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Section 1.D

Identity & Personhood in Africa

Ever since African peoples' encounters with Western traders, missionaries and colonial officials in the late nineteenth century, the traditional-modern opposition played a crucial role in organizing discourses about the specificity of African identity. Africans were marked as traditional not only by Westerners, the notion of tradition also pervaded African modes of self-description. African intellectuals and activists perceived Africans to have acquired a problematic split personality in the course of their submission to Western colonial power – a theme that has kept informing reflections about African identity until today, be it in the context of Christianity or attempts to venture an African Renaissance. While a great variety of such reflections exists, they converge in grounding the distinctiveness of 'the African person' in an essential – and indeed essentializing – difference with regard to the Western person. Salient examples of such an inverted dialectics in which the West features as Africa's 'Other' can be found in Kwame Nkrumah's African personality, and Léopold Senghor's *négritude*. Both views, excerpts of which are reprinted below, converge in taking race as the prime factor in producing a distinct African personhood that is primarily emotional rather than rational, spiritual rather than materialistic, and socialist rather than individualistic. In his book *In My Father's House*, the Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Appiah has critiqued and refuted such groundings of African identity on race. In the chapter reproduced here he makes a plea for deconstructing the mystifications and mythologies on which race-based understandings of African identity and personhood thrive, without, however, denying their actual power and political efficacy. Arguing that the value of identities is relative rather than natural, he advocates dismissing the project of a racialized Negro nationalism in favor of a new kind of Pan-Africanism based on shared experiences. Jean-François Bayart shares this non-essentializing understanding of personhood and identity. Based on Michel Foucault's thinking about governmentality, he places missionaries' initiatives to invigorate a new type of religious person, identified by a distinct modern life style, material culture and mindset, in broader processes of subjectivation through which Africans became part of colonial modern regimes. In an ethnographic study of Ali, 'one of the most "modern" people' in his village and yet possessed by spirits that make his engagement with modernity increasingly problematic, Michael Lambek highlights how the relational quality of personhood in Mayotte impinges on people's agency vis-à-vis the modern.

LEOPOLD SEDAR SENGHOR

The African Road to Socialism

Reference

On African Socialism

New York & London: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964, pp. 73–5

Let us then consider the Negro African as he faces the object to be known, as he faces the Other: God, man, animal, tree or pebble, natural or social phenomenon. In contrast to the classic European, the Negro African does not draw a line between himself and the object; he does not hold it at a distance, nor does he merely look at it and analyze it. After holding it at a distance, after scanning it without analyzing it, he takes it vibrant in his hands, careful not to kill or fix it. He touches it, feels it, *smells* it. The Negro African is like one of those Third Day Worms,¹ a pure field of sensations. Subjectively, at the tips of his sensory organs, his insect antennae, he discovered the Other. Immediately he is moved, going centrifugally from subject to object on the waves of the Other. This is more than a simple metaphor; contemporary physics has discovered universal energy under matter: waves and radiations. Thus the Negro-African *sympathizes*,² abandons his personality to become identified with the Other, dies to be reborn in the Other. He does not assimilate; he is assimilated. He lives a common life with the Other; he lives in a symbiosis. To use Paul Claudel's expression, he 'knows' the Other. Subject and object are dialectically face to face in the very act of knowledge. It is a long caress in the night, an embrace of joined bodies, the act of love. 'I want you to feel me,' says a voter who wants you to know him well. 'I think, therefore I am,' Descartes writes. The observation has already been made that one always thinks something, and the logician's conjunction 'therefore' is unnecessary. The Negro African could say, 'I feel, I dance the Other; I am.' To dance is to discover and to recreate, especially when it is a dance of love. In any event, it is the best way to know, just as knowledge is at once discovery and creation – I mean, re-creation and recreation, after the model of God.

Young people have criticized me for reducing Negro-African knowledge to pure emotion, for denying that there is an African 'reason' or African techniques. This is the hub of the problem; I should like to explain my thought once again. Obviously, there is a European civilization and a Negro-African civilization. Anyone who has not explained their differences and the reasons for them has explained nothing and has left the problem untouched.

Thus, I explain myself. However paradoxical it may seem, the vital force of the Negro African, his surrender to the object, is animated by reason. Let us understand each other clearly; it is not the *reasoning-eye* of Europe, it is the *reason of the touch*, better still, the *reasoning-embrace*, the sympathetic reason, more closely related to the Greek *logos* than to the Latin *ratio*. For *logos*, before Aristotle, meant both reason and the word. At any rate, Negro-African speech does not mold the object into rigid categories and concepts without touching it; it polishes things and restores their original color, with their texture, sound, and perfume; it perforates them with its luminous rays to reach the essential surreality in its innate humidity – it would be more accurate to speak of subreality. European reasoning is analytical, discursive by utilization; Negro-African reasoning is intuitive by participation.

Young people in Black Africa are wrong to develop a complex and to believe the latter inferior to the former. 'The most beautiful emotion that we can experience,' wrote the great scientist Einstein, 'is mystic emotion. It is the germ of all art and all true science.' To return to Negro-African speech, I refer you to two significant articles. The first, 'Ethnologie de la parole,' is by Maurice Leenhardt;⁴ the second, 'Introduction à l'étude de la musique africaine,' is by Geneviève Calame-Griaule and Blaise Calame.⁵ Leenhardt studies the New Caledonians, who are blacks; he contends that the New Caledonian meaning of the word is related to that of Negro Africans; the Calame article confirms this. For him, therefore, the black word, 'uttered under the shock of *emotion*' (my italics) surpasses that emotion. Coinciding with the real, it is not only an expression of knowledge, but knowledge itself, ready for action, already action. 'The word,' he concludes, 'is thought, speech, action!' Now you will understand why, in my definition of Negro-African knowledge, I rejected abstract analysis on the European pattern, why I preferred to use analogous imagery, the metaphor, to make you feel the object of my speech. The metaphor, a symbolic shortcut in its sensitive, sensual qualities, is the method par excellence of Negro-African speech.⁶

Today, it is also, quite often, the style of European speech, as Gaëtan Picon indicates. So, our young people should not repudiate the Negro-African method of knowledge since, once again, it is the latest form of the European method. *Participation* and *communion* — those are Picon's words; they are the very words that ethnologists specializing in the study of Negro-African civilizations have used for decades.

Does this mean, as certain young people would like to interpret my remarks, that the Negro African lacks discursive reason, that he has never used any? I have never said so. In truth, every ethnic group possesses different aspects of reason and all the virtues of man, but each has stressed only one aspect of reason, only certain virtues. No civilization can be built without using discursive reason and without techniques. Negro-African civilization is no exception to this rule. Witness the astonishment of the earliest European navigators disembarking in Africa to discover well-organized states, with government, administration, justice, and army, with techniques (remarkable for that date) for working in wood, ivory, bronze, iron, basketry, weaving, and terra cotta, with medical and agricultural techniques worthy of Europe.

From all that, I will conclude that we must maintain the Negro-African method of knowledge, but integrate into it the methods Europe has used throughout her history — classical logic, Marxian dialectics, and that of the twentieth century. Negro-African reason is traditionally dialectical, transcending the principles of identity, noncontradiction, and the 'excluded middle.' Let us merely be careful not to be led astray by the narrow determinism of Marxism, by abstraction. Let us hold firmly to the concrete, and we shall find, underlying the concrete, beyond the discontinuous and the undetermined, the liberty that legitimates not only our faith but the *African Road to Socialism*.

Notes

¹ An allusion to the Age of Reptiles. [TRANS.]

² In the French text, *sympathise*, literally, 'feels with'. [TRANS.]

³ Here again the word is separated, *con-naît*, literally, 'his born with'. [TRANS.] See Arthur Koestler, *The Lotus and the Robot* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1961) p. 43.

The traditional Eastern way of looking at things is to deny that there are

things independently from the act of looking. The objects of consciousness cannot be separated from the conscious subject; observer and observed are a single, indivisible, fluid reality, as they are at the dawn of consciousness in the child, and in the cultures dominated by magic. The external world has no existence in its own right; it is a function of the senses; but that function exists only in so far as it is registered by consciousness, and consequently has no existence in its own right.

⁴ Maurice Leenhardt, 'Ethnologie de la Parole', *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* 1 (1946).

⁵ Geneviève Calame-Griaule and Blaise Calame, 'Introduction à l'étude de musique africaine', *La Revue musicale*, p. 238.

⁶ For the importance of word and symbol in Black Africa, see Marcel Griaule, *Dieu d'eau*, pp. 15, 25, 27–8, 34, 46, 60, 73, 80. See also Leo F. Frobenius, *Histoire de la Civilisation africaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1936), and Tempels, *La Philosophie bantoue* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1949).

KWAME NKRUMAH Society & Ideology

Reference

Consciencism: Philosophy & Ideology for Decolonization & Development with Particular Reference to the African Revolution
London: Heinemann, 1964, pp. 68–70 and 78–9

The need for subtle means of social cohesion lies in the fact that there is a large portion of life which is outside direct central intervention. In order that this portion of life should be filled with order, non-statutory methods are required. These non-statutory methods, by and large, are the subtle means of social cohesion. But different societies lay different emphases on these subtle means even if the range of conformity which they seek is the same. The emphasis which a particular society lays on a given means depends on the experience, social-economic circumstances and the philosophical foundation of that society.

In Africa, this kind of emphasis must take objective account of our present situation at the return of political independence. From this point of view, there are three broad features to be distinguished here. African society has one segment which comprises our traditional way of life; it has a second segment which is filled by the presence of the Islamic tradition in Africa; it has a final segment which represents the infiltration of the Christian tradition and culture of Western Europe into Africa, using colonialism and neocolonialism as its primary vehicles. These different segments are animated by competing ideologies. But since society implies a certain dynamic unity, there needs to emerge an ideology which, genuinely catering for the needs of all, will take the place of the competing ideologies, and so reflect the dynamic unity of society, and be the guide to society's continual progress.

The traditional face of Africa includes an attitude towards man which can only be described, in its social manifestation, as being socialist. This arises from the fact that man is regarded in Africa as primarily a spiritual being, a being endowed originally with a certain inward dignity, integrity and value. It stands refreshingly opposed to the Christian idea of the original sin and degradation of man.

This idea of the original value of man imposes duties of a socialist kind upon us. Herein lies the theoretical basis of African communalism. This theoretical basis expressed itself on the social level in terms of institutions such as the clan, underlining the initial equality of all and the responsibility of many for one. In this social situation, it was impossible for classes of a Marxian kind to arise. By a Marxian kind of class, I mean one which has a place in a horizontal social stratification. Here classes are related in such a way that there is a disproportion of economic and political power between them. In such a society there exist classes which are crushed, lacerated and ground down by the encumbrance of exploitation. One class sits upon the neck of another. In this sense, there were no classes in traditional African society.

In the traditional African society, no sectional interest could be regarded as supreme; nor did legislative and executive power aid the interests of any particular group. The welfare of the people was supreme.

But colonialism came and changed all this. First, there were the necessities of the colonial administration to which I referred in the Introduction. For its success, the colonial administration needed a cadre of Africans, who, by being introduced to a certain minimum of European education, became infected with European ideals, which they tacitly accepted as being valid for African societies. Because these African instruments of the colonial administration were seen by all to be closely associated with the new sources of power, they acquired a certain prestige and rank to which they were not entitled by the demands of the harmonious development of their own society.

In addition to them, groups of merchants and traders, lawyers, doctors, politicians and trade unionists emerged, who, armed with skills and levels of affluence which were gratifying to the colonial administration, initiated something parallel to the European middle class. There were also certain feudal-minded elements who became imbued with European ideals either through direct European education or through hobnobbing with the local colonial administration. They gave the impression that they could be relied upon implicitly as repositories of all those staid and conservative virtues indispensable to any exploiter administration. They, as it were, paid the registration fee for membership of a class which was now associated with social power and authority.

Such education as we were all given put before us right from our infancy ideals of the metropolitan countries, ideals which could seldom be seen as representing the scheme, the harmony and progress of African society. The scale and type of economic activity, the idea of the accountability of the individual conscience introduced by the Christian religion, countless other silent influences, these have all made an indelible impression upon African society.

But neither economic nor political subjugation could be considered as being in tune with the traditional African egalitarian view of man and society. Colonialism had in any case to be done away with. The African Hercules has his club poised ready to smite any new head which the colonialist hydra may care to put out.

With true independence regained, however, a new harmony needs to be forged, a harmony that will allow the combined presence of traditional Africa, Islamic Africa and Euro-Christian Africa, so that this

presence is in tune with the original humanist principles underlying African society. Our society is not the old society, but a new society enlarged by Islamic and Euro-Christian influences. A new emergent ideology is therefore required, an ideology which can solidify in a philosophical statement, but at the same time an ideology which will not abandon the original humanist principles of Africa.

Such a philosophical statement will be born out of the crisis of the African conscience confronted with the three strands of present African society. Such a philosophical statement I propose to name *philosophical consciencism*, for it will give the theoretical basis for an ideology whose aim shall be to contain the African experience of Islamic and Euro-Christian presence as well as the experience of the traditional African society, and, by gestation, employ them for the harmonious growth and development of that society.

[...] Practice without thought is blind; thought without practice is empty. The three segments of African society which I specified in the last chapter, the traditional, the Western, and the Islamic, co-exist uneasily; the principles animating them are often in conflict with one another. I have in illustration tried to show how the principles which inform capitalism are in conflict with the socialist egalitarianism of the traditional African society.

What is to be done then? I have stressed that the two other segments, in order to be rightly seen, must be accommodated only as experiences of the traditional African society. If we fail to do this our society will be racked by the most malignant schizophrenia.

Our attitude to the Western and the Islamic experience must be purposeful. It must also be guided by thought, for practice without thought is blind. What is called for as a first step is a body of connected thought which will determine the general nature of our action in unifying the society which we have inherited, this unification to take account, at all times, of the elevated ideals underlying the traditional African society. Social revolution must therefore have, standing firmly behind it, an intellectual revolution, a revolution in which our thinking and philosophy are directed towards the redemption of our society. Our philosophy must find its weapons in the environment and living conditions of the African people. It is from those conditions that the intellectual content of our philosophy must be created. The emancipation of the African continent is the emancipation of man. This requires two aims: first, the restitution of the egalitarianism of human society, and, second, the logistic mobilization of all our resources towards the attainment of that restitution.

The philosophy that must stand behind this social revolution is that I have once referred to as *philosophical consciencism*; consciencism is the map in intellectual terms of the disposition of forces which will enable African society to digest the Western and the Islamic and the Euro-Christian elements in Africa, and develop them such a way that they fit into the African personality. The African personality is itself defined by the cluster of humanist principles which underlie the traditional African society. *Philosophical consciencism* is that philosophical standpoint which, taking its start from the present content of the African conscience, indicates the way in which progress is forged out of the conflict in that conscience.