
Book Review

Cultural Nationalism and Western Hegemony: A Review Essay on Appiah's Universalism

Kolawole Aderemi Owolabi*

It is a truism that the history of Africa's interaction with the West has been dominated by the urge of the Africans to define their identity in opposition to that of their oppressors. It is also true that this same desire has been very important in shaping the focus of all the intellectual disciplines relating to Africa. This theme of identity is a response to the ethnocentrism of the European invaders who reduced the totality of Africanity to the sub-human level in order to justify their plundering of the continent and the subjugation of the peoples of the continent. African scholars have reacted to this ethnocentrism of the West by articulating both a cultural integrity and identity for Africa. Anthony Appiah's recent book: *In My father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (1992) is another reaction to this theme.

The position of Appiah in this book is opposed to the cultural nationalism of most African scholars. He argues extensively in the book that the nationalism of the Africans is a manifestation of racism. Pan-Africanism according to him as a philosophy of African unity was conceived in the womb of racism outside Africa. Pan-Africanism and its racialist tendency he says was originated by the Africans in the diaspora who were victims of racial prejudice (1992:10). It is the exiled Africans who tried to cut out an identity for the Africans. They accepted the myth that Africans are genetically and culturally different from the Europeans and formulated a philosophy of solidarity on the basis of this assumption.

Appiah's position is that the concepts: race racism and racialism, are myths created in Europe to subjugate others (1992:5). His position is that there are no races because neither the biological nor the cultural explanation of race is tenable.¹ Africa he concludes is neither a racial nor a cultural entity. Its unity and identity according to him is an invention of the West. The fact that Africa is not a united entity culturally according to Appiah can

Africa Development Vol. XX, No. 2, 1995, pp113-123

1 For an extensive discussion of the Myth of Race. See the chapter two of the book, 1992, pp. 28-46.

be seen in the diverse cultures in the continent (1992:24). What Africans have in common he concludes is simply the fact that they are seen as one entity by the West. Beyond this, Africa is merely a geographical entity, a piece of land mass that accommodates diverse peoples, almost as divergent as those that live in the entire globe.

Based upon this position that Africa's identity is a product of racism, the author devoted the latter chapters of the book to an attack of variations of cultural nationalism in all aspects of Africa's intellectual life. Pan-Africanism as a philosophy of cultural solidarity, he observes gave birth to nationalistic scholarship in Africa. Virtually all the human sciences relating to Africa manifest the racialism of Pan-Africanism. All those disciplines he says are devoted to the unnecessary and unfortunate mission of proving that Africa is intellectually different.

Identifying African literature as an example of this tendency, he traces the development of African literature and its goal of attaining a completely authentic African literature independent of Western influence. Nativism as Appiah calls this orientation in literature is the attempt to challenge the claim of the Western scholars that Africa is incapable of contributing to the development of arts and letters. Nativism, Appiah argues is presently getting out of hand in Africa because it is gradually turning to the effort of making African discourse completely insulated from its Western counterpart. This extremism of nativism in Africa, according to Appiah, is exemplified by the book: *Towards the Decolonisation of African Literature* (Chinweizu 1981). The book he says is all out to denounce any form of compromise with the West by African writers. The objective, he goes on is to attain a completely African literary tradition independent of any external influence.

The position of Appiah against Nativism particularly in its extreme form is that such a unique and insulated African literature is not attainable in an Europeanised and Eurocentric African society of today. The mere fact that such a literature will be produced by the Eurocentric elites, who have completely lost touch with African culture is enough reason for the impossibility of an authentic African literature such an attempt which depends on the European language can not but manifest the culture of the West. All these factors according to Appiah make the quest for an authentic African literature an utopian dream. The truth of the matter he continues, is that Africa has so much admitted a lot of European values to itself that it can no more talk of cultural independence. Africa according to him cannot forget or neglect this fact:

[...] to forget Europe is to suppress the conflicts that have shaped our identities; since it is too late for us to escape each other, we might seek to turn to our advantage the mutual interdependence history has thrust upon us (Appiah 1992:72).

Appiah's critique of nativism does not stop at this, he goes further to denounce the assumption that there is an African cultural mindset in dialectical conflict with the European world view. He particularly condemns the celebration of an African world by the literary giant, Wole Soyinka in his collection of essays: *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976). Exposing the goal of the essays as that of explaining the mysterious dark continent to the European elites, Appiah (1992:80) criticises the said African world to be nothing but a myth. The African world he says is neither completely different nor completely homogenous to warrant such a dialectical opposition to the Western world.

But there is an inherent tension in the entire literary project of Soyinka according to Appiah. This tension he says is an expected consequence of adopting a false position, the position that Africa is a distinct and united cultural space. The tension inherent in Soyinka's project exists between the idealism of Soyinka, the essayist who operates on the myth of a cultural unity and Soyinka, the dramatist, who is realistic to the point of exploiting the materials of his local culture; the Yoruba culture for his dramatic texts (Appiah 1992:80). This conflict between the theoretical Soyinka and the practical Soyinka Appiah argues, is a concrete refutation of the claim that there is an insulated and homogenous African world by those who invented this myth.

The essence of Soyinka's myth he says is to establish an ideological programme (Appiah 1992:83); an ideology of cultural solidarity despite the constant denial of this by him. Soyinka according to Appiah is not at all comfortable with the bitter truth that Africa's unity is a product of European gaze. The literary giant therefore seeks to create an ideology of cultural identity for the diverse peoples of the continent even if such entity does not exist. Soyinka's ultimate objective is to make Africa present a common front in what he considers to be a highly competitive global community where the African society is already at a disadvantage. But this philosophy of cultural solidarity Appiah says falters not only because of the weak racialist foundation, but also because of the interaction and interdependency of the contemporary global society. Modernity by its very essence he says, abhors the nationalism, the type of which Soyinka aims at propagating. Modern culture by virtue of printing technology encourages privacy and individualism (Appiah 1992:84). If there is going to be any solidarity within the modern society he says it is going to be the solidarity of humanity rather than that of race.

Also focusing on the debate going on in philosophy between the advocates of ethno-philosophy and the professionally trained philosophers, Appiah conceives the position of the former as another variant of the cultural nationalist project. Ethno-philosophy, he says is the attempt to show that there exists a discourse that is qualified to be described as philosophy

within the indigenous traditional culture of the African people (Appiah 1992:87). The ethno-philosophers like their nationalist counterparts in literature according to Appiah will constantly maintain that this philosophy of the African people is completely different from that of the West, forgetting that for anything to pass as philosophy, it must enjoy a bit of resemblance with those discourses defined as such in other cultures.

Ethno-philosophy, Appiah argues was motivated by the desire of the African nationalists to challenge the claims of many European scholars that African people are incapable of rigorous and critical reflection that philosophy demands. To show that the ethnocentric claim is false, the African nationalists he says are presenting the folk philosophy of the community as their own contribution to philosophy. In doing this, he says they are playing into the hands of their opponents because they are merely confirming that African philosophy is permanently at the level of folk thought—which exists in all societies — and is therefore incapable of transcending this level for a more sophisticated realm of strict and rigorous philosophy.

However, Appiah's position in respect of the debate between ethno-philosophy and its opponents is rather reconciliatory. Much as he does not agree with the relativism of this orientation for reasons which we earlier discussed, he still believes that the materials of ethno-philosophy can still be annexed to serve as raw materials for rigorous analysis by their opponents who advocate for such a method in opposition to the mere descriptive approach of ethno-philosophy (Appiah 1992:100). His own position is that the synthesis of the two opposing orientations is desirable for the future of African philosophy. In this respect, Appiah is reaffirming the position of his countryman Professor Kwasi Wiredu in an earlier book: *Philosophy and an African Culture* (1980:171). Like Wiredu, Appiah also advocates that the future African philosophy must not strive to be completely different from its Western counterpart, but should see problems as universal and try to reflect on them only with the African conscience.

The position that Appiah employs as his premise in his earlier arguments that is the position that the world is culturally interdependent is given extensive attention in the latter chapters of the essay. Africa, according to Appiah is presently going through a cultural renaissance. This emerging cultural revolution involves a synthesising of the aspects of traditional and modern culture. The cultural integration going on in Africa he says, is such that traditional values are complimenting the modern culture in a way that is revolutionary in the sense that a new culture is emerging that is neither traditional nor modern. This new culture emerging in Africa is aptly captured by Appiah (1992:157) with allegory of 'The Yoruba Man on a bicycle'. This artistic image captures the modern African man as an eclectic figure, a child of diverse cultures; who as a result of modernity is presently a

polyglot and travelling wider than he can do in a traditional setting. The symbol of the neo-culture in Africa is described further by Appiah (1991:157):

The Man with a bicycle' is produced by someone who does not care that the bicycle is the white man's invention — it is not there to be 'Other' to the Yoruba self; it is there because someone cared for solidity; it is there because it will take us further than our feet will take us; it is there because machines are now as African as novelists — and as fabricated as the Kingdom of Nakem.

It is not only the traditional culture that is at the receiving end of this radical transformation, modern institutions according to Appiah is also receiving inspiration and support from traditional culture. He in fact maintains that without such a support from the traditional sector the modern institutions adopted from the West would have collapsed. To drive this fundamental point home, he alludes to the role that traditional values are playing presently in the prevailing overwhelming crisis in Africa. According to him, the present crisis has not degenerated into total collapse of all the structures holding the society together because of the simple reason that the age-long values of traditional culture such as the norms of brotherhood and corporate survival are still preventing the modern institutions from giving way (1992:168). Without the aid of traditional values filtering into the contemporary African society through the medium of civil society, the State, a modern institution, Appiah concludes could have witnessed a permanent exit from the continent.

The thesis of Appiah in this book if we can recap and attempt a summary is that between the past and future of African culture, a lot of events have taken place which demands that the desire to attain a unique African identity must be jettisoned, since such an ambition can not be realised in an interdependent global community of today. Appiah also criticises any scholarship that seeks to celebrate difference in whatever form whether racial, cultural or intellectual, since the contemporary world does not encourage dialectical opposition but promotes overwhelming integration. Relating this fact to the issue of the crisis of development in Africa, Appiah posits that the ideal of development can only be realised if Africa gives serious expression to this cultural interrelationship rather than cultural insularity and adopt ideas from those cultures that it earlier seeks to isolate. Development according to Appiah will come to Africa if we recoil from the path of antagonism and accept the syntheses of all hitherto opposing camps; modernism and traditionalism, Africanity and Eurocentricity to forge for us the desired progress.

Antony Appiah's discourse represents an attempt at transporting the revolutionary scholarship of post-modernism to Africa. The author's critique of culture employing the rigorous analytical tool of philosophy is a complete

departure from the orthodox scholarship of excluded middle in Africa where a scholar is either a traditionalist or a modernist. Post modernism as an intellectual movement in the West is out to question the conventions and accepted methodologies of modernism. It has put itself in opposition to the positions of traditional scholarship in all ramifications. It is a call for interdependence of ideas with the assumption that universal or absolute truth is a myth. Post modernism subscribes to the position that diverse interpretations can be given to one fact and it is therefore imperative for all positions to cohabit in an interdependent manner. It is this assumptions that Appiah is bringing to bear on his analysis of African culture.

Having summarised the theses of Appiah, it is pertinent for us to begin to advance our objections to his project. First let us begin with Appiah's discussion of the issue of African identity and his indictment of Pan-Africanism for asserting a racist identity for Africa. Our intention is not to contest issues with Appiah on the claim that race as a concept and racism as an idea are myths, rather we intend to question the severe attack he gave to Pan-Africanism for responding to the myth of racism created by the West. Appiah is not justified in combating Pan-Africanism for making race the basis of its philosophy of African solidarity. Racism of the Africans is a logical response in a world which has been unfair to them for being of a different colour. It is normal for the Africans to mobilise themselves on the platform of race which has been exploited to their own disadvantage. Anything short of this could have been ineffective in challenging the arrogance of Western imperialism. As Fanon (1967:171) once said in defence of racial solidarity of the Africans:

Negroism ... was the emotional if not the logical anti-thesis of that insult which the white man flung at humanity. This rush of Negroism against the white man's contempt showed itself in certain spheres to be one ideal capable of lifting interdictions and anathema.

It is in this same respect that we will take up the critique of cultural nationalism of African scholarship by Appiah. His attack of the cultural nationalism of the Africans fails to take into consideration the situation that generated this phenomenon. This tendency ought to be seen within its historical context as a response to the ethnocentrism of the West. Cultural nationalism was very relevant and appropriate at the time of its emergence. It emerged at a time when Africans were psychologically deflated. It was therefore a sort of psychological rearmament; a morale boosting enterprise after a loss of battle in order to forestall the total loss of war. It is this type of cultural rearmament that Ousman Sembene has in mind when he says: 'To confront colonialism ... there is only one weapon: culture' (Miller 1991:19).

The cultural nationalism in its totality is expected to lift the people up from their lethargy. It is a weapon directed at the most subtle but most

effective of all aspects of imperialism: the cultural imperialism. Cultural imperialism as we know involves the replacement of a culture of the colonised with the colonisers' culture which in time make the former permanently subservient to the latter. This process of cultural nationalism has been discussed extensively by some radical scholars such as Amin (1989) and Said (1978). Cultural imperialism according to Fanon (1967:167) is the process of distorting, disfiguring and destroying of the peoples past. Culture is an important target for decolonisation without which a colonised people would remain under-developed even if they have attained nominal independence. The essence of cultural nationalism of the African scholars is to purge a once colonised society of the remnants of colonialism; to restore lost hope and confidence. A reassurance that all is not lost. Fanon (1967:182) describes the objective of cultural nationalism thus:

The claims to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate the nation and serve as justification for the hope of a future national culture. In the sphere of psycho-affective equilibrium, it is responsible for an important change in the native.

Although it is true that in the process of this cultural revival some aspects of our cultural nationalist project deteriorated into a negative venture, the type of negativism that Onoge has in mind when he talks of Negritude as involving two variants: the mystical affirmation and the revolutionary affirmation (Miller 1991:20), but that is not to say that the positive variant of cultural nationalism should not be encouraged.

In fact, the unworthy aspect of the cultural nationalist project has been denounced by many African scholars.² But the act of throwing away the baby with the bathwater that Appiah's severe critique of cultural nationalism amounts to is not acceptable. Cultural nationalism for the objective of total decolonisation and for the ultimate goal of progress and development in Africa now or in the future is a desirable enterprise that should be encouraged.

Let us also turn to another cardinal thesis of Appiah, the claim that there is nothing like an African identity independent of the Europeans. Appiah as we earlier mentioned argues that African unity and identity before the European invasion is a myth. This position is one that we find to be historically speaking false. It is true that there are diverse cultures in pre-Colonial Africa, but that fact is not enough to justify the conclusion that there is no cultural unity and identity. It is a fact that the Akan society that is matrilineal is different from the Yoruba society that is patrilineal, but that

2 For detailed attack of this type of negative nationalism see *The Criticism of Negritude in Adotevi* (1972).

is not to say that the societies do not share some cultural traits like communal brotherhood and ancestral worship which will differentiate them from non-African societies.

The history of Africa has revealed that prior to European incursion, there have been interactions among the people of the continent in form of trade, intermarriage and migration. In all these processes of intermingling, a unified identity has begun to emerge, the European invasion only came as a catalyst to quicken the process. We know from historical and anthropological evidence that there is cultural unity and identity in pre-Colonial Africa. Historians like Cheikh Anta Diop and Anthropologists like Jacques Maquet (1972:16) have argued that there is cultural unity in Africa despite the visible diversities. Maquet (1972) in his seminal book: *Africinity: The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, reveals how the African environment has produced cultural features which permeate the entire African society; features which are different and unique from those cultural traits of non-Africans. Africinity as he calls those cultural traits are products of adaptation and diffusion which have been acquired after many years of dynamic interaction with the environment. The gist of Maquet's argument is that African people as a result of being inhabitants of the same geographical space must manifest cultural traits given to them by their common environment.

The argument of Appiah that African identity is a product of European gaze needs to be re-examined. Identity by its very essence can best be perceived through comparison. As Maquet argues in his book discussed earlier, the cultural unity of Africa can only be appreciated by the non-Africans and Africans who have travelled out of their society. Only the strangers to a community and members who have seen other societies can clearly perceive the cultural identity of a community. Identity is better seen when a community is considered in relation to another. 'To realise that certain styles of life and work are common in New England or in California', Maquet (1972:4) argues further 'one must leave the United States, and more or less consciously, compare them to the French or the Germans'. It is true that you can intuitively perceive cultural unity within your society, but that intuition can only be confirmed explicitly when you compare your society with the other.

In concluding our critique of Appiah's discourse, let us examine the fundamental thesis of his book. The central theme of Appiah's book as we have earlier mentioned is that the global community has witnessed an intermingling of cultures to the extent that racial or cultural differences cannot be maintained. There is therefore an interdependency of cultures and interrelationship of societies within the global community. Appiah's position is that the global community is an integrated society combining aspects of all cultures to form a universal culture. The development of Africa, he

maintains will come from a recognition of this situation. Our own position is this, granted that the African society has been integrated into the world culture, the question can be asked: Is the situation favourable to Africa's development? What is the position of Africa within this integrated global society?

Appiah's unquestioned acceptance of the global order is nothing but a mere adoption of the position of the catch up theorists. The scholars who belong to this school argue that Africa only need to 'catch up' with the developed nations of the world in order to be fully developed. But the many years of independence of many African countries and the adoption of this strategy of development have revealed that the development of Africa will not come rather easily. Appiah's assumption that Africa will develop after a conscious effort to follow the example of the developed nations is a sign of naivety or mere pretension. The issue of Africa's development is rather more complex than the simplistic approach that Appiah is advocating.

Appiah as a philosopher ought to investigate the nature of the cultural integration of the global community before adopting this simplistic position. As a trained philosopher, he ought to investigate the nature of the power relation within this society. He ought to see whether the interdependency of the world order is symbiotic or not. He ought to see whether all members of the said global order are equal. Whether the members are integrated out of their own will or coopted into the system against the will and interest of some of them. Whose interest is the prevailing global order serving? Is it the interest of all or of the few? These are questions that we expect him to raise.

These questions have been answered by some scholars who present themselves as the antagonists of the modernisation theory; the dependency theory of development. The scholars who defend this theory have argued that the global community is an unjust one. According to them, the world community is organised in a way that the developed nations are reaping the fruit of the situation; while the third world countries are being exploited. The integration of the African nations into the world order according to them is not in their interest. The linking of the African economies with the world economic system, they argue will therefore not promote the development of the continent. The way out according to these scholars is for those nations to delink. Only when this is carried out, they conclude can Africa be on the path of development.

It is true that Appiah himself is aware of the prevailing crisis that Africa is witnessing as a result of her adoption of capitalism. Appiah identifies the state in Africa — a product of Western influence — as one of the crisis-ridden institutions. He in fact acknowledges that the prevailing survival of the state is due to the support given to it by the traditional values. But Appiah fails to question the nature of this borrowed institutions and why they are not working in Africa. It has been argued that the state in

Africa has been modelled not to favour the development of the continent but to serve the interest of the metropolitan powers. The state in Africa as Ntalaja (1987:2) argues 'is not properly structured to undertake development tasks'. Our position is that Appiah fails to give the required attention to the analysis of the adopted foreign ideas and institutions. He does not give serious attention to the suitability or otherwise of those ideas to Africa. One would expect a philosopher like him to dig deeper and make a more rigorous analysis of those concepts instead of scratching the surface as he has done.

The celebration of universalism by Appiah and his denunciation of cultural nationalism is a clear indication that Appiah does not find anything intrinsically wrong with the borrowed ideas and institutions. This fact is also an acceptance of the prevailing socio-economic and political order in Africa despite the overwhelming crisis that the society is experiencing. The discussion of the synthesis of European ideas and African value by him will give the impression that the synthesis is smooth and everything is in order. This is not true, all over Africa today, the tension is visible between traditionalism and modernism. The scholars in Africa, particularly the philosophers should therefore reflect on how to resolve the prevailing tension rather than give expression to the synthesis of cultures as Appiah simply advised. The African scholars should strive to attain for Africa a new social order devoid of the prevailing tension. This position has been advocated by Serequeberham (1991:23) when he says:

The concrete resurrection of Africa, beyond the tutelage of Europe, requires in all spheres of life — a rethinking of the contemporary state of affairs in terms that are conducive and congenial to the emancipation and growth of Africa and its diverse peoples. This then is the task of African philosophy.

The question then is this: Has Appiah satisfied this condition? Has he performed the task of rethinking the prevailing state of affairs in Africa? I will not hesitate to answer these questions in the negative.

Finally, let us end our discussion by asserting that we do not contest the fact that between the past and the future of Africa, a lot of changes have occurred which our scholars must recognise and analyse. But this is not to say that those structural changes that are unfavourable to Africa's progress cannot be reversed. We believe that every African scholar must stand up to the challenge of liberating our productive forces from foreign control. To embark on an opposite path is to partake in an imperialist project. And we consider Appiah's discourse as such.

References

- Adotevi, Stanislas, 1972, *Négritude et Négrologues*, Paris, UGE.
- Amin, Samir, 1989, *Eurocentrism*, London, Zed Books.
- Appiah, A., 1992, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, New York, Oxford University Press.
- Chinweizu *et al.*, 1981, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, Enugu, Fourth Dimension Publishing.
- Fanon, F., 1967, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Harmondsworth Penguin Books.
- Maquet, Jacques, 1972, *Africanity: The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, (Translated by J. Rayfield), London, Oxford University Press.
- Miller, C. L., 1991, *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.
- Ntalaja, N., 1987, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Africa: Essays in Contemporary Politics*, London, Zed Books.
- Said, Edward, 1978, *Orientalism*, New York, Random House.
- Serequerberham T., 1991, 'African Philosophy: The Point in Question', in *African Philosophy: The Essential Reading* New York, Paragon House.
- Soyinka, Wole, 1976, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Wiredu, Kwasi, 1980, *Philosophy and An African Culture*, London, Cambridge University Press.

* Department of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.