AFRICA’S IDENTITY: FROM NEGATION TO SELF-ASSERTION

by

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PREFACE

This is the text of a public lecture which was delivered at Kulturhuset, Stockholm, on 27 April 1975. Some of the principal points contained in the paper were first developed in connection with a talk on Africa's search for identity, which was given at the University of Zambia, Lusaka, during the first half of 1970 and were further elaborated on a number of subsequent occasions including, in particular, debates and discussions on Southern Africa and the liberation of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau which took place in the course of the United Nations General Assembly session of 1974.
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INTRODUCTION

Writing some six hundred years ago the great North African sociologist and philosopher of history Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldoun observed that the subjection of one people by another gives rise to serious social and psychological dislocation which may, in due course, result in the total extinction of the people concerned.1

But the capacity for psychological distortion and physical destruction of modern European imperialism - which, incidentally, began to gather momentum only a few decades after the death of Ibn Khaldoun in 1406 - was by far greater than that of any form of imperialism or domination previously known to mankind. And this was due to two principal factors:

First amongst these is the fact that modern European imperialism was able, from its very inception, to draw on the hitherto unparalleled technical skill and efficiency resulting from the harnessing of the discoveries and inventions of modern science and technology to the purposes of navigation, trade and warfare. The resultant technical superiority of the new nation states of Europe did not only facilitate such remarkable human achievements as the circumnavigation of the globe and the discovery of the Americas; it also gave birth to an era which - beginning with the arrival of Vasco Da Gama at Calicut in 1498 - was to be characterized by the colonial and imperial domination, by various European powers, of the entire non-industrialized world - including, not only the newly discovered lands of the Western hemisphere and the islands of the Southern Seas, but also the ancient continents of Asia and Africa.

Another factor of key importance in explaining the distinctly predatory and destructive character of modern European imperialism is that it has been - and in its contemporary neo-colonial form continues to be - a totalitarian phenomenon involving not only the political subjugation of the people it dominates and the economic exploitation of their labour and
the resources of their lands, but also the cultural uprooting and psychological mutilation of its victims.

It is with this last aspect of imperialism - its dehumanizing and culturally distorting nature, particularly as it affected the peoples of Africa - that we shall first be concerned tonight.

We shall then briefly consider the principal methods by which Africans have tried to meet the challenge of imperialism to their cultural integrity: the means, that is to say, by which they have sought - and are still seeking to restore their compromised human dignity and to re-assert their jeopardised African identity.

Finally, we shall indicate the significance of these principally cultural endeavours in the context of the total effort of African liberation together with their impact on the Europe and Europeans of the post-colonial era.

I. THE CHALLENGE OF DOMINATION

A suitable point at which we may begin our consideration of the first of these interrelated questions is the attitude of the dominant Europeans towards their subjects in the various colonies and imperial domains.

Based on the erroneous assumption that military or technical superiority implied an equivalent state of moral or even racial superiority, the predominant attitude amongst European colonialists towards their overseas subjects was one of extreme arrogance and self-righteousness. As far as the less intelligent and less sensitive souls amongst them were concerned - particularly among the lesser functionaries and settler communities - this feeling of arrogance often assumed crude forms such as that expressed in the inscription which, it is said, was placed at the entrance of an exclusive European club in Shanghai. This read: "Chinamen and dogs are not allowed in."
Among the more sophisticated and less crude on the other hand, the same sentiment of arrogant superiority was expressed in terms of the pseudo-ideological notion of "The White Man's Burden". In accordance with this bogus notion held by a wide spectrum of colonial administrators, missionaries and teachers in the conquered territories it was said that the white man was there because he had a mission vis-a-vis the "natives", as the indigenous populations of the conquered territories were habitually and contemptuously called. The substance of the so-called "mission" or "burden" of the white man was that - since he was not in a position to change the colours of the supposedly dirty skins of his native subjects - it was his duty, providentially ascribed, that he should at least try to civilize them in this world and, likewise, endeavour to save their souls in the hereafter.

Since the only civilization worthy of the name was European civilization, civilizing the natives necessarily meant Europeanising them: so that to the extent that the native was able to imitate his master in dress, speech, mannerisms, and so forth he was regarded as civilized - or half civilized; to the extent that he did not or could not achieve this he remained sub-humen, a mere native.

By the same token, saving the soul of the native in the hereafter meant persuading him, cajoling him or forcing him - as may have been appropriate - to drop his traditional religious faith and to adopt instead one or other of the various forms of European Christianity.

The native had to drop his traditional religion not only where it happened to be a so-called 'pagan' faith which allegedly precluded him from knowledge of God, or where it happened to be Islam whose basic tenet was admittedly belief in the same God as that of the Christian and the Jew. The native had to drop his traditional religion even if it was an indigenous form of Christianity as was the case with some Indians, the Orthodox and the Maronite Arabs and the Coptic Egyptians and Ethiopians. Even the followers of these ancient Christian Churches were not exempt.
cism or Protestantism of their European masters - had to part with their old ways and follow in the footsteps of the master. For God was an Englishman, a Frenchman, a Portuguese or a Dutchman and could only be properly worshipped in the manner prescribed by the master. This was held to be imperative even where the master himself had ceased to be a Christian and was living instead in accordance with the principles of one or other of the so-called humanistic or rationalistic philosophies of post-Christian Europe.

The simple explanation of this apparent absurdity is that Christianity was found to be a useful means of taming the native and making him docile and submissive vis-a-vis the colonial government. Unlike Islam which promoted the self-confidence of the native and urged him to rebel against his oppressors, Christianity - as was once stated in a report by the Governor General of the Sudan on the work of Christian missionary societies in the southern provinces of that country - had the merit of "teaching these savages the elements of common sense, good behaviour and obedience to Government authority."²

"Savages" was the key word. For if colonial peoples in general - including the Chinese, the Indians and the Arabs of the Middle East and North Africa - were believed to be inferior to the European, in spite of the fact, generally if dimly recognized by the Europeans, that these peoples had in times gone by, produced civilizations of considerable power and sophistication, the Negro African, generally thought to have had no history and no civilization of his own, was regarded with particular disdain and believed to be of an even more inferior nature. This prejudice was already sanctioned for Christians by the attitude of the Bible towards the sons of Ham who, according to Biblical legend, had been cursed by the Lord and predestined to be "hewers of wood and drawers of water". It was now confirmed, in the mind of the European by the development of the triangular slave trade - by far the most dreadful and inhuman chapter of a most shameful and cruel story. For this trade, managed and financed by the budding capitalists of Europe, the West Indies and the Americas, re-
sulted not only in the destruction and serious dislocation of numerous African communities; not only in the anguish and in-calculable suffering of the millions who were torn away from their homes and carried off to labour and perish on the cotton and sugar plantations of the Indies and the Americas, but also, and in a sense even more distressingly, it led to the growth of a virulent racism which relegated the Negro to the bottom of the hierarchy of European racial prejudice.  

Accordingly the Negroes were not only a cursed people without knowledge of God, without history and without culture; they were "savages" whose very humanity was questioned by the Europeans. Thus it came about that European thinkers and divines debated the question whether the Negro had a soul or not - and were on the whole inclined to agree that he did not possess one. For many of them therefore the Negro was not human at all: he was merely a thing, an animate object created to serve the master race. As if it was not enough to so brutalize and dehumanize him, the Negro was transformed, in the racist mythology of the European, into an embodiment of all that was mean and evil. Thus, whereas God, the Angels and all things good and beautiful were usually described as white, bright and beautiful, the devil and all things evil and ugly were identified with the Negro and duly represented as black. "White" became the symbol of good, beauty, and purity: "black" the symbol of evil, ugliness and depravity.

II. PATTERNS OF REACTION: ASSIMILATION

How did the colonial peoples of the world react to this destructive barrage of blind and arrogant abuse? In particular, how did the African peoples - Negroes, Berbers and Arabs react to it?

One pattern of reaction common to all colonial peoples - and incidentally, to the Jews of Europe, who for different reasons, had been subjected to similar treatment at the hands of Christian Europe - was to accept what they were told by the all powerful white man to seek salvation - in this world and in the hereafter - by means of surrendering whatever was originally theirs and adopting, instead, their master's religion, language, customs, culture, and mannerisms. For some,
in other words, the way out of the dilemma in which they had been placed by the challenge of European cultural imperialism was assimilation. And just as in Europe many Jews sought to escape the consequences of anti-semitism by accepting baptism and trying - sometimes trying too hard - to assimilate themselves into the host society in which they happened to exist, so in China, India, the Middle East and in Africa there now appeared numerous groups and individuals who tried to be more English than the English, more French than the French or more Portuguese than the Portuguese. And just as the existence, among the European Jews, of many groups and individuals who for some reason or another were unable to achieve the degree of assimilation which they regarded as desirable contributed to the appearance of the phenomenon of the self-hating Jew, so, among the colonial people of the world, there now emerged the self-hating Chinese who detested the colour of his skin, the slant of his eyes and the shape of this teeth, the self-hating Arab or Indian who was distressed by his own distinguishing features, and the self-hating Negro who was ashamed of the kink of his hair, the curve of his lip, the shape of his nose and the colour of his skin - all of which constituted such insurmountable barriers between the would be assimilado or evolute and the supposedly blissful state of assimilation which he so craved and desired.

In British-controlled territories the obstacles to assimilation were reinforced by the rulers' romantic attachment to the exotic, their tendency to encourage native institutions and - especially after the publication of Lord Lugard's "Dual Mandate" - govern through indigenous institutions and tribal chiefs and shaikhs. By contrast, overt assimilation was official policy in the French, Belgian and Portuguese territories. It is not surprising therefore that it was in these territories that the worst consequences of assimilation were most clearly felt. Thus the eminent Algerian leader, Ferhat Abbas, had to confess during one of the first sessions of the Algerian Constituent Assembly: "I have known colonists' sons at school who could speak Arabic better than I. "It is a fact", he continued, "that I, your president, am unable to express
myself in Arabic as well as I should wish to." In order to fully appreciate the painful irony of the situation to which Ferhat Abbas refers, we have to take cognizance not only of the dilemma of the nationalist leader who is no longer able to effectively express himself in his own language, but also of the fact that the language in question, Arabic, is one of the richest and most colourful ever known to man and that it has a continuous literary record which is much longer than that of Abbas' adopted French and, indeed, of any other European language.

Mr. Abbas' dilemma was shared, and perhaps even more painfully felt by his Christian Berber compatriot, Jean Amrouche, who was once prompted to say: "I no longer know who I am" and to refer to himself in a public lecture as a "cultural monster". "Men of my sort", Amrouche poignantly said, "are monsters, historical errors." It should be emphasized, however, that the difference between so-called Francophone and Anglophone Africans in this respect was one only of degree, not of kind. For the latter had also been uprooted from their traditional cultures and subjected - albeit in different ways - to the same traumatic treatment as their opposite numbers in the territories which were controlled by France.

Thus, to quote one example, Mr Alex Quaison-Sackey, Ghana's Permanent Representative in the United Nations at the time of Dr. Nkrumah, wrote: ".... such was the influence of the Christian missionaries of various denominations that all evidence of African culture was gradually suppressed or eradicated from memory. Even our names were purposely Anglicized...(or).... dropped completely (in favour of European ones)... In these cases" he continued, "it seemed as if one's own individuality were gradually being obliterated or, at least, being overlaid with a quality that was distinctly not African." Consider the serious internal contradictions and the limitations of assimilation as a proposed solution to the problem of identity which was posed before the African's eye by the challenge of Europe's cultural imperialism - particularly the facts
that assimilation could never work in the sense of getting the European master to accept his assimilated colonial subject as an equal and that, even if this were to miraculously happen, somehow, assimilation was in any case incompatible with the human dignity of the African - it is not surprising that the African, like other colonial people caught in a similar situation, gradually came to reject assimilation and to turn his back on it.

Instead he came to realize that he could only recover his self-respect and human dignity by means of rediscovering, restoring and reasserting his original if, by now, largely obliterated African identity. Viewed in this perspective assimilation was now seen for what it really was: not an aid for the African in his quest for improvement and becoming a better human being, as its advocates and promoters had claimed, but a complete denial of his humanity and a negation of his very existence: not a golden path that led to a blissful heaven of civilized fulfilment, but a yawning abyss which led to the hell of psychological mutilation and cultural annihilation.

To be at all the African had first to be himself, and nobody else. To be a civilized human being he had to be a civilized African human being - not a civilized imitation European, a cultural monster, who was not himself and nobody at all.

III. THE MODES OF INDEPENDENCE: MAN AND GOD

Before the advent of nationalism, the development of mass political parties and of trade unionism and the opening of opportunities for direct political action, religious messianism was the main vehicle for the assertion of national cultural identity in Africa. In addition there was, of course, the great saga of tribal resistance to the onslaught of European imperialism. This was a universal phenomenon which punctuated the history of colonial domination an all parts of the continent. But it was essentially the instrument of groups of people who had only superficially experienced the challenge of European imperialism and cultural assimilation. The full impact of this was felt
by those who were removed from the matrix of traditional culture and exposed, more or less systematically, to the full blast of the whirlwind of European cultural values which swept through Africa - mainly through the agency of European churches, missionary schools and other vehicles of European education both formal and informal.

Among the Muslim peoples of Africa - such as the Somalis of the Horn, the Berbers of the Sahara, and the Fulanis of Guinea and Nigeria - this gave rise to revivalist movements which characteristically combined religious fundamentalism and puritanism with political and military resistance. These were the world famous jihads of Dan Fodio in Nigeria, the Mahdi of the Sudan, Abdel Qadir of Algeria, the Sanoussis of Cyrenaica and Muhammed Abdalla of Somalia. Overwhelmed in the battle field by the superior military and technical powers of their European adversaries these men and their supporters continued the fight for the maintenance of the cultural identity and integrity of their peoples in the mosques and the ancient religious schools and universities of Qayrawan, Kano, Al-Azhar and elsewhere. Their tenacity and the example of their life-long dedication paved the way for the growth, at a later stage, of the nationalist movements which led their peoples to political and cultural independence.

Elsewhere in Africa the white man's religion was accepted out of convenience or conviction: convenience where baptism, to paraphrase Heine, was regarded as the necessary passport to modern education at a time when most of the available means of education were dispensed through the agency of missionaries; conviction in many other cases.

But even those who accepted baptism at the hands of European missionaries out of conviction and became Christians of undoubted sincerity, found it rather difficult to reconcile the preaching of the European with his practice - particularly in connection with the treatment of Africans who had accepted Christianity, but were still subjected to humiliation and discrimination.
Father Sithole's refutation of the opinions of the famous Dr. Schweitzer whose work in Africa has aroused fervent admiration in many hearts is particularly significant in this respect. Sithole refers to the passages from Schweitzer's book in which he says that the Negro is a child and that authority is essential in handling children. Father Sithole comments: "Schweitzer deliberately reduces an adult African to a child so that he can justify the superimposition of European authority on the African. It is an insult for one man to regard another man as a child."

The experience of President Kaundu of Zambia is equally instructive in this respect. He says in his autobiography:

"I was brought up in a Christian home and my Christian belief is part of me now... I do not think I have ever seriously doubted the truth of the Gospel, but I seriously question sometimes whether God is really speaking to us in the voice of the organized churches as I see them in Northern Rhodesia today... How can I believe in the sincerity of Christians who, in Lusaka alone (European population 14,000), hold seventeen separate denominational services for Europeans every Sunday... In my days at Lubwa, I had begun to question certain things in the life of the mission which seemed incompatible with the teaching of Christ in the Bible. I could not see why European missionaries should have special seats in the church and why the Rev. Paul Mushindo went about on foot or on a cycle while the Missionaries rode around in cars.

"I found myself wandering in a spiritual wilderness and I became very bitter..."10

Many Africans who had accepted Christianity were subsequently disillusioned and became bitter. Some of these turned their back on religion once and for all and wandered into spiritual wilderness - or, perhaps, came to accept one or another of the secular religions of the day: Marxism-Leninism, Existentialism etc.

Some have rediscovered or recovered for themselves the traditional religions of Africa and continue to find solace in them.
Others have found peace in Islam, another religion in accordance with whose precepts many millions of Africans have been living for several centuries.

In view of the exceptional popularity of Islam, not only in Africa - where it is, by far, the fastest spreading religion today - but also among the African diaspora in America, we should perhaps enquire why this is the case. As may be expected a wide variety of reasons may be and have been put forth by way of explaining this phenomenon. As far as we are concerned at the moment the sociological reasons stand out as particularly relevant. Predominant amongst these, as Prof. Michael Lofchie has pointed out, is the fact that:

"The explicit social teachings of Islam provided forceful impetus to cordial and cooperative relations between races. Islam endows racial diversity with sacred status as a divine creation: 'Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and complexions (sic). This is surely a sign for all those who possess knowledge!"\(^\text{11}\)

This is somewhat different from the attitude of the Bible towards the cursed sons of Ham who are, according to Biblical legend, predestined to be slaves - "hewers of wood and drawers of water".

Considering the same point but from a different angle the Kenyan writer Parmenas Mockerie observed that "Mohammedanism has taught the African converts that religious observances can bring races together and make them live as brothers. For instance, the Indian and Arab Muslims did not encourage separate churches between races... The (Christian) missionaries, when their influence was felt in Africa, built separate churches for Africans and Europeans."\(^\text{12}\)

It is interesting to note in this connection that the building of separate churches for Africans and Europeans - though it was initially introduced as a result of the European's arrogance and sense of superiority and in order to keep the African in his place - came to be regarded by many devout African Chris-
tians as a suitable device for the projection of the African personality: that is to say, independently from European control and supervision. Hence the popularity and the proliferation of the "separatist churches" - particularly Ethiopianism and the so-called Christian Zionism. It is significant that the secession of these African churches from European controlled churches was usually on the issue of church government.

The emergence of these churches thereafter led to the assertion, within the framework of the church, of the claim for self-government. In the case of the National Church of Nigeria and the Cameroon this claim for self-government was explicitly and particularly stated in the form of prayers to the God of Africa, hymns for freedom and litanies beseeching God for deliverance from imperialism.\(^{13}\)

Quite properly and understandably, however, the Christian Africans who promoted or supported these national churches were not content with the building of African-controlled or African-orientated churches in this world only. They also, and significantly, tried to project the African image into the heavens, so to speak: They aspired to an African Heaven, with an African God and with African angels.

This radical nationalism in religious matters was perhaps best represented in the defiant poetry of Dr. Armatto of Togoland:

> Our God is black  
> Black of eternal blackness  
> With large voluptuous lips,  
> Matted hair and brown liquid eyes  
> For in his image we are made  
> Our God is black.\(^{14}\)

In a poem entitled 'Negro Heaven' he also wrote of:

> Angels black as Indian ink  
> And dark saints blacker still did sing.\(^{15}\)
By now the clock had turned a full circle: This was the Negro-African's reaction to the European missionary's gallery of a white God, surrounded by white Angels, living in white Heavens, and all things white being good and beautiful!

IV. THE POLITICAL KINGDOM AND AFTER

But the Negro African did not only aspire to the establishment of a religious kingdom in heaven. He also wanted - and urgently needed - a political kingdom on earth.

In fact, as we have already noted, the religious kingdom itself was an expression of the African's desire to assert his identity and project his own particular personality. It remains for us to note now that just as the religious and cultural resistance of the Muslim Africans - in Somalia, Nigeria, the Sahara, Algeria and elsewhere - eventually led to the development of nationalist movements which fructified in independence in these parts of the continent, so did the non-Muslim, mainly Christian or Christian-led, religious activities of African peoples in other parts of the continent lead to the development of political liberation movements whose objective was - likewise - to enable African peoples to excercise their right to self-government, self-determination and, ultimately, independence.

During its initial stages this spirit of nationalism which swept throughout the continent tended to take the form of local patriotism or, to use Senghor's phrase "micro-nationalism". The chief concern of African nationalists during this stage was the achievement of independence within each territory, i.e. separately from other territories or parts of Africa. Thus the Somalis and the Ethiopians in the Horn; the Egyptians and the Sudanese in the Nile Valley; the Algerians and the Moroccans in the north; the Chaneains and Nigerians in West Africa, the Zambians and the Congolese in Central and Southern Africa; the Kenyans and Tanzanians on the eastern coast: all tended to move more or less separately towards the achievement of their common goal.
Very soon afterwards, however, African peoples and leaders came to realize that this common goal of independence and, more importantly, the protection and safeguarding of this independence could best be achieved by pooling their resources and coordinating their efforts instead of acting separately.

They came to realize furthermore that by pooling their resources and coordinating their efforts they would be better able to reap the benefits of political independence in terms of higher standards of living for African peoples throughout the continent.

The need for Africa's people to pull together and in the same direction has been further accentuated, on the one hand, by the existence on African soil of racist regimes from whose control many millions of Africans are still to be delivered and by the persistence, on the other hand, of the threat of what Mualimo Nyerere of Tanzania has called "The Second Scramble to Africa": the existence, in other words, of the danger that Africa's integrity and independence may be negated and Africa once again be balkanized and shared out between the big and powerful states of today as it was balkanized and shared out between the great powers during the first scramble to Africa towards the end of the nineteenth century.

However, whether the immediate objective is the achievement and maintenance of such worthy aims as political and economic independence and development, or the building of solidarity and the realization of continental unity in the face of external dangers, it is generally agreed amongst African peoples and leaders that the ultimate objective of the African endeavour is the safeguarding of the dignity and human worth of African people throughout the continent.

It is equally generally realized, and agreed, that the development of independent, authentic and distinctly African approaches to questions of political and economic organization at home and in the international arena are fundamental ingredients of this endeavour - but that, ultimately, the dignity and human worth
of Africans can only be safeguarded through the development and projection of the African personality and independent identity in terms of human culture and style of daily living and social intercourse.

Hence the significance and importance of the great efforts which have been made and continue to be made in order to revive and develop - for both official and national use - such African languages as Swahili in Kenya and Tanzania, Arabic in Morocco and Algeria, and Somali, Hausa and Wolof across the Sudanic belt. Hence also, the significance and importance of the growing interest and research into African history, African art, African music and other facets of African culture, both in Africa itself and abroad.

V. AFRICA AND THE WORLD: THE FRUITS OF FREEDOM

Having thus reviewed Africa's long and arduous journey from negation through domination and assimilation to independence and self-assertion, it is important to note, in conclusion, that in thus seeking to revive, develop and project her independent identity in political, economic and cultural affairs, Africa is not and has never been motivated by any form of pathetic exclusivism or paralysing self-indulgence and narcissism. For, situated where it is, in the centre of the world, so to speak, and with its historic and living involvement with Europe in the north, the new world of the western hemisphere and, of course, with the Middle East and Asia to the east, it is neither possible nor desirable - nor indeed conceivable - for Africa to retreat behind any sort of ivory or ebony curtain. As far as Africa is concerned isolationism and exclusivism have always been, and ever will be, out of the question. Indeed, it may well be argued that by breaking the bonds of political and cultural colonialism the peoples of Africa have won not only their own freedom to be themselves and to deal actively and constructively with others on a footing of equality and mutual respect; they have also contributed to the liberation of their former masters by sweeping away the cobwebs of mythical racism which had blurred their visions and thus making it possible for them to see themselves as mere hu-
mans and to deal with other humans as such and on an equal footing.

That the liberation of Africa involves the liberation of the former colonialists has recently been dramatically demonstrated in connection with the Portuguese revolution and the consequent emancipation of the Portuguese people. For both were born out of the barrels of the guns of the freedom fighters of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau. 19

The liberation of peoples and territories elsewhere in Africa has been no less effective if less dramatic in freeing not only the colonized - by destroying the bonds of colonialism - but also the colonizers - by demolishing their false myths of racial superiority and thereby enabling them to enter into social intercourse with others on the only basis on which such intercourse could be fruitful - i.e. the basis of freedom, equality and fraternity.

In conclusion, therefore, it may be said that the African Revolution - springing as it does from the determination of the peoples of Africa to wrench their freedom and assert their identity in international as well as domestic affairs - constitutes, not only an African, but also a human achievement of world-wide significance.
NOTES


15. Ibid.

16. The first Conference of Independent African States was held in Accra, from 15-22 April, 1958. It was attended by representatives from Ethiopia, Egypt, Ghana, Liberia, Libya, Morocco, the Sudan and Tunisia. i.e. all African states which were independent at the time.


19. This point was first made by the author in the course of a Statement in the U.N. 's Special Political Committee meeting, New York, on 16 October, 1974. The idea was then discussed in conjunction with Rousseau's notion that, under certain circumstances, a person may be forced to be free.