colonial violence. Fanon maintains that colonial cultural violence undermined African civilization and imposed on the African Western culture which produced in the African personality a confused cultural identity which he refers to as “black skin, white mask”.² Since the time of the unholy union of African and Western civilizations, which now compete for supremacy in the African, there has been the desire to attach oneself to one’s root in Africa. “The desire to attach oneself to tradition or bring abandoned traditions to life again does not only mean going against the current of history but also opposing one’s own people.”³

Corroborating Fanon, Ali Mazrui maintains that Africa, having played host to different civilizational forces, is in deep distress arising from the triple heritage of cultures accruing to these forces. He avers, that “Africa is at war, it is a war of cultures. It is a war between indigenous Africa and the forces of Western civilizations”⁴. For him, throughout Africa, there appears to be a pronounced curse of cultural sabotage as institutions decay and structures rust away.

Conversely, the intercourse between two cultures as well as the concomitant changes it brings does not necessarily engender identity crisis provided the changes are consciously made. However, the reverse was the case in the contact between the West and Africa. Western



culture was too imposing and the African was over fascinated by the marvels of the West to allow such conscious and reciprocal exchange of cultural elements⁵.

In the quest to resolve the African identity crisis, the problem seems compounded in that Africa is in dire need of development which entails adoption of some Western values. While most political and economic elite are in the illusion that to be modernized implies unbridled adoption of Western culture, most academic elite especially in the African thought and philosophy circle are transferring their hatred for Westernization to everything that is Western, though in principle and never in practice. Thus Wiredu is right to hold that the current identity crisis stems from the inability to strike a balance between African political nationalism and African cultural nationalism.⁶

The thrust of this write-up is to strike this balance. This will be achieved by first attempting to convince the cultural nationalistic movement which seeks to restore the African past that patriotic romanticism is a false route to authentic African identity as the traditional African society was not as glorious as they think and thus ill-suited for the contemporary African. Similarly, they will be reminded that not all about Western culture is repugnant to the African well being. On the other hand, the political nationalists will be enlightened on the fact to be modernized does not imply becoming Westernized, that while Africans attempt adoption of some Western values for the development of African continent, such adoption should be consciously made without prejudice to the otherness of the African.

Patriotic Romanticism: A False Route to African Identity

Most efforts to redefine African identity after the culture shock of European colonization and imperialism have been channelled towards proving the otherness of the African. They aim at establishing that the African was truly human, having culture, history, philosophy etc that were equivalent or even better than the European's. In fact, they struggle to negate the negation of the humanity of the African by the West and in so doing prove otherwise the Western claim of primitivism of the traditional African society. Agbakoba calls this patriotic romanticism. For him:

In dealing with this problem [African identity crisis], it appears many Africans thought (and still think) that if the apparent ideological justification for denigration of the African person is trashed, the exploitation, humiliation



and racism it justified well disappear. This is the underlying assumption of patriotic romantic approach. It, consequently seeks to preserve and promote African identity and accomplishment based on traditional African culture and worldview⁷.

The approach is patriotic because it is nationalistic and romantic because it glorifies traditional African society and locates authentic African identity in recapturing unadulterated the traditional life and society. Many literary works written by Africans of this inclination during the independence struggle as well as the post independence era bear this imprint, namely to present the uniqueness of the African. Oguejiofor rightly located the quest for African philosophy in this quest to prove the humanness and uniqueness of the African⁸.

Insofar as this movement is towards regaining the pre-colonial African identity, it is traditionalistic and thus cultural nationalism. Cultural nationalism entails efforts to restore to modern Africans their confidence in their own culture which colonial racism had alienated them from; so, it implies a rejection of foreign cultural influences. The question of identity here becomes, "Are we what we used to be?" Since it is clear that we are not, the solution to identity crisis becomes the discovery of what we were. The unstated assumption here implies that what we ought to be is what we used to be, with bothering if what we used to be was good then let alone now. Wiredu identifies fault in this line of thought because it is a strange assumption that culture is not open to improvement. Summarizing the argument of cultural nationalism and questioning it he writes:

So, given that we do have a crisis of self identity, the following question must press itself upon us: why should we be other than we currently are? The answer of anti-colonial nationalism is: Because we became what we are now not of our own free will but rather through a colonial imposition. But suppose what we are now happens to be better that what we used to be? Or suppose that even though what we are now is no good, still what we were in the past was either not good or, if good in its time, ill-suited the present time. Then what?⁹

It is on this ground that the argument of this write-up should be interpreted and understood. The fundamental point is not that the traditional African society was entirely bad but where it



was good ill-suits the contemporary African that now has other cultures to compare with. This explains why the glorification of the traditional society of patriotic romanticism is a false solution to the current identity crisis.

Analysis of some values of the traditional African society can go a long way to indict those who think that the solution to African identity problem lies in digging out the values of the pre-colonial African societies and reliving them. The question, “how glorious was the traditional African society”, is not easy to answer because the era is past and empirical evidence difficult to get. However, the little evidence that history has deposited at our doorstep is enough to base a philosophical speculation. It is based on this that this write up argues that the era in question was not as glorious as some assume. To give credence to this assertion, the ideology as well as some values attributed to traditional African society is examined.

According to Nwala world view, (otherwise ideology) refers to:

[...] the complex of beliefs, habits, laws, customs and tradition, of a people. It includes the overall picture they have about reality, the universe, life and existence: their attitude to life and to things in general; what they do and think of what life is, what things are worth striving to attain: what man’s place is in the scheme of things; whether or not life has a meaning and purpose etc¹⁰.

All this put together form the immaterial aspect of a people’s cultural identity and all their activities as well as relationships are controlled by them. Put simple, people’s ideology embraces the ontological, epistemic and ethical outlooks. The ontological outlook of a people embraces the way they conceive being and the mode of being. People conceive being and the mode of being in a variety of ways. Being could be conceived as spiritual, or material, physical or metaphysical, sacred or non-sacred. The people’s conception of being and its mode largely determines the form of religion they practice whether, theistic or atheistic, monotheistic, polytheistic or pan-theistic. This in turn spells out their relation with both physical and social environment and circumscribes their epistemic outlook.

Epistemic outlook has to do with predominant knowledge acquisition process and whether knowledge is held to be esoteric or exoteric – whether knowledge and its acquisition process are the exclusive reserve of few or open to all. People’s definition of basic moral concepts



forms their ethical outlook; for instance, the question of good and evil, their definition of crime, for instance.

Agbakoba avers that to judge a particular ideology, one has to measure its internal consistency. While internal consistency has to do with the logical coherence of the various aspects of the ideology, horizon of consistency demonstrates the ability of the basic principles of the ideology to be applied across space and time. The ideology with the widest horizon of consistency is said to be universalistic whereas one with a very narrow horizon is said to be particularistic¹¹.

Assessment of the ideology of the traditional African society in the light of the above criteria inescapably exposes so many shortcomings. It is quite true that the said ideology was to some extent internally consistent. However, its horizon of consistency was very narrow which makes it ill-suited for contemporary society. The ideology of the traditional African society was very particularistic. Unfortunately, even the much talked culture-shock occasioned by the imposition of Western culture on the African could not alter it so much. This is consequent upon the inability of the West to completely modify African ideology owing to the fact that most colonial activities took place in the urban-centres and the hinterland was largely touched. Sequel to this, much of the ideology has been carried into the modern African and the unconscious mix up of this and some aspects of Western values is at the heart of African identity crisis.

Suffice it to say that the ontological outlook of the traditional African society was too spiritualistic with high sense of sacredness. For this everything was treated as god. The major consequence of this outlook is most noticeable in the epistemic outlook as the function of man as man was abdicated to the gods. The sacredness as well as its assumed metaphysical mode made the acquisition of the knowledge of being something esoteric and repudiated critical and empirical inquiries. Asouzu alludes to this fact when he observes:

[...] one objection that is often directed against this system of thinking is that it is not open to all and as such, it is more of occult practices than science. It is for this reason that people often associate this thought system with such negative tags as witchcraft, sorcery and magic, myth and superstition¹².

Knowledge was actually left in the hands of priests and medicine men, and the only avenue



the people got to know about things was through sorcery and divination. Writing on the positive stand of sorcery in traditional African society, Jahn holds that “[...] a wizard is a ‘sorcerer’ who fails to use his knowledge, his verbal power, in the service of the community, but misuses it maliciously and for his own gain”¹³ but this is not enough to make sorcery a reliable source of knowledge.

This ontological and epistemic outlook deeply affects even the ‘educated’ African, even today, as he has learned to spiritualize everything, situations, events etc around him. It is against this back-drop that Oguejiofor avows that the African is in greater need of science than philosophy in his training in rationality. For him:

A man who believes that his house was blown down by the wind because of the anger of the spirits of his ancestors need more lessons in geography, architecture and physics than in the logic of Aristotle.... Again one who thinks that one’s belly ache is as a result of a neighbour’s manipulation of magical charms and who seeks magical cure may need to be more convinced about the working of human anatomy....¹⁴

This is an indictment of the ontological and epistemic outlook of the traditional African society. The knowledge it provided, though might have served the people that time, has no place in the present era.

The ethical outlook presents more problems. As beautiful as many ethical values of traditional African society appear, they are truncated by horizon of consistency of the ethical outlook, which is narrow and particularistic. Obi argues of the universality of certain elements in Igbo world-view for instance ‘ala’¹⁵. But Oguejiofor rightly counters this view. He avers that although Ala is so much prevalent in the life of the Igbo, there is no a single universal Ala. Ala Nsukka is definitely different from Ala Onitsha. That is why the former does not hold one accountable for their actions against the latter¹⁶. This makes the Igbo “irimbalata” possible. An instance of “irimbalata” is given in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* where Okonkwo had to spend seven years in his mother’s birthplace to avert the anger of Ala, for the unintentional homicide he committed. Were Ala universal, there would have been no hiding place of offenders.

Still taking the Igbo as a case study, the particularistic conception of “Ala”, the moral



custodian affects the entire ethical outlook. What is just, good or evil becomes tied to one's community. Oguejiofor points out in the above text that "[...] defilement of Ala in a particular community is regarded as, (in the case of murder) killing a member of that community and not that of another community, and by the same token a subject of another particular Ala"¹⁷. This is why the use of human heads for burials and other rituals was possible. These heads were gotten from outside the community as it was a homicide to get them from within. The implication of this is that traditional African society's definition of basic moral concept is relative to particular community and sometimes family. The relationship between the parties involved in a moral situation was the most serious factor in the determination of the rightness or otherwise of an action. Acts like murder, theft, adultery etc were offences only when committed against members of one's clan¹⁸. Hence one who killed his kinsman was a murderer while he who beheaded a stranger especially in a far away land was crowned a hero.

This particularistic tendency beclouds most values that are generally desirable in traditional African society such as communalism, family-hood etc. As good as extended family-hood was, the spirit was limited and also utilitarian. People valued their families because of the benefit derived from them and partly because family had power of life and death over its members then. That is why the organizational structure of the present day society, which now provides the benefits formerly derived only from strong attachment to one's family, has sheltered the extended family ties. People blame this on the incursion of the Western individualism but it is far from that. The utilitarian calculation of profit and loss informs the contemporary African that some organizations provide the needs originally sought in the family much better. The same community of brotherhood facilitated slavery and slave trade by capturing and selling its own members into slavery. It was not uncommon for families to sell some of their members into slavery in most cases for purely economic purpose. This explains why Agbakoba maintains that African communalism "[...] cannot survive for long in the current economic setting...."¹⁹

It is often said that there were no class struggle and exploitation of the weak by the strong in the traditional African society but this is not completely true. In Achebe's *Arrow of God* there is a cold battle for supremacy between Ezeulu and Ezeidemili, the two priests of the two most powerful deities in Umuaro. Albeit tradition held that Ezeulu ranked higher than Ezeidemili,



but the latter wanted at worst that Ezeulu should consider him his equal. In another text *Thing Fall Apart*, Achebe demonstrates that there was exploitation in the traditional African society even within the same community. This is best displayed by the way Okonkwo snatched his second wife Ekwuefi from her former husband and no one raised an eye brow.

Much energy has been dissipated to demonstrate that the traditional African setting was not as glorious as patriotic romanticism tries to portray. Even some of those who champion traditionalism acknowledge this but seem to be obstinate that our devil is better than the Western angel simply because it is ours. Okere seems to buy this idea when he writes: “The choice put to them seems unfair to accept this foreign made product or to return to traditional religion which, however, discredited, has the authentic stamp of a self and homemade article. For however poorly made, it is self-made then it is truly one’s own.”²⁰ This patriotic romanticism has led many into what Wiredu in the text quoted above refers to “fallacy of uniqueness”. Everything must be different in other to be authentically African, and no matter how poorly made it is better than others simply because it is ours. Hence there must be African philosophy, democracy, socialism, religion, mathematics, science and even African sun and moon²¹.

Insofar as culture is both static and dynamic, the solution to the current identity crisis in Africa does not lie in cultural conservatism or traditionalism. Nor is irrational displacement and replacement cultural elements a better option. Both are false routes to authentic African identity.

Possibility of Authentic African Identity through Eclectics

Up to this point this essay has maintained that cultural nationalism, otherwise patriotic romanticism, is a false route to true African identity in the contemporary world. This stems from the conviction that the traditional African society was not as glorious as they would want everyone to believe. It would be a gross misunderstanding of this engagement to assume that it holds traditional African society has been completely ugly. Rather than that, it aims at establishing that even those aspects of traditional African culture that were adjudged nice need to be refined to accommodate more space and time and thus made to suit the present day life. Many African cultural nationalists agree to this point. Okere had long ago made this point.



Not all African values will need to be revived, promoted, or Christianized. There is need for a certain discrimination of values. Some values are fatally tied down to structures that are either anachronistic or for some reason no longer acceptable, for there is also such a thing as the evolution of values.... Other values are only more permanent in time but seem destined for a more universal vocation eventually being accepted beyond their time and place of birth²².

The stress here is on the need to discriminate values and even those desirable values need to be universalized.

This universalization of values is what Nyerere aims at in his *Ujamaa*²³. As good as the African family-hood is, Nyerere saw that each family stood on its own, meaning that communal life was relative to families. Thus, he advocated the unification of families to form an entire nation of brotherhood. While it is admissible that universalization of some African values (if that is possible) is a good step towards authentic African identity, the direction of this step must be clearly defined. That explains why the first step should be to widen the horizon of consistency of traditional African ideology. African ideology is still largely too spiritualistic, esoteric and narrow. There is need to redefine its ontological, epistemic and ethical values. The problem is that this reconstruction effort may be abortive unless recourse is made to some foreign cultures. This recourse can only be made with a firm conviction that the colonial enterprise was not completely devastating. Misgiving is often on the fact that whatever positive impacts colonialism seemed to have made must be incidental and by-products or unintended side effect of a domineering arrangement. This calls for cautions. There must be conscious reflection on what to assimilate into African culture and what to retain. This balance between what to take and what to retain is what has been lacking in the efforts to redefine African identity in the aftermath of the culture-shock.

In terms of what to assimilate from other cultures, technology is paramount, since it was instrumental to the Western colonization mission in Africa. Unless Africa adopts Western technology and in the process indigenizes it, there is doubt that it will eventually wriggle itself out of Western grip. What people fear is that adopting Western ideas leads to loss of identity but this is not so. Japan is convincing evidence in this regard. It has been able to adopt and indigenize Western technology which has accorded it much respect in the world



today.

At this juncture attention is called to what should be jealously guarded as the elements of African identity which differentiate it from others. Every culture has both rational and irrational aspects. The rational aspect has to do with those elements that have truth-value, that is, their assumptions can be said to be true or false. They are universal in the sense that they remain the same everywhere. They include religion, socio-political system, philosophy etc. According to Wiredu these do not represent the authentic identity of any people. The implication is that one can copy the rational aspects of culture that suits their purpose and time without really endangering their cultural identity. Conversely, the irrational aspect which has no truth value constitutes the real cultural identity and should be protected from extinct. This aspect includes language, mode of dressing, names, artefacts, tribal marks, mode of eating, dancing etc²⁴. Unfortunately this aspect of African culture is rapidly eroding, and Africans are escalating this culture erosion by unconsciously discarding them in preference of foreign ones. This is the basis of the current crisis of identity and unless something serious is done to check this trend Africa may in no far time loose all that makes it Africa, not minding that many theories are coming up in African philosophy and many are busy putting finishing touches on what they call the African democracy, African Christianity, African Logic and so on.

Let's take language for instance. What is the size of most countries in Europe compared to some ethnic groups in Nigeria? Yet anyone having a serious undertaking in any country in Europe must first sit and learn their language or forfeit the assignment. But here, African languages are not used even in some family discussions. How many students are undertaking course in African languages? Some, if not most, institutions of higher learning in Africa have no department of African languages. Ironically most of them have departments of all sorts of foreign languages, and in most cases charter foreigners who are treated like demi-gods to lecture in them. Imagine this text advocating maintenance of African languages doing so in a foreign language. This must be otherwise no one will look at it let alone read.

Look at Nigeria, most parents start from the cradle to couch their kids in English language, short of this they will hardly survive in the Nigerian society. Every ceremony is conducted in English language even cultural ones because Nigeria is a multi-ethnic group. What prevents a Hausa working in a state in Igbo land from learning Igbo language as to partake in exercises



conducted in the language, and vice versa? An Igbo spends complete four years in an institution in say Hausa land without bothering to learn Hausa because he has foreign language as avenue for communication. And yet we sit and talk of national integration.

The issue of language should not be taken lightly because language provides one with conceptual framework, as a representation of thought. One thinks clearly only in a language he speaks fluently. This is the bane of the African who dissipates his energy in the pursuit of foreign language to the detriment of his mother tongue. Now he can speak neither fluently, consequently his conceptual framework is a bundle of confusion.

Other elements of this aspect of culture such as mode of dressing etc deserve the same emphasis laid on language. Actually same modifications may be necessary but such should not destroy their cultural originality for they are the basic things that make for otherness in terms of culture.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the current identity crisis in Africa cannot be resolved by exhuming the values of the pre-colonial African society. This is propped on the fact that the said values were not so beautiful in themselves and so ill-suit the contemporary society. The good among these values should be modified by consciously adopting some foreign ideas and values that make them more desirable and fit for present day life. It further argued that Africa's the otherness does not lie in having African brand of Christianity, philosophy, democracy, socialism and so on. It is rather by strict adherence to African languages, mode of dressing, eating, dancing and well as reviving African symbols in the form of artifacts that the African can redefine his identity in the contemporary world.

Consequently, African thought will be authentically African to the extent it is able to promote the irrational aspects of African culture. In this regard, students who have the desire, the will and the resources to present any academic discourse in African language should be encouraged to do so.

Endnotes

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