

Thinkpiece

Africa Union Agenda 2063: Towards a Cultural Agenda

By

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1. Listen More to Culture: A Plea to the Continent's Experts, Bureaucrats, Technocrats, Planners, and Policy Makers

Once again, I thank the Strategic Planning Department, CIDO and the African Union for the opportunity to participate as one of the plenary presenters on culture during the African Union Agenda 2063 consultations in New York.

Being unable to present this thinkpiece on culture the way I had originally conceptualized it due to time constraint has turned out to be a blessing of sorts as it has deepened my conviction that those of us working as writers, scholars, and activists in the continent's arts and culture community have more work to do in persuading Africa's bureaucrats, technocrats, planners, and policy makers that they labour in vain if they continue to give short shrift to culture as they map Africa's path to her future and destiny. Unlike all the other plenary presenters who were allotted fifteen-minutes individually, the two people lined up for culture had to cram their respective presentations into a fifteen-minute slot, a fact they both found out only at the very moment of presentation. This creates a feeling that the African Union, like the continent's bureaucrats, planners, policy makers, and political leaders, is persuaded by the thinking that the hardware language of growth and development, of macro and micro-economics, of cutting-edge technology and industry, of GDP and other dizzying data from the IMF, the World Bank, the African Development Bank, and relevant agencies of the UN, are more germane to the continent's advancement than the software language of culture. This is a false picture because none of these things has meaning outside of culture. Science, technology, development, growth, and other modern indices of advancement are products of and a statement on a given people's culture and do not function *ex nihilo*. Only culture can enhance development, domesticate it, give it meaning. Similarly, only culture can empty growth and development of meaning. This is what the fathers of African nationalism and the founding fathers of the OAU understood so well.

2. There is a Reason the Founding Fathers of the OAU considered Culture Paramount

None of the fathers of African nationalism, some of who subsequently gathered in Addis Ababa to found the OAU entertained the idea that statehood and national development were goals to be pursued for the continent outside of the enabling matrix of culture. In fact, so crucial was culture to their respective agendas and visions for the continent that they treated African cultural nationalism and rebirth not just as the soul of political nationalism but as a precondition for the emergence of Africa into modern nation-statehood. This cultural imperative explains why the anti-colonial struggle witnessed a creative symbiosis of energy and strategies between the writer, the artist, and the nationalist-politician. Thus, Negritude and other articulations of Negro-African culture became the bases for political nationalism and pan-Africanism. Kwame, Nkrumah, NnamdiAzikiwe, L.S. Senghor, William Tubman, Julius Nyerere, SekouToure, and others in their generation understood that the African was "cultured" as a native under colonialism and could not go into independence as the same being. African personality and other notions of agency was their cultural response to the imperative of embracing independence with a new

African being. As Kwame Nkrumah indicates in his classic essay, “The African Genius”, the premium that he and his generation of African leaders placed on culture stems from their understanding of the fact that growth, development, science and technology all depend on a people’s creative genius which, in turn, depends on taste. Taste is a function of culture. Taste is a matter of aesthetics. What a people consume and how they consume it depend entirely on their cultural life-world. Innovation, science and technology respond to taste as shaped by culture. Twitter was invented because somebody somewhere understood America’s cultural predilection for information that could be packaged and consumed quickly like fast food. Innovations in the automobile industry are entirely driven by years of field surveys into taste as driven by culture. This is the meeting point of technology, development, and culture. Africa’s science and technology in the future will be driven the cultural tastes and predilections of the peoples of Africa. If the African Union’s Agenda 2063 does not follow the path of the founding fathers of the OAU by removing culture from the margins and making it the centre of its preoccupations, it will not get Africa right.

3. What have history and language got to do with it?

In 2003, Brazil passed a law that makes mandatory the teaching of African history and culture in the schools of that country - a culmination of decades of struggle by black social movements. Genius, technology, and innovation will now henceforth be driven by the cultural tastes and predilections of Brazilians of African origin for, as we have seen, science and invention often respond to the stimulus of culture. In the educational system of many African countries, the teaching of African history, cultures and languages still receives trifle attention – where it receives any at all. In my own country, politicians and government officials take pride in denigrating the teaching of African history, cultures, and languages in our schools. This is what renowned Nigerian historian, Professor ToyinFalola, refers to as “the persecution of the arts and humanities” in African educational systems by bureaucrats and officials of state keen on the teaching of science and technology and development-oriented subjects. By doing this, the state creates a dichotomy and a false hierarchy between science and technology on the one hand and arts and culture on the other hand. Says Falola: “here comes the bad news for the persecutors. Creating, managing, and solving underdevelopment is a human cultural concern. And this is where the humanities come to the fore as they generate greater imagination, thereby creating more intellectual creativity, encouraging broader reflection on the future of society.” In essence, for Africa to have a coherent cultural agenda that could power her innovation, development, science, and technology for the next fifty years, there has to be a radical encouragement of the leadership of the member states of the AU to pay more attention to the teaching of African history and cultures in the school systems of their respective countries.

4. Youth culture and the future of Africa

Everybody agrees that Africa is home to the biggest concentration of youth in the world. Policy makers, bureaucrats, and experts in the development community bandy data and statistical

figures ranging from 60% - 70% youth demographic for many African countries, with youth sometimes defined as persons thirty-years-old and below. Whichever way one looks at it, the majority of Africa's one billion people fall within the youth demographic. Using conventional language and its assorted registers – GDP, growth, development agendas, plans, etc – Africa's bureaucrats and development experts pay attention to everything about this particular demographic except for their cultural predilections and predicament. Yet we forget that their peers in America have invented Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest in response to specific cultural imperatives and stimuli; we forget that their peers in China, Japan, South Korea, and other parts of Asia are in a daily competition to invent apps informed by the cultural circumstances of those places. In essence, the youth of other continents are meeting the world, unleashing their genius and creativity on the rest of the world from the platform of their respective cultures. On what cultural platform are the youth of Africa expected to meet the world and compete with their peers when, as stated in the preceding section, the teaching of African history, cultures, and languages are treated largely as impediments to science and technology disciplines in many an African school system? The founding fathers of the OAU invested in the cultural project of the African Personality. This was a new being fashioned to meet the world, after independence, on the basis of a renewed investment in his culture, values, and worldview. Thus the radical nativism of African Personality still constitute a viable paradigm for Africa's youth as they prepare to take the continent through the next fifty years? No, I think we have had enough of African Personality because, quite frankly, anybody still questioning the humanity of the African at this stage. Going forward to 2063, Africa needs to look closely at some of the successes that the youth of the continent have recorded and the extent to which they were informed by culture. Africa's youth created Nollywood which has now surpassed Bollywood as the world's second largest movie industry. What lessons can be learnt from this? Africa's youth created Ushahidi (see Wikipedia for a description). What is left untold in the story of Ushahidi is the role of culture in that famous invention which Kenyan youth unleashed on the world after the violent 2007 presidential election in that country. Ushahidi is informed entirely by African oral culture, what it does is to take African modes of witnessing and verbal artistry to the meeting place of technology and cyber-dissemination of information. The inventors of Ushahidi were responding to the cultural stimulus of Africa's verbal art forms. Culture is responsible for that technology. Agenda 2063 must identify such aspects of African culture that her youth could run away with into the arena of futuristic scientific innovation. Ushahidi has shown that this can be done.

5. Afropolitanism and the dangers of the future?

Nothing underscores the need for an urgent cultural agenda for Africa's youth than the rise and spread of Afropolitanism as a cultural movement among the children of African immigrants in Europe and North America. Here is how the Urban Dictionary defines the Afropolitan: "An African who was educated in the US or Europe and spends a significant amount of time in those parts of the world. It doesn't matter whether they are born abroad or not; the important thing is

their global perspective on issues, as well as their mixed cultural identity.” And here is how Taiye Selassie, a successful novelist and one of the originators of the term defines it: “...We are Afropolitans – the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You’ll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss; others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos. Most of us are multilingual: in addition to English and a Romantic or two, we understand some indigenous tongue and speak a few urban vernaculars. There is at least one place on The African Continent to which we tie our sense of self: be it a nation-state (Ethiopia), a city (Ibadan), or an auntie’s kitchen. Then there’s the G8 city or two (or three) that we know like the backs of our hands, and the various institutions that know us for our famed focus. We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world.” So significant has been the rise of Afropolitanism as a cultural movement in the just a little under a decade that Western media giants such as CNN and BBC have devoted features to it. And as a Professor of African Literature and Culture who moves very frequently in the lecture circuits of Canadian, American, and European Universities, I am a firsthand witness of how quickly Afropolitanism is spreading among African students in the campuses of the West. There has been an explosion of University seminars, symposia, and conferences on Afropolitanism. Museums have joined the bandwagon. In 2011, the Houston Museum of African American Arts organized a symposium on Afropolitanism and the conference announcement celebrated “the rise of a new cultural influence, brought to America and the world by a wave of fascinating young and creative cosmopolitan African immigrants, so called "Afropolitans. The trouble with Afropolitanism is that its emphasis is on the world-citizenship (read: Western citizenship) of the Afropolitan. Africa is only present as what you glance back at, in a very tokenist sense, just to give a sense of celebrated exoticness to your world citizenship. Africa has no future with Afropolitanism. Africa dissolves into some kind of bland worldliness. Yet, this is the single most influential cultural movement among African emigrant youth thirty years and below in the West. How seriously is the African Union taking Afropolitanism in terms of the inclusion of the new African diaspora (as opposed to the traditional diaspora) in the purview of Agenda 2063? What does Afropolitanism tell us about the choices and the options of Africa’s emigrant youth? Since the African Union cannot ignore Afropolitanism because of the movement has numbers, how can the African Union engage this new movement in the context of Agenda 2063? These are questions I would be happy to take up with the handlers of Agenda 2063 should the need and occasion arise. Once again, I thank the African Union for the opportunity to share these views with this distinguished audience.