

AFRICAN RENAISSANCE: A THIRD MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE TO THOUGHT AND PRACTICE IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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Set My People Free¹

Which way Africa (2x)

Which way to go,

This is my continent

I want to know

Which way Africa is

Going to go.²

On Friday, August 11, 1996, I gave a talk that participants viewed as an *eye-opening presentation*³. This was at the Annual Conference of the South African Council of Churches. The theme of the conference was *African Culture and Development in Southern Africa*. The title of my paper was “The Significance of African Culture in Economic Development.” I would like to quote from the said presentation, specifically, where, among other things, I revisited the hitherto persistent psychological war between African thinkers and the West in their (the African’s) attempt to explain the resilience of Africa’s poverty. Quoting from the renowned African scholar, Thomas Odhiambo,⁴ I said:

It needs no emphasis that “Africans have been so buffeted, displaced, manipulated and degraded” through the years of “slave trade, imperial conquest, resource despoliation, and economic marginalization that the African has reached a depth of despair and wretchedness.” This pathetic situation often “translates into POVERTY: poverty of direction,

poverty of imagination, and poverty of enterprising vision.” This being the case, if we, as Africans, are to move forward, “we must recreate our own self-designed road to material richness” and psychic or cultural peace. We have no choice but to find our lost glory. We hold the key to our success and prosperity. But only when we redefine where we come from shall we know where we are going.

Cultural anthropologists are aware, and we want to emphasize “that it is this same technique of destroying a people’s historical memory, their sense of myth and legend, the obliteration of their consciousness of who they are,” that leads to “the replacement of their vision for the future with the conqueror’s own vision of what the colonized are to cultivate as their future.” It is this bewildering “greater universe of the conqueror’s own vision,” that has entrenched Africa’s dire need for socio-economic development and for cultural emancipation. It is this that propels us to insist on an inevitable cultural renaissance: finding a place for our culture, our common memory, our NTU - the essence of our being as a people⁵.

In 1996, the then Vice-President of South Africa, now President Thabo Mbeki gave a keynote speech to the *Friends of Africa in America* in which he said:

There exists within our continent a generation which has been victim to all things which created this negative past. This generation remains African and carries with it a historic pride which compels it to seek a place for Africans equal to all the other peoples of our common universe. It knows and is resolved that, to attain that objective, it must resist all tyranny, oppose all attempts to deny liberty to resort to demagoguery, repulse the temptation to describe African life as the ability to live on charity, engage the fight to secure the emancipation of the African woman, and reassert the fundamental concept that we are our own liberators from oppression, from under-development and poverty, from the perpetuation of an experience from slavery, colonization, to apartheid, to dependence on alms.⁶

President Thabo Mbeki certainly needs to be credited for his call for, and articulation of, an African Renaissance in that great speech. Regardless of any questions that might arise regarding the origins of the African Renaissance or whether Mbeki's call was limited to an economic-political renaissance, *the Dawn is with us*.

Renaissance: Towards a Conceptual Framework

As an idea, a concept of 'renaissance' comes from the Latin word *renascor* which literally means 'born again'. It is for this reason that the European Renaissance has been defined variously as re-birth, revival, recovery.

Cradled in the city-state of Florence in northern Italy, the Renaissance was spearheaded by Florence's array of geniuses: people like the painter, sculptor, architect and engineer Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), the statesman and political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-

1527), and the sculptor, and poet Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564). These, among others, were men of universal genius, men of ideas, great thinkers and artists. Men who, in their 'Great Quest for Truth', created intellectual ferment in the scholastic circles of the emerging domain of 'Humanistic Philosophy.'

The spirit of the Renaissance quickly spread from the precincts of the small city of Florence to Venice, Milan, Genoa, Siena, Rome and Naples. Renaissance, the revival of literature, painting, science, commerce etc., enriched, revamped, and revolutionized artistic expression, intellectual curiosity and social attainment. It marked a great epoch of human achievement.⁷

The men and women of the Renaissance, by the range of their enquiries, the freshness of their skepticism and the sharpness of their observation, gave impetus to the search for truth. They searched the histories of antiquity for precedents that could guide them to the truth. We consider this approach telling because for any great idea or movement to thrive, the prime requisite is the emergence of a reputable group of men and women to popularize it.

Centrality of Antiquity in the Quest for Renewal

We, in Africa, are in an age of rising expectations. The cry is that the Third Millennium may be a 'Dawn of Renewal and Recovery' for the once 'Dark Continent'. Though Africa has never been intellectually 'dark,' we aspire to the emergence of new men and women of genius to guide our cultural rebirth and renewal. Men and women who are intellectually born again.

Where, if I may ask, are the African thinkers and intellectuals, to search the histories of antiquity for precedents that would guide them as they propel the African peoples to the truth and give meaning to the dilemmas of Chinweizu and T.R. Odhiambo!

Just listen to the cry of Chinweizu:

For nearly six centuries, (since the 2nd Century of the Renaissance) western Europe and its Diaspora, have been disturbing the peace of the world. Fortified in aggressive spirit by an arrogant, messianic Christianity of both Popish and Protestant varieties, and motivated by the lure of enriching plunder, white hordes have sallied forth from their western European homelands to explore, assault, loot, occupy, rule and exploit the rest of the world.⁸

This is what Professor Thomas R. Odhiambo noted tearfully:

A brutal way to conquer a community or a nation or a continent is to defeat them in war. But such conquest is temporary, and will inevitably be overcome as soon as the conquered can re-group, re-train, re-equip themselves, and re-strategize their counter offensive to recapture their lost territory. But another way to accomplish a more lasting conquest of a people or society or a civilization is to destroy their self-image of accomplishment and well-being, of enterprise and innovativeness, and of their capacity to dream and invent their own self-constructed future.⁹

This is precisely how Europe conquered Africa. How was it, we might ask, that an

industrializing Europe emerged from their 'Renaissance' and were so successful in asserting their self-image of accomplishment and well-being, of enterprise and innovativeness, and of their capacity to dream and invent their own self-constructed future? What message was Ogutu giving the South African Council of Churches when he insisted on an inevitable cultural renaissance: creating space for our culture, our common memory, our NTU - the essence of our being as a people?¹⁰

One secret behind European success was an intensified classical scholarship, along with scientific and geographical discoveries built on a deep sense of individual human potentiality. This is why *Humanistic Philosophy* or *Humanism* emerged almost at the same time as the Renaissance. The centre of human world was, in the then popular thought: not God but human being; not the next world but this; not the individual soul but social life.

Where are the African men and women of genius to unlock our resources and creative potentials? Remember, the task is to search the histories of Our African Antiquity¹¹ for precedents, not Euro-American philosophies to perpetuate our slumber and subjugation. The challenge goes squarely to those of us who have the guts to claim to be students and/or promoters of the *Thought and Practice of African Philosophy*. Are we ready to take up the challenge? If we are, then we must reflect, all-be-it briefly, on the Burnt-Down Libraries of Africa.

The Burnt-Down Libraries of Africa

Global adventure and Euro-American expansionist tradition aside, one of the greatest legacies of European Renaissance is *scholasticism*: the rise of schoolmen and

universities; the people we have called men of genius and their centres of discovery and articulation of universal principles - the *studia generalia*.¹² These centres of learning were made up of Masters and Students. The pioneer universities included Paris (1150); Oxford (1165) and Cambridge (1209). The three giants were soon followed by Salamanca (1218); Padua (1222); Rome (1303); Florence (1321); Prague (1348); Vienna (1365); Heidelberg (1386); Leipzig (1409); St. Andrews (1411); Louvain (1425); Glasgow (1451 and Uppsala (1477).

My late friend and the *Father of Sage Philosophy*,¹³ studied within this tradition. Henry Odera Oruka studied Meteorology, Geography, Geodesy and Philosophy at Uppsala. I, myself, attended Oxford, where I studied Theology, Jurisprudence, Canon Law as well as Ethnic and Race Relations. Whenever we had an opportunity to engage in philosophical discourses, Odera would rock his head like a drunk wall-gecko and say "Ogututu I know you now want to talk about Oxford. Uppsala is more prestigious than Oxford."

It was a psychologically tormenting experience. Odera Oruka and Ogutu got the feel of the European Renaissance scholasticism. The challenge Odera Oruka and I met at Oxford and Uppsala was the European pride in their antiquity, the pride in searching the histories of that antiquity for precedents that led to the truth behind universal principles. This experience in the context of our quest for an African Renaissance leads me to invoke an irrevocable scholastic friendship and uncompromising interest in what should be understood as the Burnt-Down Libraries of Africa.¹⁴

Henry Odera Oruka, *rambanya ka nyako, wuonya Gangu*, is no more. But I am not

going to weep because philosophers never die.¹⁵ On Thursday, March 27, 1997, I gave a Staff Seminar paper at the Department of Philosophy, Uppsala University under the title: "WISDOM from the Burnt-Down Libraries of Africa." The title of that homage paying presentation came from a philosophic statement by Amadou Hampate Ba to the effect that: "In Africa, when an old man dies, a library burns down."¹⁶

For the purposes of our quest for Renaissance in Africa, we want to understand 'Wisdom' to mean the human ability or capacity to reflect, intuitively, on the goings on in the physical and social environment in order to establish the truth and foster creativity in the process of solving problems. Such a reflection would touch on the mystery of terrestrial and celestial phenomena: human origin, life and destiny, familial roles and responsibilities, inter-communal economic-political relations, peace, famine, epidemics, disease and war; and finally, the prophetic traditions, trends and habits. The good old days, and their utilitarian paradigms for the Third Millennium. The challenge that must be diagnosed.

The challenge here is the quest for logical and mental processes/systems of knowledge that maintained the social structures of the African past. At stake would be critical evaluation and presentation of coherent thought. The vehicle to accomplish this is language not literacy. However, whereas for articulation language is mandatory, general oracy is limited by its inadequate memory capacity. Literacy, on the other hand, has until recently, excelled in storage and dissemination of knowledge, including philosophic knowledge.¹⁷

What about critical evaluation and presentation of coherent thought that

creates the thinker? Is it possible to give episodic appraisal of historical trends based on biographical symbiosis and continental paradigms? Do the current professional discourses imbibe models that would explain emergent philosophic scenarios on which to peg the Renaissance beacons?¹⁸

The answer to the foregoing questions could perhaps be derived from the answer to the epicentric question namely, why does one engage in philosophic discourses in order to fathom the dynamics of Renaissance at all? My humble guess is that because philosophy entails wakeful, coherent, mental reflection on the perennial scramble for *space and time* to ensure security and/or survival. As Mircea Eliade put it:

Uprightness cannot be maintained except in a state of wakefulness. It is because of man's vertical posture that space is organized in four horizontal directions relating from up-down central axis. Space can be organized around the human body as extending forward, backward, to right, to left, upward, and downward. It is impossible to survive for a length of time in the vertigo brought by disorientation. This experience of space oriented around a "centre" explains the importance of the paradigmatic divisions and distribution of territories, agglomerations, and habitations and cosmological symbolism.¹⁹

To fathom this argument we need to evoke the popular dictum in Africa, namely that "the past explains the present and helps in directing the future." Cosmological symbolism evolve in time and space based on distribution of territories, agglomerations and habitations. The African Thought and Practice patterns are

rooted in episodic appraisal of events, acts and actors revolving around biographical symbiosis of orally transmitted wisdom discernible in local, regional and continental paradigms. This is significant, considering the migration of peoples, attempts to survive in an otherwise harsh environment, human contacts and their propensity to *relate* in time, *diverge* in time and *unite* in time. A brief histo-archeological digression should not only explain, but also elucidate our topic, African Renaissance.

Thought and Practice: Archeological Evidence

Until new archeological evidence is found, Africa remains the birthplace of mankind. *Kenyapithecus wickeri* roamed the African landscape more than 12 million years ago. The *Oldowan Palaeolithic Culture* flourished on the continent nearly 1,750,000 years ago. The known epicenter of this remote human culture is the *Olduvai Gorge* (in Tanzania) reputed for its lakeside camps of generations upon generations of thoughtful early man. Among these African ancestors were the vegetarian *Zinjanthropus* and the scavenging *Homo habilis* whose philosophy of "kill in order to live" still haunts us today.

One period of unparalleled human prosperity on the surface of the earth, is the *Early Stone Age* (750,000 - 125,000 BCE). Improvement in stone tools led the African man into registering efficiency in survival techniques like hunting. The *Middle Stone Age* (124,000 - 15,000 BCE) witnessed the rise and prosperity of the distinct regional cultures in Africa. For example, *Aterian Culture* in North Africa; *Sangoan Culture* in Equatorial Africa, and *Stillbay Culture* in Southern Africa. This period is identified with the invention and use of fire, improved hunting and

discovery of edible fruits and plants, besides concern for security and survival.

Perhaps it might be of interest to throw more light on the Sangoan (water based) Culture which centered around Lake Karunga that covered “the area of the present Kavirondo Gulf and extended over the Kisumu plains to the east and some distance beyond Rusinga Island to the west”²⁰. The Karunga Lake basin was fed and drained by a series of rivers flowing westwards from what is now western Kenya, across the Congo into the Atlantic Ocean.

However, following the uplift and faulting that created eastern and western Rift Valleys, the rivers, particularly Kagera, changed direction or were ‘ponded back’ into the basin forming the large but generally shallow Lake Sango which Speke was later to call Lake Victoria, after the British monarch Queen Victoria. Although the formation of Lake Sango witnessed an extended period of earth movements, there followed a period of relative stability into the last quarter of the Middle Stone Age. This period of stability created an environment conducive for ingenious human sharing of information, evolution of knowledge and requisite acquisition of survival techniques as well as intellectual concern for human security and survival.

It needs no emphasis that the philosophies of the Sangoan peoples are beyond our reach. However, there is every reason to postulate that there was change and continuity over the years, and that this could be tapped to enhance reflection on the universal principles inherent in our rich antiquity.

Be that as it may, *The Late Stone Age* (beginning 15,000 BCE) witnessed the domestication of animals. The period which saw the emergence of Egyptian

civilization, the zenith of African prosperity, also witnessed microlithic revolution in population structures, technology and social institutions. Filtering into this age at about 4500 BCE, was the *Bronze Age*, when the African is believed to have developed philosophic concern for the soul of the animal he killed for food and, by extension, *his own soul and its destiny*. By this time, the use of projectile weapons like bow and arrow had come into existence increasing man’s capacity to survive and multiply.

Further development in human ingenuity ushered in the Iron Age (from 2000 BCE). Iron tools facilitated cultivation and efforts to tame the environment. The consequence of iron workings was that food production and population expanded rapidly. People also lived in large and stable linguistic groups. The people the Greeks were later to call Ethiopians (burnt faced) prospered on a land the Arabs were later to describe as Bilad as-Sudan (land of the blacks). The group included for example, the *baNTU* peoples whose cradle land was the broad Sudanic Grasslands between the Sahara desert and the tropical forests. With population increase, need for more space and hunter-gatherer mentality, these *baNTU*-speaking peoples spread to other parts of Africa.²¹

The other large group, that evolved in eastern Africa, were the Nilotes, whose progenitor, *Sin Akuru Kuku Lubanga* lived in Dog Nam settlement in the vicinity of the present day Lake Turkana *circa* 2348 BCE. By the First Millennium BCE, these Chari-Nile peoples had split into Plains Nilotes (Turkana, Samburu and Maasai); Highland Nilotes (the Kalenjin cluster of peoples) and the River-Lake Nilotes (the Luo or Jii speakers) in Ethiopia, Sudan, Northern Uganda, Western Kenya and Tanzania).²²

Of philosophical interest to us is the resilient tradition that affirms that Sin Akuru Kuku Lubanga was a man of great wisdom; a sage, diviner and prophet who was consulted by people from afar. Traditions have it that his contemporary, Emperor Urnamu of Ur in Mesopotamia sent emissaries to consult him on matters relating to ethics, metaphysics and astronomy as these related to the perennial problems of human origin, security, survival and destiny.²³

Indeed it is not easy to conceive how the distances entailed could have been covered, but the problem of distance, even in our own time, is taken care of by the life-span of the individuals involved. Given that both of these contemporaries were more than 500 years old when they died, it would be naïve to take the traditions relating to their possible contact lightly.²⁴

Meanwhile, the principal concern that emerges from the foregoing histo-archeological detour is the problem of security and survival in time and space. The evolution of a culture, that is, the development and dissemination of skills and habits has gone a long way into defining and placing various African peoples into their contemporary setting, in particular, their use of language to communicate, recall the past, explain the present and predict the future. In other words, their ability to engage in wakeful, coherent mental reflection on the perennial scramble for space and time to ensure security and/or survival. This, to my mind, is the very basis for Philosophy, hence its relevance to discourses and articulation of *Thought and Practice in African Philosophy*.

Conclusion: Plotting the Way Forward

European Renaissance created men of genius. The men of genius created the

universities that served as *finishing schools* for those who took the lead in the development of their societies. Is there any evidence of replicas in Africa?

The campaign for the establishment of universities in Africa was a nineteenth century phenomenon. James Africanus Horton (1835-1883) called for the establishment of a university for scientific and technological education modelled on Timbuktu. Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912) wanted a university that would build the moral character and supply the cultural needs of a new African civilization - an *Indigenous African Character*. J.E. Casley-Hayford (1866-1950) wanted a university that would promote African race consciousness and serve as a nursery for African nationalism so that Africans could determine their political and cultural destinies.²⁵

Following political independence, the emergent African states established universities modelled on those of the west. The pioneer “Masters” were trained in Britain, France and Portugal.²⁶ Some of them have remained more European than the Europeans themselves. Post independence *Airlifts* brought back a large group of American and Russian trained scholars. Then there were the *local brew*: a special cohort of University dons and scholars. In this whole process and through these enviable endeavours, have we created our men and women of genius? The glorious saying remains: *By their fruits you will know them*.²⁷

Let me stop with a quotation from Professor J.E.A. Ajayi’s paper “African Universities and the African Tradition,” by which and through which he sent shock waves into our nerves at Makerere’s Main Hall in 1971. He said:

The failure to adapt African universities from alien models into institutions where African tradition is reconciled with the innovative needs of the moment owes a good deal to faulty planning, the obstruction of interested individuals, the miseducation of the university teachers or the confusion of political leaders. This is a problem not only for the universities but for the society as a whole. But it is also at bottom an intellectual problem and the society has every right to look to the universities to provide the theoretical framework for a breakthrough and the required perspective.²⁸

The new perspective in the Third Millennium is African Renaissance. The society has every right to look to the men and women of genius at our universities to provide the theoretical framework. The men of genius are the Lovers of Wisdom, the Philosophers, men and women of ideas and whose discourses revolve around *Thought and Practice of African Philosophy*. Are we equipped to provide the framework? Are we aware that our past explains our present and predicts our future? The ball is squarely in our court.

Let us not hide behind unresponsive dreams and imaginations. African Renaissance, Re-birth, Revival, Recovery is the agenda. The challenge is that we prove our worth as men and women of genius. Let us not waste our precious time and public resources on trivial support staff responsibilities. We are trained academics, men and women of genius, with a unique enviable responsibility to Read, Teach, Research and Publish. With this role in place, we shall provide the requisite framework. And, President Thabo Mbeki and our few visionary leaders will concentrate on providing the means to realize our Third Millennium goal - African

Renaissance. As we draw the attention of our visionary leaders to intricacies of the sought for African Renaissance, I wish to remind them and us of my experiences at the Nordic Regional Symposium of the World Futures Studies Federation at Reykjavik, Iceland, March 1997.

In his opening address entitled "Nordic Heritage Inspires Leadership in Democracy", the President of Iceland, Dr. Olafur Ragnar Grimson, himself a graduate of Oxford, had the following to say, among others:

A thousand years ago, Nordic seafarers travelled the known world and beyond to explore new countries and continents. They desired to blaze new trails, to learn and understand the unknown; to achieve supremacy and renown. For centuries, this common heritage has inspired a sense of shared identity and kinship, and its value has always transcended any differences that may occur in relations between us from time to time. The Nordic nations have developed societies in which democracy and human rights are not mere legal formality but the driving force in the life. We have turned the welfare of our citizens - Education, Health Care and Social Security - into a wide-reaching consensus about how the benefits of economic progress should be shared. We have developed a system of government which ranks with the most open, the most responsible and the least corrupt anywhere in the world. We have established relations with other nations in such a way that no one fears us, we are welcomed everywhere and nations the world over seek cooperation with us. In the Nordic achievement, they see the promise of a future which is not a utopia, but a reality.²⁹

A renascent Africa, a revamped, revolutionized Africa, might want to borrow a leaf from the Nordic experience. But this, as we have said, must bring into focus our African heritage, our common

identity. It is from this culture that we must emerge and to which we must be committed as men and women of genius, as *BORN AGAIN* Academics, in our *Thought and Practice of African Philosophy*.

Notes and References

1. Moses and Aaron talk to Pharaoh (Exodus 6:26).
2. A popular moral rearmament song in Africa in the late 1960s.
3. Received standing ovation and big coverage in *The Sowetan*.
4. See Odhiambo T.R., *Africa Beyond Famine*, in G.E.M. Ogotu and P. Malaska, eds., *Futures Beyond Poverty: Ways and Means Out of the Current Stalemate*. Turku: World Futures Studies Federation, pp 157-164, quotes from pp 157-158, emphasis added.
5. Ogotu G.E.M., *The Significance of African Culture in Economic Development*, unpublished paper, SACC Conference, pp 3-5.
6. Thabo Mbeki, speech given to 'Friends of Africa in America,' (1996).
7. About five centuries (1200 to 1750).
8. Chinweizu, (1975) *The West and the Rest of Us: White Predators, Black Slavers and the African Elite*. New York: Vantage Books, p 3.
9. Odhiambo T.R., *Africa Beyond Famine*, in Ogotu and Malaska, op-cit., pp 157-164.
10. Ogotu, SACC Conference.
11. Osabatey-Aguetze Isaac D., (1990) *The Principles Underlying African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: Maillu, pp 50-70.
12. Felix Markham, (1967) *Oxford*. London: Mowbrays, passim.
13. Odera Oruka H., (1991) *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*. Nairobi: ACTS Press.
14. 'The burnt-down libraries of Africa' are the wise men and women of the continent: the sage philosophers.
15. Ogotu in *Quest: Philosophical Discussions*, Vol. IX No. 2, Vol. X No.1 pp 5-11.
16. Amadou Hampate Ba with his other contemporaries of the 1930s are reputed for having invoked traditionalism as effective sources of regeneration. See also V.Y. Mudimbe, (1988) *The Invention of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp 44-97.
17. Ogotu, G.E.M., (1995) *Burnt Down Libraries of Africa*, unpublished seminar paper, Uppsala University, passim.
18. Attempts to answer such questions by Tempels, Marcel Griaule, Alexis Kagame and John Mbiti have been competently analysed by D.A. Masolo in his (1994) *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
19. Mircea Eliade, (1969) *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
20. Beadle, R.C., (1981) *Inland Waters of Tropical Africa: An Introduction to Tropical Liminology*. London: Longmans, p 247.
21. Masolo, D.A., op. cit. pp 84-102. See also G.E.M. Ogotu, (1998) *Dog Nam: The Forgotten Cradleland of Nilotic Speaking Peoples*, Kisumu: SIP.
22. Ogotu, *Dog Nam*.
23. For other peoples who came to him for guidance see Osabutey-Aguetze, *The Principles Underlying African Religions and Philosophy*, p 56.
24. Their Biblical contemporaries, the Patriarchs, lived longer.
25. Blyden, E.W., (1887/1967) *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race*. Edinburg University Press, passim.
26. Legacy of the European Scramble for Africa which was triggered by King Leopold II of Belgium.
27. Luke 6:44.
28. (1971) *East African Journal* Vol. 8 No. 11.
29. Olafur Ragnar Grimson at Reykjavik.