



African Cultures and Development

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1. The past

Of all the five continents, Africa is, together with perhaps Oceania, the one continent giving rise to controversies where the notion of culture is concerned.

These controversies have, as we know, created considerable tension in the course of the last twenty years between Africans and other races. From this point of view, they are unfortunate.

When, however, we consider the progress made since the end of the last war, we are tempted to be thankful for the clashes which have occurred with regard to African cultural achievement ; we would go so far as to say that we understand these controversies and can find excuse for them, for it was a very difficult uphill struggle, feelings were very reserved and the idea of a Negro culture appeared surprising, to say the least.

What was the problem ?

The problem consisted of making the West understand - the West, sole guardian and source until then of civilization - that Africa also had, in the course of the centuries, devised its own ways of life, its own concepts ; in short, that it possessed a culture.

But it was easy for the West to have reserves about this ; faced with the contrast of African societies living under its rule, cared for, nourished and educated by it ; of tribes constantly warring with one another and leading an unstable life, and of the Western Societies, full of dynamism, living in progress and for progress, even the man the most disposed to accord to Africa some sort of cultural life had in fact reason to hesitate. It was against such a background that Africans demanded acknowledgement of their cultures ; the world was entering the atomic age, Africa was becoming adolescent : it wanted to be accorded the right to speak about itself, to express itself according to its own standards. It was a difficult polemic.

Need we recall the two opposing view points ? In the West, they were content to say : culture being the state of development of knowledge, the arts, technical sciences and of public spirit within a community, Africa could not claim to have a culture : its poverty, its ignorance,

its primitiveness are just so many negative factors calling into question even the quality of Africans as human beings.

We remember what, at this period, a man as versed in sociological matters as Levy-BRUHL thought, when he defended his thesis about the prelogical mentality of the Negro.

As for the Africans, their idea of culture was quite different.

Culture, they said, exists wherever there is a human community ; each community knows in effect how to organise the framework of its existence and animate itself by its own means, and culture can only be understood in the sense of being both a reflection upon life and a reflection of this same life. In the long run therefore, it is the expression of social reality.

Undoubtedly, the existence of Negro cultures cannot be denied. This appears to be conclusive as far as the African past is concerned ; where does it stand today, what will it be tomorrow ?

2. The future of Negro cultures

We are going to try to consider this double question. We know that the encounters between Africa and Europe took place under the sign of major events : slavery and colonisation.

This encounter, often marked by countless atrocious human dramas, brought upheavals and disorders to the native societies. Everywhere, the West imposed its law, its ideas, its aspirations. Everywhere, it acted as though it wanted to lend Negroes a head, a heart ; on the collective level, it strained its ingenuity to induce an entire society to renounce its own manner of thinking and feeling.

This invasion of techniques, beliefs and cultures from the West into native societies constituted an initial threat to the existence of African cultures.

Henceforth, there would be Christian Africans with all the sects familiar to the Christian race : Anglicans, Protestants, Catholics just as there were African Moslems.

This diversity of cultural moulds, each of them seeking universal acceptance was supplemented by technical humanism.

How can the African avail himself of his own culture, above all, will he have the time and means to rethink it, caught up as he is by the imperatives of daily existence ?

Some there are who have pretended they have solved the problem by the pure and simple rejection of non-African beliefs. Freed from alien religions, Africa, by returning to its traditional animism, can in this way rethink its mode of life and devise its own concepts, so it has been affirmed.

Let us suppose the problem has been resolved : Africa abandons Christianity and Islam and tries to develop its own potentialities. Will it be for all that as free from external influence ?

We do not think so. Technical humanism from the West has penetrated the very soul of Africa, nothing can eradicate it.

We fully realise that all techniques were not born in the West. We can easily mention gunpowder, the compass and many other technical inventions ; but why pretend to ignore that humanism originated in the West ; how can one forget that Africa lives with techniques since its encounter with the West ?

Some are not displeased by this : more than ever at the present time, Africa seems to be neglectful of its past ; preoccupied by the search for a better, essentially materialistic, life, Africa thirsts eagerly after techniques which estrange it from itself, all the more so when its proper self has not been completely revealed to it.

It can be seen amongst the elite as amongst the people : it infiltrates everywhere : social well-being, the result of technique is becoming the be-all and end-all of everyone.

At this rate, African cultures run the risk of becoming the prerogatives of a few, mere museums pieces.

It is accordingly the very existence of Negro cultures which is jeopardised. The situation seems to be all the more disturbing in that technical humanism reveals its universal vocation in non-European societies.

When it is realised that this universal vocation coincides with the awareness, henceforth a real awareness, of underdevelopment, there is reason to fear that efforts towards development will be made to the detriment of cultures, or fringe cultures. For what African cultures suffer the most from, what causes some people finally to deny their existence, is their state of underdevelopment.

This underdevelopment however depends less upon their intrinsic value than upon their capacity for propagation. This brings us back to techniques : Africa has no books. Now no books, and no continuity nor efficacy in cultural and social development.

We shall only therefore overcome this cultural underdevelopment when a policy for culture has been established on the individual level, as on the State level, so as to ensure the spreading of innovations resulting from techniques, and their comprehension. Let us be clear about this.

African countries have made substantial progress in the economic and social fields since the end of the last war. *Fides* and the Colonial Development Corporation have permitted the development of natural resources and the raising of living standards.

We have progressed from a barter economy to an economy of solidarity in which all taking part, if only they can make good use of it, can turn these new concepts to good account.

Progress in the economic and social domains has not however always corresponded with the natural human values. And the problem posed today is that of integral development combining both economic evolution and the values of civilization. Now development understood in this way presupposes the devising of an educational system consonant with its peculiar needs. In this way, the rhythm of training of a sufficient number of technicians and teachers, the rhythm of the annual growth rate in school education become the basic factors in economic, social and cultural development.

But the rhythm and time factors we have just mentioned are notions dependent upon economic planning. They imply the rationalisation of efforts capable of promoting a harmonised development which comes about through creation, propagation and explication.

Now, propagation and explication imply changes in attitude and a certain amount of receptiveness which allow the innovation to become intelligible.

In short, education ceases to mean an initiatory function subject to the biological rhythm of slow maturation and becomes at one and the same time a method of transmission, a factor for change and an initiation into life. Do we not have here the meaning and traditional practice of education within African Societies both of which have to be adjusted to the modern concepts of information and diffusion?

3. Information and the diffusion of culture

Before, however, turning our thoughts to this field, let us pause a moment to consider the action which must first be taken on behalf of African cultures.

It goes without saying that the first steps to be taken must be with regard to the awareness of Africans of their culture. We know now that Africans have lost no time in improving their material lot and that they bring all their energy to bear on it. No where in Africa do we come across a similar preoccupation with African values. Apart from a few of the elite, the cultural problem meets only with indifference or even scorn.

It seems a matter of urgency therefore that action be taken to arouse the people's attention ; the people must be told that the raising of living standards without self-assertion, without a spiritual and cultural flowering, leads to absurdity. The people must be warned against the frailty and incompleteness inherent in the adoption of any form of culture which is alien to Africa.

No doubt in this matter we must beware of letting it be thought that Western culture is devoid of usefulness to Africa or incapable of being assimilated. Western universities can perfectly well produce great scholars and eminent statesmen. But what must be said in all fairness is that, if Western humanism, full of richness and experience, can help the African to blossom out, it is perfectly justifiable to want to give to men, undergoing training and living in an environment of global development, such transcending values and motivations as are faithful to the original humanism of these men.

When the people have realised that African culture is a fact, they must be introduced to it. But speaking of culture to the people implies first that culture exists in a living and practical form. Now we know that Negro culture, as far as literature is concerned, is oral ; that its works of art exist in museums ; that the dance and music are also expressed orally.

As long as such culture is not inventoried, collated and catalogued in hand books or treatises nothing serious can be embarked upon.

To accomplish this, it seems that we shall have to turn to the West and ask it to perfect the bonds of solidarity that have come into being since the meeting of our two worlds. The West has managed to take a valid interest in Negro cultures. No doubt its reasons for so doing were not altogether disinterested ones ; but why bother about the motives that have impelled it in this direction ? Its sociologists, linguists, ethnologists, geographers and historians have amassed material for years past, it is now up to us Africans to utilise it, to place it in its natural context as need be and continue with the work that has been accomplished.

If the inventorying and cataloguing of cultures are indispensable, the most important factor remains the spreading of such cultures and the programming of information media.

And here a first question arises : which classes of society are we to approach ?

It is obvious that the only way to satisfy the natural function of Negro cultures is to bring them within reach of people ; it is a good thing for the elite to be immersed in Negro cultures, it is equally as good, if not more so, for the people to know Africa's past and live intimately with its heroes and wise men ; it is the best means of imbuing it with self-confidence.

Two methods can be employed to spread culture : popularisation and traditional school education. A distinction in fact must be made depending upon whether it is proposed to spread cultures outside or within the schools. For children of school age, initiation into Negro values must be effected through the media of school curricula. The more the curriculum is adapted to the natural environment of students,

the more successive generations absorb Negro cultures, the easier will it be to form a real Negro humanism.

The way leading to this Negro transformation is a hard one : better to have this conviction than pretend to ignore it.

The education of the present generation of youth and of future generations is a long and exacting task, time is needed to attain the objective. In the case of adults, the same time factor is evident. Here, however, the time factor is perhaps the least important : what matters is the means essential to the launching of a vigorous, attractive programme capable of earning the people's support and likely to satisfy their needs.

Here, the lack of capital for financing such a campaign is certainly a major obstacle that we must try to overcome ; the same applies to the lack of trained technical personnel.

In the final analysis, that is the problem of education : we are here and now faced with the importance of this problem in the development plans of African countries.

We are faced accordingly with precise questions : can the African elite continue to be interested in African cultures if priority is not given to educational planning amongst the efforts needed for their country's development ; and supposing it is agreed that education is the overriding task, will the introduction into it of certain natural values be overlooked, values contributing to the total development of man and assisting him the better to conduct his own life ?

But the moment that the social structure becomes profoundly disturbed by external influences originating in other conceptions of harmony, is it not worthwhile to create the working instruments necessary for the renewal of these same values ?

No one will underestimate the importance of these questions : it is pointless to cavil about the value of African cultures whilst regarding the past. More so than the present, we have to face up to the future.



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