

Of Change, Famished Roads, and African Development

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1. Introduction

The fact of the underdevelopment of Africa is a direct challenge to the enlightened minds on the continent. Indeed, it is a burden that is borne with a certain amount of shame by those who are more sensitive and capable of deep reflection. They have often asked fundamental questions in frustration and anger, wondering what was wrong with Africa and with the African, seeking to know why Africans seemed incapable of rising above their reputation of being the '*les damnés de la terre*' ('the wretched of the earth'). Among the questions about Africa that have troubled such minds are the following:

- Why did Africa succumb to slavery like it did?
- Why was the enslavement of African peoples on African soil possible?
- Why has education failed to produce the kinds of societal changes that should normally have followed?
- Why does good governance continue to elude so many African countries, after over 40 years of independence?
- Might certain aspects of the African culture be standing in the way of the continent's development?

I believe that we now stand at a very opportune moment for re-considering the issue of African development. The task, as I see it, is one that properly belongs to the African intellectuals, who must look closely at all the aspects of the issue and help to bring about a deeper understanding of the African condition as well as come up with a well-reasoned programme of action. While the job is rightfully ours to do, we nonetheless need a great deal of good will from the rest of the world. I say that this is an opportune moment because that needed good will seems to be available at the

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present time. The world has become a global community and our fates are inextricably bound together.

It seems to me that two elements of our culture which deserve to be examined critically and dispassionately are our general dislike of change (not to say abhorrence of it, in certain contexts), and the belief in 'famished roads'.¹ Under this second point are subsumed all the different kinds of non-rational beliefs which impute wicked and evil intentions to human beings and objects alike as a way of explaining complex occurrences.

In the following section (section 2), I discuss more fully the question of development in Africa and mention some related issues, like that of identity. I also make the point that African researchers, especially in the fields of philosophy, sociology and anthropology, may not have given the necessary attention to the question of the relationship between African peoples' beliefs, traditions and cultures and the (lack of) development on the continent. In section 3 I shall be examining aspects of Yoruba culture, tradition and world view based on some linguistic data, to the effect that the general Yoruba world view is one which operates primarily on 'givens'; that is, many domains of existence are considered as basically predetermined or fixed. This 'given-ness' will be seen to operate in the language's structure as well, via the preponderance of what Bisang and Sonaiya (1997, 2000) have referred to as 'pre-constructed domains'. The consequences that such a world view might have on development will be discussed.

In section 4, the necessity for a radical transformation of the African world view as a catalyst for development will be argued for. It will be suggested that the educational system should be the focus of this action, and that a means of systematically teaching new and more beneficial attitudes be found, for example, through the writing of new textbooks to be used for social studies classes. This will entail a critical and honest examination of traditions and beliefs, so that those which do not promote the progress and development of the society will be excluded.

2. Rationally considering related issues

Ramsey Clark, in his discussion of Scott Buchanan's work, writes:

So, what does a man of reason do in an age of incoherence? Buchanan says that he reasons his way to the limits of his light, urging others to do the same, standing on the shoulders of the giants who help illuminate our journey. (Clark, 1983)

In this discussion of the issues bearing upon development in Africa, I have found the notion of *mediation* developed by Jean Gagnepain and his co-researchers to be useful. Within the framework of this theory, everything that concerns human beings can properly be considered under the rubric of rationality, for culture and reason are taken to be identical. Culture, for its part, encompasses 'the specific order of reality in which human beings participate'. Thus, everything about human beings is cultural and touches directly upon rationality. Furthermore, human reason, according to the theory, is 'diffracted', that is, it operates at several different levels: at the logi-

cal level as well as the technical, ethnical and ethical levels. It is on each of these levels that human beings *mediate* their relationships with the world and with others (whence the name of the theory). For our present purposes, it is the manifestation at the logical and ethnical levels that are of relevance: the logical level being that at which human beings, through the words they speak, 'designate the world and explain it to themselves';² while the ethnical level is that at which the world is manifested through the histories and societies originated by human beings.

One important question, which in my opinion touches upon development, is that of identity. There is a general revival of 'culture' and 'tradition' across the globe, arising from a desire by many of the world's populations to define more clearly their identities. As globalization sweeps across the world, bringing humans together and seemingly intending to dissolve the various identities in one big, homogenizing pot, people are sensing the need to resist this tendency by holding on ever more tightly to the things they consider as defining them. Examples of this abound: the revival of regional languages in Europe, ethnic rivalries resulting in wars in several parts of the world, even the revaluation of old ways of fabrication, from watch-making to wine-making.

Amin Maalouf, in a recent book (*Les identités meurtrières*, 1998), writes about 'murderous identities', which he describes as identities constructed uniquely on the vertical axis, that is, strictly in terms of biological identity. Such a construction, he maintains, is exclusive and makes nothing of the common experiences shared with one's contemporaries, even though they may belong to a different ethnic group. For example, young people today share a great deal, be they Asian, African or European; and, indeed, there may be even more that is shared among them as young people than between them and their parents or grandparents, especially if they live within the same society. Ignoring such common ties, according to Maalouf, might lead to murderous identities when pushed to the extreme, where only one's narrow ethnic group is seen as having any worth. This is the stuff of which terrorists are made.

The problem of Africa, in general, may not have assumed such murderous proportions, but there is no doubt that the question of identity is pertinent. The tight clenching of the fist on tradition, the very slow pace of adaptation to change for which the continent is well known, must have to do, at least, with a fear of losing one's identity, an identity which already feels greatly compromised by the years of colonial experience. The question which must be resolved is to determine how identity can be preserved while at the same time accepting or making the kind of societal change which would lead to development and be of benefit to the people.

Indeed, even more fundamental questions should be posed: Where does true identity lie? Is identity something that is static, determined once and for all, or does it evolve with people in line with their ever-changing realities? Does this evolution have its own intrinsic dynamic, or could it be helped along, shaped and molded consciously in a given direction? These are crucial questions to tackle, questions which may help us to reason our way out of our current predicament.

Another issue I wish to touch upon, very briefly, is that centered on the debate regarding endogenous versus exogenous development. This debate has been continuing for some time, and UNESCO in particular has sponsored seminars and

published books on the topic, for example, *Participate in development* (1986) and *Développement endogène* (1988). Obviously, many institutions in Africa came into being under colonial rule, and could therefore be seen as having been imposed upon the people. After the years of independence (in the 1960s), it took just a few decades for decay to set in and for the institutions to start to crumble. 'Sustainable' and 'endogenous' became important words in reference to Africa. Ali Mazrui, in his well-known documentary *The Africans*, also published as a book with the same title (1986), showed very graphically this decay as he traveled around the continent filming what he referred to as 'white elephants' – grandiose projects which never were completed or which were operating at a level far below the targets for which they were built (for example, a five-star hotel without running water or electricity).

The point of view which was advanced in the 1980s was that development generated from within stood a better chance of being sustained, meaning that the excuse for Africa's lack of development was the fact that development was being imposed from the outside. The fact of the matter, however, is that this kind of discussion has gone on for over two decades now, and not much seems to have been achieved, even with the change in approach. Two Earth Summits have been held, and the opinion in some quarters now seems to be that there is a lack of political will on the part of the developed world to improve the lot of the poorer nations of the world.

Again, this is a situation which demands that we reason our way out of it. There is no doubt that such issues of global dimensions are very complex indeed, and positions taken at the international level often fall outside the sphere of influence of the common person. While the international policies of the developed countries without doubt influence the economic and political well-being of African nations, do the corruption, ineptitude and nepotism of African leaders not go a long way to compound the problem? Indeed, are they not the real obstacles to development? What can be done? Again, let us start to ask the real questions:

- Why do we, as Africans, find it difficult to demand good governance from our leaders?
- Why are we so easily awed by political power?
- Might we need to look more closely at our traditional political institutions and identify those aspects of them which keep us forever downtrodden and which are, therefore, deserving of being done away with?

In the following section of the paper I intend to discuss some linguistic data from the Yoruba language. The intention (a rather risky one, I dare say) is to show that there are aspects of the language, structurally, which reflect the general world view of the people, one in which many domains of human existence and activity are perceived as given or unchangeable. The risky part of the business is to suggest, based on the linguistic data to be presented, that this constitutes, at least, part of the basis for the Yoruba people's resistance to change. A caveat, however: resistance to change is not here taken in any way as altogether negative. Indeed, the very facts to be discussed may be seen as being responsible for the preservation of the Yoruba language and culture in the diaspora (for example, in Brazil), to a degree which surpasses that

of many other languages which left the shores of the continent during the slave trade.

3. Yoruba: a world of perceived 'givens'

My intention in this section is to present some data from the Yoruba language which apparently correlate with facts about Yoruba culture which have been discussed by anthropologists. I called this a risky enterprise above because it throws us right in the heart of the debate over what is known in linguistics as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the idea that 'a man's language molds his perception of reality, or that the world a man inhabits is a linguistic construct' (Sampson, 1980: 81). This is a domain of shifting sand, and I really do not wish to enter into the controversy here as to whether there is hard evidence to make us conclude that the difference between languages is 'more than a difference in formal models of expressing a common range of ideas' (p. 87). However, the idea has its own fascination.

Now, the Yoruba world view represents human experience as being governed by factors that are largely predetermined even before the individual comes into the world. The concepts of *ori* (head) and *ayanmo* (what has been chosen for one) are well-known: the individual chooses a head before coming into the world and that head determines all that happens to that individual in life. The Yoruba world, therefore, is one in which practically all of experience is seen to have been pre-ordained, one where everything has its own place and nothing is easily allowed to break out of the established pattern.

This, to my mind, is the origin of the concept of the 'famished road'. Let me give an example: a motor accident occurs and Ade loses his life in it. Why did the accident occur? Well, it was raining, so the ground was slippery; the driver was speeding, and when he suddenly came upon an obstacle and slammed on the brake the vehicle took off in the air, somersaulting several times before finally crashing into a stationary trailer. Would this be a sufficient and an acceptable explanation for the Yoruba? No. For them, the question remains: why was it that very vehicle that Ade had to board? (Could this have something to do with the evil workings of his father's second wife?) Why did Ade have to travel on that particular day, indeed, at that particular hour when the road was thirsty for blood? Hence the need for the prayer: *a ko ni rin ni ijo ti ebi n pa ona* – 'may we not travel when the road lies famished'. However, one's *ori* or *ayanmo* is the deciding factor.

When the unusual or the unexpected happens to disturb this world of givens, then it must be recognized as such. This is what is expressed through sayings like *ti ko ba ni idi, obirin ki i je Kumolu* – 'A woman does not bear the name Kumolu without a reason', and *a ki i ri ewu ni osan* – 'grey hairs don't appear at noonday'. The point of these sayings and other similar ones is to underscore the fact that something has occurred which does not conform to the regular, given pattern, and the assumption is that a higher purpose is to be served by the occurrence.

3.1 Pre-constructed domains

What is interesting and of relevance for the present discussion is the existence in Yoruba of countless sayings with the marker *ni* which are used to make incontrovertible declarations. Examples of these are:

- iya ni wura* – ‘mother is gold’
- aye loja, orun nile* – ‘the world is a market, heaven is home’
- odo laye* – ‘the world/ life is a river’
- ori lonise* – ‘the head is the one that acts’
- eefin niwa* – ‘character is (like) smoke’
- bintin laye* – ‘life is so small/inconsequential’
- omo laso* – ‘children are (like) clothing’
- owo lagba* – ‘money is the most important’

This construction also abounds in Yoruba names: *Omolara, Owolabi, Adelani, Ogunlari, Omolabake, Omoleye, Omoniyi, Olowolafe, Ayelaagbe*, etc. Bisang and Sonaiya (1997, 2000) have studied this construction and view it as being preponderant in the Yoruba language. Indeed, it is a highly productive one, for new names and sayings using it are constantly being added to the language. A recent and interesting creation is: ‘*The End*’ *lopín sínímá* – ‘“The End” marks a film’s conclusion’ (meaning: once it’s over, it’s over, nothing more can be done).

According to Bisang and Sonaiya’s analysis, particularly in their (2000) article, these sayings can be taken as expressing incontrovertible truths not so much because of the meanings they convey but rather because of the structure of the utterances themselves. Here is a brief discussion of the facts. The marker *ni* is used both as a copula and in so-called focus constructions. There exists another copula in Yoruba, *je*. Compare:

- (a) *Ade je olowo* – ‘Ade is rich/ Ade is a rich man’
- (b) *Ade ni olowo ilu yii* – ‘Ade is the rich man in this town’

In terms of how information is structured in Yoruba, Bisang and Sonaiya demonstrate that *ni* is employed both as a copula and in focus constructions to signal that there exists a pre-constructed domain, that is, a domain of concepts taken by the speech act participants as already given. While utterances without *ni* (that is, regular utterances as in (a) above) are structured from left to right and are marked by the famous high tone syllable (HTS), those with *ni* are structured from right to left and cannot take the HTS marking. For greater clarity, we take an example with a subject ending in a low tone:

- (c) *Ayo je omoluwabi* – ‘Ayo has a good character’
- (d) *Ayo (*') ni mo ri* – ‘Ayo is the one whom I saw’

The pre-constructed domain is the one to the right of *ni* (in (b) and (d) above), and it is after that has been established that the person who fits the description can be identified. Thus, the meaning of (b) can be paraphrased: ‘As for who the rich man in this town is, Ade is the one’, and (d): ‘As for the person whom I saw, Ayo was the one’. It should be noted that once the choice is made it is done exhaustively – no one

else qualifies again to fill that slot. This is the point about the truth expressed in such utterances as being incontrovertible: *iya ni wura* – (What is gold?) ‘Mother is gold’ (and no-one/nothing else).

The interesting point is that a language chooses to grammaticalize this fact. It is not so much that pre-constructed domains exist – they do in other languages as well – but Yoruba finds it necessary to grammaticalize them through the use of a particular marker. I consider this interesting because it so perfectly coincides with the Yoruba world view of predetermination and givens. The question then is: what effect might this have on attitudes and on the Yoruba people’s being-in-the-world? Is it so much of a surprise, then, to find in the language a saying that cautions against disturbing the established order of things, that is, against change? – *e je ka se e bi won ti n se e, ko le ri bi o ti n ri* – ‘Let us do things as they are (always) done, so that they will turn out as they normally do’.

Finally, what kind of world view do these fixed expressions convey? In general, it is one which does not encourage an individual to strive in order to achieve a particular goal or to create a new order. For example, in *odo laye*, the idea is that life is a river, flowing where it will and carrying people along its course as it pleases. All one can do is simply flow along with it. Is this the stuff from which progress and development are fashioned?

3.2 *The rationality of folk stories*

In this section I wish to briefly examine the rationality of Yoruba folk stories. I will not be examining in detail any particular story, but rather discussing in general the kinds of values that are placed on events in the stories. I will be drawing a contrast between these stories and the ‘quest’ stories so common in western folklore.

Yoruba folk stories generally either deal with how things came to be the way they are, or, when they concern heroic acts on the part of some individual, show that the acts are performed for the benefit of the community, not for that of the particular individual. Many of our moonlight tales are ‘and-that-is-why’ stories: why the tortoise has a broken shell, why the dog barks, why the owl comes out only at night, etc. The *ifa* (divination) corpus also contains accounts of how the earth was formed as well as the various contributions of each of the divinities in sustaining the earthly order.

Stories of heroic deeds by individuals show that the good of the community must be the motivating factor for such deeds. For example, *Moremi*, the princess of Ile-Ife, allows herself to be captured by the invading armies of the enemy so that she can go and learn the secret of their power over her people. She returns with that knowledge and uses it to deliver her people from the hands of their oppressors.

Richard Rohr has stated the following:

Western civilization was shaped by Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian stories. We see the Greek and Roman worlds most vividly in our poetry. These myths are at the heart of how Western people see themselves. The most significant, for our present purposes, is the myth of the labyrinth or maze. (Rohr, 1994: 34)

The myth of the labyrinth has to do with the individual's quest for self-discovery: each person must pass through the labyrinth or the maze and finally arrive at the point of discovery. This is just like the Quest-for-the-Holy-Grail stories, which involve the individual's setting out on a journey and encountering several obstacles which have to be surmounted. The journey culminates in the discovery of the individual's true identity.

The Yoruba world view does not place much emphasis on the individual; rather, it is the community that is all-important. Indeed, one is hard put to find natural equivalents in the language for concepts relating to the individual, like 'loneliness' and 'privacy'. On the contrary, terms abound which express ideas relating to communal life, as noted in Sonaiya (2002): *ajogbe* 'living together', *ajose* 'doing together', *ajoda* 'creating together', *alajobi* 'being born together', etc.

What is being said here is that the Yoruba do not leave much room for the individual, for self-discovery. They focus primarily on how things are and how to maintain them as such. However, a quest is needed. Again according to Rohr, people often confuse 'the quest with role, custom, or group identity, which really are not much of a quest – they raise no "questions"! He states further that the western world is fast losing this sense of the labyrinth and replacing it with a mythology of progress that is linear:

We are indoctrinated into the progress myth, which says basically that the little boy . . . must be taught that the goal in life is to get from here to there as quickly as possible, in lines as straight as possible. (Rohr, 1994: 36)

I would also add that the issue of individuality is being pushed to the extreme in the West. There used to be a time, for example, when the West was seemingly more concerned with *human* rights; now the concern seems to be more and more about *individual* rights. Thus, while the West needs to focus more on the communal, Africa needs to make room for the individual. It is in the (temporary) withdrawal from society, for private work and contemplation, that ideas will be born which may lead to the progress and development of that society.

4. Conclusion: the need for a rational approach to development

Change is a fact of life; it is one's response to it that makes all the difference. In a discussion of the changes which have taken place in the world due to technological advances in the last century, John Dickinson mentions three different kinds of responses to them:

One response is to reject change by concerted action . . . Other responses are to run away from change in the mistaken belief that it can be escaped, or to lapse into passivity and despair. A more constructive attitude, however, consists in extending a positive welcome to change, as expressed by a willingness to seek new occupations and to embrace new skills. (Dickinson, 1984: 18–19)

The challenge to us as Africans is to seek out ways of encouraging a constructive attitude toward change and a jettisoning of beliefs and attitudes which may stand in the way of our development. We will not be the first ones to have to do this either; other societies have had to evolve with the times as well.

I wish to suggest here that the educational system should be the main target of our effort at creating new and positive attitudes towards change and ridding our belief systems of the morbid, paralyzing fear of famished roads. Indeed, it seems to me that there was such a conscious effort made in the early 1960s, during the 'Awolowo' days of western Nigeria.³ I remember distinctly learning in the primary school Yoruba poems which did not necessarily express the 'life-is-a-river-taking-you-where-it-will' world view. One such poem had in it the phrase *apa lara, igunpa niyekan* – 'Your arm is your acquaintance, your elbow is your relation'. This was a poem intended to teach children to work hard to achieve success rather than depending on other people, and it would have served to counter-balance the more traditional notion of *ori* which told them that everything about their lives had been predetermined.

In each university, in each institute for the study of society, researchers ought to set to work, fashioning out for us ways of putting across new values which will produce the new attitudes which must be adopted by our children as well as the general populace. It must be a conscious, deliberate effort, for the needed change is not likely to happen by itself – or it would take far too long for it to arrive. New books should be written for our schools to help us teach these new attitudes. To my mind, that is about the only rational option we have. We must start creating new sayings susceptible of causing our spirits to soar, our individual creativities to find expression, rather than keep repeating the centuries-old ones which keep us earth-bound.

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Notes

1. The expression is borrowed from Wole Soyinka's well-known poem, *Abiku*, in which he translates the common Yoruba prayer, *a ko ni rin niyo ti ebi n pa ona*, as 'May we never walk when the road lies famished'.
2. From the website of the Interdisciplinary Laboratory for Language Research.
3. That is, when the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo was the Premier of the Western Region of Nigeria.

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