

# The Place of Culture in Africa

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Before getting into the subject, I have deemed it worthwhile to start off by defining culture. But instead of reinventing the wheel, why not revert to the description put forward at the landmark Mexico City Declaration adopted by the world conference on cultural policies in 1982:

*“In its broadest sense, culture to-day can be valued as a set of distinctive spiritual and material, intellectual characteristics, which define a society or a social group. In addition to the arts and letters, it encompasses ways of life, the fundamental rights of the person, value systems, traditions and beliefs.”*

Yes, the definition is quite a mouthful but is inclusive and appears to have survived the test of time, just as the value of culture itself has not only survived but its role is increasingly recognized.

In other terms, culture has been described even more simply as “whatever we retain of education once all that we learn’t has been forgotten.” That is the sum total, the distinctive characteristics, attitudes and behavior acquired along our lives as individuals and as communities which make us the human and social beings that we become.

It is true that the definition of cul-

ture adopted at the Mexico City Conference is applicable to most societies, communities and countries, Western and non-Western, developing and industrialized. But in my view, the definition would appear to apply much more generally to the developing world and, particularly to Africa for that matter, where the identity of the group still takes precedence over any sense of individual identity. In the Western or so called developed world, the term culture is more readily applied to a specific category of activities amongst which each individual can choose according to personal taste. It often refers to activities such as music, theatre, literature, sport etc. One is considered cultured if one is knowledgeable or conversant with or practices those activities. In Africa, culture is where the whole society meets and identifies itself in terms of its existence and day-to-day life.

Isn’t it relevant to observe that most of the African dishes and “delicatessen” are always presented in a “group-shared” fashion, similar to Chinese? Meat is often prepared and served in palaver sauce rather than in form of meat parts such as steak or cutlets, individualized according to the number of guests! Well, in traditional Africa, one never knows in advance the exact number of people to expect for lunch. It is also noteworthy that greeting in a great number of



Photo courtesy of African Caribbean Dance Theatre

African countries is a relatively lengthy process. The greeting is not only addressed to the individual being greeted but it also extended to his or her household and to the family.

The preamble of the Constitution of the United Nations Educational and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognizes the importance of culture in that: "ignorance of each other's ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of mankind, of that suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken out into war,... "and the preamble goes on to advocate for the "wide diffusion of culture ....as a sacred duty which all the Nations must fulfill in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern."

Luckily, the International Community is becoming more increasingly aware of the importance of culture, in all its various facets, to human existence, social cohesion and to socio-economic advancement as well as to sustainable development.

In his message to the launching of 2002 as the United Nations Year for Cultural Heritage; Mr. Koïchiro Matsuura, the current Director-General of UNESCO said: "To value the Cultural Heritage and care for it as a treasure bequeathed to us by our ancestors that it is our duty to transmit as wholly as possible to our children is a sign of wisdom."

Seen in the above light, culture takes on a special significance as one of the most valuable features and perhaps not sufficiently recognized

"givens" or aspects of human social being. Furthermore, culture should perhaps be one of Africa's most important contributions to the rest of the world. This is mainly if one were to identify several African social values relating to solidarity and sharing, social security, and a sense of common good. Africa's recognized contribution through music is to be put on

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the account of the high sense of socialization; it is a key element in the rallying of the people.

At this juncture, it must be stated that the term Africa, needs to be used with some caution. For, the term is too often applied to the continent as if it is a uniform mono-cultural entity. How often do we encounter speakers or writers referring to Britain, France,

Africa and India, as if the whole continent was synonymous to a country! And yet, in spite of some common features and significant similarities, cultures in African countries are quite varied. There is as much difference between Algeria, the Cote d'Ivoire, Gabon, Kenya, Madagascar and Mauritania on one hand, as there is between Germany, Italy, Portugal, and Switzerland on the other.

Furthermore, Africa in this context is not simply a geographical representation but a socio-cultural grouping of people and their way of life.

Understandably, this article is likely to carry along traces of the author's Ugandan (Ganda) cultural background and professional outlook acquired from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Therefore, my references to Africa will be more or less influenced by a particular cultural group: the Baganda of Uganda, hoping that many of my fellow Africans- but most likely of the Bantu race, will recognize the examples and descriptions put forward. The approach is from an interested native's standpoint of view rather than that of a cultural scholar or, a professional practitioner of culture.

For the African people, culture is basic and fundamental to the life and existence of the individual, the family, and the various social units within the community and to the entire socio-fabric. As is often remarked "culture is the glue that holds the social fabric together." This view makes more sense in developing

countries such as those of Africa where the structures and instruments (and resources) for modern governance are neither fully in place nor operational. Having had the opportunity to observe more closely the practice of “democracy” in the Western world, particularly in the USA, over the past few years, I am convinced that many of the traditional institutions and systems in Africa can still play a credible role in reasonable governance and they should be allowed.

Talking about the socio-cultural fabric and, with a view to illustrating the point more vividly, I will use three units: the nucleus family (which continues into the extended family), the clan and the kingdom or the tribe. Right from birth, a child must be recognized, not necessarily within the nucleus family but within the clan. People are more interested in knowing the “clan”, to which one belongs than the immediate parents. Names do not belong to families: they are part of the clan or tribal heritage. The clan provides the basic and stabilizing socio-cultural reference, more important than the father-mother relationship, although one’s appartenance to the clan hinges on one’s “patrimonial” parentage. The clan helps define who we are as individuals, as blood members of a community, beyond our immediate family. In some aspects, the clan, the wider community takes precedence over the individual or the immediate family.

That attachment to a clan, socio-cultural source, contributes to the notion of self-sustenance and security, a

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sense of psychological security. The clan provides a wider and more solid social security. Unlike in the case of modern religion-based culture where the child’s legality or status is determined by the marital status of the two parents, in my culture the child’s legitimacy is determined by its appartenance to a clan. In that case, every child is legitimate.

As a matter of fact, the term “bastard”, generally used in the Western societies to designate a child outside a wedlock, does not exist in the Ganda language.

Clearly, this traditional culture lays emphasis on the sense of wider responsibility and common good rather than promote individualistic or nucleus family values and attitudes borrowed from the West, which have tended to dominate the African socio-political space, particularly starting with the mid-sixties.

On the other hand, the clan system imposes certain strict taboos or “undones” such as the interdiction to eat one’s clan symbol (totem), which is usually in form of a wild or domestic animal; a bird or a common vegetable or a food item and, a general interdiction of marriage or sexual relationships within one’s clan or within that of one’s mother. Such culturally based guidelines do form a solid basis for discipline throughout one’s childhood and mature life. Looking around us in the present and recent past, we have come to realize the importance of having the notion of actions socially categorized as “dones” and “undones” motivated by

the sense of shame - *helas*, too often lacking among some of our world leaders to-day; a sense of: "but, what will the people say?" A very common expression or reflexive question in the Ganda culture before one indulges into a questionable action.

Starting with what is seemingly assimilated rather than imposed discipline as the basic element, African culture embodies a set of values and references relating to solidarity, personal security, general social and interpersonal relationships as well as to general governance etc. Social security is automatically enjoyed through the culture in the face of the natural process of life relating to birth, death, aging, or social events such as marriage, etc. One confronts all these with the confidence and serenity procured by the socio-cultural solidarity. I recall that death is lived as a phenomenon affecting the whole community.

For instance, when a death occurs within the immediate neighborhood, all routine activity such as agricultural work or hunting is automatically suspended in solidarity with the bereaved. The elderly are still cared for as active and integral members of the families and of the community, not only for charitable reasons but as a source of wisdom for the younger generations. Through the extended family network, the "haves" share with the "have nots". This is where modern facilities such as remittances, where members of African families living abroad regularly cater for the needs of their extended families. This has become an important factor with-

in the field of socio-economic globalization and is beginning to be taken seriously in the modern economic processes. Remittances constitute a huge flow of foreign earnings entering the economies of low income countries, and going directly to benefit families and communities, untouched by the corruption of central administrations and bureaucracies.

Within the traditional cultures of Africa, one finds a lot of knowledge and wisdom relating to human survival within a given environment, which has sustained the communities through generations. Unless one understands and recognizes the internal workings of a certain cultural group one cannot contribute effectively to its advancement.

Two examples will suffice to illustrate the above point. In many African and polygamous societies [official or informal polygamy], the number of children a woman has contributes to her security within the family, clan or community; it is a form of empowerment. One may therefore need to take into account or deal with that particular phenomenon in trying to drive home the notion of birth control. Apparently, according to the recent demographic studies, the fewer the number of births, the higher the chances of survival. It is therefore useful for the message to link the two. Uganda has been applauded for the way it has dealt with the HIV / AIDS Control. Knowing that the pandemic has been spread essentially through sexual transmission, and assuming that talking about sex in the African

tradition is taboo, how has the issue been handled by government and the rest of the civil society in the country? My explanation is that the local culture, while not encouraging verbal and open "talk" about sex, in reality accepts free and early-age sexual relationships between individuals. There is hardly any stigma about the activity. Therefore, one who contracts a sexually transmissible disease such as AIDS faces little stigma. Talking to teenagers, youths and the elderly about the dangers of unprotected sex cannot shock a community where sex is so freely indulged in as a natural and common part of day-to-day life.

That is why, taking cultural aspects into account, UNESCO's action in the field of preventive education is underpinned by an inter-disciplinary approach, which requires knowledge of socio-cultural, ethnic as well as scientific kind. The nature of the issue requires us to call upon the public sense of responsibility in their socio-cultural environments in order to bring about change of attitude and behavior in relation to AIDS as a social phenomenon.

However, all that should not be construed to mean that my African culture is totally free of shortcomings or aspects that require change in practice or total abandonment. The clan system for example, being based on biological relationships, has the unfortunate tendency of shutting out new entrants. Access and acceptability into a clan may require engaging into a complex process. Some of the cultural traditions such as genital mutilation of

girls and human sacrifice may benefit from second thoughts.

There is no denying that the arrival of outside influences such as Islam, Christianity and Colonialism benefited Africa in various ways. But on the other hand, they have permanently eroded the African cultures and ways of life. Yet, regretting the past will not serve much purpose. It encumbers on us Africans, albeit with the solidarity of the outside world, to preserve whatever remnants are still redeemable of our culture.

Unfortunately, our leaders have continued to stifle our cultures which are embodied in our ethnicities and ethnic languages. The word "tribe" which was invented by the colonial masters to designate our pre-colonial states, kingdoms or countries, has taken on pejorative and negative connotations. Mention of ethnicity in some countries such as Uganda and others has been branded "sectarian" by politicians in power although all key positions in government parastatal bodies and armed forces tend to be distributed on ethnic lines in favor of the powers that be. Hence, little government effort is devoted to protecting and promoting the tribal languages and cultures, such as sports, games, music and dances, leave alone the physical cultural heritage.

Of course, there are various obvious tensions between nation-building and promoting tribal cultures and interests; between nurturing a national culture and tribal cultures; between institutionalizing one or several tribal languages into national language(s);

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between promoting a national language(s) and mastery of international foreign languages. The tensions are real and are exacerbated by issues of poverty and the lack of resources, although the situation tends to be occasionally exploited by politicians for immediate political gains.

Ali Mazrui, one of the most remarkable political scholars of Africa, observes in a related article published in an earlier edition of Chimera™: “Ignoring the salience of ethnic loyalties has cost Africa three to four million lives in civil conflicts since independence.” Notwithstanding, listening to the political leadership which has just won the elections in Rwanda, ethnicity is to be ignored if not banned. In such a case the danger is to throw away the baby along with the dirty bath water.

While recognizing the difficulties and tensions surrounding promoting culture in Africa, all that is being advocated in this discourse is that culture be given “un droit de cité,” that it be recognized as an element to be looked at in a more positive light within our social development plans and day-to-day applications.

Research in African traditions and cultures needs to be encouraged by government and academic institutions with a view to distilling thereby, preserving, and promoting essential and valuable elements on which authentic and sustainable progress can be founded. The research is not to be limited to oral traditions but to all spheres of life including areas such as medicine, technology, crafts and art.

In the case of my country, Uganda, it has always puzzled me that the only inter-regional manifestations in culture, such as dances, disappeared as national political independence settled in. Would it not be more enriching to stage inter-regional cultural festivities, sportive activities, and culinary presentations rather than parading military equipment and uniformed personnel during celebrations such as National Days? Shouldn't cultural tourism be equally developed as part of nation-building efforts not only as foreign earnings oriented?

In conclusion and, having made a case for a place for culture in African affairs and, pointed to some of the difficulties relating to its adoption, it is only fair that we make mention of some approaches which may contribute towards a positive promotion and application of culture in Africa. The fact that the basic elements of national cultural expressions are embodied in tribal or regional groupings, a federal system of government strikes me as a reasonable option to consider. Although this it not the place to get deeply engaged in making the case for federal system governance, it suffices to say that the advantages to be gained, just as those of decentralization, have been widely argued in various fora and texts dealing with democratic governance. In my view, a federal system is one way of positively nurturing and galvanizing regional cultural differences into a national strength.

Finally, I would like to turn to mother language education in our African

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schools. Once again, the same tensions of nation-building and difficulties of resources are likely to apply here. But all the same, it is worth recognizing in the first place, the educational value of a mother language instruction policy, given that all studies in this area have conclusively highlighted the advantages of early schooling using the language of the family environment. Interestingly many of my generation who did our early primary schooling using the mother tongue faced no difficulties in progressively moving to English and then picking up several others such as Swahili, French, German, etc. on the way. Objective analysis, courageous decisions and the will to persevere in the name of authentic and sustainable development should guide us into the future.

Boutros Boutros-Ghali, in an interview appearing in “Le Monde, Paris,” of 4 October 1994 reminded us that:

“Development cannot be limited to economic growth only. It also embraces a political, social, human and environmental, as well as a cultural dimension.”

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