The "Africanist" Heritage and its Antinomies

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Prelude

Although the term, Africanist, can, and has been, used in different ways, it is essentially a political-ideological concept. It purports to have as its referent either the African continent or a category of people who are identified as Africans. Like all such concepts, it is largely taken as self-evident either as geographical or subjective specification. For instance, in general it does not include north Africa nor does it refer to people in the continent other than blacks. While Sub-Saharan Africans have been used as a convenient shorthand for this, it is worth noting that peoples in the horn of Africa and northern Sudan are not associated with nor do they claim such a political-ideological identity. This would suggest that being black is not a sufficient criterion. What remains is cultural and somatic criteria which led to the well-known colonial characterization, Negroid Africa. While this might be objectionable to modern Africans, it is well to remember that the original *Africanists* used it of themselves, as will be shown.

The point of bringing out these details is not to cast aspersions on anybody or to draw invidious distinctions among Africans of different hues or somatic types. It is a way of inviting modern Africans to come to terms with their historical heritage. According to the English dictionary, "heritage" is that "which is or may be inherited". This is suggestive because it implies a selective process. This is vindicated by the fact that since independence more peoples in Africa, including some of those who had cherished an otherwise identity, have come to identify themselves as "Africans" - not to say, "Africanist". While examples could be drawn from the horn of Africa and north Africa, the most spectacular cases come from southern Africa. As is known, there, racial classification set the so-called colored and Indians apart from the Africans and saw themselves as such. With the march of time things have radically changed.

One of the implications of the above is that, whatever the "Africanist" conception of the self might be, it could not mean or represent the same thing throughout time. The inconsistencies or contradictions this entails could be viewed synchronically i.e. within the movement itself or diachronically i.e. between itself and its changing environment or historical stages. It is in this sense that we can talk about the movement and its

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antinomies. By the latter is meant a contradiction within a principle or law; a contradiction between principles that are derived from the same law. A good example of the former would be "anti-racist" racism and of the latter, nationalism and socialism as dimensions of the same revolution. Here, we enter a very difficult terrain which could easily provoke schism or controversies within the African intellectual community. However, it is worth the risk because it touches on some of the contemporary political issues which still await clarification. In areas such as southern Africa where racial issues are intertwined with capitalist exploitation it is very difficult to rationalize the "Africanist" heritage and, at the same time, it is impossible to ignore it. Elsewhere in Africa where black is exploited by black, it is hard to give it currency, except by invoking imperialism and thus obfuscate the relationship between internal and external exploitation.

These contradictions notwithstanding, some have sought to revive the concept by emphasizing cultural and psychological factors. This might be quite legitimate, but so far the "Africanist" heritage has not yielded viable concepts for dealing with the problem, as will be shown later. If the desire is to avoid the usual positivist separation between subjects and objects, then the epistemological problem is how to avoid cultural relativism and to eschew the pitfalls of idealism. This is made even worse by the fact that the bearers of the "Africanist" tradition are by no means the best representatives of African culture. If anything, they belong to the most alienated section of the African population, the educated and urbanized elite. Indeed, part of their grievance is being accorded a subordinate position in a world which is white-dominated. It is the hurt pride and continual racial humiliation which accounts for their combative spirit. This might be necessary but is hardly sufficient, as it does not necessarily distinguish between primary and secondary contradictions within the African revolutionary struggle. Like every other social phenomenon, racism is structurally-determined. As such, its historical instances predicate different structural solutions. It would be strange if modern "Africanist" projections have as their object the same structural concern as those of the 1950s. If it is acknowledged that important historical changes have occurred since independence, then inevitably the question must be posed and answered unambiguously: what is the significance of the "Africanist" heritage in the present historical conjuncture in Africa?

The Africanist Primeval View

Before any evaluation of the "Africanist" heritage can be contemplated, it is necessary that we comprehend what is being objectified. For the sake of a true sociology of knowledge, it is important to acknowledge that the "Africanist" tradition or political philosophy is not African in its origins nor is it a product of African culture. It was initiated by what used to be called

"Negroes" in the New World. While their blackness is not at issue, to imagine that they were authentic representatives of African culture would be to show a lamentable lack of sociological sense and appreciation of the meaning of history. One has in mind such historical figures as Edward Blyden, Sylvester Williams, W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Aurelius Garvey, Price Mars, George Padmore, Aimé Césaire, and Léon Damas. What they have in common with other blacks in colonial Africa was racial oppression and exploitation. Secondly, like the other blacks who carried the Africanist banner forward in Africa, e.g. Kwame Nkrumah and Léopold Senghor, they were products of Western education and culture to varying degrees. It can be surmised that the combination of assimilation and rejection is what became intolerable and led to an identity crisis. However, the feeling of alienation among the blacks in the diaspora and among those who were born in Africa could not have been the same. In the case of the latter, as Franz Fanon once remarked, past happening of by-gone days of their childhood could be brought up out of the depths of their memories.

Nonetheless, the primeval view of "being black in the world" remained the same; so did the concepts which were used to invoke it. The two key concepts that have been passed on to us are "African personality" and "Negritude". Although the former is associated with the name of Kwame Nkrumah, it was in fact first introduced by Edward Blyden in 1893 back in Freetown. It was taken up in 1900 by Sylvester Williams when he convened the first ever pan-Africanist congress in London. It can be supposed that this inaugurated the third concept, pan-Africanism, which was destined to hold sway in the 1950s and the 1960s. Although George Padmore played a significant role in developing both the concept of "African personality" and of "Pan-Africanism", it was Nkrumah who gave both political currency and substance throughout Africa. Kwame Nkrumah, who had spent nearly ten years studying at Lincoln University and Lincoln Theological Seminary, knew the black American "Africanists" and was familiar with their ideas. Above all, after the Second World War he spent two years, working with George Padmore in London as Joint Secretary of the Fifth Pan-African Congress. By the time he returned to Ghana (then Gold Coast) in 1947 to become General Secretary of the United Gold Coast Convention, his position as an advocate of "African personality" and "pan-Africanism" among African leaders was unassailable.

Similarly, the concept of "Negritude", though associated with Léopold Senghor in most minds, was in fact first introduced by the French-speaking blacks in the diaspora, especially from central America. Among its best known exponents may be mentioned the names of Aimé Césaire and Léon Damas. Léopold Senghor came into contact with them towards the end of the 1920s when he went to Paris for further studies. It was a felicitous event

which led to a lasting collaboration. Between 1929 and 1940, the three leaders laid the foundation for the movement and saw intense participation by black students from central America, Africa and elsewhere. In their case, unlike in "African personality" or "pan-Africanism", the emphasis was not on the political but rather on the cultural. It was a fight against cultural assimilation by the *grandchildren of the Gauls* and a conscious attempt to revive *black civilization* or the entire world of black culture as was represented in Paris. However, with the participation of Léopold Senghor, the emphasis began to shift towards African culture and values. Instead of being a mode of being, a consciousness of color and race in history. Under his influence, "Negritude" became the "cultural heritage, the values and particularly the spirit of Negro-African civilization".

Despite differences in interpretation or emphasis, the primeval view of the "African personality" and "negritude" represented an ontology of being black in a white-dominated world. It expressed the predicament of men from the colonized world who had been attracted and repelled by white civilization and values. In Paris in particular, this was manifested in the publication of such periodicals as *Légitime Défense, La Revue du Monde Noir, l'Etudiant Noir* and, not least of all, *Presence Africaine* which outlived all of them. Launched in 1947 by the Senegalese, Alioune Diop, the latter became the most effective mouthpiece of the "negritude" movement. In his first editorial Alioune Diop made it clear that:

> *This review does not fall within the range of any political or philosophical ideology. It seeks the collaboration of all men of good will (white, yellow or black) who are capable of helping us to define the nature of the African essence, and hastening the integration into the modern world*[1].

This might not have been representative. With such men as Césaire, Damas and Senghor behind it, the Journal could not eschew altogether political issues. Its "Africanist" orientation demanded that it addressed not only the question of the social and psychological liberation of Africans but also of the liberation of the African continent itself from white colonialism. It is, therefore, a question as to whether Sartre in his introduction, *Orphèe Noir*, to the *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie négre et malgache de langue française*, edited by Senghor in 1948 was right in supposing that "negritude" was but a moment in the dialectical progression which would ultimately transcend black and white racism and create a new human society. The fact that all three founders of the movement were at this point in time back in

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1 Gendzier, I.L., *Frantz Fanon: A Critical Study*, London Wildwood House Ltd., 1973, p. 42.

Paris as deputies from their respective territories, Martinique, Guyana, and Senegal, to the French Assembly might have confirmed the illusion of a non-racist "French commonwealth". This in part would explain why militant Africanists such a Frantz Fanon rejected "negritude" a non-revolutionary concept which was likely to lead to a compromise between white colonizers and the colonized Africans or blacks in general. This is, notwithstanding the fact that "Negritude" advocates such as Senghor presented a highly romanticized picture of African culture in their denunciation of European individualism and instrumentalism. In its imagery "negritude" invoked the innocence and harmony of a lost world, without indicating how it fitted into the "realities of twentieth century capitalism".

The Transfigured View and African Independence

Whatever were their experiences abroad, future African leaders succeeded eminently in one thing. They managed to indigenize the political and ideological ideas they had picked up abroad. What started off as a general black philosophy in the New and the Old World in their hands became "Africanist" philosophy or ideology. Whereas the material conditions - racial humiliation, economic exploitation, and political and cultural domination - under which they struggled can be presumed to have been the same as those suffered by other blacks elsewhere in the world, subjectively, they believed in the uniqueness of the social, psychological and cultural attributes of the Africans. Consequently, in their quest for freedom or liberation, the first generation of African leaders elevated Africanness or "negritude" to a philosophical principle. Amongst those whose philosophical projections have the greatest impact may be mentioned Kwame Nkrumah, Léopold Senghor, Cheikh Anta Diop, and Julius Nyerere.

At the level of ideology, if by ideology is meant a complex system of ideas articulating more or less felicitously a particular vision of the world and a body of guiding principles, it is possible to distinguish between "African personality", as is elaborated by Nkrumah, and "negritude", as is expounded by Senghor. It could be argued that the former had a definite socio-cultural reference to which were attributed those social characteristics and cultural reflexes which distinguished Africans from whites, especially as encountered in a colonial setting. On the other hand, "negritude", as expounded by Senghor, had certain metaphysical connotations, over and above what could be ascribed to "African personality". We are here referring to such concepts or notions as *Black soul, emotion is negro, communion of souls, reason that is "seized"*, etc.

A new excerpts from Senghor's philosophical repertoire will illustrate the point:

"Negritude" is the whole of the values of civilization - cultural, economic, social, political - which characterize the Black people, more exactly the Negro-African world. It is essentially instinctive reason, which pervades all these values, because it is reason of the impressions, reason that is "seized". It is expressed in the emotions, through an abandonment of self in an identification with the object; through the myth, I mean by images - archetypes of the collective soul, especially by the myth primordial accorded to those of the cosmos. In other terms, the sense of communion, the gift of imagination, the gift of rhythm - these are traits of "Negritude", that we find like an indelible seal on all the works and activities of the Black man.

Negro African society is collectivist, or more exactly communal because it is rather a communion of souls than an aggregate of individuals ... Africa had already realized socialism before the coming of the Europeans ... but we must renew it by helping it to regain a spiritual dimension[2].

The universalization of African values and cultural traits is not limited to Senghor. Cheikh Anta Diop tried to do the same and went so far as to claim an Egyptian ancestory for most African cultures and, *vice versa*, the black nature of Egyptian culture. Not only this, he laid claim to Egyptian civilization as essentially black African civilization and postulated affinities between the Pharaonic languages and modern African languages.

There are at least three things noticeable about the "negritude" trajectory. First, there is a deliberate attempt to portray blacks as antithetical to whites in every sense of the word. This is obviously an expression of the rejection of whites and all they stood for. Second, there is a glorification or idealization of blacks. Once again, this is a veiled way of seeking respectability by those who had been humiliated and despised. Third, there is a yearning for the African traditional past. Undoubtedly, this is a sign of alienation on the part of the educated black elite who, nonetheless, never retreated from the *entrepôts* of white civilization before and after independence. These antinomies present the modern, critical African with philosophical and theoretical problems.

One thing certain is that hardly any African intellectual would accept the idea that Africans are by nature irrational, intuitive, and emotional. Consequently, in their consultative meeting in Nairobi in June 1980, African philosophers came to the conclusion that:

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2 Sumner, C., "Assessment of Philosophical Research in Africa: Major Themes and Undercurrents of Thought", UNESCO, 1984, p. 154-157.

> *"Negritude"'s characterization of the reasoning of Africans is not acceptable. "Negritude" is not scientific; it suggests falsely that the Negro is incapable of conceptualization. It gives a privileged position to intuition, that is to the identification of the knowing subject with the object*[3].

For lack of a critical and ratiocinative function, "Negritude" was, accordingly, rejected as no philosophy. Secondly, despite its political importance, there was some uneasiness about its implicit racism. But Senghor himself had described "Negritude" as an "antiracist racism" - something which even African philosophers are not able to avoid entirely in their aversion to foreign (European) influences and in their attempt to say what is peculiarly African about their discourse. The strictures against "Negritude" could have been, and were, made against the concept of "African personality". But the difference is that, being largely pragmatic, it was quickly extended to pan-Africanism in the hands of Nkrumah. Pan-Africanism, unlike "Negritude", was, or so it seemed, a set of practical principles and ideas and had no transcendental connotations. If it failed, it did so as a political programme or vision, if somewhat illusory.

Associated with "blackness" in the minds of earlier generations of African leaders such as Nkrumah, Senghor, Kenyatta, Nyerere, Sékou Touré, and Kaunda was a communal spirit which was exemplified by the way of life in traditional Africa villages. In their ideological projections the leaders concerned construed this as natural disposition towards socialism among Africans. Nkrumah summarized this point of view as follows:

> *The traditional face of Africa includes an attitude towards man which can only be described, in its social manifestations, as being socialist. This arises from the fact that man is regarded in Africa as primarily a spiritual being, a being endowed originally with a certain inward dignity, integrity and value. This idea of the original value of man imposes duties of a socialist kind upon us. Herein lies the theoretical basis of African communalism. This theoretical basis expressed itself on the social level in terms of institutions such as the clan, underlying the initial equality of all and the responsibility of many for one*[4].

Reference had already been made to similar claims by Senghor. Echoing to some extent Senghor and Nkrumah, Nyerere, in texts which became a source of controversy in post-Arusha Tanzania, declared:

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3 Ibidem p. 250.

4 Nkrumah, K., *Consciencism*, London, Heinemann 1963, p. 69.

> *We, in Africa, have no more need of being "converted" to socialism than we have of being "taught" democracy. Both are rooted in our own past - in the traditional society which produced us. Modern African socialism can draw from this traditional heritage the recognition of "society" as an extension of the basic family unit. But it can no longer confine the idea of the social family within the limits of the tribe, nor, indeed, of the nation*[5].

Similar sentiments had been expressed, although in a vaguer and almost elusive manner, in the Kenyan concept of *Harambee* and Zambian *Humanism*.

Much has happened since the above theories were enunciated. It can be said, without prejudice, that they represented African nationalism in its pre- and immediately post-independence phase. This phase was essentially an anti-colonialist or anti-white domination movement. Symbolically, it glorified the African past and extolled its human virtues. It embraced *all* Africans or blacks as brothers and asserted their equality to whites. Insofar as it was anti-colonial, it was liberating and, insofar as it encouraged and enjoyed popular participation, it was *democratic*. Insofar as it played down social inequalities, injustice and class divisions in traditional African societies and in the emerging neocolonial social formation, it was fraudulent. This is particularly so that it was the same leaders who after independence constituted an exploitative and repressive elite who, far from treating with solicitude African rural communities, adopted and turned African primate cities into Western El Dorados and centers for conspicuous consumption. Insofar as this was their version of socialism in practice and insofar as they got comprised with the former colonial countries and imperialism in general, they had become reactionary. These are the issues which occupied most African intellectuals from the beginning of the 1970s onwards. They called for re-evaluation of the earlier political theories as well as the post-independence programmes for social and economic reconstruction. Undoubtedly, these marked a break from the old nationalist tradition.

Neocolonialism: A Debasement of the Africanist View

In the wake of the collapse of the Africanist view of the founding fathers of African nationalism, there are two questions which need to be answered. First, was Jean-Paul Sartre right in supposing that, though a necessary phase in the development of the consciousness of the black man, "Negritude" was but a moment in the dialectical progression which would ultimately erase black and white racism to create a new human synthesis? Second, has

5 Nyerere, J., *Freedom and Unity*, Dar es Salaam, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 170.

the internationalization of capital rendered all nationalism anachronistic and irrational, as has been suggested by some European Marxists such as Eric Hobsbawn[6] and Tom Nairn[7]? These questions have been implicit in some of the debates in Africa for some time now. In answering them, African intellectuals have been inclined in either of two directions, Eurocentric universalism or particularism (relativism), or outright chauvinism.

While it is clear that the Africanist view that inspired the anti-colonial struggle and ushered independence has proved hollow it is absolutely important to see it in historical perspective for leaders such as Nkrumah, Modibo Keita, Sékou Touré, and Nyerere counted as progressive in their time. The issue can be tackled on at least three levels: the emotional-psychological, the cultural, and the structural. The first was a dialectical response to white racism. To emancipate themselves from white-instilled racial inferiority, blacks had to believe in themselves as subjects of their own history as good as any other. To do this, they did not have to be authors of racism for they did not need it. On the contrary, it was white colonialists and imperialists who needed it for structural and ideological domination. Therefore, while Sartre was justified in recognizing "negritude" as a necessary phase in the development of the self-awareness of the black person, he was mistaken in thinking that it would in itself erase the scourge of white racism, without transforming its material base. Properly understood, racism is not a problem of the South but of the North which has an objective interest in it. For that matter, even the definition of "African" and the existing racial hierarchies in the ex-colonial world are attributable to this. If this is in doubt, one has only to recall racial hierarchies in colonial Africa, culminating in such grotesque examples as apartheid South Africa. The racial issue is still very much part of the current struggles in Africa and the rest of the Third World. The only historically significant difference is that in the process of the struggle identities such as "African" or "black" are being re-defined so that the scope for racial manipulation by the authors of racism is getting narrower. In the present epoch, we can now talk of "Africans" and the "Third World", without recourse to race or color. This is true of even those groups which still insist on "black consciousness" as in South Africa. This can be interpreted not as an end of nationalism but as a new and broader nationalism against imperialism which is fundamentally a *structural* issue, as will be shown in the subsequent discussion.

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6 Hobsbawn, E., "The Attitudes of Popular Classes Towards National Movements for Independence" in *Mouvements nationaux d'Independance et Classes populaires*, Paris. A. Colin, Vol. 1, 1971; Hobsbawn, E., "Some Reflections on Nationalism" in Nossiter, T. *et al* (eds), *Imagination and Precision in the Social Sciences*, London, Faber & Faber, 1972.

7 Naim, T., The *Break-up of Britain*, London, New Left Books, 1977.

On the cultural question, vague and pretentious claims have been made in the name of African culture within the "Africanist" view, without saying clearly whether or not there is a pervading pan-Africanist culture and, if so, who its authentic subjects are. While it is true that all thinking occurs in particular cultural and socio-historical contexts, there is no denying the fact that the dialectical relationship between discourse and its immediate social environment is crucial. Although African leaders during the struggle for independence frequently referred to *African culture*, after many years in exile or in foreign *entrepôts* in their own countries this was probably an illusion, a mirage of their past, and that they themselves contributed nothing to African culture. Even Senghor, the poet, might have succeeded in making a contribution not so much to African culture as romantically depicted in his writings but more to black French literature. This might also apply to those modern African intellectuals who, out of frustration and alienation under imperialist domination, invoke *African culture*, without reflecting on their own social status in African society. Culture is created only by virtue of *belonging organically*. This holds for artists as well as creative intellectuals or leaders. All manipulate cultural symbols. But the question is: whose symbols?

As far as the dynamic link between the African creative thinker and his socio-cultural environment is concerned, a distinction could be made between pre-colonial and post-colonial African thinkers. Owing to the fact that pre-colonial intellectual forms in black Africa were oral, they were necessarily steeped in idiom, symbolism, style and content in their immediate cultural environment. The same cannot be said of post-colonial forms. By and large, modern African creative expression is in foreign languages (mainly English and French). This, no doubt, signifies a rapture of that original, organic link between the creative thinker and society. The educated literate in black Africa, probably represent the nearest thing to the blacks in the diaspora who started the back-to-the-African-roots movement.

Naturally, the extent of alienation will vary according to historical accident and personal vicissitudes.

In this context, it might serve us well to recall Franz Fanon's historical schema, dividing the process of alienation of the colonized writers into three phases:

> *In the first phase, the native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power. His writings correspond point by point with those of his opposite number in the mother country. His inspiration is European and we can easily link up these works with definite trends in the literature of the mother country. This is the period of unqualified assimilation.*

In the second phase, we find the native is disturbed; he decides to remember what he is. But since the native is not a part of his people, since he only has exterior relations with his people, he is content to recall their life only. Past happenings of the by-gone days of his childhood will be brought up out of the depths of the memory; old legends will be reinterpreted in the light of a borrowed estheticism and of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies.

Finally in the third phase, which is called the fighting phase, the native, after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people, will on the contrary shake the people. Instead of according the people's lethargy an honored place in his esteem, he turns himself into an awakener of the people; hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature[8].

Whether or not one follows Fanon's exact evolutionary schema, "African personality" and "negritude" theoretical projections would fit his second phase when the native remembers who he is and would qualify as pre-combat. While the latter characterization might be debatable from the point of view of the beginnings of militant African nationalism, in African literature the case is cleaner. From the point of view of sociology of knowledge, a random sampling of black African literary works from the late fifties and early sixties, whether they be by Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, or Okot p'Bitek, exhibit a pre-occupation with traditional African values and their threatened disintegration under the impact of Euro-Christian values, backed by an uncompromising colonial administration.

After independence, there is increasing concern about the degradation of the African ethics under the influence of urbanization and the unchecked venality of African ruling elites and their grasping bureaucracies. Even to the untrained eye or mind, works such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and *No Longer at Ease*; Cyprian Ekwensi's *People of the City*; James Ngugi's *Weep Not Child*; Aluko's *One Man, One Wife, Chief the Honorable Minister*, and *His Worshipful Majesty*; Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*; Onoura Ekwensi's *Highlife for Lizards*; and Oswald Ntshali's *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* seem to fall into this genre. However, while some appear to be a liberal critique of modern African society, relying basically on the 19th century European paradigm of *gemeinschaft* versus *gesselschaft* - community (rural) vs society (urban), some represent the beginnings of a radical critique of both. For that matter, if Léopold Senghor

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8 Fanon, F., *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York, Grove Press, p. 178-79.

and Ousmane Sembene are in some way a reincarnation of the wolof *griot*, then they are so in dialectical contradiction.

Likewise, it would not require any great literary sophistication to comprehend the difference between Soyinka or Achebe's liberal bourgeois nationalism which separates between the model and its perversions and, say, Sembene's and Ngugi wa Thiongo's radical nationalism which perceives a betrayal in the model itself. Unlike the Nigerian doyens of African literature who stop in the second phase of Franz Fanon's evolutionary schema, writers such as Sembene and Ngugi have definitely entered the third or combative/revolutionary phase. Works such as Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* and *I Shall Marry When I Want*; and Sembene's *Emitai, Mandabi, and Xala* (as reviewed by Cham[9] *and Felix Mnthali*[10] testify to this. While these works are rooted in the African society, as is shown by the novel idea of "rural theater", they are underlined by a totalizing critique which cuts across both traditional and neocolonial African society. The powerless, especially the peasants, are subtly encouraged to assert themselves against both their traditional and neocolonial oppressors. Most importantly, the message is carried to them in their own language.

The latter is an unmistakable attempt to re-establish the lost organic link between the artist and his audience. To achieve this goal, not only must the artist command the local language(s) but also must be conversant with the details of local culture. Implicit herein is a process of cultural revivalism of the self and of a community which has been undermined from both ends, with the intention of bringing about a revolutionary transformation. As Mbye Cham remarks:

> *When Sembene decides to put more emphasis on film in local languages than on fiction in a foreign language and when Ngugi chooses to stage plays and write fiction in kikuyu, one is dealing with a conscious artistic choice as well as a deliberate political act designed to recapture and develop the traditional concept of art as part of society in the context of a "new reality in action"*[11].

Once again, implicit in this cultural revivalism is a rejection of foreign domination and the alienating and degrading dynamics of the neocolonial State in Africa for which certain classes among the blacks are responsible. The insistence on breaking up parochial structures and to reconstitute the

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9 Cham, M.B., "Artist and Ideological Convergence: Ousmane Sembene and Haile Guerima" Ufahamu, XI, 2, 1982.

10 Mnthali, F., "Semiotic Constants and Perceptions of Change: A Study of the Symbolism and ..... of change in African Literature", *Africa Development*, XI, 4, 1986.

11 Cham, M.B., op. cit. p. 10.

nation by jettisoning the neocolonial mode of political and social organization proves that these writers are still operating within the realm of the *national question* in Africa. Insofar as they have in their perspective transcended the limitations of the uncritical petit-bourgeois nationalism of the "fifties" and "sixties", they can justifiably be referred to as progressive African nationalists.

In this category, one would be tempted to include some South African writers such as Alex Laguma but for the fact that South African writers are still dominated by the racial question and have not clearly projected their new society beyond the confines of petit-bourgeois nationalism. Theirs is combative, without being revolutionary in the sense of anticipating the negations and perversions of black bourgeois nationalism. The latest example of this is Lewis Nkosi's *Mating Birds*. If Fanon from his experience equated "combative" with "revolutionary", this does not seem to be apposite any more. After a soul-searching exploration, the African philosopher, Paulin Hountondji, comes to the conclusion that in order to replace the present vertical dialogue among themselves with horizontal exchange, African research people "will be forced to enlarge their theoretical horizon beyond that of Africanist obsession"[12].

As seen by an interested observer, it would appear that, historically, culture revivalism in African literature has been used in two different ways. One tendency was to decry colonial subversion from the point of view of idealized traditional cultural values. This gave rise to a backward-looking critique which took for granted both African traditional democracy and communion as well as liberal bourgeois democracy. Undemocratic predispositions of the underlying structures themselves at either end of the spectrum were hardly contemplated. It was a moral indictment which offered no solution for the structural transformation of neither traditional, nor modern African society. The second and relatively new tendency used traditional values and local languages precisely to make apparent the iniquities of both traditional hierarchies and neocolonial structures.

Insofar as this cultural revivalism is forward-looking and is committed to a totalizing critique, it is progressive and lays a basis for a new national integration. This is more of a structural than a cultural question. It is apparent that cultural revivalism or relativity can be used for conservative as well as progressive ends. The need for cultural independence does not seem to be in dispute. The question is, as Hountondji poignantly puts it,

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12 Hountondji, P., "Aspects and Problems of Philosophy in Africa", Paris, UNESCO, 1984, p. 27.

> *How can we avoid the pitfall of conservatism and the reactionary attitude inherent in all cultural nationalism (read chauvinism), without succumbing to the excesses of an uncharted universalism?*[13]

Particularism vs Universalism: A Challenge to the Africanist View

The question of whether or not in the present epoch all nationalisms have become anachronistic and irrational is not unrelated to the question of whether in the present crisis in Africa nationalist or Africanist representations are of any relevance at all. As is shown especially by the Marxist debate of the 1970s which were inspired by Gunder Frank's and Samir Amin's work, there was an unmistakable loss of faith in African nationalists and their bourgeois/petit-bourgeois nationalism and a preference for class-analysis which lent itself easily to universalistic theories of labor, capital, and imperialism. While these were not rejected, as the economic, political, and social crisis in Africa deepened, at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s there was a significant shift towards a re-examination of the internal structure in the African countries themselves. This included those which were thought to have taken a progressive stand against neocolonialism, e.g. Algeria, Tanzania, Mozambique, Angola, Ethiopia, and Guinea Bissau. This meant not only a denunciation of the neocolonial state in Africa, which was fast getting discredited, but also a great deal of soul-searching among African radical thinkers. What had gone wrong? Who were they? Had they foreseen the coming crisis? The Socratic injunction, "know thyself", had come into play.

In a spirit of self-criticism it was acknowledged that the continued intellectual domination of Africa by foreigners in research and in development policy formulation was a reflection of failure by African intellectuals and scientists to take the necessary initiative and provide endogenous theoretical options and, thus, put themselves in a position where they could offer new solutions to African problems. Secondly, there was the nagging question about whether they themselves were the authentic interlocutors. Could they have in their individual careers become victims of abstracted universalism and party to a tendentious rendering of African history? Could it be what they were talking about was an illusion or a mirage, reflecting reality conceived "under other skies", as Fanon put it? There was a felt need to dig deeper into the African society. Although it did not strike us as such at the time, the Kenyan debate of the early "eighties in which there was an expressed determination to go and find out the real facts in the villages themselves" was one of the first signals. The candid review,

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13 Ibidem., parenthesis added.

not of the Frelimo government, but of the history of Frelimo itself by some Mozambican intellectuals was another example; so was the effort by the authors of *Zimbabwe: The Political Economy of Transition*[14], the various debates in the African *Journal of Political Economy*, and some research sponsored and published by CODESRIA.

What emerges from all this is that there is a new awakening in Africa which is born of disillusionment and resentment of domination, intellectual as well as political and economic. What is new about it is that it is consistently radical and leftist on its own terms. Secondly, it is critical not only of the bourgeois nationalism of the leaders of the independence movement but also of their misconceptions about their own societies. The latter, as was mentioned, has stimulated a back-to-the-roots movement. In its wake, this has necessitated a revision of both the intellectual and political terms of reference. This is no easy task, as those who are concerned have to struggle on at least three fronts. First, the beleaguered African regimes have become increasingly intolerant of any criticism by their own intellectuals. Consequently, banning, banishment, detention and imprisonment of intellectuals has become common, with unmistakable deleterious effects on the quality of education and research in most African universities.

Second, donors, who are invariably politically and ideologically motivated, are hostile to or at best suspicious of independent-minded African scholars and often accuse them of "ideological bias". This has proved very awkward, indeed. As African scholars are dependent for their research on donations from the North, they are caught in a serious dilemma. They either have to compromise or forfeit any support from such sources. Either way their pride is hurt and the realization of the power of veto of the North is hard to swallow. In recent years, this has led to bitter arguments among African scholars. There are those who will have none of it and there are those who, for pragmatic reasons, are willing to be party to a horse deal. Or even worse, there are those who, out of desperation or cupidity, go behind the backs of their fellow-Africans and make personal deals and hope that nobody finds out. It is hard, if not impossible, to combine revolutionary zeal with personal corruption.

Third, as if to add insult to injury, the Northerners rationalize their own desire to control and dominate by imputing that most of the research proposals by African radicals or nonconformists are unscientific or "below standard". Given the fact that in such cases the criteria for judgement themselves are in dispute, rationally, who is to say? Here, we come face to face with what is unmistakably Northern intellectual arrogance and

14 Mandaza, I., (ed), *Zimbabwe: The Political Economy of Transition*, 1980-1986, Dakar, CODESRIA Book Series, 1986.

prejudice. One is reminded of a case of Senegalese professors - all trained in the best French universities - whose proposal to do research in some *French* villages met with resistance because their French counterparts (including some of their former professors) expressed "some doubts" as to their ability to carry out the research successfully. The issue was not scientific; it had to do with racial superordination and subordination in an age of imperialism. Under these conditions the African is still being denied the right to become a truly universal person. This is made possible by the internal weakness of his/her world, namely, the unresolved national question.

It is as if the African radicals are being thrown back onto the question of "being-black-in-the-world". Without going into the question of the use of analogies and metaphors in historical and scientific analysis, it can simply be acknowledged that nothing could be further from the truth. If the former was the essence of the African nationalism which brought about independence, we are now witnessing its negation, despite appearances to the contrary, e.g. the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa and momentary lapses into black chauvinism by some African intellectuals who allow their anger and frustration to get the better of them. As has been pointed out, racism is not the problem of the South but of the North, including their kith and kin in the South. This is even more so, if it is recognized that racism is *structurally* determined but *rationalized* in cultural and somatic terms.

What we referred to as progressive African nationalist intellectuals have certainly been through this. There are two reasons for believing so: a) they make a distinction between themselves and those Africans who have been coopted into the structural racism of the North and benefit by it; and b) they have fallen back onto their African heritage not to glorify it but to draw valid clues and sustenance with the express purpose of bringing about a structural transformation of society as a whole, which is the ultimate antidote to Northern structural racism. This creates a common ground or structural convergence among those who are similarly engaged within Africa and elsewhere in the Third World. Insofar as this is true, we can talk of African nationalism as well as Third World nationalism in the contemporary structural setting, without contradicting ourselves.

Despite protestations to the contrary and lingering chauvinistic sentiments, however justified, it must be stated most emphatically that the struggle of the contemporary, radical, nationalist African intellectuals is not cultural but structural. Culture is not made at will by willing individuals. It is a slow cumulative process made by free and autonomous peoples. If the autonomy be lacking because of structural domination, then the culture of any people cannot be defended. The dialectic of culture is one of the most misunderstood phenomena even by anthropologists and sociologists. It is important to note that, while culture distinguishes between different peoples,

it does not in itself and by itself engender hierarchy or structural divisions amongst peoples, nor does it guarantee harmony amongst those who are structurally divided but share a common culture.

Addressing ourselves to the former proposition first, it can be pointed out that the vast majority of cultures in the world stand in a non-hierarchical relationship to one another and that, historically, cultures have borrowed from one another, without undermining one another. In fact, cultural diversity has always been a source of curiosity even to the Europeans. European explorers of the 15th and 16th centuries were full of praises of the cultures they encountered.

It was latter-day European colonialists and imperialists who used cultural differences as a justification for domination and exploitation. Their arguments about inferiority and superiority of particular cultures was spurious from beginning to end, for, if it was a matter of logical necessity, then they should have deferred to the great civilizations of the East, which preceded theirs by thousands of years.

Even in the case of Egypt, the acknowledged cradle of Western civilization, they did not hesitate to degrade it and put it under their thumb. More significantly, once the structural domination had been accomplished, it was the same Europeans who appropriated and perverted the best of the so-called inferior cultures through a flourishing industry for the structurally dominant tourism. The structurally disadvantaged Mediterranean Europeans suffered a similar fate, despite the fact that they belong to the same culture. In the light of this, Africans do not have to be defensive about their culture(s). It will come to its own and regain its dynamic, if the requisite structural space is created.

However, as has been warned, cultural affinity is no guarantee for structural harmony between peoples and within communities. There is not much love lost between Red China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong: or between East and West Germany or, indeed, between Eastern and Western Europe. All those who are structurally threatening are lumped together as enemies of western civilization and, symbolically, are seen as the incarnation of the devil itself. This occurs at the national level as well. The radical African intellectuals have already had a fore-taste of this from their fellow-Africans. Although at times this takes the form of linguistic or the so-called tribal cleavages, it happens just as frequently within what is supposed to be solidary linguistic and cultural groups e.g. among the north Africans. This points to the structural consequences of class divisions within given communities, something which bourgeois nationalists ignored for ideological reasons.

Likewise, when radical nationalists in their search for authenticity insist on using their own African languages, they should bear in mind that even languages are structurally-loaded. The language of the rulers is not the same

as that of the ruled. Insofar as this is true, every language has its own vernacular, including the European languages. The only difference is that the colonized were initiated only into that part of the European languages which had universalistic pretensions. Therefore, it became impossible for them to find its social equivalent among the uninitiated masses and hence the feeling of alienation among the educated African elite. In essence this means that even African languages have to be approached critically, as they are also bound to play a particular role in the ideological reproduction of certain culturally determined hierarchies such as elders and juniors, men and women, slave and master clans, royal and commoner clans etc.

It is evident that every culture has its progressive as well as its reactionary aspects. Secondly, while it is a powerful source of identity and an infallible instrument of social mobilization, if used chauvinistically, it could destroy what it seeks to preserve or promote. Islamic fundamentalism under the Ayatoullahs in Iran, under General Zia in Pakistan, under General Nimeri's Sha'ria code in the Sudan, and the demonstrable cultural intolerance of the Moslem Brothers in Egypt are hardly a reason for equanimity. Far from guaranteeing freedom for cultural action, all these movements have produced the opposite - cultural and political totalitarianism, whose dire consequences have been felt in recent years. What is most significant is that they caused alarm among the general populace, if not outright rebellion as in the Sudan and partially in Iran. This is a point which Anouar Abdel Malek and his collaborators[15] overlooked in arguing uncritically in favor of cultural nationalism in the Third World as counter-weight to western cultural imperialism. While the anti-imperialist stance is commendable, mere reversion to traditional culture and values is no guarantee for progressiveness. To meet the requirements of a post-imperialist society, traditional culture and values must be revolutionalized. In other words, in fighting imperialism we must develop a critique of indigenous cultures as well. Moreover, it would be a conceptual error to suppose that cultural relativism has no universal implications. Not only do cultures cross-fertilize one another in the course of their autonomous development but also willing subjects can participate in more than one culture by learning other peoples, languages, literature, and pleasing habits. These could be facilitative points of convergence, without implying assimilation or subordination. Referring to this experience in Ethiopia, the European philosopher, Claude Sumner, had this to say:

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15 Malek, Anouar A., (ed), *Culture and Thought*: UN University - McMillan Press Ltd., London, 1984.

> *As I was pursuing my research on Ethiopian Philosophy ...I became aware that philosophy in its scientific context was insufficient to express the richness, beauty and depth of the cultural world I was attempting to penetrate. I had to turn to poetry, drama, dance and music to communicate the unitary vision of life and world of which my methodological research had given me the first insights*[16].

An African could say the same of the West under conditions of equal and free exchange. But, for the time being, there are serious structural obstacles.

Nevertheless, it behoves us not to oversimplify the relationship between structure and culture. First of all, in ordinary speech, *culture* is used in two senses, namely, that which people acquire by virtue of their upbringing in a particular society, or being civilized. The expression, "civilized", has become extremely emotive due largely to Western prejudices and imperialist ideology. The Westerners made it appear that they were the only civilized people in the world and insisted to judge the rest of the world and its past by the standards of their few-centuries old civilization. At the height of their colonialist expansion, they conceptually divided the world into *historical* and *non-historical* peoples (even Marx and Engels subscribed to this ludicrous idea). As things stood between 1750 and 1850, black Africa which was believed to have produced hardly an outstanding individual in the fields of "either action or speculation" (Hume) was, by common consensus, uncivilized and inhabited by "unhistorical" peoples. This piece of European prejudice should not blind us to the importance of the question of whether or not a valid distinction could be made between culture as a general human endowment and civilization as the highest human endeavor with universal implications.

According to this postulate, not every culture produces a civilization. Historically, we know of fewer civilizations than we do of cultures. Whereas we frequently talk of Egyptian, Chinese, Persian, Indian, Japanese, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Inca, Maya, Aztec, and more recently, European civilization, we hardly speak in the same vein about a multitude of other cultures. What is the difference? One of the most obvious factors is the level of development of the arts, technical and abstract, which in turn facilitates complexity and scale in organizational forms. In the past, the increased demand for labor and surplus for underwriting the high standard of living of the non-working classes have necessitated the overrunning of weaker groups. If every civilization has been accompanied by great human sacrifice and blood, can the uncivilized hope to do the same one day? It is an

16 Summer, C., op. cit. p. 155.

acknowledged fact that the era of expansionism has long been fore-closed. It is also unimaginable that the modern global industrial civilization, inaugurated by the West, will be succeeded by particular civilizations, reminiscent of ancient civilizations. Is the universalism of the present epoch, therefore, irreversible? What does the future hold for those regions which have been denied the opportunity to play an active part in its development?

As far as the industrial civilization is concerned, it has been suggested that black African cultures are objectively handicapped because of lack of growth of the technical arts and mathematisation of knowledge. Samir Amin, among others, reminds us that:

> *Africanists too easily forget that the Sub-Saharan societies they study had neither the plow nor a written language ... and warns that this conjunction is not accidental. The development of productive forces ... occurs through the transition from human energy to animal energy - Amin, S., Class and Nation: Historically and in the Current Crisis, London, 1980, p. 42..*

This implies that, authenticity of African cultures notwithstanding, Africans will not develop until they have acquired those social attributes which, historically, made it possible for other societies to develop. Without accusing Samir Amin of historicism, it can be pointed out that the Arabs were among the first to develop algebra and certainly were familiar with the plough and used animal traction; and yet, they did not produce any industrial civilization and as of now their societies along with the African ones count as "underdeveloped". This would indicate that the link between lack of technical arts and development is not absolute. Nor would Samir Amin deny this, without contradicting himself, for in the same book he explains that:

> *The only reason it (capitalism) was not invented in Asia or Africa is that its prior development in Europe led to its impeding the other continents' normal evolution. Their subjugation did not begin with imperialism; it started with the birth of capitalism itself*[17].

It is, perhaps, unavoidable that in materialist analysis there is a certain ambiguity between historical necessity and historical accident. But from Samir Amin's statement, we can infer that it was a historical accident that capitalism had not invented immetaphorical black Africa, for we cannot assume that even there stone age societies such as the *Ik*, the *Twa*, the *Mbuti*, the *Hadza*, the *San*, etc. etc. had an equal chance of doing so. Indeed, Samir Amin bars all communal formations from this possibility and argues

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17 Ibidem, p. 6.

that "The high level of productive forces ... involves, capitalist property"[18]. All this leads him to the basic supposition that:

> *Capitalism is a necessary stage not only because it already exists, and exists worldwide ... all tributary societies had to transform the relations of production underlying their development and to invent capitalist relations, which along enable the productive forces to further develop*[19].

This supposition is highly questionable. First of all, the proposition that "all tributary societies ... had to invent capitalist relations" cannot be clarified because the most advanced among them in the Orient, Latin-America and in West Africa did not do so. Second of all, Samir Amin's dogmatic insistence on capitalism being a necessary stage gives rise to unnecessary problems of theory as well as practice.

First, epistemologically, there is either a theory of stages (which he rejects) or there is not, but certainly not of *one* stage. Second, whatever the technical and scientific deficiencies of particular cultures, in an era of global capitalism, it is utterly unnecessary that they re-discover the same system. In the same way that Africans do not have to re-invent the plough or the wheel, they do not have to re-invent capitalism in order to develop and become part of the industrial civilization.

However, taken at its face value, Samir Amin's basic proposition could mean either of two things, viz., that capitalism is a necessary condition for the development of an industrial civilization or is an historical necessity which need not be realized by all societies. The preemption of its development in Africa by European antecedence and intervention would be an illustration of the latter. But then, if it prevents its full realization among the late comers in Africa and elsewhere, how could it be a necessary condition for Africans and others to develop further? Has not, in fact, the elimination of capitalist domination become a necessary condition for further development in the Third World? Or is it the case that the uncivilized could beat the civilized in their own game? If so, how do we, logically and historically affirm socialist transformations as a necessary condition for overcoming the negations of capitalism in Africa and elsewhere? But then if we are right in our supposition, how do we begin without the necessary material conditions the technical and intellectual attributes which made the capitalist revolution possible?

Although it might have been used as a mere slogan even by those who introduced it and most of whom remained within the international orbit anyway and thus never developed any organic links within their home

18 Ibidem, p. 49.
19 Ibidem, p. 6.

regions, "self-reliance" might still be the answer to the problem. Being coopted might not have been seen as detrimental by African intellectuals for at first the concept was intended largely for governments and not for themselves. Consequently, regional scientific and intellectual organizations remained weak and individual researchers outward-oriented, which made nonsense of their Africanist effusions. But if, according to radical African intellectuals, African governments have betrayed and the North is not interested in the liberation of the South but rather in its domination, then who is supposed to lead the way and how? Conventionally, it is thought that philosophical and social revolutions are contingent on scientific revolutions. Historically, this is true. It might still apply in our situation, with a difference though. In an integrated world it is futile to think of African science rather than of Africa-specific scientific activity. This presupposes antonomy as well as access, both of which are structural requirements. Therefore, the level of development of material conditions notwithstanding, it is apparent that what is needed most in the modern world is freedom for action. In our view, this puts a premium on the political or self-organization so as to guarantee better access and communication, and a greater impact on both the local and the global environment. This is even more so when it is remembered that scientific concepts and intellectual ideas do not develop in *vacuo*; they develop in relation to particular kinds of society. This brings us back to the question of what type of society, culturally and socially, do progressive African intellectuals aspire to?

It would seem, to achieve the so-called indigenization of the arts and sciences in Africa. African researchers and intellectuals must find a base within these societies and the region in general - something which some African organizations are seriously attempting. This is what self-reliance requires of them in practice. But insofar as this is a reaction against imperialist domination, it is still a search for authenticity. It is a direct counterpart of Northern structural racism which ever so often takes the form of abrasive Europeanist chauvinism, e.g. in the case of South Africa and Palestine, or Japanese super-capitalism or Arab oily petro-dollars. Insofar as it is an indictment of the bourgeois nationalism of the independence movement which issued in neocolonialism, whose *modus-operandi* is capitalism, it cannot but be anti-capitalist. Here, we encounter a historically-determined dialectic between nationalist and socialist forces which baffles the ethnocentric European gurus. Nonetheless, it must be admitted that so far Africans have experienced this intuitively and no clear theoretical paradigms have emerged in their midst. But, as every African would agree, the will has grown, though commitment has yet to be tested, except in a few individual cases.

For the social scientists, arts, and philosophers the task of identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing popular cultural notions, various progressive

nationalist and socialist pre-conceptions and demands is Herculean but not impossible. The temptation to take refuge in self-imposing manifestations such as culture and skin color, which are not themselves germane to the problem, should not be allowed to detract from the fact. But in reality is it not the case that every crisis is followed by catharsis? Steadfastness and abandonment of tendentious historiography is what is required. After all, it is said that Minerva's owl takes flight only after nightfall. Might not the twilight of the "Africanist" heritage have arrived only for aspirant African radical intellectuals to take off?

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