

## **AFRICAN CULTURE**

### **RELEVANCE WITHIN DIGITAL AGE AND GLOBALISED WORLD**

Culture throughout the world is alive in many global societies, but in the African world culture is on the verge of dying. Africans have been made to believe that our culture is irrelevant and inferior even before the digital age. For that matter we have witness a systematic imposition of other cultural forms on African societies either by American, Europeans, and Arabs in particular. The Kenyan Nobel laureate (late) Wangari Maathai has said “Culture is an important part of humanity. Development agencies, religious leaders, and academic institutions are increasingly recognising its central role in the political, economic and social life of communities”. This implies that if a society allows its culture to be substituted with exotic culture there is serious implication not only for that society to become equally irrelevant in the global scene but it will fade out by losing great amount of inherent ability to self-development. What is culture and how important is our culture in the digital world today and the [galatica] future?

In many African societies, culture has become synonymous with drumming and dancing, and food. Not so, culture describes a lot about our ways of life. Maathai again say “During the long, dark decades of imperialism and colonialism from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, the British, Belgian, Italian, French and German governments told African societies that they were backward. They told us that our religious systems were sinful, our agricultural practices inefficient, our tribal systems of governing irrelevant, and our cultural norms barbaric, irreligious, and savage”. But by so doing our traditionally vibrant societies have been made passive about our world whilst we sit down for the same people to impose their way of life on us which according to some scholars has economic cost and is destructive. Therefore today the need for cultural revival among traditional South African societies has become source of debate on our radios on what is important and what is not. To achieve a balance on what aspect of culture is relevant and not we need to understand what culture entails.

Culture has been described as dynamic way of life, and Maathai rightly say “Agriculture, democracy, heritage, and ecology are all dimensions and functions of culture. Agriculture,

agriculture, is the way we deal with seeds, crops, harvesting, and processing and eating. One result of colonialism was the loss of indigenous food crops such as millet, sorghum, arrowroot, yam, and green vegetables, as well as livestock and wildlife". Culture includes also leadership, management, healing and medicine, language, arts, simple technology, etc. Our traditional religions and ancestral veneration are all significant aspects of our African culture without which we shall be living as a people on our continent without understanding who we are. Maathai emphasises, "people without culture feel insecure and are obsessed with the acquisition of material things, which give them a temporary security that itself is a delusional bulwark against future insecurity. Without culture, a community loses self-awareness and guidance, and grows weak and vulnerable. It disintegrates from within as it suffers a lack of identity, dignity, self-respect and a sense of destiny".

Today, among our African societies these symptoms are so glaring with our young generations who do not know where they are coming from and which way therefore to go, and what to look for. They are left without sense of identity and many perceive the European ways of life as better, but that is not practically true. Today the world is going through serious economic crisis because of Europeans and American cultural ways of living that is not sustainable without cheating and harming other people elsewhere for resources. But our African values and culture is what remain significant against the wrong perception of it as relevant.

Obuntu (literally, I live, because you live; thus, one's significance is tied to the wellbeing of one's neighbour) is one of the cardinal values of traditional South African and African societies. Akan people say, *wo yonko da, na wo nso wo da* (my neighbour's peace is my peace). In that case, though not implying a perfect society, nevertheless our African way of life placed importance on being concerned for one's neighbour; fairness to one's neighbour and not crooked; and not passive to genuine need of that person. In South Africa, e.g., many Black people today have imbibed Europeanised values to the point that they have become inward looking and so individualistic that they have become unconscious of the world around them. It prevents individual Africans helping each other and lack of sense of community is pervasive in Black South African societies. These are the consequence of our African society apparently losing vital cultural values; the consequence of increased negative outlook for self-driven development, poverty eradication, and community safety.

The fact is that, who cares for whom and what for? I'm not my neighbour's keeper is the norm underlying women abuse and the abuse of vulnerable ones. Therefore, we stand aside, even, when we have the ability and capacity to help the next person in need of protection and care. Of course, such behaviour underscores high rising corruption among the race that should hate corruption most at a time many previously disadvantaged are in desperate poverty crisis in SA and Africa generally.

Our African societies have become stagnant not capable to self-driven transformative development because we have been told to look to elsewhere for our needs. Daily we hear many saying Africans cannot be productive farmers. Even far away to DRC and East Africa people feel Whites are the farmers. With diminishing farm output by White Commercial Farmers by reducing active agricultural activities in SA due to land redistribution issues, the importation of greater portion of staple food is now rising. It should have been the contrary as the entire land redistribution policy has its serious weakness in empowering and encapacitating emerging African Farmers. It is not economic conflict but cultural one as well.

Disempowerment and dependency, the state of *not feeling capable* to active economic activities and economic improvement, has increased across Africa as contributing factor of increased poverty in households; because losing cultural sustenance means losing our own way of solving our problems and challenges. Almost from religion to eating everything is imported and scholars believe such a way of living is not sustainable in the long-term. So, if African people today and future have to overcome wide spread poverty and diseases there is the need to resort to some of our cultural and traditional ways which provides sustainable solutions to agriculture, food security, diseases, child delinquency and crime.

The lack of cultural awareness makes many young Africans live double standard life of not knowing who we are, the loss of identity and pride. That also undermines youth idealism and progress, and the drive to entrepreneurship that is contagious and sustainable. In a lecture class opinion test showed about 80% of African students in the class expressed African culture is not necessary - possibly exposed to mainly negative excesses of African culture or media brain-washed; whilst 99% of Euro-descent students (even American exchanged ones) felt African culture should be important and practiced. The later are young generation Western mind that are averse to cultural discrimination of all kinds.

Many aspects of our African culture have been described by people elsewhere as devilish or demonic and backward because they did not, and still refuse to understand Africans eco-friendly ways of living. The borrowed “banking education” has made many educated Africans (as testified by Prof Rukuni) and theologians a sell-out of African heritage and our impoverishment now. The African tradition Cosmology that embrace all living things with equal rights existed before Human Rights was centuries later declared in Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, has gained significant attention beyond the continent, especially by pro-environmental groups. Today, there is scholarly affirmation that Indigenous Knowledge derived from African cultural ways of living is necessary for sustainable development and ecological preservation among others. But how can we benefit from the remnants of Indigenous knowledge and utilise what we already have for social development and economic transformation?

There is the need to write and document our cultural heritage not only by academic scholars but ordinary people capable to write in isiZulu, Swahili, Hausa, Akan and other African languages to write about their cultural heritage and values for preservation and use by our young generation and posterity. It is simplistic to assume people will get to know about their culture in a pluralistic world unless they are taught. Some Africans and African-Americans though outside the continent have been training their young generations about positive valuable African heritage outside Africa. The Kwanzaa (Harvest Festival) revival has begun not from Africa but off-shore Africa in USA.

The significance is that economic competition involves cultural wars and if cultural norms and values are not preserved by writing them in book forms we will continue to experience foreign cultural and economic imperialism that eventually make us irrelevant people without identity and significance to compete on the global scene equally. The intelligence of cultural preservation is what saved South Korea from being deadly overrun in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century occupation by Japan. Today, Africans are making noise of Chinese economic encroachment on the continent forgetting that Chinese are simply action oriented and pragmatic by their belief and value systems that is impenetrable by Western cultural imperialism. They are tactical, strategic and resilient what Akan, Shona and Zulu people formerly used to be. Africans rather are still waiting at the coastline for the wooden Western vessels to deliver free goodies as answer to prayers, this is unfortunate. What have

Africans got to learn from the Chinese instead of idling our time after miracles and feeding on sensational illusions?

Many of African stories and history have generally been written by non-Africans who do so from positions that seldom tells whole truth that suit Africans. It even worsens our perception of ourselves. Looking for pre-colonial history on Zimbabwe in a University library but I found none apart from history that locate Africa as founded by Mango Park, David Livingstone, etc. So the young people get disillusioned where the African belong in history. There is thus, dearth of identity pride as source of racial, ethnic and community confidence in African societies today. What can be done to restore such vital social life quality?

Older African people can document their knowledge about African cultures and values using others who can do the scribing. Documentation is what Asians have used to protect their culture and religious practices and the benefit for them today. Documenting our heritage is simply preserving our age old wisdom for now and the future generations who need that most. If we don't have documented heritage we don't have the Word of God just as other Societies elsewhere document their histories etc as *Divine Scriptura*. Africans are compelled to borrow a history that doesn't belong to them with complicated and conflicting interpretations and conflicts, and it has not been efficacious to solution finding to African problems and challenges.

Other benefit for documenting our heritage is that it stimulates learning and promotes cultural revival and sustainable change. This has economic benefit of promoting tourism and hospitality industries and to some extent industrialisation. For example, cultural revival results in organising festivals programmes that educates and raise cultural practices awareness about relevance of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and values. Such restoration of communal energies stimulates people to reflect and grow or pursue change. It happens in parts of West Africa such as Ghana, Nigeria and partly the Bull-Killing festival in the Zululand.

High prevalence of HIV/AIDS (not caring to protect one's loved partner, etc.) and crime are all aspects of breakdown of value systems. A cultural revival restores identity, value and confidence to societies to foster care and love life. The sense of identity can help us rediscover our history to know where we are coming from. If we cannot tell from where we

are coming, how then can we know where to go? Scholars believe any society without cultural roots is a society without heart and mind of its own. We find our own African Indian communities and Whites hold on to their cultures centuries old, understanding what they signify to them. Culture acts as foundation that holds community and society together in solidarity with common interest to promote ubuntu and development. So President Jacob Zuma minces no words that we've experienced value system assault which has demoralised our way of living and there is less care for what values as life which was seen as affront at imposed religious institutions.

Culturally revived communities bring about sense of belonging and openness to diverse cultures. The awakening of confidence and group renewal heightens understanding to respect other people and value for life and living. For example, many societies in the world today are plural ones, meaning diverse cultures living along side each other or mixed. In South Africa and Africa today, we have more than historically indigenous people, Euro-descent and Asian settlers with all kinds of diverse people from all the places having made their home in SA and the continent. The need for tolerance is essential to show self-appreciation and regard for others who have different traditions. In SA even though Apartheid created situation of segregation, the present democracy provide platform for cultural tolerance of diversities.

To enhance the sense of tolerance there is the need to promote each others culture and seek to understand and appreciate the differences as source of beauty of variety giving by the Universe. It goes beyond mere aesthetic beauty to economic benefits. Different cultures specialises in certain aspect of economic productivity. In a situation of cultural plurality it become means of exchange were Whites may provide services to Blacks where among Blacks there is no specialisation. For example, White farmers can teach Black farmers certain skills based on their long experience of large farm management. Blacks can help Indians where they lack such experience for cultural reason such as pastoral activities. These culminate in coexistence of unity in diversity.

Nevertheless, not all aspects of cultural practices are good all over the world from one place to another. The many years of neglect and lack of documentation by Africans have skewed interpretation of cultural values and some practices such as *Okutuala*. A man absconding

with seriously underage girl for forced marriage is serious affront to African culture that espouses ubuntu and protection of minors and human dignity. The practice of Sangoma (soothsayer-medicine person) is essential religious side of African culture but the abuse where some of the practices subscribe to human sacrifice to satisfy greed for money is against African sense of protection, care and love. There may be many other negative practices done out of misunderstanding and ignorance, but with cultural revival, certainly the negative ones shall wash away with proper education on cultural norms, etc. The fact of abuse does not mean African cultural practices are generally negative as some non-Africans and other western-biased Africans have wrongly perceived.

If culture is such important what can be done with regard to reviving and promoting African culture for its positive benefit for development and transformation?

What is required is:

- Social education on significance of culture is critical for our African societies who have been partially absolved in western ways that are not sustainable. Introduction of cultural studies in public schools can go far way to produce a generation that begins the transformation we want to see.
- Writing about African culture by black Africans who understand our Indigenous Knowledge systems is a key to promoting, reading, and preservation of our way of life that is essential for development.
- Organising cultural festivals and social activities that outdoors African values and belief has significance for social confidence, competence and correcting development of extreme individualism that is dehumanising our communities and ascendancy of crime and disease.
- Traditional communities' leaders should be given necessary authority to serve as custodians of cultural values and traditions and leaders of self-initiated development.
- The need for various cultures to begin to learn other cultures through language learning and other practices as sense of appreciation of each other for who we are.
- Media should contribute by writing about African culture and values and the benefit for African societies positively, at the same time too exposing the bad practices that persist.

It can be concluded that despite modernity and digital age revolutions culture and traditional values remain everywhere the core basis for sustainable existence; and the need to preserve positive cultural practices is necessary for Black African communities who face

cultural extinction with the consequence loss of identity and capability to self-driven development solutions. Resorting to cultural ways of doing many things will reduce the level of high dependency in society, where rat-race is the cultivated norm but self destructive in the long-term, and ecological resource abuse. There is the need for cultural tolerance among various cultures in Africa for micro-level socio-economic transformation, and SA in particular, to foster unity for progressive national development that benefits township and majority rural communities. Africa is a culturally diverse continent but that does not negate the relevance of our identity of who we are and how we live with distinctive beautiful cultural ways. And by such self-appreciation we can easily identify and tolerate other cultures with whom we share same office, same district, same Province/Region, same country and continent and even beyond to reduce unnecessary societal conflicts and promote peace for sustainable development.

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