

THE AFRICAN PERSON : A CULTURAL DEFINITION

Man as the object of knowledge has remained a difficult quest practically since the dawn of philosophic reflection. "I can't as yet know myself" was a straightforward confession of Socrates on this question, following his injunction at Delphi. Philosophers ever since have seriously attempted various ways to attain self-knowledge, in fact, to face the most profound and perplexing, of all questions, namely, what is man?; what is his essence in real life?

Various and oftentimes conflicting answers have emerged. In deed adequate self-knowledge has been sought in terms of some metaphysical essence, an inborn faculty or instinct. Hence man has variously been defined as a rational, political, religious, sexual, economic etc. animal. "Rationality", however, has enjoyed universal appeal over the years, hence, man is commonly defined as a rational animal, a thinking substance.

This definition has its limitations. For man not only thinks, he sings, makes tools, creates language, art, etc. as well. He lives not merely in a physical universe but certainly, as Ernst Cassirer put it, "in a symbolic universe; language, myth, art and religion are parts of this universe. They are the varied threads which weave the symbolic net, the tangled web of human experience".¹

We thus gather that culture is important not just to social scientists but to philosophers as well and is to them an important path to self-knowledge, and to the question, what is man?

Received : 9-6-87

Culture is also the key to the understanding and definition of "the African" which is what this brief paper is all about.

* "The African" the object of inquiry in this article is the black, African, mainly South of the Sahara unless the context shows otherwise.

That black Africa shows certain cultural unity is no longer in dispute among anthropologists. As a matter of fact, in his recent study of black Africa, Professor Jacques Maquet clearly shows how analogous existential experiences of life in an isolated and difficult environment have slowly produced a unified African world distinct from and comparable to the Western and Asian worlds. This unity according to him is not racial but cultural.³ He gives the understanding of culture as "the totality of ways of living, working, and thinking and the totality of what results from these activities (institutions, artifacts, philosophies, etc.) as they are constituted in a given society".³ It is also the meaning we give to culture in this article.

The point is that the African has taken the Delphic injunction, "Know Thyself" seriously particularly since the Second World War. He ardently wishes to become conscious of himself as a being-in-the-African world and to live with that consciousness. Consequently his culture, his being, and total environment have become very significant to him. The late Tom Mboya of Kenya (East Africa) expressed this collective aspiration of the African as "the desire to show the world that Africa has her own culture, her own social structures and her own mannerisms".⁴ In his philosophy of negritude, the African in diaspora, Aimé Césaire, a West Indian from Martinique, likewise stated this new significance of cultural roots and values to the African, in plane terms:

We affirmed that we were Negroes and that we were proud of it, and that we thought that Africa was not some sort of

blank page in the history of humanity; in sum, we asserted that our negro heritage was worthy of respect... that its values were values that could still make an important contribution to the world⁵.

The point is that the African wishes to identify and be identified with his culture and, consequently, it is through culture that his personality is fully defined and, for Ernst Cassirer, the only possible mode to totally and truly understand man

The Essential African

What is important here is to determine what makes the African who or what he is as a distinct cultural being in a distinct world. For what binds Africans together, what gives them a common soul, so to speak, arises from culture. This is what Professor Jacques Maquet calls "Africanity" which he briefly defines as, "the totality of cultural features common to the hundreds of the societies of sub-Saharan Africa"⁶. He makes up a general list of the contents of this Africanity. "It is made", he says,

of elements belonging to various dimensions of culture : economic organization, family structure, political institutions, philosophical concepts, religions and rituals, graphic and plastic arts, the arts of movement, sound and speech.⁷

To Leopold Sedar Senghor, the late leader of Senegal, West Africa, what determines the soul of the African, his cultural essence, are the values of negritude. "Negritude", he says, "is the cultural heritage, the values, and above all, the *spirit* of Negro-African civilization". Its ontological dimensions, the affirmation of the African and his world are strongly stated in his more complete definition of negritude. It is,

the whole of the values of civilization, cultural, economic social, political which characterize the black peoples, more

exactly the Negro-African world. It is essentially instinctive reason, which pervades all these values, because it is reason of the impressions, reason that is "seized". It is expressed in the emotions, through an abandonment of self in an identification with the object; through the myth, I mean by images, archtypes of the collective soul, especially by the myth primordial accorded to those of the cosmos. In other terms, the sense of communion, the gift of imagination, the gift of rhythm. These are the traits of Negritude that we find like an indelible seal on all the works and activities of the black man.³

Thus in this definition, Senghor sees negritude as the sum total of the cultural roots of black self, those cultural traits which intuitively make the African perceive himself as an African and as belonging to that distinct race. These traits, Senghor holds, are found like an indelible seal on all the works and activities of the black man and, consequently, make him who or what he is.

As part of this cultural definition, Senghor, we have seen⁴ makes mention of "sense of communion", "gift of imagination", "rhythm", etc. Other scholars identify the African with his artistic and symbolic forms, that is to say, his works of art, sculpture, paintings, masks, wood carving etc. It is in these areas particularly that the African manifests his creative genius. Speaking about African art for example, Paul Bohannon writes "Africa has an extensive good art. Its ineffable quality can be widely perceived and it has taken its place in museums and in the collections of many art lovers".⁵

The point is that in works of art, paintings, other signs and symbols no less than in music and dancing, the African reveals and identifies himself in his cultural personality. Likewise in cul-

tural arts and symbols, the African reveals his essential worldview as well as his ontological conceptions, his belief in and worship of ancestors, for example. The African believes in living beings beyond the grave, the so called "living dead" and portrays this belief and communications with his ancestors in signs, symbols, through sculpture (statues) and the rituals which usually accompany his many works of art.

Mention has also to be made of another aspect of cultural characteristic of the African, namely, his religious nature and praxis. For one thing, the horizon or worldview of the African is essentially religious. The African is "notoriously religious", Mbiti says. Other scholars regard him as "incurably religious". Religion permeates his total life, consequently there is nothing like a secular vision of world order. In this important way also, he is poles apart culturally from the western man.

Furthermore many socio-cultural practices also give distinct identity to African personality for man establishes himself not only through language, art, signs, and symbols but action as well. The first is the idea of family-hood. Extended family-hood characterises the mode of life of the African and shapes his personality and outlook in life. The African sees his nuclear family essentially as an extension of a broader family. Professor Maquet describes this broader family tree thus :

The African child has only to take a few steps in his village to visit several people who can substitute for his father, mother, brothers and sisters and they will treat him accordingly. Thus the child has many homes in his village and he is simultaneously giver and receiver of wide-spread attention.¹⁰

Indeed this extended family system is one "in which everybody is linked with all the other members, living or dead, through a

complex network of spiritual relationship into a kind of 'mystical body'¹¹. Through cultural upbringing, therefore, the African is not individualistic. There is no question of rugged individualism in outlook and life-style so characteristic of the European or the American. The African is essentially man-in-community. It is the community which makes the individual, not the other way round, a point made by Professor John Mbiti in defining the "becoming" of an individual in African culture in this aphorism, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am"¹².

Other than the socialist mentality which characterises the African way of life and which is rooted in the extended family-system practiced by the African, Maquet enumerates other cultural practices which altogether create a distinct African personality. These are "finding One's place among kin", "depending on lineage", "Being Rooted in Kinship", "Going back to the Ancestor" (ancestor worship), "Being in Harmony with Reality", "Making the lineage Continue" (love for children and family life), etc¹³. This is a brief portrait of the African in his cultural heritage, what gives him a distinctive personality.

African Culture and Self-Realization : Concluding Reflections

In this attempt to define "African personality" through the cultural traits of the African, we come back to the conclusion of Ernst Cassirer that man is indeed "a symbolic animal", not just a rational animal. He is a culture-builder. Emphasis is to be made that the African since independence has regarded self-realisation through building up a viable, dynamic culture as a serious project. "we have for too long been the victims of a foreign domination, Kwame Nkrumah once echoed. "For too long we have had no say in the management of our own affairs or in deciding our own destinies"¹⁴.

The African wishes now to build a new image, a personality altogether different from the "colonial one". He wants to establish himself as the master of his world and architect of his destiny, which amounts to a re-establishment of self in a self-determined, self-directed, self-controlled continent. He realises he can only accomplish this goal through his culture, hence the impatient assertion of President Sekou Toure of Guinea is easily understandable :

We insist for our part on the cultural rehabilitation of African and it is with this in mind, that for us, financial backing, however burden it may be, remains a means at the service of an eternal cause, that of the affirmation of Africa's dignity.¹⁵

"We are doing everything to revive our culture", Nkrumah assured the National Assembly in Accra in 1965. The point is that culture-building is not just a mere theoretical affirmation on the part of the African. It has remained with him since independence a top practical pursuit. The various festivals of arts and culture held in many African countries bear this out as well as the pursuit of indigenous technology, indigenous political systems as *Ujamaa* Experiment in Tanzania initiated by that nation's former leader, Julius K. Nyerere¹⁶, the promotion of indigenous music, paintings, religion, fashion, education for self-reliance, etc. All these efforts of cultural revival and survival prove the point Aimé Césaire made earlier on, namely that "Africa (is) not some sort of blank page in the history of humanity" and (can) still make an important contribution to the world". But

above all, they point to the fact that the African has his own distinct, hence identifiable cultural personality.

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NOTES

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2. Jacques Maquet : *Africanity The Cultural Unity of Black Africa* tr. Joan K. Rayfield (New York : Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 4.
3. *Ibid.* pp. 8-9.
4. Tom Mboya, *Freedom and After* (London : Andre Deutsch, 1963), p. 227.
5. Aime Cesaire, *Discourse On Colonialism* tr. Joan Pinkham, New York : Monthly Review Press, 1972, p. 76.
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7. *Ibid.*
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14. Kwame Nkrumah, *I Speak of Freedom*, quoted by Gideon Cyrus M. Mutiso and S. W. Rohio (eds.) *Readings in African Political Thought* (London : Heinemann, 1975), p. 61.
15. Sekou Toure, " Negritude Versus Pan-Africanism " *New Horizon* (March-April, 1976). p. 13.
16. See Julius K. Nyerere *Ujamaa : Essays on Socialism* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1968).