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African Culture: The Revolution Within **By Mukoma Wa Ngugi** **BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator**

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We have been looking for solutions to Africa's problems everywhere except in the most obvious and logical place: within African cultural, economic and political institutions. From Western socialism and communism to western capitalism and today's neo-liberal democracy, ideologies seeking to liberate Africa from the malaises diagnosed by the followers of Karl Marx and Adam Smith have had one thing in common - a distrust of all things African. African cultural, philosophical and political systems are seen as part of the problem and not part of the solution.

And the few that suggested African institutions and systems of thought have something to offer have also been the least interested in liberating Africa from colonial relationships and internal despotism. So Mobutu and Idi Amin contorted African culture to accommodate and prop their dictatorships, while others like Kenyatta and Senghor incubated authoritarian neocolonialism in what they called "African socialism." Even the architects of apartheid claimed a supreme respect for African cultures behind the Bantustans.

So we ended up in a situation where African culture and history were completely ignored or misused. Where the choices were the black hole of a primordial past or an enlightened Western future. Today, the history of slavery, colonialism to present global inequalities does not inform the neo-liberal democratic solutions offered the continent. African culture is most certainly not considered in the implementation of western styled

democracy.

But a closer look at societies in times of great change shows that neither culture nor history can be ignored. The French revolution of 1789 was a uniquely French affair. The New deal that lifted the US out of depression of the 1930's was American in its peculiarity - an affirmation of capitalism, individualism and social welfare.

The US civil rights did not happen outside the American culture of individualism, racialized capitalism, the welfare state and an aggressive foreign policy that revealed contradictions back at home. Muhammad Ali's poignant statement "I ain't got no quarrel with the Vietcong. No Vietcong ever called me nigger" could not have been made in any other society. The resistance to the Vietnam War that also galvanized a domestic civil right movement is a direct product of American culture and history.

Why then do we expect Africans to define the character and content of a continent's liberation outside Africa's history and political and cultural philosophies?

By ignoring the elasticity and dynamic nature of African cultures as we search for solutions, we end up creating alternative realities that clash with a living historical African experience. The result is a disjuncture between the proposed solution and the living present of Africa. In this disjuncture, oppression, inequality and continued exploitation of African resources thrive without serious challenge.

African cultures contain the most progressive and retrogressive elements within it, as all cultures do. They contain in them legacies of slavery, colonialism and globalization. Yet, the Yoruba and the amaXhosa, for example, continue to thrive as a people in spite of great upheavals coming from within and without. Culture is dynamic and elastic precisely so that a people can survive as a people even in the most adverse of situations. In this regard there are no pure cultures - like languages, cultures borrow, adopt and adapt - they evolve.

There is much for us to draw upon. Take the amaZulu philosophical concept of "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" - A person is a human being through other people- and compare it to Western humanism that has at its basis the recognition of collective humanity. These two concepts are not complete as they stand. But in practice one finds that they are antithetical to a capitalism that has at its center the concept that the wellbeing of one person is at the expense of another's labor and resources - that one is human to the extent another is not. Che Guevara might as well have been drawing from Ubuntu when he said that a "revolutionary is moved first and foremost by love."

In Marxism, humanism is to be achieved through class struggle. We too can radicalize Ubuntu so that it speaks to colonial legacies and global inequalities, despotism and the oppression of women in African societies. In using African concepts of change that learn from other philosophies and histories, the search for Africa's true freedom will find a language, a theory of change, and perhaps most importantly - an audience.

The concept of ituika amongst the Gikuyu can also inform present day African political theory, for example. Ituika, which literally means break, was invoked by the Gikuyu youth when, in the face of continued danger, the elders lacked the political imagination and will to confront and deal with that danger. During a great famine, ituika could be invoked, allowing the youth took over. The Mau Mau liberation war was an invocation of

ituika. The Gikuyu system of thought and culture sanctioned revolutionary change.

Amongst the Gikuyu, one also finds woman-to-woman marriages. True enough that what culture gives, culture also takes away so these marriages were allowed only under very specific circumstance - they had to conform to the demands of patriarchy. They were expected to be non-sexual and reserved for widows with property who needed a wife to perform feminized chores. In effect, the widow became a husband. But nevertheless shouldn't African feminism, in seeking to rollback patriarchy, first draw inspiration from a cultural practice such as this, instead of immediately adopting racist western feminism as the organizing principle?

"Decolonization does not happen in a straight line," Fanon once said. The movement toward a true African liberation, where there is equality within and between nations, will not happen in a straight line - from a primordial African past to an enlightened Western future. By definition, change has to move in concentric elliptical chaotic ripples that reach far into the past in order to find bearing, momentum and strength way into the future.

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