POSTCOLONIAL IMAGINATION AND MORAL REPRESENTATIONS IN AFRICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction: Postcolonial Imagination and Moral Representations—Africa in Discourse and Culture

Much of Africa lives in the delusion of racial innocence.[1] It is the kind of innocence that encourages a Manichean oppositionary thinking that, on the one hand, arranges the world into good, us, and evil, our oppressors and those who fail to see how evil they are. On the other hand, the oppositionary thinking erects bogeymen against whose backdrop leaders of most African societies become tyrannical to their own people while claiming to love and protect them. The delusion of racial innocence is largely due to Africa's violent encounter with the West, in which Africa is decidedly a victim. This encounter has very much shaped the mind-set of most Africans especially in regard to African culture and discourses, and it continues to do so in more subtle, subliminal ways that are not entirely wholesome to African self-perception.[2]

Most enlightened and morally conscious Africans and scholars of Africa elsewhere are rightly disturbed that Africa is not politically and economically as developed as it is capable of. What is perhaps more troubling than the degree of dysfunction in Africa though, is the much effort that has been expended and, in some corners, is still being expended, to explain the African condition by some innocuous reference to the experience of colonialism, and thereby dodging the most obvious link between individual people's lack of feeling of responsibility to their societies, and societal dysfunction. Strictly speaking, nearly every discussion of Africa's problems and prospects inevitably winds its way to the Western assault on Africa. In these discussions, both on interpersonal levels, on Internet Listservs and in professional and intellectually more rigorous forums, the mere invocation of Africa's colonial past appears to lend an argument a decisive point—at least emotionally.[3] There have been attempts, even as late as 2010, to explain incompetence and brazen instances of corruption and embezzlement of public funds by Africans in their thirties and forties as consequences of some kind of colonial trauma, an explanation that somehow finds some justification in what Chinua Achebe referred to as Africa's wound in the soul.[4] The image of Africa in the West, and perhaps even in Africa, in line with the stated mind-set, is due to the "after-

math of colonial discourse" and other persistent attempts by the West to portray Africa as the Dark Continent.[5]

In 1980, three prominent Nigerian writers and critics, Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike, published a book, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*. Upfront in the preface, they declare their "concern for the health of African culture," and go on to dismiss works they considered inimical to African culture, works that were supposedly products of imperialist manipulations.[6] Despite some of the merits of the book, its rhetoric operates largely on the oppositionary parameters, situating the oppressing cultures of the West against the oppressed ones of Africa. Influenced, in large part, by the African American cultural nationalism of the sixties and seventies, the three critics articulated the idea of African cultural authenticity that defines the African to the degree to which he has distanced himself and his worldview from the West; they lent voice to the mood of the time that saw a near-collective romantic looking back to the past, real or imaginary, in search of the true Africa. The fascination with the past, which in most cases was accompanied by the soothing belief that, as the aggrieved party, one is better than the aggressor, produced in the African mind a deceptive satisfaction with one's own world, however flawed that world is. Implicit in this mind-set is the idea that borrowing from other cultures, especially from that of one's historical enemy, meant accepting defeat or proving the enemy right; it also meant losing the perceived moral advantage of the victim. The book, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, and the debates that it provoked dominated the discourse of culture in the English speaking Africa for the most part of the 1980s and well into 1990s.[7] In most cases the debates devolved into name-calling from the trio that suggested that those who did not adopt their understanding of African culture were practically working in the interest of white colonizers of Africa. Much of African discourse, specifically, the Anglophone African intellectual culture has not quite recovered since then.

In his essay, "Why I gave up African studies," Gaving Kitching suggests that much of the problem in the African discourse world "has been the psychological Siamese twins of endemic guilt on the European side and endemic psychological dependence on the African side, legacies which make truth telling hard and the adult taking of responsibility even harder."[8]

The consequences of the guilt-driven discourse in Africa, and its manifest moral assumptions are arguably more detrimental to Africa than the legacies of colonialism. The most obvious of these consequences is intellectual and cultural penury, a condition in which the mind virtually refuses to engage reality in a creative way that could open more possibilities than there have been. There is, as in Nigeria, for example, an official condoning, and in some cases, celebration of incompetence and standardization of ignorance and mediocrity part of which manifested itself in the

government's decision to tackle corruption and other problems by rebranding the country.[9] The thought behind the rebranding frenzy was obviously fed by the perception that Nigeria was ugly not because of the near absence of modern infrastructures such as good roads, electricity, potable water, or even good governance, but because the Western media have woven a single negative story about the country.

While other formerly colonized parts of the world such as India, Brazil, Indonesia and Singapore have consciously imitated and improved on the Western paths to development, Africa, conscious not to lose its authenticity and the treasured role of the victim, fans the ember of guilt and blame on the West, on the one hand, and on the other, solicits aid from the West. While in the 1990s most Asian and Latin American countries signed trade agreements with the US, agreements that set most of their societies on the path to modernity, the most that some African countries could get from Bill Clinton were arguably apologies for slavery and some promises of aid. It is then highly disturbing that African leaders settle for symbolic victories even though there are many serious fights to be waged: fight for elemental survival, and eventual thriving and competitiveness of African societies; fight for economic and social justice within the continent. It turns out that most African leaders were blinded by legitimate anger towards the colonial masters, and unfortunately never vigorously sought to understand and master the economic, technological and, perhaps even the sociocultural, systems that made their conquest and oppression possible. With very few exceptions, these leaders never sought to be masters of their own worlds in view of making them places where lives can flourish.[10] It is troubling to watch the ease with which African states have welcomed the control of their resources by the emerging Asian powers, formerly colonized people, who, themselves, did not seek to luxuriate in the balm of victimhood, but rather have taken up responsibilities of ordering their own societies.[11]

The guilt-driven discourse in Africa, as in every other continent, hinders the individual from assuming some moral responsibility for the ills of his worlds; and against this background, social or political dysfunction becomes a self-sustaining system that feeds off of its reluctance to admit incompleteness and insufficiency. Besides preventing one from taking an active part in making whole his dysfunctional world, the feeling of being the victim of history generally blunts the human capacity to empathize with the other, to imaginatively reenact the other's pain, and this is because the victim already feels that the world has spun a web of conspiracy around him. Any burst of anger or violence towards any person, institution, object or history is already justified *a priori*. Unfortunately though, the victim's neighbors and relatives or compatriots often bear the brunt of his incapacity to empathize and to focus on specific issues and problems facing their world. The self-proclaimed victim of history sees the world only in his image and likeness; all those who fail to do the same

invariably become his enemy, or they are thought to sympathize with his enemy. There is therefore an acute deficit of empathy among the elites of most African societies, owing to people's unconscious need to take out their vengeance, for some putative wound in the soul, on others.

Africa's dysfunction owes some of its explanation to the simplistic moral representations of the African postcolonial world, representations that shape-shift from the assumption that all is well with African culture to the feeling that even if all is not well with the African world it is not Africa's fault; it is the fault of the colonial masters. By moral representation I mean how people judge the world, the fundamental disposition within individuals and societies that allows them to differentiate between good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable conducts or views. Moral representation also means how the existing ethical codes of conduct in a given society are dramatized, or made to stand for far-reaching values. I contend that Africa's postcolonial dispositions have skewered the dominant African judgment of the world, and shelved it in clean oppositionary categories to the West. In some instances, and in some minds, what is African and therefore acceptable is what is fundamentally against the West, and therefore unacceptable. Given this new moral order, African elite failed to cultivate African humanity in the face of the new dispensation that has effectively neutered all traditional guardians of morality, law and order.

Africa's postcolonial imagination and the attendant moral representations have a long intellectual history; they are rooted in the responses of the African Diaspora to their experience of oppression and racism. My book examines the nature of these moral representations. I argue that the African imagination, in engaging Western representations of Africa, constructed a world whose operative ideas were more effective in salving people's hurt egos than they were in addressing Africa's epistemic, structural and infrastructural problems. More appropriately though, Africa's intellectual response to the European assault was reactionary, aimed at putting off the fire of the white man's attack, and in that way it made Europe a bogeyman, whose existence, imaginary or real, began to control the African mind more than Europe had controlled the African body. In their desire to get back at the colonial aggressors by writing or fighting back, Africans wrote and argued themselves into a corner out of which it is difficult to emerge. The 20th century African intellection locked itself in an unhappy binary.[12]

Shocked by the conquest by the West, and humiliated by the apparent weakness of their culture, African leaders (and the African Diaspora), allowed their response to be dominated by a firefighter instinct to save the world under attack. The response, however, morphed in most thinkers such as Edward Wilmot Blyden, Leopold Sedar Senghor and others, into justifications of the African frail world, a defense on the one hand, and on the other an attempt to discredit the validity of Western culture

by suggesting its moral deficiency. Africa's experience with colonialism left trails of disappointment and bitterness, and hollow apologies, which, with time, brewed into fierce accusations, cleanly embedded in terms and concepts associated with Western oppression such as colonialism, neocolonialism, neoimperialism and capitalism, Europe, the West, white man, and so on. These concepts have, in the course of time, assumed a powerful symbolic status that operates on purely affective plane in the African discourse world. They are symbolic in the sense that they already embody all the historical wrongs visited on the African body. One therefore, does not need to enumerate all those wrongs; one merely needs to squeeze in any of these words or concepts in a discourse. The concepts are accusatory and condemnatory on the one hand, and on the other, exculpatory and justificatory; they accuse and condemn the historical oppressor, the white man, while justifying and absolving the oppressed, the African.

In laying out the discourse shaped by the victim's affective state, I will seek to move the African postcolonial discourse beyond the hitherto dominant paradigm that still defines Africa against some ubiquitous West ,beyond the write-back paradigm. I hope to add to the emerging voices, in the art, literature and social sciences, that seek to redirect the African mind towards itself. The African mind can begin to address issues that directly shape the African life if it ignores the perceived gaze of the West and the instinctive urge to justify one's being, which often translates into a falling back to the symbols and idioms that are thought to carry the weight of one's authentic being. In ignoring the gaze of the other, the African mind, it is hoped, will begin to seek for ways to create decent living environments for Africans even if it means actively borrowing idioms from the former colonial masters. With literature as an example, I argue that the true test of modern African culture will be the degree to which it leads Africans towards their humanity, and not the degree it reminds them how evil the other, the West, is. I ask: Can Africans ever empathize with fellow Africans?

There are other ways to explain African realities. One of them is to see Africa from transcultural paradigms—as Wolfgang Welsch argues about modern culture. Another is to see African lives as already contaminated, as Kwame Anthony Appiah argues about modern world; Africa can therefore no longer be able to lay claims to purity and innocence. Africa is thoroughly implicated in its woes, and, every African is part of that contaminated world. In acknowledging his world as already contaminated, and himself as implicated in that contamination, the African sees his reality as cosmopolitan and necessarily deserving of a broader, universal moral world outlook which invites his active participation. Another way to understand African reality is to explore some ideas original to Africa such as Ubuntu, which, as Bishop Desmond Tutu explains, is the one central idea that made Truth and Reconciliation possible and therefore

the peaceful transition from apartheid regime to a multiracial, diverse modern society in South Africa imaginable. Space will not allow me to engage this idea here, though.

This book does not claim to be exhaustive. It is conceived of as a catalyst to a broader debate about African culture and moral consciousness. It is, indeed, selective in its discussion of ideas. It is selective to the degree to which it considers a book or an author decisive in initiating or enhancing Africa's response to the West and to itself. I will be satisfied if this book succeeds in enhancing the already emerging discourse rather than claim to provide a final answer to Africa's many questions. This book is conceived as two parts of the same problem. The first part, which explores morality born of the feelings of hurt, is designed as a question, while the second part, which discusses the moral values of the awareness of vulnerability, provides some answers. The overarching goal of this book is to raise questions that would steer the African mind towards recognizing the pain of fellow African, and undertaking something to stop it.

Chapter 1, "Postcolonial States of Injury and Moral Imaginations," lays out the theoretical basis for my discussion of Africa's postcolonial moral representations. It discusses Gavin Kitching's highly publicized and in some instances contentious criticism of the state of African Studies as symptomatic of the consequences of Africa's history of discourse based on affective state. Inspired by Achille Mbembe's essay, "African Modes of Self-Writing," this chapter discusses more specifically the idea of valuations born of the spirit of *ressentiment*. It appeals to Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Scheler's discourse of the judgments born of the state of injury.

Chapter 2, "The Moral Reinvention of Africa," traces the evolution of moral representation of Africa as a colonized space and Africans as victims of history. It situates the African postcolonial discourse in the African American intellectual tradition, and discusses Olaudah Equiano, Edward Wilmot Blyden, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Afrocentrism and aspects of African American cultural nationalism of the civil rights era as precursors and enablers of African postcolonial moral attitude. This chapter works from the premise that the dominant perceptions of Africans in the Diaspora about Africa were carefully packaged in fiercely antislavery, antiracism resistance; these perceptions and the subsequent reconstruction of the African image, in turn, constituted a large bulk of African colonial or postcolonial present.

Chapter 3, "*Things Fall Apart* and the Invention of African Culture," examines the proposition that Chinua Achebe invented the modern African culture; it analyzes the role of the narrative world of *Things Fall Apart* as one of the central fulcrums around which the African postcolonial moral attitude revolves. It notes that *Things Fall Apart* is a novel conceived primarily as an answer to Joseph Conrad and other Westerner's

misrepresentations of Africa. In reconstructing the African, however, the novel created one that served Achebe's ideological write-back goals.

Chapter 4, "The Pitfalls of African Feminism," discusses the responses of representative African women thinkers such as Oyeronke Oyewumi, Nkiru Nzegwu, and others, to the discourse of African feminism. It examines how most of their responses were framed in the models that largely imitated the existing postcolonial oppositionary paradigms. Owing to the fact that African women thinkers have generally dismissed the theoretical concerns of their Western counterparts as parts of the West's historical oppressive machinery, some contentious issues regarding women in African communities were largely ignored. Perhaps this is so because addressing some of those issues might give the impression of confirming the perceived prejudices of Western feminists. In this way African feminism merely recycled some of the arguments of culture clash discourse.

Chapter 5, "Robert Mugabe and the Symbolic Power of History," states that in no African country does the effect of discourse of culture clash exert as much negative influence as in Zimbabwe. This chapter examines the dilemma of Robert Mugabe in African history, and argues that Zimbabwe could be understood as metonymic of the devastations of the anti-imperialist rhetoric and moral implications that accompany it in the African thought world.

Chapter 6, "Frantz Fanon and the Search for New Discourse Paradigms," begins the second part of this book, a part that was conceived of as an attempt at finding a solution to the issues raised in the first part. I suggest some ways of engaging modern African culture that would increase the sum total of Africa's humanity. Frantz Fanon warned that the failure of postcolonial subjects to go beyond narrow nationalist consciousness would ultimately stall the fulfillment of African revolution. This chapter proposes how the African world could go beyond the discourses of postcolonialism and embrace a more universal moral grammar in order to encompass the complex nature of African reality.

Chapter 7, "Wole Soyinka and the Moral Foundations of Community," speaks to the obvious notion that not all African thinkers can be grouped as reactionary ideologues. Wole Soyinka provides a clear example of progressive ideas that though acknowledge the ills of colonialism, but do not seek to create a world outlook based on some opposition to the West. This chapter situates Soyinka as opposed to the discourse of culture clash. Because his discourse paradigm is not rooted in culture clash, he is naturally disposed to a more universal moral attitude. Wole Soyinka's moral worldview is rooted in his Yoruba heritage, while at the same time being universal. This chapter shows how his universal vision can help African communities consolidate their gains from independence while reaching out to world communities.

Anticipating African literature that goes beyond the culture clash model, chapter 8, "Literature and Task of Increasing the Sum Total of Humanity," discusses how recent African writers reimagine the African postcolonial, group-transcendent identities by confronting the imprints of one-dimensionality left behind by years of dictatorship and misplaced nationalisms. There is, in this new generation of African writers, not only a rigorous embrace of modernity and a visible attempt to increase the sum total of humanity, but also a pronounced, unsentimental love of the African space and person.

NOTES

1. I am aware of the many cultures in Africa. The title of this book should therefore not give the impression that Africa has one monolithic culture. It is, however, fair to say that there is an underlying theme or sameness in Africa's response to the colonial encounter. This response has largely shaped modern African culture. I restrict my discussion of culture to the imaginative expressions in philosophy and the arts and their manifestations in politics and society in general. In this book, I am not interested in other forms of modern cultural expressions, such as the media, music, and visual art, however relevant they may be in our understanding of modern Africa.

2. I owe the inspiration for this book, among other sources, to Kwame Anthony Appiah's book *In My Father's House* and Achille Mbembe's seminal essay "African Modes of Self-Writing," trans. Steven Rendall, *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 239–73. I acknowledge also Bruce Janz's *Philosophy in an African Place* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).

3. I am aware of the enduring legacies of the Western assault on Africa, such as the existence of artificial geopolitical boundaries, the policies of Western governments, and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In most cases, however, these have provided convenient excuses for some leaders to dodge the difficult task of consistently working for the development of their societies. In the recently concluded Fourth European Conference on African Studies, in Uppsala, Sweden, titled "African Engagements: On Whose Terms?" the second keynote address, delivered by Oyeronke Oyewumi, reiterated the core arguments of how Western discourses imposed their gender categories on Yoruba cosmology, implying that before Colonialism, the Yoruba had no such rigid differentiation.

4. Ogaga Ifowodo, "They Won't Even Build Toilets for Themselves! Thinking through the Corruption Complex with Frantz Fanon," http://www.saharareporters.com/article/they-won%E2%80%99t-even-build-toilets-themselves-thinking-through-corruption-complex-frantz-fanon?page=1 (accessed October 6, 2010).

5. Martin Asiegbu, "African Migrants in Spite of 'Fortress' Europe: An Essay in Philosophy of Popular Culture," http://www.ajol.info/index.php/og/article/viewFile/52332/40957 (accessed May 23, 2011).

6. Onwuchekwa Jemie Chinweizu and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension, 1980), 207.

7. Bernth Lindfors, "Beating the White Man at His Own Game: Nigerian Reactions to the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature," *Black American Literature Forum* 22, no. 3.1 (1988): 475–88.

8. Gavin Kitching, "Why I Gave Up African Studies," http://motspluriels.arts.uwa.edu.au/MP1600gk.html (accessed June 28, 2010).

9. "Rebranding Nigeria: Good People, Impossible Mission: The Government of a Great Nation Tries a Short Cut to Salvation," http://www.economist.com/node/

13579116?story_id=13579116. See also "Rebranding Nigeria," http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/documentaries/2009/10/091021_rebranding_nigeria.shtml (accessed May 21, 2011).

10. There are, of course, outstanding examples of African political leaders who paid with their lives because they sought to improve the lot of their countries—leaders such as Patrice Lumumba of Zaire, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso.

11. See, for instance, Hillary Clinton's warning on Africa against new colonialism. "Clinton Warns against 'New Colonialism' in Africa," http://www.theafricareport.com/last-business-news/5141496-Clinton%20warns%20against%20%5C (accessed June 11, 2011).

12. There are, of course, notable exceptions to these, such as V. Y. Mudimbe, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Simon Gikandi, Wole Soyinka, Abiola Irele, Biodun Jeyifo, and Achille Mbembe. Despite the few dissenting voices from the general thrust of write-back discourse, the age that began with the publication of *Things Fall Apart* until the last day of the twentieth century can hardly escape being tagged the *age of ressentiment* due to its largely reactive stance to reality. What has characterized this age is the general tendency to present Africa in some form of response or explanation or answer to the European gaze, an alternative to the perceived European variety. For example, in the humanity disciplines (e.g., philosophy, theology, religion, literature), there are expressions such as the *African concept of life* and the *African idea of ethics*.

Contents

ONE

Postcolonial States of Injury and Moral Imaginations

THE CRISIS OF POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN DISCOURSE

In his book *The Trouble with Nigeria*, Chinua Achebe discusses the dysfunction in his native country, Nigeria, and locates the core of Nigeria's problems in the failure of leadership. "The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership."[1] His analysis of the Nigerian situation is accurate and has influenced many other thinkers about the Nigerian situation.

Nigerian scholar, Moses Ebe Ochonu wonders in his "Democracy and the Performance of Power: Observations from Nigeria," how Africans as scholars and intellectuals can justify "a system that, in practice (at least in Nigeria), seems to exist only for its own perpetuation and nothing more—in a self-replicating cycle of vertical and horizontal mobility by politicians."[2] Ochonu's observation, I think, is much in line with Chinua Achebe's discussion of the Nigerian dysfunction. Ochonu's examination, however, takes a few steps towards analyzing the mind-set of the said leadership. What do the leaders think about when they think about leadership? What exactly formed their worldview? How do they understand the system they have either inherited, or constructed themselves? What is their relation to the ruled?

What these two Nigerian scholars say about Nigeria applies, with local colorations, to African leadership. Ochonu challenges Nigerian and indeed, African intellectuals to rethink the hitherto operational paradigms in the discourse and understanding of their modern societies. To me, Ochonu seems to aim at understanding the culture that either produced the leadership, or sustained their attitude to the ruled.

Ochonu's concerns are not far from those articulated by Achille Mbembe in his book, *On the Postcolony*; they also recall what Gavin Kitching, one of the major scholars in modern African Studies, observes in his piece about the crisis of African studies at universities in the West. Kitching was depressed about the state of African Studies because of the failure of the African elite and scholars of Africa to be truthful and respon-

sible to their constituencies. The African leaders in particular are the major causes of dysfunction in Africa, yet much of the blame for African crises goes to the former colonial masters. He asks in this regard: "why have African governing elites been particularly prone to behaving in ways which are both economically destructive of the welfare of the people for whom they are supposedly responsible and which have led—at the extreme—to forms of state fision (civil war etc.) collapse or breakdown?"

I understand Kitching to mean that the crises in Africa are not due only to the legacies of colonialism as such, but rather the attitude to those legacies. To be specific, much of the problem lies with how scholars and producers of knowledge about Africa have shaped and continue to shape opinions in, and about Africa. He is particularly depressed by the polarization within the field of African studies, the polarization "between those advocating what were called 'internalist' explanations of Africa's problems and those who continued to favour 'externalist' explanations. . . . [The] advocates of the latter view often charged advocates of the former with 'blaming African people' for Africa's parlous state."

The said polarization is both result and enabler of the guilt-driven epistemologies about Africa that are characterized by random name-calling with its heavy moral and psychological implications. In the end therefore there emerged what he calls the "psychological Siamese twins of endemic guilt on the European side and endemic psychological dependence on the African side, legacies which make truth telling hard and the adult taking of responsibility even harder."[3]

The easy name-calling that has deeply affected, if not characterized, much of African studies in the past is only equaled, or indeed, buttressed by the application in the discourse of culture in Africa, of handy concepts associated with Western conquest and dominance of the world: imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, and so on. These concepts, in most cases, replace the difficult task of rigorous examination of issues of relevance in Africa. An African with a somewhat critical stance on Africa that might appear to resemble what the "racist" white man has said, risks being labeled a sellout. Some of Kitching's respondents commit the exact mistakes that Kitching warns about. Marc Epprecht calls Kitching Afro-pessimist and believes that he wants "to berate Africans for their shortcomings."[4]

Some other respondents to Kitching exhibit somewhat essentialist, or romantic, if not naïve, ideas about Africa. Lisa McNee notes that Kitching most likely was a victim of romantic cynicism; she encourages Africanists to try to cultivate the virtues that she has "noted as typically African: friendly perseverance in the face of adversity, generosity, hope and a willingness to help others."[5] McNee's opinion characterizes the approach of some well-intentioned scholars of Africa, which is just well-inten-