

## TOWARDS DECOLONIZING AFRICAN CULTURE

P.T. MTUZE

*Rhodes University, South Africa*

### INTRODUCTION

The article reviews African culture in the light of the dominant culture of the ruling class. It seeks to record the devastation that took place during the imperial era when the indigenous culture was trampled down and thrown overboard without any attempts to assess its role in ensuring stability and a sense of belonging among its peoples. The main objective of the article is to plead for closer co-operation and mutual respect among the various cultures so as to pave the way for the eventual evolution of a common South African culture.

I am aware that the paper articulates a dilemma it cannot really resolve, and that there is a latent danger of confusing culture with nostalgia and tradition, thus causing further tension. However, we cannot fully celebrate the present, until we have fully appreciated the essence of the past, and accounted for the numerous gaps between the two. As indicated in the title, this is only a first humble step towards deconstructing colonialisation and the paradoxes of decolonialisation.

In attempting to do so, I cannot help but echo Koponen (1993: 118) who, with reference to an equally mindboggling issue, "The Partition of Africa", states so articulately:

In this short article I have no ambition to "solve" these or other major questions concerning the partition of Africa, not to speak of European imperialist expansion more generally. But I think that at least some confusion can be cleared away by subjecting well-known things to new scrutiny and by emphasizing dimensions which have been relatively downplayed in the discussion.

### 1. THE ONSLAUGHT ON AFRICAN CULTURE

Culture is one of those enigmatic issues that have been bandied about to achieve a variety of objectives, ranging from deculturizing others in order to acculturate them with your own norms and values, to the total exclusion of anything that is unknown to your own, to blatant cultural conquest where the

"others" must be made to feel primitive, backward or even sub-human, unless they are shed of all vestiges of their own "pagan" culture and accept your own.

When this could not be achieved in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa, those who were not lured by "civilization" to mimic the white man were regarded as the noble savages. The Masai and the Zulu are admired in Western popular culture, where the "town native" or "detrribalized black" who has lost his own culture and taken on the worst traits of the European was seen as the lost soul. It is the image of the "noble savage" with his wives, pipe and kraal which inspired the romantic anthropology enthusiasts for apartheid.

This really opens up the whole issue of boundedness and flexibility of cultures. Culture is about humanity's learned and applied adaptation to the environment. A crucial part of that adaptation is the formation of groups for self-protection, subsistence and sociability.

The irony of the cultural imperialism of Europe was that it was both evangelical (seeking to make others like us) whilst at the same time it was culturally racist (viewing the victims of that "civilising mission" as being unable really to become fully civilised).

One of the common definitions of culture, as explained by Perrucci and Knudsen (1983: 613) is that culture is:

Shared knowledge, meanings, concepts, rules, and ideas that are acquired by humans through social learning.

Degenaar (1993: 52) gives eight possible definitions of culture of which the seventh resembles the one cited above:

Culture as a dynamic system of knowledge, values, actions, artefacts, and articulations of a community in particular historical contexts. Culture in this sense refers to all meaningful expressions and symbolic formations by a community.

Art would be one kind of symbolic formation.

The same concept can, however, be loaded to include other operational elements as can be seen from the following definition of ruling class culture, the more reactionary aspect of ordinary culture, by Fitzgerald (in Campscreur and Divendal 1989: 161):

We might take ruling class culture in South Africa to define generally the international capitalist culture of the non-racial bourgeoisie. This would include the drive towards acquisition of private property, extreme consumerism, the following of international cultural fads in dress, music, film, etc.; the commoditization of personal relationships; and in general, the breaking down of traditional culture in favour of the bland new world of orchestrated cultural imperialism.

Of course, this is a loaded description of one culture, not a definition of culture in general. It implies other cultures with which the ruling class culture associates, hence the boundaries between them.

It cannot be gainsaid that our imperialist conquerors went all out to destroy what they perceived to be a primitive African culture in their frantic efforts to supplant it with their own. Degenaar (1993: 53) once remarked that:

... the tendency of nation-building programmes is to impose a common culture which cannot accommodate communal cultures since nationalism prescribes the congruence of one culture and state power.

This ignores indirect rule and gross apartheid which sought to preserve the institutions of the conquered people and at the same time co-opt their leaders for economical administration. Missions and schools fitted awkwardly into this model, but were approved in as far as they produced better workers and more amenable leaders for indirect rule, hence the establishment by the government of the schools for chiefs' sons like Zonnebloem.

Nation building has been much more of post-colonial enterprise attempting to overcome the momentum of the "divide and rule" policy and the indigenous ethnicities. The empires did not seek to build nations, but to govern territories as cheaply as possible.

The colonization process was total as it was waged from all fronts. Blacks were said to have no civilisation, no religion, no culture, no scientific language and no concept of science. Such people were, in the thinking of the imperialists, a threat to humanity, hence the mass introduction of schools, churches and other measures that would combat the spread of this threat. This imperialism is also attested to by Degenaar (1993: 54) when he states:

There are, of course, many forms of imperialism, for example, the imperialism of the process of colonization as the physical and mental imposition of a Western- European power structure, culture and mind set on non- Western Societies. But equally imperialist is colonization as physical and mental imposition of a mind set in opposition to traditional colonialism.

Cultural domination became the order of the day and was so ruthlessly enforced that the good in the dominant culture was clouded by the bad, giving rise to suspicion and antipathy from the victims. This cultural imperialism manifested itself in diverse ways. Only four will be highlighted here.

Firstly, the missionaries opposed all traditional practices such as circumcision and the "intonjane" puberty rite. Blacks were debarred from active participation in the church if they did not renounce these so-called pagan practices. One can imagine the humiliation for black men when they were prevented from going to initiation schools, the pillars of African culture!

Secondly, black potential converts to the Christian faith had to shed all their traditional clothes and buy the white man's clothes before they could enter the church. This led to serious divisions in the communities between those who adhered to these practices and those who readily changed to Western clothing. Psychologically, it also meant that God did not recognize you if you wear traditional clothing.

Thirdly, those who ventured as far as the baptism font had to contend with new Christian names because their own names were regarded as pagan while, in fact, this was done to hide the missionaries' ignorance of indigenous names and surnames. Of course aliens would have tremendous problems trying to pronounce some of the sounds in the names e.g. Qudalele (runs in a stooping posture), Nongxaki (Lady adversity), and Nongcucalazo (Lady restless or homeless). Gone were those lovely names which in most cases commemorated important incidents and events in the lives of the people as Nombandezelo (adversity), Ngcayechibi (grass alongside the lake), Mpayipheli (endless war) and others had to give way to Esther, Peter, Paul, Simon, George and many other English names with no meaning to those called by them.

Fourthly, those charged with working among the Africans failed to come to grips with the culture of the people they were supposed to work with. Instead, they arrogantly distorted the true essence of the indigenous culture, e.g. note the remarks once made by Warner (as cited by Maclean 1906: 70) about African marriage:

Marriage among the Kafir has degenerated into slavery, and is simply the purchase of as many women by one man as he desires, or can afford to pay for.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Evidence from Soga (1931: 274) crushes these uninformed comments to dust:

The custom, so much the subject of abuse by the well-meaning but uninformed, is, as applied by many tribes, the Bantu woman's charter of liberty. Any attempt to destroy the *lobola* custom would be most strenuously resisted by the women themselves, for they realize, as no others can, what it means to them in security of person and social status.

No doubt, we have come a bit further in our understanding of *lobola* than Warner or Soga. To us *lobola* implies that the woman is always under the protection of one man (or lineage). This is fine if we accept that a person can be a minor throughout their life (or at least to menopause), but if women seek jural equality with men, then there are problems.

It is strange that Warner, as one of the so-called Native Commissioners of the time, could be at so much odds with the findings of the South African Native Affairs Commission, 1903-5, cited by Soga (1931: 276):

In reference to this much misunderstood and misrepresented *lobola* custom the commission says, inter alia: - "The contract is not one of purchase and sale. The woman does not become her husband's slave. He may not sell her. He may not kill, injure, prostitute and maltreat her all of which would be within his power and right were the statement correct that by passing of 'ikazi' or 'lobola' a woman becomes the chattel of her husband.

All these had disastrous effects on the fabric of African social life and consciousness. People lost faith in themselves and their self-image. They started to despise their fellow people who still believed in these things. Their God could no longer be called Qamata because the missionaries preferred Thixo as Qamata was said to be associated with the veneration of the ancestors.

People were ruled by their traditional rulers, the chiefs, but sooner or later, they were to show allegiance to young Resident Magistrates who took over the functions of the traditional chiefs. The chiefs were soon derogatorily referred to as trouble makers before they were replaced by government appointed headmen. They were later brought in through the back door as civil servants and were paid by the government who expected them to be loyal and to enforce loyalty among their people. Many of those who failed to collaborate with the regime ended up on Robben Island.

The Xhosa nation has a paradoxical history of a deep-rooted patriarchal system, several devastating frontier wars of colonization, the inadvertent but concerted onslaught of missionary influence on the Xhosa cultural life, the ravages of westernization on the traditional social fabric, and more recently, the impact of economic deprivation on the entire Xhosa nation.

The above-mentioned forces combined to make severe inroads on how the Xhosa people perceived themselves and on how they viewed, among others, their culture in this rapidly changing environment. This general disintegration of traditional culture prompted the earlier writers such as W B Rubusana to write books aimed at capturing the efficacious elements of this dying heritage, e.g. *Zemk' inkomo magwalandini* (1906). John Henderson Soga wrote *AmaXosa: Life and Customs* (1931) with the same purpose in mind. Jordan, in his *Inqumbo yeminyanya* (1940) also warned against deculturation.

One of the most disastrous consequences of the forces sketched above was the relegation of the Xhosa language to an inferior position. This tendency was noticed many years ago by Junod (n.d. 42) who once remarked in the early thirties:

Our time is one of great changes for the Bantu peoples. Many able students of Bantu think that these languages are doomed, and there is much to be said for this point of view. The way in which European words have been invading Bantu languages, the way in which educated Africans have

sometimes disregarded their own tongue and thought it fashionable to despise it, are alarming features.

This attitude has persisted ever since. The Xhosa language has been relegated to an inferior position. It is common cause that African languages are, wrongly or rightly, regarded as not having economic value. It is not doubted that this is true in the present post-colonial situation, but one's culture and/or mother-tongue cannot be commercialized in this way, unless one is prepared to go the same way as did the Afro-Americans whom serfdom had compelled to speak the colonizers language only.

The French have launched national campaigns to protect their languages from Anglicism. In South Africa, the Afrikaners had their own "Language factory" at Stellenbosch to create "non-English" words. Besides, they fought for many years for recognition of their mother-tongue as an official language, a battle that is threatening to erupt once more, if the present language policy is seen to relegate Afrikaans to an inferior position.

If properly used, culture offers the individual social identity. This, in turn, not only leads to stability and self-determination in a multi-cultural context, but also to an appreciation of other people's culture. This is because culture is not something out there but something in us. It is us, as Albie Sachs (n.d. 4) points out:

The fact is that the cultural question is central to our identity as a movement: if culture were merely an instrument to be hauled onto the stage on ceremonial or fund-raising occasions, or to liven up a meeting, we would ourselves be empty of personality in the interval. Happily, this is not the case - culture is us, and we are people, not things waiting to be put into motion from time to time.

Culture, in this context, refers to "high culture" in language and the arts. This immediately raises two problems. Firstly, culture cannot be imposed or rescued without doing damage to it - it becomes a tool of the imposer or rescuer, not part of the former bearers of it. Secondly, cultures are dynamic things. They change or decay.

Of course, apartheid is to blame for most of the chaos we see today. Blacks lost their culture through colonization but could not completely assimilate the oppressor's culture as he steadfastly kept them away from even the fringes of his culture. The two races stayed together in a single balkanized country, making one a total stranger to the other. Culture, including the high artistic and literary culture, on both sides of the divide, has become a curiosity item. The honour always lies in assimilating the master's culture and if the master happens to dress in traditional wear, it is only to please the noble savage who

does not share a common humanity with the master as pointed out by Sachs (n.d. 6):

Apartheid philosophy, on the other hand, denied any common humanity, and insisted that people be compartmentalised into groups forcibly kept apart. In rejecting apartheid, we do not envisage a return to a modified form of the British Imperialist notion, we do not plan to build a non-racial yuppie-dom which people may enter only by shedding and suppressing the cultural heritage of their specific community.

While ethnic cultures will always play an important role in our multi-cultural context, we should not allow them to thwart our efforts to work towards some form of common national culture in this country. It is, however, worth noting that Degenaar (1993: 53) strongly advises against the imposition of a new imperialistic uniculturalism:

We must be guarded against the imperialism of culture which is typical of nationalism. If we choose a democratic culture in South Africa there is no need for the notion of nationhood sponsoring the ideal of a common culture, a culture by decree, a homogeneous life-style promoting identical citizens, a collective feeling, a general will, the sense of being part of a collective personality, 'being of one language and one mind,' the ideal of a national culture or a national uniformity which in an imperialist fashion takes the place of communal cultures.

We are moving towards one common motherland of which all of us will be full citizens. We, therefore, need to develop a culture that will foster the honour of serving our mother country by having common national symbols such as the national anthem, a national flag, and a common communications network where GOOD MORNING SOUTH AFRICA would be including all South Africans and not a section of the population.

We need to formulate strategies by which the various communities and groups will contribute to the democratic culture we all want to see evolve in the post apartheid South Africa. We need to establish a democratic reconciliation of the hitherto divergent and antagonised cultures. Reactionary or racist elements in the dominant culture must be jettisoned in favour of some cultural pluralism that will be acceptable to the new South Africa. We are the people who should initiate these moves as the oppressor cannot be able to do so as Paulo Freire (1968: 32) points out:

Although the situation of oppression is a dehumanised and dehumanizing totality affecting both the oppressors and those whom they oppress; it is the latter who must, from their stifled humanity, wage for both the struggle for a fuller humanity; the oppressor who is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes others, is unable to lead this struggle.

The resources for a brighter cultural future are copious if only we could sit down, cool down, and get on with the business of rebuilding this country on genuine and solid cultural foundations.

## 2. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the ultimate goal, as pointed out by Fitzgerald (in Campschreur and Divendal 1989: 167), must be:

... to redouble our efforts to tear out of the moribund hands of the monstrosities of apartheid all the means of production of repressive cultural apparatus and ideology. In the situation of political, social, moral and cultural bankruptcy which apartheid has now reached, decisive cultural action by the progressive forces may well yield spectacular results.

We need to transform, fundamentally, all the institutions of cultural reaction and cultural racism in all their manifestations. We also need to bring about a revolution in our society, in line with the meaning that Degenaar (1993: 51) attaches to the word 'revolution':

In the moderate sense of the term the emphasis is placed on an attitude of turning upside down with the purpose of dismantling hierarchies which stifle freedom and of opposing all forms of absolutism in favour of individual energy and the creativity of the imagination. In the moderate sense - the revolution of the mind - we can speak of a perpetual revolution, for it remains conscious of the fact that the new dispensation can itself fall into absolutism. Eternal vigilance, continually holding off gods and tyrants, becomes part and parcel of this revolutionary attitude.

Then only will we hope to establish, in their place, vibrant democratic cultures for all in this country along the cultural diversity of today, as Sachs (n.d. 4) points out:

The objective is not to create a model culture into which everyone has to assimilate. but to acknowledge and take pride in the cultural variety of our people. In the past, attempts were made to force everyone into the mould of the English gentleman, projected as the epitome of civilisation, so that it was even an honour to be oppressed by the English.

It is only by so doing that the various cultures could play a salutary role in the reconstruction of a new South Africa. They are like threads in a tapestry. We need to weave them together to produce one whole of which we can all be proud. Our Nguni culture has long established that "injobo ithungelwa ebandla"

which literally means that a good garment has to be weaved communally, i.e. we must pool our resources. This is again confirmed by the Xhosa expression that says "Umntu ngumntu ngabantu" which means that no person is an island. We need one another. Some of the metaphorical threads of the future culture will consist of the progressive elements of the so-called Western culture while the Eurocentric, reactionary elements will be relegated to oblivion. The non-salutary aspects of the different ethnic cultures will also have to suffer the same fate if we have to strive for common humanity in a common destiny.

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## A REFLECTION ON FAITH-HEALING MINISTRY IN AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

EMMANUEL ADOW OBENG

*Moi University, Kenya*

## INTRODUCTION

Prior to the advent of Christianity, the black African resorted to native medicine for healing. The traditional healer, in an attempt to solve health problems, dealt with the whole person and his or her problems as a single unit. He did not deal with the affliction alone as if it is separate from the person suffering it. With the advent of christianity, the African had an alternative to healing - western medicine. People walked far to avail themselves of western medicine at the missionary stations since it was seen as an extension or even an improvement on native medicine. But there is little recognizable ritual associated with western medical treatment. The examinations are usually detached and cursory, placing emphasis on the clinical and biological evidence which closes off contact with the socio-religious forms of diagnosis used by traditional practitioners. This apparent over-stress on a scientific and non spiritual approach to healing by western medicine and the failure of this type of medicine to protect people from diseases which are believed to have supernatural causation, has triggered off a third form of healing in some African countries. This is faith healing - the practice of treating illness or relieving suffering by calling for divine help or by asserting that the mind or spirit can control the body. The term is sometimes used as synonymous with divine healing or spiritual healing. These terms cover a wide range of views. At one end of the spectrum is the assertion by some proponents of faith healing that sickness does not exist except as a mental condition. They refuse medical assistance on the ground that accepting treatment would show lack of faith. Other people seek divine or spiritual help only in cases where medical science has not cured them. At the other end of the spectrum is the belief that faith healing can be associated with the standard practice of medicine.

In Africa, however, faith healing is foremost the reliance on the power of prayer to heal all diseases. The practice gives the African a religiously related health treatment in a clearly religious environment without attracting the derogatory remarks levelled at traditional healers. Let me quickly clarify here that (a) faith healing is found in all cultures but the reason for its rise or