

## **Building a Culture of Knowledge**

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There are thousands of prescriptions for Africa and none of them working. Or maybe they are but just not working fast enough; as we solve one problem, others compound. So what is the solution to problem-solving that will result in exponential growth? It may just be public libraries. As simple as this sounds, those of us who know Africa know that obstacles are the name of the game to initiating, implementing and maintaining any idea on the continent. This essay will discuss in depth, the corollary surrounding these three stages of development. In order to do this, I am going to take the most radical step politically, and suggest that Africa is indeed a country that has developed sporadically throughout its perceived subcomponents of balkanized states and tribes since 1957.

Africa's ailments ring loud and true in all corners of the world: As the poorest continent, Africa hosts the AIDS pandemic, malaria, extensive internal strife, dependency on foreign aid, and dictators galore. It is a wonder people are even living! Yet because of the failure to implement Kwame Nkrumah's counsels of 'unity and community between free African States', and 'economic and social reconstruction of Africa' by not negating the 'materialistic civilization which disregards the spiritual side of the human personality and man's need of something beyond filling his stomach', Africa has found herself in an ironic pan-African state in which economic failure is one ubiquitous (save for South Africa) ailment of each country.<sup>1</sup> Other common denominators, however, bind South Africa to the pack and it is for these convictions of a resultant pan-Africanism that I will regard Africa as a country.

### **Initiating a Library**

Recently a young Kenyan woman approached me and told me boldly that she would like to be a performance artist. Her ensuing question after this statement was what one might think - what is it she needs to do to achieve this goal? However before I could answer, she answered her own question, saying she knew she had to watch videos and in fact had begun with a piece of Tania Brugera's. She described it in just one sentence and in addition could not remember anything about the (political) context of which the performance was done. I instantly got frustrated but merely suggested that reading about what art is before she decided to specialise in performance could be a place to start. The conversation then continued as she disavowed her own perceptions of Brugera's performance as wrong and inadequate. I asked her what it was she had read about the performance that may render her own experience disingenuous, but unfortunately she was unable to recount anything to me. In summation of our thirty-minute exchange - during which I had continuously reiterated that it was important for her to understand what art is (or could be) - she said something that raised my eyebrows (and my concern). She said, terribly offhandedly, "So I will do this reading thing...!" I was not too surprised as this was not the first time I had encountered this unconscious adversity to reading on the continent, but this was an educated woman; a university graduate. I will come back to this story but first I would like to explain something that may help us assess this woman's situation.

There are three classes of people in Africa. These are the politicians; the higher profile developmental organisation workers (the United Nations and International Non-Governmental Organisations); and the rest of us. In this decrepit capitalistic society that calls itself a democracy a couple of things are known:

1. The politicians do what they want whilst pretending to represent the people;
2. The developmental workers get paid a lot of money in accordance to representing the people but nothing ever changes; and
3. The people both accept that politicians do what they want and want to be developmental workers.

What we have heard recently in both Egypt and Tunisia is the voice of the people. But what we hear in the rest of Africa is a flailing capitalist guise of democracy in which advantageous socialist avenues are left by the wayside as means to suppress the rights of the people. There is an uncanny likening of the economically oppressed Africans of today to the nineteenth and twentieth century proletariat of Europe. Not only is there a need for the people of Africa to go beyond their subjectivity, they no longer possess any land or property; internally displaced people are rampant throughout the continent. Jean-Paul Sartre's comments on the position of the proletariat in relation to the Negro in his famous essay *Black Orpheus*, now apply to the (economically oppressed) African: 'the oppressed class must first find itself...it is a question of recognizing – in and by action – the objective situation of the proletariat'. In further irony, Sartre then refers to our development workers; 'the poetry of the future revolution has remained in the hands of the well-intentioned young bourgeois who found their inspiration in their personal psychological contradictions, in the dichotomy between their ideal and their class'.<sup>2</sup> It would seem that through hundreds of years of psycho-social behaviour the determining factors of socialist ideals now ring true in Africa.

In 1959, Léopold Sédar Senghor cautioned African leaders enchanted with socialism to not review Marx as an economist but instead as a sociologist and philosopher. They may have, however, listened too carefully heeding his advice without further contemplation, discarding Marx altogether. Senghor described the beneficial side of Marx's writings as the '*philosophy of humanism*' which in fact can be applied to twenty-first century Africa; in the thinking that it is better late than never.<sup>3</sup> Marx wrote:

*'(W)hat from the very first distinguishes the most incompetent architect from the best of bees, is that the architect has built a cell in his head before he constructs it in wax. The labour process ends in the creation of something which, when the process began, already existed in an ideal form. What happens is not merely that the worker brings about a change of form in natural objects at the same time, in the nature that exists apart from himself, he realises his own purpose, the purpose which gives the law to his activities, the purpose to which he has to subordinate his own will. Nor is this subordination a momentary act. Apart from the exertion of his bodily organs, his purposive will, manifesting itself as attention must be operative throughout the whole duration of labour'.<sup>4</sup>*

Senghor quoting this extract of *Das Kapital* did it to realise Marx's humanistic intentions; I quote this to draw a parallel to labour for survival by primitive man or 'nature', and the contemporary African populous. The majority of Africans are still bees building their hives and in fact the further cautionary predictions of Senghor are now reality. The non-implementation of socialist ideals over the past fifty years of African independence and the fool hearted jump into capitalism has essentially robbed us: 'religion, ethics, art, and literature – lose their real, autonomous character as they are invaded by the 'ghostly realities' of the economy. *Homo sapiens* become *Homo oeconomicus* and regress to the status of the animal' as we see today.<sup>5</sup>

But of course contemporary Africa does not exist within a vacuum. The means of communication in the nineteenth century were nowhere near as extensive as the Internet is today. Not every African today is isolated from the Internet, yet not every African has access to it. As Internet accessibility grows at a remedial pace (most rural

areas do not have reliable Internet connections), an establishing middle class are trying to keep up with Europe and North America. Nowhere else but in Africa is the detritus of capitalism more visible because of the contrast between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. The desire of excess runs rampant on our continent: 'In most cases, you see a huge squalor of strewn dirty garbage piled high, and mosquito infested waters. And yet all around it you see cars upon cars of Lexus, BMW, Mercedes-Benz and other luxury cars'.<sup>6</sup> To be absolutely clear I am not deriding capitalism and upholding socialism; as political practices, both resulted in materialism on either side of the iron curtain and remain undistinguishable today in Kenyan politics in which the current Prime Minister is a product of the former communist bloc and the current President a product of Western education. I am merely situating the groups of the population into sociological and quasi-economical contexts.

And so to return to our prospective performance artist, I must clarify that her ambitions, as she admitted, were in fact subjugated upon her by someone else; what *she* wanted to do was to work for an NGO (non-governmental organisation). So what we see here is her desire to jump social groups (I will refrain from using the word "class" as Sartre stated fluently in counter to Marx, class struggles are not the only determinations of social reality). This exhibiting the universal (not exclusive to Africa) desire of individuals to want more than one has with no obvious intentions of truly rewarding one's community. During those first fifteen minutes, however, when I was for a small while an interesting novelty she was still being driven by the desire of status; although capitalism has suffocated culture on the continent this growing middle class is aware but unsure of culture's importance to civilisation. What appears as full comprehension of what art is is entangled to an avant-gardism and unconscious post modernist lifestyle in the hopes of elevating one's standing in the eyes of others. Alternatively, this could be the comprehension of identity as a reflection of fullness and richness of one's community. What we also see is that her inherent impetus to educate herself remains dormant as she is living in the primitivism of natural survival, unaware of Marx's 'purposive will' of the attention to labour. And finally, in today's world it may be as helpful to watch a video but it will never be congruent to reading. This is the mentality and social situation we are up against when we say we want to construct a library.

### **Implementing a Library**

It is very unfortunate that precedents on the African continent are set by politicians. Getting things done, means clawing one's way through this status quo. These precedents are the initiations of rampant corruption throughout the continent. It is true however, that not *every* African politician is corrupt. By viewing the pan-African pandemic of corruption, let us look at pan-African leadership by examining the motives of the African Union which came into being in 2002. The thirteenth point of Article Three, Objectives of the Constitutive Act of the African Union states that one objective of the Union shall be to 'advance the development of the continent by promoting research in all fields, in particular in science and technology'.<sup>7</sup> So let us examine the particular arrears of science and technology. One of the growing thoughts in Africa of educated Africans is on the abundant wealth of the continent; the raw deposits of natural ores, fertile lands and oil. However in order to turn this into fiduciary and tangible wealth, we need Americans, Europeans and now Asians to refine our ores, oil, and land. In his highly controversial book *Capitalist Nigger*, Chika Onyeani states,

*'Africa has diamonds and gold...all countries depend on the Caucasian to discover the products...Africans have oil. The geologists who discover the area where there is oil in Africa are either Europeans or Americans...Nigeria is one of the leading oil producing nations in the*

*world. Yet, all the exploration done in that country is carried out, not by Nigerians or other Africans, but by Americans or Europeans. Shell Oil controls more than 50% of the oil produced by Nigeria. Cocoa, Coffee, Rubber – name the product – Africa has it in abundance.*

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Now surely if our leaders of the African Union were up to their (self-stated) task this would change. But instead of sufficiently subsidising research in the areas of science and technology, the countries' revenues go not to improving communities but to personal bank accounts. And in fact by negating this particular objective of their constitution, they are unable to fulfil their ninth objective which says that they will 'establish the necessary conditions which enable the continent to play its rightful role in the global economy and in international negotiations'.<sup>9</sup> Surely the position of the African as rightful owners of African oil, diamonds, gold and other valuable natural resources is not at the bottom of the pile living on the redundancy of 'one-dollar-a-day'. In action and deed what our leaders teach us is that all is for the taking; live for today with no cognizance of tomorrow. It is this extreme lack of integrity that significantly hinders the formation of any institution on the continent. One must actively counter this in order to be successful.

### **Maintaining a Library**

Once an institution is set up what one wants to ensure is that it stays there. Maintaining the integrity of the institution is cardinal. To have integrity is to do what one says, and/or sets out to do. Learning how to achieve is important and having a direct and determining path or means of operation to achievement is integral. Africa's history from the arrival of the European has been tragic; millions and millions of people died on the continent and crossing the Atlantic. What is tragic today is that nowhere on the continent, excluding South Africa, is there the development of technology that will protect the African people from a recurrence of such fatal invasions. In fact the consolidation of African independence rides on the fact that Americans, Europeans and Asians hold each other accountable under humanitarian laws for their conduct on African soil, and not instead on the laurels of Africans who have stated unequivocally that never again shall we be held under imperialist powers. If this were so, Africa in the twenty-first century would be economically *independent* and not dependant on foreign aid. In his radicalism Onyeani asks;

*'How can a race of people sleep at night or face their conscience in the knowledge that 500 years later, they have not acquired the knowledge for making guns to defend themselves in case of future confrontations. If it was not so tragic, it would be so comical to see Africans slinging automatic weapons on their shoulders and boasting about seizing this territory or that territory'.*<sup>10</sup>

How we learn as a continent is questionable.

The avenue of integrity has impediments at all levels. I was recently a part of a life-affirming workshop in Nairobi, in which a middle-aged man told the group after significant prodding, that when at work he tends to take on more work during his day than is actually possible to do. He does this because he does not want to disappoint his boss and because he wants to appear efficient. However saying you will do work which you do not do is, at the very least, the antithesis of efficient. This lacks integrity. Saying you will build one thousand schools and building five hundred, lacks integrity. Saying you will respect African independence when each state remains economically *dependent* on foreign powers, lacks integrity. Saying you will 'promote democratic principles and

institutions, popular participation and good governance' when in reality you quash any street demonstration that is in opposition to your rule, lacks integrity.<sup>11</sup>

An institution of integrity on our continent stands out less like a sore thumb and more and more like a beacon of hope and encouragement. This is how one maintains a library.

## Conclusion

The importance and accessibility of public libraries on the continent cannot be understated. Libraries today are not limited to books alone. All types of media including rooms for discussions need to be readily available in these public spaces. The way in which these spaces can serve as a step to answering our problems can be neither defined nor quantified. Instead, one must literally trust in the power of knowledge. Knowledge is what will redeem the African people to feel worthy of independent, economic success. And with this success comes true independence.

It is only through the supplement of knowledge that a young woman can enliven sincere aspirations of performance art. Only through knowledge can a public interested in art grasp the necessary discourse to supply its civilisation with ideas, values and feelings of which each generation can learn and grow from. Only through knowledge can culture thrive.

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<sup>1</sup> Nkrumah, Kwame. "Speech by the Prime Minister of Ghana at the opening session of the All African People's Conference, on Monday, December 8, 1958." *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945 – 1994*: 365-367. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Black Orpheus." *Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poésie Nègre et Malagache de Langue Français*. Ed. Léopold Senghor. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Senghor, Léopold Sédar. "Nationhood: Report on the Doctrine and Program of the Party of African Federation." *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945 – 1994*: 396-410. Print.

<sup>4</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital, Volume 1*. First English ed. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1887. Print.

<sup>5</sup> Senghor, Léopold Sédar. "Nationhood: Report on the Doctrine and Program of the Party of African Federation." *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945 – 1994*: 396-410. Print.

<sup>6</sup> Onyeani, Chika. *Capitalist Nigger*. New York: Timbuktu Publishers, 2000. Print.

<sup>7</sup> African Union. "AU in a nutshell." *African Union: a United and Strong Africa*. African Union 2011. Web. 22 February 2011 < <http://www.au.int/en/about/nutshell> >.

<sup>8</sup> Onyeani, Chika. *Capitalist Nigger*. New York: Timbuktu Publishers, 2000. Print.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> African Union. "AU in a nutshell." *African Union: a United and Strong Africa*. African Union 2011. Web. 22 February 2011 < <http://www.au.int/en/about/nutshell> >.