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# Mbiti and Achebe on the Forward Movement through the Past

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Development and modernization theorists often disagree over the role of the past or tradition in the processes of change and social progress. While for some, change and economic progress often entail the abandonment of traditional orientations, for others, any change not controlled by traditional perspectives remains at best superficial and disorienting for societies as well as for individuals. Africans in particular, whose traditions have long been subjugated to the degrading discourse of remorseless colonialism, have—under pressure to solve basic problems of poverty, ignorance, health, and lack of modern infrastructures—sometimes come to regard traditional beliefs and institutions as obstacles. However, there are Africans who believe that genuine forward movement for change in Africa can only come when agents of change and development are aligned with values and philosophies behind the African traditional conceptions of being. And central to the question of beliefs and values is the phenomenon of religion.

John S. Mbiti, an African theologian, spent a great deal of time studying African traditional religion and philosophy because, according to him:

... since traditional religions occupy the whole person and the whole of his life, conversion to new religions like Christianity and Islam must embrace his language, thought patterns, fears, social relationships, attitudes and philosophical disposition, if that conversion is to make a lasting impact upon the individual and his community.<sup>1</sup>

Mbiti thought of religion as an ontological phenomenon and was very aware of how African traditional religions, unlike revealed religions, “evolved slowly through many centuries as people responded to the situations of their lives and reflected upon their experiences.”<sup>2</sup>

It is significant that Mbiti’s studies of African religions led him to consider Africans the authentic heirs to Christianity. According to Messay Kebede, “Mbiti defends traditional African religions on account of their closeness to the original, non-hellenized message of the Bible.”<sup>3</sup> D. A. Masolo goes on to suggest that “for Mbiti, it would seem, Africans need no conversion to Christianity. They already live the Christian message.”<sup>4</sup> When Africans, because of the depth of their internalization of the colonial discourse, reject their past traditions on the basis of the alleged conflict between tradition and modernity, they render themselves incapable of genuine forward movement because they have suppressed their authentic lines of development. An imposed modernization that is not a result of a creative synthesis of the traditional and the modern can only lead to a rootless mentality, and according to Mbiti, “may well be at the root of, among other things, the political instability of our nations.”<sup>5</sup> Chinua Achebe has Ikem write in a letter to Beatrice in *Anthills of the Savannah*:

Society is an extension of the individual....we can only hope to rearrange some details in the periphery of the human personality. Any disturbance of its core is an invitation to disaster. Even a one-day-old baby does not make itself available for your root-and-branch psychological engineering, for it comes trailing clouds of immortality. What immortality? Its baggage of irreducible inheritance of genes. That is immortality.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1986), 3.

<sup>2</sup> John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religions* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1975), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Messay Kebede, *Africa’s Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization* (New York: Rodopi, 2004), 76.

<sup>4</sup> D. A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Bloomington: UP, 1994), 119.

<sup>5</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 28.

<sup>6</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (Ibadan: HEB, 1988), 100.

The arguments or pleas for a backward- and forward-looking praxis for Africa, aimed at restoring the continuity shattered by colonial intrusion into the continent, have earned powerful strictures from notable African intellectuals; Abiola Irele for instance, has warned against the “organic fallacy” that forgets that:

...the colonial experience was not an interlude in our history, a storm that broke upon us, causing damage here and there but leaving us the possibility after its passing, to pick up the pieces. It marked a sea change of the historical process in Africa, it effected a qualitative reordering of life. It has rendered the traditional way of life no longer a viable option for our continued existence and apprehension of the world.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, Irele’s view does not admit of any possibility of a healthy creative synthesis or at least co-existence between the traditional and the modern and so in turn reminds us of Oyekan Owomoyela’s lament:

Long before Africans were colonized, the Hebrews suffered a similar fate. They always relied, however, on the survival of a faithful remnant that would in more auspicious times reconstruct the essentials of Hebrewness....Africans are unique in their belief that their future lies in becoming, in thought, speech and habit, like their erstwhile colonizers.<sup>8</sup>

“Original non-hellenized Christianity,” “core of irreducible inheritance of genes,” “faithful remnant”—these are different ways of saying that Africans should, like other peoples of the world, continually look back for directions on how to move forward. In support of this, Messay Kebede invokes Hegel’s philosophy of progress, Plato’s world of ideas that are perfect and unchanging models to finite and living things, and even Karl Marx, whose philosophy of history is ultimately about retrieving the initial state of fraternity between men, shattered because man did not develop himself to control nature and prevent the struggle over scarce resources. These considerations and the fact that all cultures have myths about the fall, leading to notions of a “golden age” and a “renaissance,” the latter signifying that “a return to the right path occurred after a period of decline and wandering,”<sup>9</sup> lead Kebede to recognize that free construction of African identities is possible within the framework of a history that actualizes what was only potentially given. As he puts it, “As an actualization of the past, the movement toward the future is exactly backward going ... a process such that differentiation as well as the action of external things result in the continuous self-enrichment of the subject.”<sup>10</sup>

Mbiti’s singular contribution to this discourse of African traditions and modernity derives from his study of the African conception of time. However, before we get into the details of his findings, it is perhaps important to make the distinction between the past that one is not aware of or has been forgotten, but that affects our being and the past we remember, which because it is

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<sup>7</sup>Abiola Irele, “In Praise of Alienation,” in *The Surreptitious Speech: Presence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness, 1947-1987*, ed. V.Y. Mudimbe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 207.

<sup>8</sup>Oyekan Owomoyela,

<sup>8</sup>Kebede, *Africa’s Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization*, 136.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 134.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 132-3.

necessarily subject to selection and interpretation, risks being arbitrary and subjective, especially in the absence of written documents. Mbiti admits the difficulty that may arise from selective and subjective remembrance of the past, but tries to mitigate it by arguing that any native-born African in traditional societies who has been properly socialized into the language and culture of his people is not likely to make subjective and arbitrary interpretations of important, defining moments in past traditions. But perhaps the point to stress is not so much how what is remembered must have an empirically verifiable fidelity to the past as how the present needs can best be met through a creative synthesis of relevant aspects of the past and what present knowledge and skills can offer. In other words, what is required is not a return to the past as it was, but a deployment of the present knowledge for the creative interpretation of the relevant past for the purpose of meeting the present needs. Traditions grow through creative interpretations and reinterpretations of the past designed to meet present needs. It should also be remembered that for every society or culture, one effective way to inspire and empower its members to achieve great heights in all aspects of human endeavor is to glorify and elevate to the level of myths and legends the past achievements of their ancestors and compatriots who lived up to and sometimes surpassed the challenges of their times.

What then is the African traditional conception of time, as Mbiti described it? As he saw it, “the concept of time may help to explain beliefs, attitudes, practices and general way of life of African peoples not only in the traditional setup but also in the modern situation (whether of political, economic, educational or church life).”<sup>11</sup> Mbiti states simply that for Africans, “time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long *past*, a *present* and virtually *no future*.”<sup>12</sup> It sounds almost unbelievable that according to Mbiti, people set their minds not on future things but chiefly on what has taken place,” and that future events are not yet time, but “at best constitute only *potential time*, not *actual time*.” Mbiti goes on to explain that “Africans reckon time ... in connection with events but not just for the sake of mathematics.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, time is always filled with events. There is nothing like empty, abstract time. This is why Mbiti makes a distinction between the original Christianity which Africans are heir to by virtue of their traditional beliefs and philosophy and a Western, Hellenized Christianity that turns salvation into a future event through what Masolo describes as “a wrong interpretation of the central theological point of Christic intervention in history.”<sup>14</sup> The African belief in afterlife, in contrast, “does not constitute a hope for a future and better life. To live here and now is the most important concern of African religious activities and beliefs.”<sup>15</sup> In Mbiti’s view, there is no clear line drawn between the spiritual and the physical in the African conception of being, life in the hereafter being “conceived in materialistic and physical terms.” This explains the belief in the ancestors as the living dead and the value Africans put on children, who are expected to keep the dead alive through rituals of remembrance. Most people are familiar with the African concept of the family as the ever-present cycle of the dead, the living (immediate and extended), and those on the way. What goes around comes around.

Mbiti buttresses his contention with the observation that whereas most cultures of the world, including African ones, have myths about the separation of the heavens from the earth or man from God, African cultures unlike the others do not have “a single myth ... which even attempts to suggest a solution or reversal of this great loss. Man accepted the separation between him and God.”<sup>16</sup> It is because of this, in his view, that African religions became historically powerless against the message of hope in reconciliation emphasized in other religions, because these other religions

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<sup>11</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 16.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Masolo, *African Philosophy*, 109.

<sup>15</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

offer mankind a way of escape in the name of redemption or salvation. Africans prefer a relation with God that provides an eternal manifestation of God's omnipotence and love that is to be continually mediated by ancestors, elders, priests and priestesses, lesser divinities, and spirits. There is no apocalyptic vision which involves a future endtime when God will step in and bring about a radical reversal of normal human life with a final judgement. There will always be a successful direct or mediated relationship with God or an unsuccessful one, followed by consequences and further attempts. The cause of failure is either inappropriate mediation or disconnection from the African worldview through Western education or the wholesale adoption of a foreign religion. The Western-educated African, Mbiti says,

... becomes an alien both to traditional life and to the new life brought about by modern change. He is poised between the two positions; the traditional solidarity which supplied for him, land, customs, ethics rites of passage, customary law, religious participation and historical depth; and a modern way of life which for him has not yet acquired any solidarity.<sup>17</sup>

When it comes to the modernization of African societies, the problem as Mbiti sees it is that Africans have so far largely failed to domesticate modern ideas and beliefs in ways that harmonize with traditional systems because of the misconception that there is an irreconcilable conflict between the two. The bridges between the two have not been built by most Africans and those who can help them build them, as thanks to the deep fascination with Western civilization they inherited from colonial education; therefore, they are not convinced of the need to do so. Kebede sums up Mbiti's position thus:

The traditional cannot be simply pushed away; to think so is an illusion which only succeeds in turning the traditional into a subconscious force, all the more resentful because it is ignored.... the best approach is to try to satisfy it by means of modern expressions. This harmonization of the traditional with the modern is called creative synthesis ...[which] counters the rise of a bastard culture, ... the main impediment to Africa's advances ...<sup>18</sup>

In his novel *Anthills of the Savannah*,<sup>19</sup> Chinua Achebe makes an attempt at such creative synthesis or bridge-building through the character of Beatrice. Set in the fictional West African state of Kangan (recognizable as Nigeria) whose leader Sam has lost all traditional and modern moorings and, like most African leaders, is interested in the exercise of power and privilege for their own sakes, the novel portrays a society under the throes of crass dictatorship. Nothing in the novel points to a visionary plan of social development or attempts to meet any pressing needs of the citizens. What we have instead is sycophants on the side of the leader and a few dissidents and communities opposed to the cult of personality, capitalism, and subservience to foreign manipulation. Among these we have the populace, exploited and disempowered, suffering as much, if not more, than they did under colonial rule. At different points in the novel, the question of what a people must do to redirect the alienated journey of an embittered history is raised. Textbook revolutions describing the struggles of other peoples will not do; in any case, history has proven them ineffectual. Attempts at class suicide may be well-meaning but are in the end, dishonest;

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<sup>17</sup> Kebede, *Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization*, 80.

<sup>18</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 219.

<sup>19</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (Ibadan: HEBN, 1989).

human beings would like to see their leaders at different levels belong to a class that can create role models who are not oppressors and power-mongers. Crucial to the creation of such role models is the kind of education that benefits from a deep immersion in one's history and culture; however, it must be an immersion that is equipped with a critical mind and sensitivity to the present needs of society.

Part of the solution Achebe offers in the novel is embodied in Beatrice. Being a woman, she is used to make the important statement that the problems of Kangan cannot be resolved if the potentials in women, who constitute more than half of the population of the countries, are marginalized and undeveloped.

There are two parts to Beatrice Nwanyibuife, corresponding to her life in present Kangan and her roots and upbringing in a particular Kangan culture. The essentials of her present life are well documented; with a first-class degree in English from Queen Mary College, University of London, she is a senior assistant secretary in the Ministry of Finance. Her boyfriend Chris is the Commissioner for Information for the present regime, and their mutual friend Ikem Osodi is a writer and editor for the *National Gazette*. Ikem is more or less Achebe's mouthpiece in the novel, and opposition to the dictatorial governance of Sam is spurred by his crusading editorials and public speeches. Beatrice is therefore a member of the elite and although she is worried about the deteriorating relationship between Chris and Ikem based on disagreements over means not ends, she first appears as a comfortable, middle-class boss.

When things get very bad and she has the first-hand experience of the collaboration between delinquent leadership, exploitative internal capitalism, and foreign manipulative control to which she is invited to give tacit approval during a party at the presidential retreat, something is triggered in her that makes her undertake a retrospective journey into her past in mythical terms. Named Nwanyibuife at birth, as if her father, after he and his wife had given birth to only daughters, had to remind himself that a woman can be somebody in life, Beatrice nevertheless witnessed the show of naked power by her father. Achebe brings in the myth of Idemili, the daughter who the Almighty God sent to the world to tame man's misuse of raw, naked power to indicate the final role Beatrice as the woman who will inaugurate the society's return to the equality of all classes and all human beings before God. But like all Western educated Africans,

Beatrice Nwanyibuife did not know these traditions and legends of her people because they played but little part in her upbringing. She was born ... into a world apart; was baptized and sent to schools which made much about the English and the Jews and the Hindu and practically everybody else but hardly put in a word for her forebears and the divinities with whom they had evolved. So she came to barely knowing who she really was. Barely ... because she did carry a vague sense more acute at certain critical moments than others of being two different people.<sup>20</sup>

Her father and even her boyfriend see only the superficial Beatrice. We are told that "...Ikem alone came close to sensing the village priestess who will prophesy when her divinity rides her ... he knew it better than Beatrice herself." The narrator goes on to explain that "knowing or not knowing does not save us from being known and even recruited and put to work. For ... baptism ... is no antidote against possession by Agwu the capricious god of diviners and artists."<sup>21</sup> And so Beatrice is recruited by Agwu to function as a priestess of the goddess of Idemili, as she prophetically sees the coming doom and tries to teach Sam a lesson and bring together Chris

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

and Ikem. Like Nwakibie in the myth of Idemili, they pay little or no attention to her efforts and suffer the consequences. She is in the end left with picking up the pieces and inaugurating a new return.

Achebe in this novel is therefore alluding to the redemptive power of myth. Beatrice, the modern priestess of Idemili, deploys the knowledge and power she has obtained from her modern existence in the service of a creative interpretation of the Idemili myth in an effort to intervene in the power play ravaging her country. She fails not because of the ineffectiveness of the myth, but because men have the power to ignore it even if they lack the power to prevent the consequences of their neglect. In the return journey that she symbolically inaugurates through the naming of Ikem's daughter, giving her a boy's name, it is unlikely that men and women and the representations of all the classes of society who are her witnesses and co-travelers will ignore her prophecies.

This researcher has tried to argue in the aforementioned that Mbiti's creative interpretation of African past through his study of African religions in general, and African concept of time in particular, is significant for the way it demonstrates that the present may be the result of our attitude toward the past, and, that these two markers of time in the African worldview must be taken into account if we are to have any genuine sense of empowering tradition and social development in Africa. The researcher used Achebe's creation of Beatrice in his novel to illustrate and reinforce the view that the creative reinterpretation of the past in the form of empowering myths, far from being retrogressive, may in fact be indispensable in any serious effort to address Africa's political and social problems. It is instructive in this regard that Yujiro Hayami states as one of his concluding remarks in his influential book:

The historical fact that Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand, among others, were able to achieve miraculous economic growth in the latter half of the twentieth century, each based on their own unique system and tradition strongly suggests the possibility that many low-income economies today will be able to achieve modern development in the future, not along a monolithic path but along multiple paths according to their different traditions.<sup>22</sup>

The fact that Africa was colonized by Europe and that the slave trade flourished for centuries between Africa and the Americas must be absorbed and transformed by the powerful traditions of Africa re-energized in the creative synthesis of myths. After all, the Queen Bee and her population from time to time survive the great fires of the African Savannahs in the Anthill.

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<sup>22</sup> Yujiro Hayami, *Development Economics: From the Poverty to the Wealth of Nations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 332.