

Tempting traditions

Internal debate needed in traditional cultures

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In examining a given tradition, two temptations should be resisted: The temptation of contempt and rejection, and the temptation to justify and idealise. Paulin Hountondji, a philosopher from Benin, emphasises the need for internal debate within traditional cultures, in order to develop new alternatives.

It was the fate of some cultures in the world to be considered inferior during centuries of Western domination. As far as Africa is concerned, this included the long years of the slave trade as well as colonialism. This experience led to the internalised, to various degrees, of a sense of inferiority in the cultures themselves. There were other voices, however, both within these cultures themselves and from the dominant, especially the European cultures that rejected these claims to superiority and put Western civilisation back in a far more modest place. African voices have been part of this new concert. A danger here, however, could be that non-

Western cultures are over idealised and romanticised.

Two temptations

The first temptation is that of cultural imperialism based on what might be called ethnocentrism. Historically its most visible form during the last four centuries has been the collective sense of superiority that has emerged within Western civilisation. A wide range of scholars have put their intelligence and learning to the service of this prejudice, such as Gobineau, the author of *Essay on the inequality of the human races*, for example.

The second temptation is that of an excessive and uncritical reaction to the former one: romanticising and idealising the so-called primitive cultures. It usually takes the form of an identification with one's own tradition, as a result of self-defence and justification. We are still facing this danger today. As an African, it is tempting to develop a kind of relation with our own culture which is not so pure and straightforward as it would have been, if we did not feel compelled to answer the challenge of other cultures. People from dominated cultures are not the only ones, however, who react this way. They may be supported by dissident voices from within the dominant cultures themselves. I called attention to this point many years ago: the rejection of ethnocentrism, or in this case Eurocentrism, came first from European intellectuals themselves, especially the anthropologists and ethno-philosophers. Some of them went as far as simply inverting

the imperialistic scale of cultural norms.

One of the most serious issues, therefore, is to get rid today of this obsession and to develop a free and critical relationship to our own cultures. In other words: how to revive the internal debate in places or circumstances where it has been slowed down or stifled by external influence? How to minimise the negative impact of racism and colonial contempt on the way people behave towards their own culture? How to get mentally liberated from the views other cultures held of our own culture, so we can prioritise our own debate?

The wives of King Ghezo

Let me give an example. In his overview *African religion, spirituality and thought* published 30 years ago, Dominique Zahan, a French anthropologist, mentions a sacred custom in some parts of Africa in the nineteenth century. At the burial of King Ghezo of Abomey, now part of the Republic of Benin, several of his wives were sacrificed in the belief that they would accompany him in the Beyond. Moreover, most of them were said to consider it a great honour to be chosen. Colonial ideologists would have simply presented this practice as another proof of the savage or primitive African cultures. The modern anthropologist, on the contrary, tried to identify the *philosophy* behind this custom. To Dominique Zahan, this ritual only meant that for the Africans, there is no real discontinuity between life and death: life flows from death, and death is but the continuation of life.

This is a good example of how ethno-philosophy works: it refers to a collective worldview as a possible justification for the most unjustifiable customs. Cultural nationalism has the same objective: it seeks to justify all inherited practices, including unjustifiable ones. This is the appeal of ethno-philosophy to so many Third World intellectuals, especially African philosophers. Yet, no woman today, even from the Fon culture in present-day Benin, would like to be buried alive with her husband, however prestigious he may be.



Photo: Beckwith/Fisher

It is important to resist both romanticizing and rejecting traditional practices. Hamar woman, Ethiopia, preparing ritual coffee for jumping-the-bull ceremonies

Internal debate

What is needed in the present circumstances, therefore, is to get rid of this need for self-justification before the tribunal of other cultures. This must be done if we are to develop the internal debate we need about our own cultures, within our own cultures. We need to understand how such a ritual came into being, why so many princesses not only accepted it but went so far as to offer themselves as voluntary victims. Zahan's reference to a certain conception of life and death is probably correct, but we need more. We need to appreciate how strong the social pressure on these princesses was, and understand the overall social atmosphere in the context of absolute monarchy in a small size country. We need to understand how this very philosophy of life and death came to develop and why it does no longer work today.

I wrote some time ago about brainstorming as a way to favour, from within a society, a new awareness of values. Instead of trying to impose norms imported from other cultures, it would be more effective to draw upon the inner dynamism of every culture for self-criticism and self-improvement. All cultures have developed social practices in the past that are no longer accepted. Clear examples are the inquisition in Western Europe, the slave trade and in our own time the anti-black racism in Western Europe and North America.

Cultures are not only dynamic and bound to change over time, more importantly no culture has just one system of norms at any one time. Instead, there are always several systems mutually competing in any given culture. Therefore, in any given culture one should always carefully look for the wide range of secondary models, beyond the dominant social model.

African cultural pluralism

In order to do this we need, first, to develop new paradigms in the social sciences. Whatever the discipline, the tendency in the social sciences in Africa has been to frame out just *one* way of living or thinking that appears to express the specificity of African cultures. By calling attention exclusively to what might be considered as the African difference, social scientists have overlooked the internal pluralism that exist within African cultures. They have not focused on the inner tensions that make them living cultures, just as unbalanced and therefore, just as dynamic and bound to change as any other culture in the world. Greater attention should be paid, therefore, to the wide range of marginal practices and norms beyond the norms and social practices usually held as characteristic of a given culture.

The next problem, then, is a methodological one: by what methods, through what theoretical and practical tools is it

possible for the social scientist to identify these hidden models? How can we best recognise the voices that tell another story? To stick to our example, how can we identify the stifled protest which was presumably uttered or eventually suppressed during King Ghezo's burial, by the princesses' mothers, sisters, relatives, secret lovers, or even by the princesses themselves, if they had been given the opportunity to speak off the record? Such questions are based on the assumption that, beyond the unity and specificity of a culture, it is important to explore its internal diversity and pluralism. They invite new approaches and an important shift in the current scientific paradigms.

Breaking walls of prejudice

It is not enough to develop a new reading of the past, a new comprehension of tradition, however. Once it has been recognised that tradition is plural, the practical question is how to promote the internal debate inside our own cultures in such a way that it may itself develop the best possible new alternatives?

Here I have not elaborated on how difficult it can be to organise brainstorming in a context where some people are used to manipulate the masses and for that reason do not want the truth to come out at all. A favourite method used by these manipulators is to pour torrents of lies on their followers. Walls of prejudice are erected around them, making them inclined to avoid listening to any other information or explanation. Despite this, some people sometimes come across facts that were supposed to have remained hidden. The charm is then neutralised and people are prepared, once again, to face reality.

The question thus arises: how can these walls of prejudice be broken? How can people, unwilling to discuss any questioning of the established order, be progressively brought to face reality and accept discussion? How can such people be brought into the brainstorming exercise which is the condition for collective invention and renewal? Specific actions are needed to deconstruct the walls of prejudice erected by manipulators to prevent fair discussion and dialogue. We need to rebuild the traditional cultures with elements provided by internal debate.

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Strengthening traditional cultures implies supporting the internal dialogue. Baganda woman, Uganda, combines traditional and modern element in her clothing

Photo: Beckwith/Fisher