Jacob Aleonote Aigbodioh

Ambrose Alli University, Faculty of Arts, KM 70 Benin Auchi Road, P. M. B 14, NG-ED–310101 Ekpoma
jabodioh@yahoo.co.uk

African Experience, Development, and the Metaphysical Radicalism of the African Humanities

Abstract

African colonial experience in the South of the Sahara, a product of African social-cultural interaction with European colonialist globalisation of foreign values, is often perceived, notably in some African humanities (as against the social sciences) as posing a predicament to African socio-cultural development. The situation has generated a spurious, metaphysical understanding that the African predicament stems necessarily from what her colonialist experiences have created of her cultures and human nature – a negative psychic inheritance. This is indicated mostly by the radicality of some proffered panaceas to the African predicament, say, violent revolution, existential suicide, cultural revivalism and acquiescence in the African fate. The paper argues that the understanding of African colonialist experience as a crippling challenge to African development runs deep in the consciousness of some African elite today, breeds disillusionment and hopelessness in the possibility of reversing the African predicament, and serves as an alibi for social vices. It, therefore, urges the need for a more collaborative, practical and strategic programme for the purpose of deconstructing the popular "irrationality" that is embedded in African cultures, and hence, to re-humanize the understanding and resolution of the African predicament.

Keywords

African experience, metaphysical radicalism, violent revolution, existential suicide, cultural revivalism, development

Introduction and Clarification of Terms

For this paper, the notion of "African experience" is used to cover the colonial and postcolonial (Independence) periods of the social-cultural history of Africa South of the Sahara, beginning from the 15th century A.D. till date. Considering that experience lacks a monolithic signification, the expression is used here to refer to, firstly, the 15th to mid-20th century A.D. social-cultural events of forced infiltration into the said African territories, extensive transatlantic slave trade in Africans, and violent subjugation, arbitrary partitioning, occupation and administration of the mentioned African peoples and nations by some European imperial powers. Associated with these events and activities was the imposition of a false ideology or a deceptive consciousness by which African people, through the process of *othering* their identities via pragmatics, were labelled "barbaric", "backward", "uncivilized", "superstitious", "incapable of logical reasoning" and "lacking in good self-governance" in order to justify the colonialists' prescription and legitimization of alien forms of social institutions and practices which unjustly functioned to promote the (hidden) purpose of domination or hegemony and relation of

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exploitation. Secondly, the notion refers to the post-colonial period of the said African experience (late 1950s until today), when the involved African countries began to attain political independence but have continued to live in a forced "onward match" with what appears to be the irreversible globalist influence and enduring ideologies of European cultural superiority and supremacy. The result is a cultural amalgam of conflicting values and the apparent creation of a composite identity of African peoples.

Some prominent African scholars and elite, working on those social-cultural events, activities and realities of Africa today – including Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, Chinua Achebe, Cheik Hamidou Kane, Basil Davidson, and Onyemaechi E. F. Ogbunwezeh – perceive African experience as a predicament, that is, as posing apparently insurmountable challenges and problems which hamstring the said African peoples and governments from expressing themselves freely in thought and action, hamper their social and human development and stand on their way to self-determination. This is so in both the African humanities, mostly in African literature and some philosophical disquisitions, and the social sciences. In the social sciences, the approach to the African experience is usually empirically diagnostic and remedial and often leads to the understanding that with proper planning and implementation of some development policies, the adverse effects of colonialism in the African scene could be turned around. But this is not the typical approach and understanding in some of the said African humanities. Although the humanistic approach is often sincerely diagnostic, it fails, in some selected instances, to provide practicable remedies. The understanding of the African predicament which emerges therefrom is that the African experience poses an exceptional predicament which cannot possibly be remedied through normal means of affecting positive social change, however Africans may strive. This understanding is what this paper labels "metaphysical radicalism".

By metaphysical radicalism, I mean simply excessive or extreme metaphysical indulgence or, in other words, the unnecessary resort to explain and/or resolve banal social-cultural problems by appealing to terms which are not relevant or significant to the problem at stake. This implies that metaphysical radicalism could occur at one or both of two complementary levels, the diagnostic level and the prescriptive level. At the diagnostic level it consists in alleging that there is a somewhat necessary (causal) connection, for example, between social-physical acts of conflict, enslavement and subjection to forced governance which a social group suffers, on the one hand, and the near-permanent handicap or psychic inheritance of not being able to improve on one's social and material conditions on the part of the group and its posterity, on the other hand. In other words, if, in the process of seeking to explain or identify the factors responsible for a social group's lethargic attitude towards its self-improvement, an appeal is made to terms which, for example, signify psycho-mystical entities or bear no relevance to social-physical realities then the explanation can be said to be guilty of metaphysical radicalism. Some works of Frantz Fanon and C. H. Kane, for example, diagnose, by way of explanation, the African social-cultural lag as due to the pathology of alienation, dual consciousness or (psychic) identity crisis.

On the other hand, it so often happens that remedies which are prescribed to resolve a social problem situation bear no relevance to the problem, not because they are irrational but because they are misinformed and constitute unusual, extremist departure from proffering remedies which appeal to terms

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about banal social-cultural phenomena. The extremist import of the remedies derives from the fact that the terms of justification are often about some strange supernatural entities, say, some psycho-mystical factors, or evoke some fatalistic theories such as that a given social situation is hopelessly beyond human remedy. This radical position is reflected in Emmanuel Biakolo's view that "the fashionable pessimism about material and societal development in Africa seems to be more part of a sustained doctrine of congenital incapacity than a serious reflection on history" (Biakolo, 1998: 12).

Both levels of metaphysical radicalism, in our view, are betrayed by the language with which the African predicament is often depicted and/or the radical (extreme) nature of commonly proffered panaceas to the African predicament, for example, violent revolution, existential suicide, cultural revivalism and passive acquiescence in the African condition. It has the social and philosophical effects of breeding despondency and apathy among Africans about the African condition and of serving as an alibi for such social vices like corruption and misgovernance. The understanding, the paper further argues, fails to appreciate the potential role of social conflict and human nature in societal development. The paper canvasses a more practical and strategic programme of deconstructing the irrational pattern of understanding the African predicament that is "sedimented" in African cultures.

The Language of Assimilation of the African Social Condition

One of the earliest widely read, and practical works on the devastating consequences of colonialism in Africa was written by the Nigerian literary artist, Chinua Achebe in 1958. It is entitled *Things Fall Apart*. The novel was and remains the most frequent source of widespread knowledge of the evils wrought on the African continent by the European colonial encounter. The intention and spirit of the work are clear and commendable. It depicts the African peoples, with particular reference to the Igbo of South-East Nigeria, as prepossessing great and enviable social institutions before the advent of the colonialists. The institutions, in Achebe's view, bear evidence to the existence of a democratic setting wherein decisions were made by consensus as well as to the presence of traditions and laws which ensured social justice and fairness. Although the societies were non-literate, he gives the impression that they were mostly peaceful, free, progressive and self-determining.

However, according to Achebe, the African value system was disrupted by the advent of the colonialists who propagated foreign religions, notably Christianity and Islam, at the expense of existing local religion, and dictated strange social boundaries, modes of governance and new legal systems. Under these conditions, he posits that for fear of being caught up in the "abominable" web of the new colonial dispensation, the literary hero, Okonkwo, chose to commit suicide rather than go to prison.

In Achebe's view, therefore, the European incursion means that Africa's entire cultural heritage was lost, including her cultural rootedness and identity. That Okonkwo opted to commit suicide rather than accept the socio-cultural conflict situation occasioned by the new social and political dispensation, also implies that no other reasonable remedy or practicable antidote to the crisis could be envisaged by the hero, and hence the situation was hopeless and beyond remedy. The very title of the novel popularizes these perceptions of the

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African colonial experience, *Things Fall Apart*, the mere mention of which, in a typical African gathering, elicits the final response "And the centre cannot hold.". This manner of speaking was widely popularised and imbibed. Norton Critical Editions (2008) has it that:

"Written during a period of nationalist assertion and an emerging modern culture in Africa, *Things Fall Apart*'s influence quickly spread from Nigeria throughout Africa and beyond. In its fifty years, this unforgettable novel has been translated into fifty languages and has been read by millions."

Apart from its numerous translations, and in support of its widespread readership, one recalls that the work was for many decades a staple text for elementary and secondary school pupils all over Africa. The pupils of those years are now the adults of today. This gives a hint of the extent to which the uncritical African populace has internalised the perception of the African experience as an irremediable impasse. The perception has stuck like the yoke of the bullock.

Achebe's work may have set the stage for the enormous proliferation, in some notable African humanistic studies, of the mostly diagnostic but negative rationalisation of the evil consequences of the colonial experience for the post-colonial times. Salient examples include Walter Rodney's *How Europe underdeveloped Africa* (1972); Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1978); Chinweizu Ibekwe's *The West and the Rest of Us* (1975); George Ayittey's *Africa Betrayed* (1993); Abiodun A. Oyebola's *Black Man's Dilemma* (1979); Basil Davidson's *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (1992); and Tsenay Serequeberhan's *Our Heritage: the Past in the Present of African–American and African Existence* (2000).

An African adage has it that he who relays an insult of the king to the king's face is held responsible for insulting the king. Works like these promote the dehumanisation of Africans in the sense that they tend to deny Africans of their natural human capability to affect their environment positively and to adapt to the social conditions they find themselves, however harsh they might be. The language is an example of how people ought not to rubbish themselves as it violates and demeans the dignity of African corporate integrity and diminishes the African natural right to moral self-preservation. They tend to create and institutionalise undesirable concepts by which Africans tend to understand their socially afflictive conditions, and by which other peoples would stigmatise and control them socially.

They violate the humanistic mission of their disciplines, which is to "make the best sense of our life, and so of our intellectual activities, in the situation in which we find ourselves" (Bernard, 2001: 4). It suffices to note that the works under consideration are negative exercises in the African humanities.

Radical Remedies to an "Exceptional" African Social Situation

The late Ghanaian scholar Paul Ansah, reflecting on the African predicament in a newspaper article, as reported by Gyekye (1997: 233), asked: "Is Africa Accursed or Bewitched?". He had answered the question in the negative, and this is because, as Gyekye (1997: 233) rightly puts it, there is no justification for resorting to "supernatural or fatalistic metaphysical causal explanations for phenomena, such as the African predicament, that can be causally ex-

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plained in rational terms, that is, by exploring the underlying reasons". Thus if Ansah had answered his question in the affirmative, he would have been saddled with the burden of providing some supernatural or metaphysical causal explanations for the mere social phenomenon of the African predicament. A few but popular works surreptitiously allege the African predicament to consist in metaphysical congeries which would not go away except specific radical measures are taken.

The radical remedies often suggested are a violent revolution, existential suicide, pan-African cultural revivalism and acquiescence in the African fate. Severally, the radical context of these measures consists in their assumption that the African predicament is inherent in the African social condition, and their magical promise that they alone, without any other efforts, can guarantee freedom, self-determination and development for Africa.

1. Violent Revolution

Revolution is broadly defined as

"… any or all instances in which a state or a political regime is overthrown and thereby transformed by a popular movement in an irregular, extra-constitutional and/or violent fashion." (Goodwin, 1997: 233)

In a narrower sense, it is said to entail

"… not only mass mobilization and regime change, but also more or less rapid and fundamental social, economic and/or cultural change, during or soon after the struggle for state power." (Goodwin, 1997: 233)

It is violent when the means employed to attain a change of political regime involve intense and unrestrained force, resulting in killings and the destruction of properties. Its causes range from issues of modernisation, economic recession or social discrimination to being an outcome of a power struggle between competing interest groups. The primary cause is, however, traceable to the masses' widespread frustration with the existing social and political situation.

Among the scholars who advocate violent revolution as a panacea to the African predicament are Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Alex La Guma, Ousmane Sembène, Festus Iyayi, and Ben Nwabueze, apart from those African leaders (e.g. Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda and Kwame Nkrumah) who, inspired by Marxism that aims to replace capitalism with communism, have stridently called for an African socialism. According to Jude Agho, these writers

"… assume the role of literary defenders of the masses and prescribe revolutionary solutions in the form of organised revolts and syndicalism to the problems of Africa in very combative and denunciatory ways." (Agho, 2011: 17)

Fanon, for example, proposes a process of decolonisation through a violent revolution which would halt the African political elites perceived as accomplices of the colonialists, from their exploitative tendencies, and by so doing ensure freedom and right of self-determination for the African masses. As D. A. Masolo puts it, for Fanon, who frequently paraphrased his ideas in

"… the language of his medical training, there is a specific problem to be solved (…). The disease is alienation, the cause is colonialism, the cure is a revolution, and destiny is freedom, which is the basis of a positive (healthy) humanity." (Masolo, 1994: 32)

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On the nature of the revolution required, Fanon writes:

"The naked truth of decolonisation evokes for us the searing bullets and bloodstained knives which emanate from it. For if the last shall be the first, *this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists* (…) [The programme of decolonisation] *can only triumph if we use all means to turn the scale, including, of course, that of violence* (…) the native who decides to put the programme into practice, and to become its moving force, is ready for violence at all times. From birth, it is clear to him that this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, c*an only be called to question by absolute violence.*" [Emphases are mine] (Fanon, 1978: 36)

For Fanon, as for other advocates of violent revolution, only a violent revolution can ensure Africa's freedom and self-determination. The panacea thus precludes the feasibility of alternative remedies to the African predicament, with the implication that the African predicament will not and cannot be remedied or mitigated except the African masses embark on a violent revolution. This point is succinctly expressed by Ben Nwabueze, a Constitutional Law expert, a Senior Advocate of Nigeria (SAN) and a one-time Minister of Education of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, when in a recent public presentation of his *Colonialism in Africa: Ancient and Modern* (Vols. 1 and 2), regrets that "things get worse every day", and says:

"Bringing changes with all the proposed methods and reforms here and there cannot work. We have passed that stage of transformation. What we need is a surgical transformation because (…) this country [Nigeria] can only be changed by blood. Bloody revolution so that whoever survives would gather the pieces." (Bammidele, 2010)

In his support, a one-time Military Governor of Lagos and lmo States of Nigeria, Admiral Ndubisi Kanu (Rtd.), is quoted as saying, "Africans and indeed Nigerians would have themselves to blame for the internal colonisation and not the white colonial masters" (Bamidele, 2010). The stress on the exclusive necessity and sufficiency of a violent revolution to cure Africa of her socio-cultural maladies is, in our view, too strong as it implies the fatalistic belief that whatever other efforts Africans put up, except a violent revolution, the parlous African conditions cannot be assuaged. To use the words of Jeff Goodwin (1997: 233), revolutionary movements are indicative of "No other way out.", and this is sufficiently disconcerting.

Again, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), Fanon lays out in a Hegelian mode the dialectics of the colonialists' creation of the "Other" in the persons of the colonised peoples, in the prototype image of the Negro. The white man, he says, needed the Negro to serve as a mirror reflection of what the white man was not. The Negro was a necessary medium for the white man's attainment of self-consciousness. So the white man created in the Negro, an indisputable complex of dependence on the white man. This, he says, is a universal practice. In his words:

"Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognised by him. As long as he has not yet been effectively recognised by the other, that other will remain the theme of his actions." (Fanon, 1967: 216–17)

This relationship which the colonialists allegedly established with the colonised people, according to Fanon, was perpetuated by the African political elite in independence times. The elite alienated themselves from the masses, for which reason Fanon says that they are not in a position to champion the African cause of freedom. Hence, he writes:

"But they will not. They will not, because they are creatures of the colonial regimes and leaders of the western political parties, and also, for the most part, because they do not direct their prop-

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aganda towards the rural masses (…) they do not go out to find the masses of the people. They do not put their theoretical knowledge to the service of the people; they only erect a framework around the people which follows an *a priori* schedule." (Fanon, 1978: 88–89)

In this way, it is clear that Fanon's much-touted violent revolution is to be directed at the African political elite who are the "creatures of colonial regimes, and leaders of the western political parties".

Fanon's explanation of the African human and social condition has been variously criticised. Here, I shall limit myself to the question of the validity or rationality of his metaphysics of the "other" as a necessary condition for the realisation of not only the white man's consciousness of his existence but for all humans to be able to realise their distinctive existence. In his view, to the extent that any one's existence is not yet stamped out by the recognition of the other, "the other will remain the theme of his actions". If this is a precondition for all human existence, it is difficult to see how the Negro might succeed in extricating himself from being the other, however hard he struggles, since his distinct otherness would need to be recognised by the creation of an-other. In other words, since the Negro has been created by the "other" through whom the white man can assert himself as a distinct existence, it is difficult to say how else he would be recognised at the end of the struggle against his image, or how the struggle would obliterate his otherness. At best, it seems, his struggle would still mark him out as the "other" (Masolo, 1994: 35–36). All these raise doubt about Fanon's rationalisation, in Jean-Paul Sartre's mode of existentialism, about the African human and social condition on which he premises the need for a violent revolution.

The point here is not that revolutions or regime changes, violent or not, are incapable of affecting socio-political changes that could ensure freedom, self-determination, social justice and development. Like the French and American revolutions, the recent or on-going revolutions in the Northern African states of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Algeria and in parts of the Arabian world are obvious lessons in the transformative power of revolutions. If nothing else, it is expected that there would be a change in the "sit-tight" syndrome of many African political regimes, and an attitudinal change towards social justice and democratic ideals in those states. Still, the point must be made that socio-cultural transformations are not necessarily the outcome of violent revolutions. Like all other means of attaining regime changes, say, *coup d'etats*, civil wars, revolts, rebellions and even peaceful transitions to democratic regimes, through a plebiscite or free elections, violent revolutions can bring about a change of political regimes but without affecting the more desirable socio-cultural transformations. This implies that more than the sheer occurrence of a violent revolution, other factors are pre-conditional. For example, the masses would seem to need to have the right education or intellectual awareness not only of the real social causes of their parlous conditions of existence but also of social and political alternatives. This is the need for what Gyekye calls "mental revolution, involving radical changes in the mental habits or outlooks of a people" (Gyekye, 1997: 224). This, in turn, would seem difficult to realise in a social condition of weak economic and technological viability, scientific and intellectual dependence, hunger, poverty and disease (Oladipo, 2009: 28–33). Hence, in a "culture of dependency" (Oladipo, 2009: 33) and enervating poverty, the masses would be oblivious of the existence of alternative means of attaining socio-cultural reforms. To this extent, a genuine and effective violent revolution would presuppose minimal changes (revolutions) in the people's "agricultural, moral, industrial and politico-legal" experience

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(Gyekye, 1997: 224). In the absence of these preconditions, the panacea of a violent revolution to the African predicament would for long mean no more than a façade for drumming up in the minds of the African people the belief that the African despicable socio-cultural situation is irremediable.

2. Existential Suicide

The suggestion of "existential suicide" by some scholars comes close to saying that Africans should be prepared for the misadventure of corporate self-annihilation. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* betrays this line of thought in the hero Okonkwo's resort to suicide. Irele (1982: 9) cites Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* (*Ambiguous Adventure*) as a classic recast of the pathology of alienation. In this novel, according to Irele, the hero, Samba Diallo, represents the African who suffers from a dual consciousness (schizophrenia?), the mental dilemma of being a composite of two cultural heritages, and is, as a result, unable to have a "stable and compact order of values" (Irele, 1982: 10). Irele rightly alleges that the hero's "suicide at the end of the novel is thus a logical outcome of his spiritual tragedy" (Irele, 1982: 10). This gives the impression that the choice for Africans is, as in Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, between being and nothingness,

"… between an affirmative being in the world, which confronts all its problems in order to wrest a meaning out of its contingencies, and a withdrawal into meaningless void." (Irele, 1982: 10)

The hero's suicide thus signifies, on Kane's suggestion, that the only option open to Africans in the face of the African predicament is to withdraw into the abyss of nothingness, rather than confront their social problems in the world with natural human ingenuity.

Such a prescription of suicide, as an only remedy to the African predicament, has no doubt contributed immensely to the psychic demoralisation of Africans in connection with the practical possibility of positive leverage from African predicament. Kane's work, like Achebe's, is a carry-over of the intellectual orientation which the author received from the western system of education, given its Sartrean underpinning. Beneath it lies the metaphysics of a divided African personality which is no longer able to make meaning out of the hybrid African socio-cultural realities. To suggest that suicide is the sole panacea to Africans' inability to recover their original personality amounts to saying that Africans have lost their natural human potentialities to adjust and adapt to a mere social-cultural conflict situation, and this is patently false. First, there are no cultures whose social values and ways of life are static, such that they function to maintain the individual personalities in a permanent condition of no conflict with other cultures (Lauer, 2003: 25). Secondly, African human nature, like the human species generally, is capable of adaptation to culture-conflict situations. Man, in the generic sense, is a self-creating and self-organising creature, imbued with innate potentialities at birth to make himself "what he becomes by the habits he forms" (Adler, 1985: 219). Africans are no less human and endowed with every material and spiritual abilities to adapt to social conflict situations. Finally, it is un-African to ask one to contemplate or condescend to an act of suicide, literally speaking or otherwise. This is because suicide violates the normative ontological principle of traditional African social existence. This is the principle of ontological unity which, according to Mambo A. Mazama, is about the

"… energy of cosmic origin that permeates and lives within all there is – human beings, animals, minerals and objects as well as events. This common energy shared by all confers a common

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essence to everything in the world, and thus ensures the fundamental unity of all that exists (…) This energy constitutes the active dynamic principle that animates creation and which can be identified as life itself." (Mazama, 2002: 219)

The principle thus confers personhood and humanity on the individual and ensures connectedness with all that possess the common essence, including the ancestors and the yet unborn generations. It is for this reason that victims of suicide were denied normal burial rites, and were, instead, dumped and abandoned unceremoniously in places outside the villages, commonly referred to as "bad-bush" or "evil forest", for vultures and other scavengers to feed on. They are believed to have lost their ontological connectedness to the common human essence. Hence, an act of suicide is considered in traditional African societies as an abominable taboo.

Besides, the option of existential suicide falsely presupposes that the reality of African existence is necessarily tied to the pre-colonial cultural form of life and that Africans are incapable of tolerating changes in their ways of life. Authentic African existence does not terminate where the pre-colonial cultures left us.

3. Pan-African Cultural Revivalism

There is also the proposal of "pan–African cultural revivalism", the thesis that unless Africans embark on a wholesale recourse to their root cultural beliefs and practices, there is no hope that they would escape the schizophrenic identities which the colonial encounter has created of them and their cultures. Irele (1982: 11) shares the view that Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir* (*The African Child*) and *Le Regard du roi* (*Radiance of the King*) are illustrative of how African modern literature offers us "an image of our experience as one, not only of cultural and spiritual disorientation but of moral decline". Irele also notes that this image implies the feeling that "it is within the traditional culture that we were happiest, more at ease with ourselves, that there was the truest coincidence between us and the world: in other words, that our identity was located" (Irele, 1982: 11–12). This is the feeling which Oke (2006: 333) refers to as "cultural nostalgia", the "longing for the return to such supplanted cultures or cultural patterns", which defined pre-colonial African existence. As we shall argue presently, not only does this remedial proposal smack of a feeling of helplessness, and indicative of abdication of responsibility to tackle the African predicament realistically in empirical terms, its extremist character creates apathy, despondency and disillusionment that current African deplorable situations are not amenable to social re-construction. Meanwhile, let us take a cursory view of some banal arguments to the conclusion that only a return to African cultural roots holds the key to African liberation and development.

Among the scholars who champion the advocacy of cultural revivalism are Segun Gbadegesin, Basil Davidson, George Ayittey, Peter Kanyandago and Toyin Falola (Oke, 2006: 333–335). As if to indicate how fashionable the trend has become, Oke quotes two Nigerian political leaders, Tunde Adeniran (one-time Nigeria's Federal Minister of Education) and General Olusegun Obasanjo (one-time military Head of State and former constitutional President of Nigeria) as endorsing it. With specific reference to Nigeria, Adeniran (quoted by Oke) says:

"The time has come for Nigeria to go beyond ethical appeals, drop our anchor into the depths of our cultural heritage and draw from the pool of brotherhood, communion, community and

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other virtues and values that make man human. By the time these are made to condition intra
and inter-party activities and inter-personal interactions across ethnolinguistic and geographical
zones, as well as determine the dynamics of our political system and the process of governance,
we would have effectively eliminated the raging poverty which presently characterises the prac-
tice of democracy and threatens its survival in Nigeria. The Nigerian people would also have
been drawn away from an atrophying culture that unlinks them from their aspirations and mocks
their efforts at self-actualisation." (Oke, 2006: 336)

In the same vein, Obasanjo is alleged to have "asked rhetorically out of de-
spair":

"Should we not in our own interest and in the interest of humanity, hack back to our tradition
of 'esprit de corps' and communalism and build an economy and a society of our own?" (Oke,
2006: 336)

In Oke's (2006: 337) view, the panacea thus urged by prominent African intel-
lectuals and political leaders suggests that the African past has some values
which need to be given serious attention in seeking to resolve the African
predicament. At the same time, he thinks, for several reasons, that "the past
seems to be a wrong direction in which to seek the way forward for Africa".
His arguments boil down to saying that given that social frictions are natural
consequences of inter-cultural contacts, indigenous African traditions, values
and ways of life may not be recoverable, even with the possible input of ex-
perts of the African past, for the African peoples to return to after over five
centuries of living with the colonial cultural encounter (Oke, 2006: 337–338).
This is coupled with the fact that some of the defining traditions (e.g., trade
by barter) of the past are no longer compatible with contemporary order of
existence or globalisation (Oke, 2006: 337). Oke also points out that returning
to the African past is "an escapist approach to the problem (…) an undesirable
diversion from the serious task of re-making Africa" (Oke, 2006: 338).

Kwame Gyekye (1997: 233–235) alleges five reasons why the cultural revival-
ists may be justified. They are, in summary, that African cultural virtues and
values will serve as a basis for redeeming African cultural identity and pride;
lead to "mental liberation", or the "release of the mind" from the constraints
imposed on it by the inherited garb of colonial mentality and disorientation;
expose the western forms of life as degenerate and hollow; facilitate deve-
lopmental processes which will know no failure or frustrations, and to which
African peoples are intellectualy, ideologically, or emotionally attached; and
lastly, bring about integrated nation building through the elevation of com-
mon cultural elements from various cultural groups to a national status. After
an extensive review of the main arguments of some cultural anti-revivalists
represented by Marcien Towa and Paulin J. Hountondji, Gyekye thinks that
the positions of the cultural revivalists and the anti-revivalists are extreme and
unrestricted, and as such must be rejected as "not all the products of a cultural
past can be said to be valuable or worthless in terms of the ethos of a present,
or a later epoch" (Gyekye, 1997: 235–241). In other words, no culture has the
monopoly of values since every culture, on a realistic normative assessment,
possesses both negative and positive features. This, in his (1997: 242–263)
view, is the case with African pre-colonial cultures, especially in the areas of
science, technology, and social and moral life. According to him (1997: 242–
263), no one can reasonably doubt that pre-colonial or any people whatsoever,
possess an empirically based knowledge insofar as they survive on the uses
of some agricultural tools to produce staple foods, and on natural (herbal)
resources to procure medicine for health care (cf. Wiredu, 1980: 42–44). The
problem with those cultures is that science and technology were not subject-

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ed to theoretical discourse, and the questions of "why" and "how" were an-
swered within the context of "*traditional* thought" (Wiredu, 1980: 42–44). By
"traditional thought" is meant "prescientific thought of the type that tends to
construct explanations of natural phenomena in terms of the activities of gods
and spirits" (Wiredu, 1980: 39). This implies as Oke (2006: 340) makes clear,
that African pre-colonial cultures, like other cultures in their pre-scientific
stages of development, were not without some problems, amounting to one
form of predicament or another. But such problems are social, and not neces-
sarily definitive of those cultures. This is because they can be surmounted if
genuine efforts are made at re-constructing and re-engineering those cultures.
Hence, according to Wiredu:

"There is an urgent need in Africa today for the kind of analysis that would identify and separate
the backward aspects of our culture from those worth keeping." (Wiredu, 1980: 41)

And there is no doubt that many features of traditional African cultures are
normatively desirable.

However, Wiredu and Gyekye appear to miss out on the real import of can-
vassing a wholesale return to African cultural past and ways of life. Agreed
that there surely are desirable aspects of traditional African cultures, mostly in
the areas of socio-political organization (say, communalism with its ethos of
co-dependency), decision-making process (say, by consensus) and moral and
justice systems, one wonders what precisely is being urged for wholesale re-
appropriation without some forms of modification by the cultural revivalists.
The practical question one needs to ask is: Is it to traditional African modes of
agriculture, dressing, constructing buildings, bridges and roads (architecture),
healthcare, transportation, informal education, or trade by barter ('demoneti-
zation') that Africans should return uncritically to avert the lingering African
predicament? It is not that this question cannot be answered in the affirmative;
it could indeed be answered in the affirmative. But if one does, as the pan-
African cultural revivalists do, then one would be saddled with the burden
of demonstrating the desirability of those cultural ways of life in the face
of current realities, as well as the feasibility of reversing and re-creating the
present conditions to tally with the past. Such a task, it must be said, would
be impossible to carry out, considering the immense influences the colonial
encounter, inter-cultural interactions and modern technological trends have
wrought in our midst socially, politically and economically over the past cen-
turies. Underlying the difficulty of reverting the current African hybridised
culture to its traditional forms is the fact or necessity of cultural interactions
and mutual influences. Cultures, their worldviews, values and beliefs are not
isolated monads, however distant they might be from one another geographi-
cally, politically and economically. As Helen Lauer points out:

"Because in general, such cross-fertilisation is so familiar a feature of 'globalisation', it has
become truistic to observe that one cannot define exactly where one's worldview leaves off, and
another begins." (Lauer, 2003: 25)

In other words, even if there had been no colonial incursion into Africa, it
would still have been practically impossible to undertake a wholesale rever-
sion to the African cultural past because the present would still have been
different from the past owing to other cultural influences. This is more so
because many Africans have access to other worldviews via their linguistic
interactions with other peoples. Hence, to suggest a wholesale return to the
African past amounts to proffering an impracticable or unrealistic remedy to
the African predicament.

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Consequently, like the panaceas of violent revolution and suicide, it is a de-
featist response to the African predicament, for it amounts to a strident procla-
mation that Africans have become weary and incapable of change, or meeting
up with the spate of cultural changes.

4. Acquiescence in the African Fate

The fourth panacea to the African predicament which deserves consideration
is one that is usually not overtly expressed. It is that the African condition
today is a necessary consequence of a grand design by the West and its allies
to exploit Africa to extinction, and that about this *a priori* arrangement there
is nothing Africans can do other than to acquiesce in it until such a time when
those imperialists will loosen their exploitative grip on Africa. This view is
implied in all the negative regurgitations or rationalisations about the emas-
culatory impact of colonialism and neo-colonialism on the African conditions
today. In "Explaining the African Predicament", for example, Emmanuel F.
Ogbunwezeh succinctly expresses the view thus:

"I agree with Chinweizu when like him, I designated imperialism as the metaphysics of exploita-
tion, which never gets its fangs off the bleeding flesh of its victim. Chinwezu and Walter Rodney
(*How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*) were right here on the money that neo-colonial power
centres never granted Africa independence. Contemporary works like Jeffery Sach's *The End
of Poverty*, Joseph Stiglitz *Globalization and its Discontents*, John Perkins *Confessions of an
Economic Hit-Man*, Noam Chomsky's classic pieces, and Karl Maier's *This House Has Fallen*
all lend credence to this. They are all testaments to the fact that neo-colonial power centres are
not sleeping in their avid desire to exploit Africa unto extinction." (Ogbunwezeh, 2008)

From this excerpt, it is clear how Ogbunwezeh and his likes bemoan and la-
ment the African conditions and depict a gloomy image of them as hopeless
because of what Western imperialism is doing to them. For these scholars, the
neo-colonial powers operate a "metaphysics of exploitation which never gets
its fangs off the bleeding flesh of its victims" and are "not sleeping" in ensur-
ing that Africa is exploited unto extinction. This has the obvious implication
that there is nothing Africans can do about their conditions other than to re-
sign their fate to the whims and caprices of their foreign manipulators. This
"policy" of passive acquiescence without interference in the African existing
state-of-affairs as a panacea to the African predicament is popularly expressed
among the Nigerian populace and government officials in pidgin English as
"Siddon look", meaning "Let's sit down, wait and watch (how things go).".
It is borne out of the belief that behind the foreign aids, programmes, poli-
cies and actions of the West, there is a conspiratorial design to undermine the
development and freedom of their African beneficiaries. According to Chin-
wezu (1978: 251), for example, foreign loans in the form of "aid", "continues
to intensity the old colonial pattern of maldevelopment" and serves to be "the
help of a burglar who offers to guard your house".

What strikes one from the preceding is not that colonialism and imperialism
are an "irreversible" part of African history in the sense that it is impossible
to divest entirely African cultures and identity of their colonial insignia, and
hence, for Africans to return wholesale to their pre-colonial roots.[1] Nor is it
that there is need to expose the critical elements of the activities of those neo-
colonial power centres who have enriched themselves through the heinous
crime of the trade in African slaves, activities which have detracted from the
African human resource development and have continued to create economic
imbalance and exploitation for Africa in an unjust world. For, as Nettleford
(2007: 5) rightly notes, the diagnostic enterprise is necessary to be able to de-

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fine, determine and delineate the destiny of the African people. Rather, what is worrisome is that the prolonged negative discourse with our practicable remedies tends to create a lethargic condition of acquiescence, which promotes and is sustained by the development of faith in an unquestionable conspiratorial design by the West and her allies against the African nations. This faith is closely associated with what Karl Popper calls the

"… *conspiracy theory of society* (…) the view that whatever happens in society – including things which people as a rule dislike, such as war, unemployment, poverty, shortages – are the results of direct design by some powerful individuals or groups." (Popper, 1965: 341)

In the African situation, it is a dominant belief among scholars and government officials that African post-colonial ills – including corruption, unemployment, dictatorial regimes, ethno-religious conflicts, wars, inequitable distribution of resources, mis-governance, underdevelopment, and dearth of practicable ideologies – are the inevitable consequences of Western European and North American neo-colonialist machinations.

In an environment, such as the African, which is traditionally suffused with superstitious beliefs in the abilities of wicked ancestors, sorcerers, evil spirits, witches and wizards to influence and manipulate personal and social destinies, faith in the conspiratorial design of the West and her allies is easily made gullible and justified. For while success is commonly regarded as the result of individual or societal hard work in the traditional African setting, failure is, more often than not, attributed to the handiwork of mischief-makers. Apart from being a source of despair and hopelessness in the possibility of a reprieve from the African predicament, the option of acquiescence in the African fate has continued to serve as an alibi for the perpetration of all sorts of vices in national public life. The option presumes that the African predicament is necessary *de dicto* (by definition) and *de re* (by its essential characteristics) insofar as our actions are deemed incapable of affecting it positively and are rendered arbitrary.

Conclusion: The Strategic Need for Deconstruction and Re-humanization of the African Predicament

Africa South of the Sahara is populated by humans. By its nature, the human species has the propensity to strive to control its environment and conquer the conflicting forces of nature. It, therefore, creates its environment by constantly seeking to modify all aspects of the natural furniture of the world around it to suit its purposes. Inherent in its nature is the productive powers and properties to generate problems, make choices and seek to resolve its problems. According to Allan L. Larson, "whatever else he may be, man has been simultaneously a problem-creating and problem–solving creature" (Larson, 1976: 26). Hence, rather than resign its fate to chance, bemoan its precarious condition, or await an auspicious time for a violent revolt owing to its conflict situation, the human species is naturally endowed with the capacity to resolve its problems systematically in a social context.

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This is the sense in which Irele (1982:8) could have meant that "we are conscious of the irreversible nature of the [colonial] transformations" in our midst, rather than that life – African existence, freedom and right to self-determination – ends where the colonial effects leave us, and hence, that Africa's present and future have gone with the past and cannot possibly be affected positively to suit our purpose.

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That humans are thus endowed with built-in capabilities to resolve their prob-
lems may have informed Niyi Osundare's opinion that resolving the African
predicament

"… involves throwing off the yoke of History, turning that prison into a palace of hope, under-
standing Africa, denouncing her vices, [and] nursing her virtues. Above all, it means believing
in ourselves." (Osundare, 1998: 234)

The import of this suggestion is that Africans seem yet to be mentally "im-
prisoned" in their historical past from which they need acquittal or a release
through a philosophical self-understanding and a social re-orientation.

The Africans need what Jacques Derrida calls "deconstruction". Etymologi-
cally, to deconstruct means "to undo" or "to de-construct". According to Dav-
id B. Allison:

"[Deconstruction] signifies a project of critical thought whose task is to locate and 'take apart'
those concepts which serve as the axioms or rules for a period of thought, those concepts which
command the unfolding of an entire epoch of metaphysics. 'Deconstruction' is somewhat less
negative than the Heideggerian or Nietzschean terms 'destruction' or 'reversal'; it suggests that
certain fundamental concepts of metaphysics will never be eliminated (…). There is no simple
'overcoming' of metaphysics or the language of metaphysics." (Allison, 1973: xxxii)

Given that the problem of the African experience as a predicament is one
of a negative psychic inheritance, the relevance of Derrida's notion of de-
construction cannot be gainsaid. What needs to be deconstructed are not
the texts or writings, including pictorial, musical and sculptural "writings",
which give away the African situation as hopeless and irremediable, but the
"(ir)rationality" which governs their radical forms. The irrationality of a text, to
use Richard Rorty's words, refers to "how the 'accident' features of a text can
be seen as betraying, subverting its purportedly 'essential' message" (Rorty,
1995: 171). Deconstruction, therefore, implies setting aside such irrationality,
the ancestral biases associated with African history. It is the devaluation of
the pattern of historical understanding which has become "sedimented" in our
colonial and post-colonial cultures. It means a re-evaluation of the classics of
African philosophy as well as those about the African socio-historical exist-
ence. In these ways, it is our hope not just that the metaphysical radicalism,
which we claim is fundamentally responsible for the African predicament,
would be deconstructed, but also that the African psyche would be on the
path to re-humanization, i.e., seeing the social and cultural problems which
currently plague Africa as *human p*roblems, rather than as "*African* problems
generated by our being somehow unlike others" (Appiah, 1992: 136) (Em-
phasis is mine). The deconstruction which is here recommended goes beyond
the traditional methods of philosophical analysis and critique, or what Wiredu
(1995: 22–23) calls "conceptual decolonisation", to what Derrida refers to as
seeking to "multiply the cautionary indicators and put aside all the traditional
philosophical concepts" (Derrida, 1988: 3). What I suppose Derrida means
here is that a concerted programme or project is required in the form of a prac-
tical philosophy which is not limited to professional philosophers, but needs
the collaborative efforts of all relevant societal segments, including writers,
musicians, pictorial and sculptural artists, governments, non-governmental
and corporate bodies, as well as international bodies, like the African Union
and the United Nations. The goal is to consciously generate what one may call
"psychic courage or confidence boosters", such as would re-orientate Afri-
cans, for example, to see their problems as expectedly human, but surmounta-
ble. For example, one considers that some of J. F. Kennedy's speeches, Martin
Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream.", and Barack Obama's "Yes we can." have

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an inestimable (de)constructive and humanising impact on the psyche and problems of the American people. With similar home-grown boosters, Karl Marx (1978: 145) would most probably concede that philosophy would not only have interpreted the African form of life but changed it.

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Jacob Aleonote Aigbodioh

**Afričko iskustvo, razvoj i
metafizički radikalizam afričke humanistike**

Sažetak

Afričko iskustvo kolonizacije južno od Sahare, proizvod afričke sociokulturne interakcije s europskom kolonijalnom globalizacijom stranih vrijednosti, često se percipira, naročito u nekim afričkim humanistikama (a protiv društvenih znanosti) kao predikament za afrički sociokulturni razvoj. Situacija je proizvela lažno, metafizičko razumijevanje da predikament nužno proizlazi iz iskustva kolonizacije – negativno psihičko nasljedstvo. Najviše se to uočava preko radikalnosti nekih preferiranih paneceja za predikament, primjerice, nasilna revolucija, egzistencijsko samoubojstvo, kulturni preporod i pomirenje sa sudbinom Afrike. Rad obrazlaže da je razumijevanje afričkog iskustva kolonizacije kao sakačućeg izazova afričkom razvoju duboko ukorijenjen u svjesnost nekih afričkih elita, da rasplođuje razočarenje i beznadnost u mogućnost preokretanja afričkog predikamenta, te takav služi kao alibi za društvene poroke. Stoga rad potiče na potrebu za više suradničkim, praktičnim i strateškim programom u svrhe dekonstruiranja popularne »iracionalnosti« usađene u afričke kulture te time rehumanizacije razumijevanja i razrješenja afričkog predikamenta.

Ključne riječi

afričko iskustvo, metafizički radikalizam, nasilna revolucija, egzistencijsko samoubojstvo, kulturni preporod, razvoj

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Afrikanische Erfahrung, Entwicklung und metaphysischer Radikalismus der afrikanischen Geisteswissenschaften

Zusammenfassung

Die afrikanische Kolonisationserfahrung südlich der Sahara, ein Produkt afrikanischer sozio-kultureller Interaktion mit der europäischen kolonialen Globalisierung fremder Werte, wird insbesondere in einigen afrikanischen Geisteswissenschaften (und gegen die Sozialwissenschaften) oftmals als Prädikament der soziokulturellen Entfaltung Afrikas perzipiert. Die Situation erbrachte eine falsche metaphysische Auffassung, das Prädikament gehe notwendigerweise aus der Kolonisationserfahrung hervor – eine negative psychische Hinterlassenschaft. Dies wird am deutlichsten bemerkbar angesichts der Radikalität etlicher bevorzugter Panazeen für das Prädikament, beispielsweise der gewaltsamen Revolution, des existenziellen Selbstmords, der kulturellen Wiedergeburt und der Versöhnung mit dem Schicksal Afrikas. In dem Artikel wird begründet, das Verständnis der afrikanischen Kolonisationserfahrung als beeinträchtigende Herausforderung an die Entwicklung Afrikas sei tief im Bewusstsein einiger afrikanischer Eliten verwurzelt, es erwecke die Enttäuschung und Hoffnungslosigkeit bezüglich der Möglichkeit einer Umdrehung des afrikanischen Prädikaments und als solches diene es als Alibi für soziale Laster. Daher steigert die Arbeit das Bedürfnis nach einem mehr kollegial, praktisch und strategisch geprägten Programm zum Zwecke der Dekonstruierung populärer, in afrikanische Kulturen eingepflanzter „Irrationalität", und damit zum Zwecke der Rehumanisierung des Verständnisses sowie der Auflösung des afrikanischen Prädikaments.

Schlüsselwörter

afrikanische Erfahrung, metaphysischer Radikalismus, gewaltsame Revolution, existenzieller Selbstmord, kulturelle Wiedergeburt, Entwicklung

Jacob Aleonote Aigbodioh

Expérience africaine, développement et radicalisme métaphysique des sciences humaines africaines

Résumé

L'expérience coloniale en Afrique au sud du Sahara, résultat de l'interaction socioculturelle africaine et de la globalisation coloniale européenne par laquelle ont émergé des valeurs étrangères, est souvent perçue, particulièrement dans les sciences humaines africaines (et à l'encontre des sciences sociales) comme un obstacle au développement socioculturel africain. La situation a produit une compréhension métaphysique fallacieuse selon laquelle les difficultés dérivent nécessairement de l'expérience coloniale – héritage psychologique négatif. On observe cela principalement à travers le radicalisme de certaines panacées privilégiées censées remédier à cette situation difficile, à l'instar de la révolution violente, du suicide existentiel, de la renaissance culturelle et de la réconciliation avec la destinée africaine. Ce travail défend l'idée selon laquelle la compréhension de l'expérience coloniale en Afrique, en tant que défi mutilé allant à l'encontre du développement africain, est profondément enracinée dans la conscience de certaines élites africaines et entraîne de la déception et du désespoir concernant la possibilité de renverser cette situation difficile, servant ainsi d'alibi pour les vices sociaux. Par conséquent, ce travail souligne la nécessité d'élaborer un programme plus coopératif, pratique et stratégique dans la but de déconstruire les « irrationalités » ancrées dans les cultures africaines et ainsi rendre plus humain la compréhension de cette situation délicate africaine et ses résolutions.

Mots-clés

expérience africaine, radicalisme métaphysique, révolution violente, suicide existentiel, renaissance culturelle, développement