

## **LITERATURE AND CULTURE - THE SUSTAINABILITY CONNECTION FROM AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE**

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### Summary

Since the late 1980s, attempts have been made to establish a strong sustainability connection in culture and literature. Objectively, this connection is uneasily recognised. Yet culture and literature offer a potent weapon for the sustainability of Africa. The reason is that colonialism greatly damaged, and in some cases masked, this connection in Africa. Development specialists and agents have always looked at Africans through the ideologically coloured glasses of ‘prejudiced’ colonial anthropologists who documented African cultures as raw, uncooked, primitive and uncivilised in a bid to justify the high-handed colonisation scramble. Today such prejudices still linger in “development agencies like FAO and Intermediate Technology” further dampening sustainable development prospects of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). These agencies see African cultures and literature as ‘being in the way’ of development and must be rooted out for there to be development. From extensive literature review, and interviews, it is clear that the world still needs practical and genuine democratic mobilization and ways of thinking and acting that allow Africans to live together harmoniously without losing their identity and sense of community, and without betraying their heritage. Hence, the need to strengthen our regard for cultural diversity to achieve a global ethic (DMFA, 2002:2). According to anthropological calls for cultural relativity, sustainable development can only thrive if we fully acknowledge the principle of cultural freedom and begin to show respect for other cultures. A reconstruction of the African history to give meaning to African cultures is therefore crucial. We have provided observable and verifiable examples of sustainability aspects in the African ways of life—cultures. We argue that failure to accept the relevance of African cultures, as is the case with many literary works on SSA, will make the longest term sustainable development goals unrealisable. We buttress our arguments with life support strategies like crafts, obligation, reciprocity, levelling, taboos, having many children, craft and witchcraft. Our examples come from a variety of sub-Saharan African countries. We further recommend that more research is needed and should be done by Africans themselves studying their own cultures the way local people see them rather than the point of view of western cultural values. This implies a divergence from the current anthropology of the ‘exotic others’ to an anthropology of ourselves.

### 1. Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) includes countries located south of the Sahara. Apart from West Sahara, 48 of the 53 countries in Africa, including Sudan, belong to this region. Most of them fall in the low Human Development Rank with a few exceptions that tail the medium rank (UNDP, 2002). In 2003, over 81% of the countries in the Low Human Development Rank were from SSA (UNDP, 2003). The sub-region is blessed with enormous cultural, mineral and natural resources but largely depends on foreign companies for their exploitation and transformation. Despite this richness, Africa is not a favourable destination for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). We are chiefly pre-

occupied with the issue of sustainable development in the sub-region because since independence Africa has faced problems due to its inability to embark on a meaningful path to development and to achieve a level of well-being deemed satisfactory for a sizable proportion of its population. The problems that plague Africa are an ongoing process, a social history of which each and every African is part and parcel. Post-modern anthropology calls for a shift from an anthropology of the “exotic other” to an anthropology of “ourselves” or the call to “anthropologize ourselves” (Rabinow, 1986). Implicated in this call is the need for Africans to focus their attention on their assumptions and strategies to “study up” their societies. As academics from the sub-region, we feel the urgent duty and call to incorporate all the ecological, socio-economic and political connections in African cultures and literature into an academic mainstream with a view to “study them up” (Gardner and Lewis, 1996).

Lack of data is a serious impediment. Data on development aspects and sustainable development indicators are lacking for countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Even data that is available mostly originates from the industrial north and has been tainted by ideological orientations. This is true given that the basis of most scientific enquiries on SSA is literature from colonial administrators gathered and put together by ‘prejudiced’ anthropologists. Fortunately and unfortunately, the sustainable development agenda for the sub-region is founded upon the existing literature, which has for the most part favoured the transfer of inappropriate technologies and a total reformation of all that is African. It was not until the late 1980s and 1990s that the issue of culture became highlighted in international affairs. For long, development attempts regarded African culture and literature as “development barriers” (Crew & Harrison, 1998). For instance, in cultural studies, ethnic or nationalist movements are represented as resulting from cultural interests, generated by emotion with complexities of identity formation (Eriksen, 2003). With the increasing realization of the fundamental flaws of relegating (inferior) cultures in development agendas, we wonder just how successful this new wind of thought can gain impetus and give a people a chance to choose and own their development according to their way of life that is compatible with nature and respect for all generations. Given that propositions for guidelines of sustainable development are based on what is already known about a region, can we think of a sustainability connection if we rely on existing details about sub-Saharan African cultures and literature? We attempt an answer to this question by linking the trilogy of literature, culture and sustainable development as they pertain to SSA.

### **1.1. The Concept of Literature**

Literature is understood in a multiplicity of ways. It is a body of written or oral works, such as novels, poetry, or drama that use words to stimulate the imagination and confront the reader with a unique vision of life. The underlying assumption here is that a work of literature is a creative, universal form of expression that addresses the emotional, spiritual, or intellectual concerns of humanity. However, this idea about literature is no more than the fourteenth century idea that literature is writing (Milner, 1996:1). In the eighteenth century literature was viewed as “well-written books of an imaginative or creative kind” (William, 1976:152). Good literature is said to demonstrate craft and artistry and has the power to raise questions, provide fresh points of view, and expand the understanding of self and the world, stimulate the imagination,

and renew the spirit (Beasley, 2003). A good anthology of literature as fiction, poetry, and drama can be found in the six editions of '*Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature*' with very readable explanations of the elements of all the forms of writing and excellent chapters on critical thinking and writing (Meyer, 2003). To us Literature is any creative, factual and imaginative work about people and what they have done, believe, and have created or are willing to create. Literature is a multitude of works; written in books, journals, newspapers and magazines; spoken; acted; sung; filmed; drawn as cartoons or shown on television. Literature should not only portray the positive side of human activities but the negative consequences with the view to command a reversal for the better. This implies a balanced representation of the realities of human existence. Literature can be experienced through a variety of media; oral, audio, audiovisual and so on. It is an expression of culture because it documents human knowledge, belief and behaviour.

## **1.2. The Concept of Culture**

Like literature, culture is a contested phenomenon which is understood to mean different things by different groups. Culture is the "integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behaviour". Culture embodies languages, ideas, beliefs, customs, taboos, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals and so on (DMFA, 2002). Culture consists of shared values, beliefs, knowledge, skills and practices that underpin behaviour by members of a social group at a particular point in time. It is creative expression, skills, traditional knowledge and resources. These include, craft and design, oral and written history and literature, music, drama, dance, visual arts, celebrations, indigenous knowledge of botanical properties and medicinal applications, architectural forms, historic sites, and traditional technologies, traditional healing methods, traditional natural resource management, celebrations, and patterns of social interaction that contribute to group and individual welfare and identity (DMFA, 2002; World Bank Group, 2003). It is generally accepted that culture embodies the way humans live with and treat others and how they develop or react to changes in their environments.

### **1.2.1 True African Culture, Literature and Development**

Objectively speaking the true African Culture and Literature is still undocumented. When one looks closely at the daily lives of ordinary Africans, one is bound to come out with some bench marks of what true African literature and culture can be. The total way of life of the ordinary African and the stories, drama, art and so on are dominated by communal values. Sharing, interconnectedness and co-operation dominate. These values are reflected in their interaction with each other, song and dance. Informal discussions with a group of forty women in the South West province of Cameroon show that most of the stories told to them by their parents were geared towards encouraging social solidarity and cohesion. The stage for such stories was around a fireside after an evening meal or in the moonlight. Members of the household and even neighbours could join in such story telling times. Sometimes songs were sung which convey a message that encourages group behaviours and discourages individualism. True African culture is being manifested in what we call Life Support Strategies.

Reciprocity, obligation and levelling have often been misinterpreted as “the anti-thesis to rationality” (Crew and Harisson, 1998). We shall explain each of these concepts by using an example. Death is seen as a common problem in the sub-region. At such an event, sympathisers come from far and wide to pay their last respect and to mourn with the bereaved family for weeks. At such times, noone goes to the farm or to any other work. They come with food and drinks during celebrations to see the ghost ‘on its way’ to the spirit realm. Stories are told, songs are sung and danced to appease the bereaved. When others are confronted with death, the same is reciprocated. In the west, tight work schedules have given room for international mourners to make money. The handling of the dead is not treated as a community affair but an individual matter where money plays a key role. There is little sustainability because money cannot buy co-operation at all levels to solve common problems.

It is an obligation for parents to socialise their young into the values of the community. If a child turns out to be a prostitute, a thief or killer or has HIV/Aids, the parents are blamed. So we see a sort of intergenerational contract that seems to reduce disease, crime and deviant behaviours. Evolved societies see such things as interfering with human rights of children and others. The outcome is increased incidence of Aids, killings or child prostitution especially in cities. Delinquency is on the rise as families lose their socialisation function, which is not good for the sustainability of society.

The most widely used levelling mechanism in SSA is witchcraft. In Mali for instance, witchcraft accusations are so strong that small-scale farmers dare not produce more than their peers for fear of being bewitched (Crew and Harisson, 1998). The assumption here is that individuals who ignore social obligations for individual pursuits are likely to be regarded as deviant. While witchcraft has its underpinnings, we are of the opinion that its crucial function of social control should not be undermined. For instance, magical spells are used to determine who stole something, who tells lies, etc.

When asking about why such group values are eroding today, we were informed by our group of women described above that formal education is the main cause. Schools teach individualistic values reminiscent of western societies who introduced such schools in Africa during the colonial period and have done much to preserve them since then. Another reason was that women no longer have time to stay at home with children because they work in offices and not on farms where one can determine rest periods at will. Economic pressures are relegating group behaviours to the background. We see that as society becomes more complex, so too are family relations and roles. Families spend time watching pop music and soap operas on television, then tell folk tales, sing folk songs, and so on. What then are SSA’s hopes for sustainable (human development?).

### **1.3. The Concept of Sustainable Development**

African development scholars tend to ignore the environmental factor. To them development is about change for the better, which must be appropriate culturally, economically, technologically, etc. Equity, sustainability and justice are at the heart of any such change. True development cannot be measured in solely economic terms but must also include changes in the quality of lives. Development occurs with reduction

and elimination of poverty, inequality and unemployment within a society. Hence, development is about reaching poor people, so that they meet their basic needs as indicated in the Millennium Development Goals (World Bank, 2003). Consequently, indicators like GDP, GNP and HDI indices like life expectancy, access to health; clean water; and education is used to measure human development (UNDP, 1993). What then is sustainable development? Sustainable development as a concept came to the forefront in 1981 in the work of Brown and in 1987 through the Brundtland Commission, and is defined as "development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs". At the time of writing her report, little did Gro Harlem Brundtland know that industrialised countries would only pay lip service to this very political definition. Sustainable development is a planned cultural, economic, social, environmental and political change for the better. It calls for co-operation at all levels by all stakeholders geared towards the wellbeing of the masses for the masses and by the masses. It is long termed, fosters inter- and intra-generational equity and does not foul the air, poison the water, pollute and degrade land. Respect for other cultures, be they inferior or dominant, high or low is a necessary condition for a global attempt to achieve sustainable development with every stakeholder getting involved and staying engaged. It is important to note that traditional African culture is not opposed to but is integral to sustainable development because in most cases it commands cooperation to prepare for a common future rather than individualism.

## **2. Literature and Cultural Enrichment in Sustainable Development**

Here we argue that if literary works about the total way of life of ordinary Africans are given keen attention, the world will realise a cursory link between culture, literature and sustainable development. The Japanese and Chinese offer the best examples of embracing modernity whilst being firmly grounded in their traditions. Africans associate modernity with discarding cultural values, norms and traditions even when these are beneficial to society. Most of the traditional medical and healing techniques have been lost as these were branded as heathen. This contrasts with traditional Chinese healing techniques like acupuncture and herbal remedies, which have suddenly become widespread even in the west. Publications on African healing techniques and subsequent research based on these treatment methods, running alongside modern medicine and complimenting each other are more sustainable than otherwise. This would help in discovering technologies relevant to the level of advancement of the continent. Africa went all out to adopt technologies from the west without having the capacity to maintain or service them, resulting in disastrous photocopying.

## **3. Perception by Western Countries on African Literature, Culture and Development paths**

Western countries have often viewed Africans as inferior, lacking in self-governance and backward in every aspect of life. This idea stems from the idea that SSA had no literacy and intellectualism. This is justified by the widely publicised notion of Africa as a continent of 'song and dance' (Zanganah, 2004). Although SSA has a rich intellectual heritage which is familiar to many Africans, westerners still tend to believe that Africa

has had only an oral, non-literate culture. Contrarily, recently discovered manuscripts dating to the fourteenth century show that Timbuktu (Mali), was a haven of high literacy, a religious and cultural hub and a commercial crossroads on the trans-Saharan caravan route (Zanganeh, 2004).

Africa has been a millhouse for economic experiments by the IMF and other partners in development. The guiding idea has often been that westerners know too well what SSA needs to foster its development. Without understanding the cultural context of countries and communities for which intervention measures have been designed, Structural Adjustment Programmes, Enhanced Structural Adjustment Programmes, etc., all wrapped in the one size-fits-all development model of the IMF and World Bank have been forced on African ministers of finance and governments. The result is that there has not been ownership of programmes and therefore no continuity (DMFA, 2002).

### **3.1. Theories and Concepts that have Guided Africa's Development**

The scramble for Africa was partly driven by the search for raw materials for the growing industrial base in Europe and the perception that Africans were incapable of self-governance. Colonisation was the tool through which a development paradigm for Africa was developed. After colonisation sucked dry the African continent, Africa is still seen as the poorest continent in the world today. Since the publication of the first poverty report by the World Bank in 1948, poverty has been defined as living on less than \$2 a day and extreme poverty as living on less than \$1 a day. This flawed definition pushed development agents and specialists to think that Africa needs economic growth in order to 'catch-up' with societies in the west. Guided by modernist ideas, the intention is to let the continent move from tradition to modernity. Such an evolutionary thinking is being propagated by newly emerging global financial institutions like the IMF and the World Bank whose reform packages to SSA have often ended up in major tragedy. For instance, the structural adjustment programmes have ushered in mass poverty and misery among Africans while ensuring that debt servicing requirements by these poor and heavily indebted countries are met. Transfer of western technology is having its own underpinnings in SSA today. Vast areas of forests are being transformed into deserts, arable land is fast degrading because of abusive and inappropriate use of fertilizers, rivers are being polluted with industrial effluents and biodiversity is being lost. These are silent emergencies SSA has to deal with compared with the "loud" emergency of global warming, though SSA contributes only about '2% of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions' (The Globalist, 2003). Exacerbating the problem is the fact that western donors have often favoured the transfer of their technologies to SSA, without taking the culture of the peoples into consideration.

Recent calls for privatisation and globalisation are mere vehicles for importing the western capitalist culture of over-production and over-consumption. These attitudes may increase the Gross Domestic or National Product (GDP or DNP) of a country but these do not ensure Gross National Happiness, neither do they ensure that future generations can use the same resource base to meet their own development needs. There is ample evidence that the more affluent a society becomes, the more waste and environmental health hazards populations have to face. The higher the GDP, the economically better off the country. This also means more production and consumption

of goods and services, accompanied by heavy waste production. The objective reality is a plundering of the rich resources base in SSA, yet economic and social development prospects remain bleak.

Alternatively, we believe SSA can move from its current state of underdevelopment to sustainable development by adopting policies, programmes and projects that ensure that the resource base is not depleted. The economic growth model that has championed the development agenda imposed by westerners and which perceptibly destroys the life support system of the earth (land, air and water bodies) must be avoided. This should be accompanied by a development path that does not destroy the life support system of the earth. Key to this path is cross-cutting and broad based policies that guarantee inter- and intra-generational equity for both sexes, social acceptability, improved quality of life for the masses and their full participation in development policies, programmes and projects. This is known as the Sustainable Development path. What follows is a resume of contextualised case studies according to selected headings.

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