

PARADIGMATIC CONSTRAINTS AND AFRICA'S QUEST FOR IDENTITY

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Introduction

The term paradigm has its etymological root in the Latin work *paradimier*, which means example or model. Apparently this etymological meaning is one of the many that Thomas Kuhn adopts when he defines paradigm as a tradition of thinking and acting, a criterion which defines the boundaries of meanings and actions, and human interaction.¹

In this paper the term paradigm is used to mean a framework within which meanings are generated and used, and within which human beings as the dynamic bearers of specific attitudes and values interact. Thus, paradigm is a term that defines discourse on the basis of consciously or unconsciously designed criterion. In whatever form, discourses are dynamic and therefore, they are perpetually changing form and content. The content of discourse within specific paradigms is variously labeled—viz. social, economic and political. The specific content of discourse is a product of paradigmatic fundamentals—which Kuhn describes as the object, form, and magnitude of what is permissible. Thus, there is a dialectical relationship between a paradigm and existing socio-cultural realities.

By their very nature, paradigms tend to permit only discourses that are in concordance with their existence. Paradigms will therefore tend to exclude all elements that are alien and inconsistent

with their essence. Apart from this mode of response, some paradigms will tend to seek ways of absorbing alien elements into their framework. This behavior of paradigms is conceived by Kuhn to be a characteristic of science, but we argue here that it's also the behavior of cultures and discourse on culture.

Mikhail Bakhtin, a discourse theorist, has argued that there are some forms of discourses that tend to entrench themselves and annihilate other discourses. On the other hand, Bakhtin argues that there are discourses that tend to be receptive of elements from other discourses. Because of this tendency to be receptive, such discourses are characteristically hybrid in their content and logic. Bakhtin argues that the development of discourse towards inclusiveness is marked by quantitative and qualitative growth. Thus an inclusive discourse will manifest a high variety of elements and, through a process of selection, a tendency to sieve out inferior elements and retain superior elements. There is, therefore, a kind of natural selection process in the inclusive discourse. The reverse is the case with discourses that are self-centered and inward looking, which Bakhtin calls 'centripetal'.² In this kind of discourse, changes from without are perceived as disruptive, anarchic, and fatal. To a certain extent, self-centered and inward looking discourses are vulnerable to the inimical intrusion of the outside author or other.

Now, in the history of socio-cultural discourses, there are occasions when they make contact through various means. The initial contact between a self-centered and inward looking discourse and an inclusive and outward looking discourse could be amiable and pleasant. There is, therefore, what Bakhtin calls a relationship of dialogism in the initial contact between these two dissimilar discourses. Bakhtin contends that beneath the appearance of amiability and pleasantness is tenacious antagonism.

Bakhtin conceives the relationship between the inward looking discourse and outward looking discourse as one of self and other. In due course, the appearance of dialogism of the self and the other become diabolic and unbearable, the self recoils and responds with foils that more authentically define the self.³ Whether and how this response on the part of the self can lead to a more acceptable situation is an open question. The fact that needs recognition is that a discourse, as a paradigm that is established in a particular locality, necessarily has mechanisms of discursive nature that it deploys in dealing with disruptive elements from within and from other discourses.

Since all discourses are paradigmatic, they either are self-centered and inward-looking or inclusive and outward-looking. Human attempts to realize specific transformations are determined by the nature of the paradigmatic elements prevailing in their discourse and the constraints imposed by other paradigmatic constraints imposed by other discourses. This exploration of the quest for identity of Africans is made on that theoretical assumption. That is, there is the assumption that the quest for African identity must address the issues of the nature of contact between the discourse of Africans and the discourse of the

European. This can only be done after determining the situation of the African vis-à-vis the European — herein referred to as the Self and Other, respectively.

The situation of Africa and Africans

There is no doubt at all, except to those afflicted with rabid skepticism, that Africa is a vast continent that is bound on its eastern and western shores by the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean respectively. To the north of the vast continent is the Mediterranean Sea. The continent is separated from Arabia by a narrow stretch of water called the Red Sea. If the continents had not broken and drifted away from each other, Africa would be one with Arabia, America and Asia, and locating it would be quite a task.

Yet, when we talk of the situation of Africa and Africans in this discourse of Africa's quest for identity, there arise a number of issues that defy the simple geographical situation. In the first place, the fact that the issue of identity should arise for Africans is in itself indicative of a crisis of African identity. That crisis is contingently linked to the existence of an Other, that stands menacingly above the African Self. For Africa and Africans the menacing other is the Occidental, which in various ways has been involved in defining and describing Africa and Africans.

In the period prior to the presence of Europeans, the Africans lived in a state that can be characterized as carnivalesque. According to Bakhtin, carnivalesque is a state of existence in which there is little concern for distinctions, definitions, and rationalizations of life in its multifarious outpourings. Consequently there is hardly a distinction between Self and Other, orifices and oracular, death and life, old and young.⁴ The discourses that emerge in the novel and art of that period in the

existence of Africans is carnivalesque in content, spirit and presentation.⁵ V.Y. Mudimbe (1991) offers lucid constructions of the discourses of Africans in this stage of existence. The discourses of Africans in that stage were characteristically presented in parables, fables, myths, and metaphors. These modes of presentation are distinctively non-discursive. Within carnivalesque discourse there is an element of dialogism that bears no mark of violent dichotomization and atomization of life. There is no concern with questions of identity, genesis and destiny. This typifies the situation of all societies in their infancy and African societies in the pre-colonial discourses.

In this respect, the assertions of Hegel and Hegelians that Africa and Africans were not in any way an aspect of history and therefore a nonentity could not in any significant way ruffle the plumes of Africans. For, just like for Hegel and Hegelians, Africa and Africans did not exist, so for Africa and Africans, the Occidental and its people did not exist. While the occidentals coined fables, myths and metaphors to define themselves rigorously—having been challenged and conquered by the Arabs—the Africans had no such tendencies. And, therefore, the carnival state of the Africans then was logical and sensible, granted that definition or situation is only possible and necessary to a temporal-spatial reality.

The arrival on the African continent of European explorers, missionaries, colonists and crass marauders, significantly transformed the situation. The Africans were suddenly transformed into being situated in a particular manner vis-à-vis the Occidentals. In that encounter, the dynamics of the pronominal 'I' against 'Other' were immediately set in motion.

According to Christopher Collins (1998) in such encounters, the pronominal 'I' defines the world in terms of itself.⁶ For the Occidental, the African was situated a great distance from the center of the 'I'. The African was perceived as black, pagan, and beast-like – qualities that made the African to be an absolute Other. The African was not a 'you' nor could 'he' ever be a 'we.' He was a 'they' – strange, unknowable, and outside the 'I's space. Africa was not just a vast continent, but one to be found at the edge of the universe of the defining 'I'. But so were the Europeans in the eyes of the Africans: they were a strange breed of creatures, so unlike the Africans. In other words they, viewed from the center of African's existence, were the Other. From this point that 'I' stand, the Occidental is a 'they.'

From their carnival existence and discourse the Africans were thrust into a dialogism that was from the very beginning tilted in favor of the intrusive, violent Other.⁷ Initially, the Self-Other relationship of Africans and Europeans appeared to be motivated by love. The Occidentals were motivated by desire to help the Africans accomplish a number of things. But gradually the seeming love, philanthropy and civilization took on an unacceptable and menacing facet. At the end of the day, the self-other relationship was found to be fraught with deception and treachery. It was found to be primarily exploitative, degrading, and abusive. It was as though the African and the Occidental were re-enacting the ballet, *Swan Lake*.

For the perceptive Self, the Other was essentially a diabolic force. The religion, social life, economic structures and processes, and the norms and gnosis of the Self were undermined, shifted to correspond to an axis of modernization: they were condemned as superstitious,

satanic, hellish; they were characterized as savage and pre-logical and mystical; and therefore contrary to civilization. Thus as V.Y. Mudimbe observes:

The conjunction of the politics of missionary interrogation with techniques of manipulating symbols of divine power signifies a re-ordering of a social map. Everything is intermingled in a quite serious 'historical drama' indicating the universalization of the western paradigm made intelligible and familiar by the colonial library. Development equals the extension of the capitalist mode of production, while education and social norms necessarily assume the profundity of western experience and religion means conversion to Christianity.⁸

That the situation of Africa and Africans was outside civilization is quite understandable within the framework of the western and other paradigms, and the Bakhtinian theory of culture. It is interesting that the arrival on the scene of the authoring Other seemed to mark a process of violent negation of the history and culture of Self. The puzzling question is: Why did the history, culture and sufficiency of the Self become violently negated? Why did the Occidental paradigm in its various forms negate the myths, fables, metaphors, mythologies and mythos of the Africans, with very minimal effective resistance? And with what consequences was the negation and minimal resistance? These are the questions that will pre-occupy us in the next section.

The Paradigmatic Factor in the Self-Other Relationship

In Bakhtinian conception "[T]he relations between Self and Other are viewed as

equivalent to those between hero and author."⁹ In that relationship, the author is motivated in his activities by a love that is bestowed on the hero in various ways. The problem with the early Bakhtin is that he does not see the strains, conflicts and constraints that arise in the relationship as an essential aspect. Furthermore Bakhtin does not see pitfalls that await that link especially granted his view that 'the relation of the author to the hero' is 'a relation of interest outsidersness [vnenakhodimost] of the author to all the moments of the hero.' This is 'an outsidersness which makes it possible to assemble the whole hero.'¹⁰

Quite certainly, the colonist in his authorial capacity, creates 'the whole hero.'¹¹ But with what interests or aims, and using which tools and models does he create that whole? The authoring Other, we have seen, sought to negate, and indeed annihilate the hero. That aim was in line with the socio-economic interests of the authoring other. The tools that were employed in authoring the hero in the dialogism of the colonist and the colonized were those of the Occidental discourses. The discourses, as Mudimbe aptly observes, were constituted with the aim of strengthening the Occidental paradigm. He argues:

Western interpreters as well as African analysts have been using categories and conceptual systems which depend on a western epistemological order... My own claim is that thus far the ways in which they have been evaluated and the means used to explain them relate to theories and methods whose constraints, rules, and systems of operation suppose non-African epistemological locus.¹²

Thus in terms of objectives and activities, the authoring Other is essentially a

diabolic force. The fact that the values, perceptions and attitudes inherent in the Other are distinct and even contrary to the values, perceptions and attitudes of the Self means that 'the whole hero' is the author's object. In other words, authored and created into a whole, the Self is objectified and therefore downgraded into just one object of concern among other objects. The nature of the Self-Other relationship, both at the level of physicality and discourse, does violence to Self. Once the violence reaches an unbearable level, Self seeks to disengage from Other and define Self. But it is not simply because of violence that Self seeks disengagement from Other. More tellingly, in the Sartrean view, the Self seeks to end a relationship that is 'a theft, an alienation, and enslavement,' and that represents danger, brings shame and fear, and is a harbinger of death of my possibilities.¹³ While a physical disengagement may be realized at the stroke of the pen, real meaningful disengagement is complicated. In the course of the embrace, the Other's paradigm has become implanted in the space of the Self. Thus, the project of realizing the authentic definition of the Self as an upright, wholesome, free, proud and calm being is hamstrung by Other's paradigm.

Africa's Quest for Identity

The identity of any particular people is their specific discourses. Thus the quest of African identity is essentially one of the discourses of Africans, as manifest in the religion, language, myths, and ethos. A close study of African discourse shows that by the phrase are meant studies on Africans. Apart from the fact that the discourses deal with African culture, religions and productive and reproductive activities, there is not much that is African. In *The Invention of Africa*, Mudimbe is primarily concerned not with identifying

the quintessential form, content and style of Africanizing, but with indicating the shortcomings of the existent Africanizing discourses.¹⁴

Kwasi Wiredu, Eboussi-Boulaga and Paulin Hountondji are some of the scholars who have approached the issue of African identity on the basis of Occidental style, with due respect to 'the universality of scientific canons.' In *Philosophy and an African Culture*, Wiredu advances the thesis that the methods of philosophy and science are universal and the use of African myths, mythos, fables, metaphors etc., in the construction of a more authentic image of Africa and Africans should not lapse into parochial and pseudo-scientific methods.

Within the framework of the Bakhtinian conception of discourse, the position of Wiredu, Hountondji and Eboussi-Boulaga would be seen as reinforcing the inclusive and outward looking discourses of the Occidental, with all its realities. Wiredu has assiduously asserted the universalist thesis which is quite consistent with globalization. Yet globalization is essentially a reality born from the opening up of hitherto inaccessible realms of the world to an influx of Occidental values. The hypercritical approach and assertion that such values as rationality, democracy and freedom are universal, plays into the hands of the dominant Other.

V.Y. Mudimbe explains the inclination of some African scholars to universalization as a consequence of misperception. He says, "The fact that universal civilization has for a long time originated from the European center has maintained the illusion that the European culture was, in fact and by right, a universal culture."¹⁵

The illusion is increasingly turning out to be reality, even for those who would want

to assert the existence of some other cultures and identities. Western colonialism did not only subjugate the individual Africans and their land, but, more fundamental to the quest of identity, it sought and did define Africa and the Africans in its own terms. The process of defining Africa and the African as an Other reflects the tendency of the discourse of a dominant 'I.'

In the aftermath of colonization and the continued interaction, the Occidental paradigm has been involved in conflict with the African's search for identity. However, in the discourses that emerge from the West, the search for identity is portrayed as a quixotic exercise pursued by men and women who yearn for their pre-logical past. In actual fact, the quest of identity cannot be advanced without conflict with the Occidental paradigm. The various discourses on the future of Africa are better viewed as consequences of the reality of the Occidental paradigm. This applies to those discourses that seek to construct an African identity and those which disavow the possibility and necessity of constructing an African identity. In other words, discourses express conflicts and are the essential realities of conflicts. Thus, there is a conflict in which the Africanizing author is caught up in the awkward and paradoxical position of fighting and resisting European discourses, by the use of concepts, theories and canons generated by Europeans. The difficulty of the Africanizing author's position is that the concepts and theories of the Other admit only realities that are in conformity with that Other's interests and existence. Even when there have been radical shifts of perspective in Occidental discourses, such as that arising from the shift from the Newtonian world to the Einsteinian world of Relativity and Heisenberg's indeterminacy, such never quite alters the

fundamentals of the Self-Other conflict. Indeed after Einstein's Relativity theory, the Occidental shifted from direct confrontation with the African identity and other identities of Others to a nominal recognition of these Others.

However, the Occidental paradigm has accelerated the penetration and conquest of Africa. In spite of the movement away from *cogito ergo sum*, *Deus*, and Newton's absolutes, the Self's existence remains tethered to the voice from Washington, London, Paris. As Jeffrey Seabrook points out, human beings who fail to see the logic of capitalism as the right logic are perceived as 'loonies.'¹⁶

Nevertheless, various scholars have been trying to argue that apart from the Occidental center there are other centers. In *Moving the Center*¹⁷ and *Ngahika Ndenda*,¹⁸ Ngugi wa Thiong'o does just that. Ngugi also gives a theoretical basis of his shift from using English language as the medium of doing literary discourse to Swahili and Gikuyu in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Languages in African Literature*.¹⁹ Similar motives can be read from Mudimbe's *Parables and Fables*²⁰, and Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*.²¹ The significance of these discourses can only be fully appreciated within the vein of Bakhtin's cultural theory. Sartrean conception of self-other relationship and Roland Barthes' theorizing on the body. They are all high level discourses, that define the nature of the relationship between Africans and Europeans, and the possible mechanisms which can be used by Africans to extricate themselves from the diabolical relationship with the European.

The response of mainstream European discourse is that such discourses are misplaced. After all, it is argued, at a time when the world is being drawn together by

the awesome resources of the super-highway, it is quite illogical that some theorists should be trying to raise walls. Many are Africans who are eager to be hooked up to the Internet and to be participants in the global economy. The benefits of being involved in the global economy seem to far outweigh the benefits of being uninvolved. While it would be true, as Sartre observes, that the Self-Other relationship is like a perpetual see-saw on which neither side can achieve permanent ascendancy over the other, the centers of capital determine economic progress. And through control of print and electronic media, the centers of capital determine the social and cultural development of Africa and the rest of the world. Chomsky and Herman are justified in arguing that Washington ensures that nothing that is contrary to its interests is given unslanted publicity in the main media houses.²² Consequently activities that are critical to the Occidental paradigm are excluded from the main media houses. How, in these circumstances, can we entertain hope of the see-saw ever swinging in favor of our Self?

Now, although Europe's opinion of the African was prior to Africans' own explicit conception of their Self, through certain practice of language (writing) the status of the African in European discourses can be altered positively. Whereas the African has been a mere object of representation in Occidental discourse, the African has to become the support and condition of linguistic activity. In this transformed presentation, the African is presented empathetically and this becomes the basis of positive existence. Apart from the positive existence that emerges from the presentation, it becomes possible for the African to counter the opinions of the European. This is the countering of the doxa of the Other by the Self.²³ Barthes sees a chink of light for the carnivalesque

features of the body. Only the carnivalesque can enable Self-Other relations to be altered from the fundamentally Sartrean form of painful love to a positive and enabling relationship. Representation is abolished as the body comes out of the frame with which Other seeks to confine it. This abolition is the effect of what Barthes calls figuration.²⁴

Critically, though, it would seem that there is little possibility of the alienated and the enslaved African regaining the carnival, primeval state that was disrupted by the arrival on the scene of the European. The European is deeply entrenched in the psychologies of Africa, and a carnival state of existence is not quite consistent with these times of capital and computer. In this context, the carnival mode of existence that was there in the pre-colonial times would stand out as obscenity and unintelligibility. It would stand out as a form of living bordering on the repugnant.

The Africanizing author has to break from the constraints of European discourse. Perhaps through uneventful but significant efforts such as those of Ngugi and Kwei Armah, a basis for a different, positive future can be constituted. But the Africanizing author has to break beyond the polarization of inward looking discourses on one hand and the overly aggressive discourses of the European on the other hand. There is the option of a multilingual field where "the languages of the colonizer and the colonized are indelibly inscribed within each other and in which opposition initiatives should seek to exploit rather than escape".²⁵

The violence and trauma of colonization should not drive Africanizing discourses into undertaking discursive activities that amount to subversion of fruitful relationships with other discourses. This is important since the subversion of

relationships with other discourses would lead to a process of inbreeding, which has the danger of amplifying flaws and generating discursive monstrosities. Although Ngugi's literary switch from English to Gikuyu is a commendable effort in constituting a response to the European discourse, it has the danger of degenerating into an inward looking discourse and excluding other discourses' elements. But this need not happen, even when discourses are constructed in a provincial language.

Conclusion

The conflict between the African and the Occidental is a paradigmatic conflict. As such, it runs deep into the veins of the two people. Although it's the nature of the Self-Other see-saw to swing and shift position, that nature is not inherent in the see-saw. Rather, it has its dynamics in the spirit of men and women who occupy and constitute the scales in the swing. The see-

saw swings only because of the variations of the scales of discourse at both ends. To assert therefore, as some scholars have done, that the center shifts on its own is to urge for passivity and complacency. And to assert that the Occidental civilization has proved itself vis-à-vis other civilizations amounts to sneaking from the 'is' to the 'ought'. The might of the Occidental civilization should not blind us to the decadence and spiritual crisis that it has brought in its wake. When Frederick Nietzsche proclaimed that : 'God is dead,' it is possible that he was already sick. Yet what more apt an observation! And Arthur Schopenhauer could not but see life as a great mistake!

The Occidental paradigm is the dominant paradigm today, but it's fraught with fatalities. The Africanizing authors offer an alternative to the efficient but spiritually bankrupt paradigm. It's not simply a matter of identity. It is a matter of life. I think we should choose life.

Notes and References

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