

**Indigenous African Cultures and Relevance to Socio-economic  
Development in the Contemporary Era.**

**By**

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“We could assimilate mathematics or the French language, but we could never strip off our black skins nor root out our black souls” (Senghor, 1963, quoted in English and Kalumba, 1996: 50).

## **Introduction**

This paper provides a critical review of the literature on the role and the relevance of indigenous African cultures and value systems to progress and development. An interest to study and seek to understand the nature of the African cultures and/or value systems and their relationship and relevance to the economy grew in the period following the end of colonialism, a period in which intellectual energies were geared towards finding workable models and strategies for reconstruction and development of the formerly colonised African countries as well as for ending of the legacy of colonial subjugation and exploitation. As Kwame Gyekye pointed out, the post-colonial era not only signified an end to “...the period of dictation, forcible imposition of a variety of alien values and institutions, ... (but also) a period of autonomous self-expressions on the part of the formerly colonized people, as well as of self-assertion, sober reflection on values and goals, and the gradual weaning away from the self-flagellating aspects of colonial mentality acquired through decades of coloniality” (Gyekye, 1997: 25). However, for Gyekye, this period does not only signify the total rejection of the entire colonial heritage by the formerly colonised, but also the voluntary selection of those aspects of the heritage considered worthwhile and conducive to development.

It is within this framework in which the formerly colonised African countries sought self-expression, self-assertion and reflection on their values and goals that the debates on the economic and developmental role of their traditional cultural values ensued. As will be noticed from the literature review on the subject of the African traditional values systems and/or cultures and their relevance to economy and development, varying conflicting perspectives and accounts have been developed and advanced.

## Review of Debates

Within the debates, there is a perspective which holds the view that African traditional cultures and/or value systems, unlike the Western ones, are inhibitive to and incompatible with scientific, technological, economic, and philosophical development and progress (Gyeke, 1997; Horton, 1982 and 1997). Gyeke attributes this incompatibility to the “intensely religious and spiritual nature of African traditional life”, which he argues, has discouraged an expansion of existing practical knowledge of crafts and technologies such as those used for food preservation and herbal therapeutics through scientific enquiry and analysis, which eventually stunted the growth of sciences (Gyeke, 1997: p.27). He, for instance, argues that while African cultures appreciated the notion of causality, which is crucial in scientific inquiry and explanation of natural phenomena, their religiosity led to explaining causality in terms of spirits and mystical powers. This, he argues, resulted in empirical causal accounts being abandoned and neglected in favour of religious-inspired accounts<sup>1</sup>. The latter accounts, Gyeke argues, tend to see spirits or mystical powers as causal factors.

Another stumbling to the development of science and technology within the African cultures identified by Gyeke is that of the manner in which knowledge of external world has been acquired. He argues that unlike in science, knowledge acquisition was not based on experimentation but was personalised through a strong element of secrecy. This resulted in such knowledge not being made available for further objective, public scrutiny and analysis in order to verify its conclusions. This veil of secrecy around it, Gyeke argues, results in the possessed knowledge simply vanishing on the death of its bearers. He illustrates this point by making specific reference to the knowledge of potencies of herbs and other medicinal plants possessed by African traditional healers. Considering this knowledge as the most secretive of them all, he argues “even if the claims made by African medicine men and women of having discovered cures for deadly diseases could be substantiated

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<sup>1</sup> Gyeke (1997: 28) refers to empirical causal explanations as “empirical causation” as they ask what- and how- questions, and religious-inspired accounts as “agentive causation” which ask who- and why-question.

scientifically, those claims cannot be pursued for verification, since their knowledge-claims were esoteric and personal. The desire to make knowledge of the external world personal has been the characteristic attitude of our traditional healers. In the past, all such possibly credible claims to knowledge of medicinal plants just evaporated on the death of the traditional healer or priest. And science, including the science of medicine, stagnated.” (Gyeke, 1997: 29)

It should however be noted that while Gyeke is critical of what he considers a lack of drive to pursue sustained scientific enquiry into knowledge of the natural world and lack of desire for knowledge for its own sake, he however acknowledges the existence and presence of technological and scientific capacity within African societies and their cultures or value systems. He mainly attributes lack of drive to unlock and exercise that capacity on a sustained basis to the mindset often expressed in statements such as “this is what the ancestors said or did” or the maxims such as the Ghanaian Akan one that says “if you insist on probing deeply into the eye sockets of a dead person, you see a ghost” (this is an English translation) which says that curiosity or deep probing could result in dreadful consequences (Gyeke, 1997: 30-31). Such maxims, Gyeke argues quoting Laing, stunt the spirit of inquiry, exploration and adventure.

Gyeke’s view that African traditional cultures or value systems are inhibitive to scientific growth, development and progress is shared by Robin Horton. Horton (1997), drawing distinctions between the African traditional cultures and Western scientific cultures, refers to the former as “closed” cultures and the latter as “open” cultures. By “closed” cultures or thought systems, he is referring to those cultures in which there is no developed awareness of alternatives to the existing, established theories or beliefs. In contrast, the “open” cultures are those that have a highly developed awareness of such alternatives (Horton, 1997: 327). For Horton, an obstacle to progress within the African traditional cultures lies in their reluctance to question the established beliefs owing to the fear that any threat to those beliefs could result in a horrific chaos (Horton, 1997: 333).

This point was also echoed in Wiredu's comparative analysis of the African (traditional/folk) thought and the Western (traditional/folk) thought systems. Wiredu (1980) argues that any culture and/or thought system which is both non-scientific and non-literate (be it Western or African), is seriously handicapped. This, he argues, is so since scientific methods can only occur where there is a recording of precise measurements, calculations, and observational data i.e. where there is what he calls the scientific spirit and/or the spirit of rational inquiry (Wiredu, 1980:41).

He argues, based on his examination of the conception of a person by the Akan people of Ghana, which he found to be more interesting and imaginative than the Western philosopher's thesis, that while (such) folk thought could be comprehensive and interesting, the lack of discursive content in it remains a major drawback. Hence that, unlike the modern Western philosopher, who argues for his/her thesis, clarifies meanings, and responds to objections, the believer in traditional and/or folk thought usually respond like this: "this is what our ancestors said". Such response, Wiredu argues, only serves to block opportunities for further development. It is perhaps ironical and self-contradictory for Wiredu to make this kind of comparison between the Akans (traditional/folk people) and the modern Western philosophers, as he repeatedly condemns and dismisses tendencies by Western anthropologists to make similar kind of comparisons. Wiredu considers such comparisons to be not only unfortunate and unfair, but also as having led to misleading conclusions about the differences between the peoples of Africa and those of the West. His critique is best reflected in the following argument:

"...instead of seeing the basic non-scientific characteristics of African traditional thought as typifying traditional thought in general, Western anthropologists and others besides have mistakenly tended to take them as defining a peculiarly African way of thinking, with unfortunate effects... one such effects is that the really interesting cross-cultural comparisons of modes of thought have rarely been made. If one starts with the recognition that each nation has some background of traditional thought – and remember by *traditional* thought that here I mean pre-scientific thought of the type that

tends to construct explanations of natural phenomena in terms of the activities of gods and spirits - then the interesting and anthropologically illuminating comparison will be to see in what different ways the belief in spirits is employed by various peoples in the attempt to achieve a coherent view of the world. In such specific differences will consist the real peculiarities of African traditional thought in contradiction to, say, Western traditional thought ... In the absence of any such realisation, what has generally happened is that not only the genuine distinguishing features of African traditional thought but also its basic non-scientific tendencies have been taken as a basis for contrasting Africans and Western peoples. One consequence is that many Westerners have gone about with an exaggerated notion of the differences in nature between Africans and the people of the West...

... my point is that they (i.e. *backward beliefs*) are not African in any intrinsic, inseparable sense; and the least that African philosophers and foreign well-wishers can do in this connection is to refrain ... from serving up the usual cogeries of unargued conceptions about gods, ghosts and witches in the name of African philosophy. Such a description is highly unfortunate. If at all deserving of the name 'philosophy', these ideas should be regarded not as a part of African philosophy simply, but rather as a part of *traditional* African philosophy." (Wiredu, 1980: 39 and 45-46)

Notwithstanding this, Wiredu however acknowledges that, although rational knowledge is not the preserve of the modern West just in the same way as superstition is not peculiar to Africans, the fact is that Africa lags behind the West in terms of the degree to which the scientific spirit and the rational spirit of inquiry has been developed. Wiredu thus argues that, for Africa to develop the spirit of rational inquiry in all spheres of thought and belief, Africans should urgently rid themselves of those backward aspects of customs and only retain the progressive ones essential for and relevant to development. Wiredu, however, notes that despite this lag in the spirit of rational inquiry in Africa when compared with the West, there is within the

traditional African thinking some presence of the principle of rational evidence (Wiredu, 1980: 41, 43, 45). Hence, his argument:

“...no society could survive for any length of time without basing a large part of its daily activities on beliefs derived from the evidence. You cannot farm without some rationally based knowledge of soils, seeds and climate; and no society can achieve any reasonable degree of harmony in human relations without the basic ability to assess claims and allegations by the methods of objective investigation.” (Wiredu, 1980: 42)

Wiredu's proposed solution for Africa is shared and upheld by Gyeke (1997), who argues that for the above obstacles to be overcome and thus unlock the scientific and technological potential of African countries, it is necessary that Africans develop an understanding of scientific principles through the knowledge of physics, metallurgy, biology and chemistry. He sees this as being essential for establishing a strong scientific base which would encourage the asking of what- and how-questions, and hence the use of empirical causation as opposed to agentive causation in explaining technological and natural processes. He argues that although African cultures display the presence of indigenous technological capacities within them, those capacities could not be fully developed and expanded due to the lack of understanding and application of scientific principles. To illustrate this point, he cites a few cases which include that of the Ghanaian motor mechanic and a woman food technologist. The Ghanaian mechanic, who was working on the engine adjusting the contact breaker point in the car distributor, was found to be doing so using only his sense of sight and refusing to use technical aids such as the feeler gauge. His refusal to use technical aids, Gyeke argues, which was not peculiar to him but could also be found amongst other mechanists is rooted in the broader societal culture.

Such culturally entrenched attitude towards technical aids, he argues, not only deprives mechanists the benefits of achieving precision measurement for proper maintenance of the machines but also impedes opportunities of further growth and improvement of technology. Similarly, he argues, the woman food technologist in

Ghana was found to be practicing technology with some limited insight of scientific principles. The woman in question was processing “fante kenkey” which Gyeke describes as a fermented cereal dumpling made from maize dough. He argues that while this woman displayed a high level of competency and knowledge in terms of handling the processing efficiently in terms of time and the material used to achieve desired outcomes, a knowledge clearly rooted in basic and applied scientific principles; she however could not explain and articulate those principles (Gyeke, 1997: 35- 36).

Gyeke thus argues that this and what seems to be the thinking amongst African technology practitioners that the what- and how- questions do not matter in the application and practice of technology, whereby technology is meant to only resolve practical problems of survival, necessitate an urgent need for change in such attitude towards knowledge. In his view, such a change in attitude would make the possessed knowledge of technology exoteric and accessible to the public for scrutiny, thus releasing knowledge from mysticism or spirituality. For Gyeke, the significance of such scrutiny lies in the fact that it could result in the existing knowledge being rejected or amended or confirmed.

The new intellectual attitude, together with the understanding of scientific principles and the resultant strong scientific base, is according to Gyeke, essential if the African countries are to fully exploit and adapt transferred technologies from the developed world to their own local conditions and to meet their needs. Hence, that this would enhance the *appropriation* of technology characterized by “the active, adroit, and purposeful initiative and participation of the recipients in the pursuit and acquisition of a technology of foreign production.”(Gyeke, 1997: 41) This would, in his view, not only prevent Africans from becoming permanently dependent on technology transfer but also enable them to ensure that the choice and application of technology transfer is guided by local principles and needs. His argument is based on the acknowledgement and recognition that technology is developed within specific cultural frameworks to meet certain needs. Hence that as a cultural product, technology transfer constitutes cultural borrowing, and therefore requires an active

and adroit approach by the recipient in order to avoid a negative impact on local values and ways of life and ensure maximum benefit from it (Gyeke, 1997: 38-42). Thus, although he argues for the separation of cultural values and religious beliefs from scientific, technological world; Gyeke however believes that both can still co-exist to ensure that technology is socio-economically beneficial while not undermining highly regarded cultural values.

While the above perspective on African traditional cultures and value systems highlights some vital points and issues that need careful consideration when exploring the socio-economic role of African cultures in the contemporary era of globalization, it however elicited a response which led to counter arguments that challenge and in some cases dismiss those arguments expressed in it. Counter arguments have also exposed some serious conceptual problems and dangers in this perspective's assertion that unlike the Western knowledge systems, African traditional cultures and knowledge systems are pervasively mystical, nostalgic and lack dynamism (i.e. discourage any deviation from original, authentic past) as well as scientific and conceptual content, and in turn impede progress.

Note, for instance, the review and critique by Jean- Marie Makang (1997) of the view held by Placide Tempels, a Belgian missionary in the former Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), of the indigenous African people and their traditional cultures. Through his "philosophy of *Ntu*" or "ontology of participation" or "Bantu ontology", Makang argues, Tempels advanced the view that the real authentic Bantu tradition is that which has not departed from its source but had kept its original purity and innocence (Makang, 1997: 326). This view is premised on Tempels' perception of the Bantu mentality as captured in the expression "the source is pure, but waters are polluted" (a quote from Eboussi in Makang, 1997: 326). Informed by this perception and his Bantu ontology, Makang argues that Tempels' went on to draw distinctions between what he called the "bush people" or "authentic Bantu" and the "Europeanized Bantu" or "modern Bantu". In that distinction, Tempels considered the "Modern Bantu" as those Africans who have been corrupted by European materialism and lost their authenticity and the sense of

the old, ageless, wisdom of the ancestors as well as everything stable in Bantu tradition. In contrast, the “bush people” are, for Tempel, the real authentic Bantu as they are not spoiled by European modernity and are vital in preserving the authentic Bantu culture (Makang, 1997: 327).

Makang is however critical of the failure of Tempels’ ontology to recognize the evolutionary, dynamic nature of African traditions. He argues that this discourse is unhistorical as it constantly regrets the disappearance of the past by reducing African traditions to a fixed past and to the nostalgia of an original state, thus stripping the African people of their historicity (Makang, 1997: 236 – 237). He thus sees Tempels’ praise of the “bush people” or “authentic Bantu” as amounting to nothing but the “praise of the past over the present, of archaism over the and against progress, of the good soul over and against technical and material improvement”. Hence, that Tempels’ nostalgic tradition of “what ceased to be is not a living reality, but a dead tradition” (Makang, 1997:327). Rather, and in contrast to Tempels’ and those upholding this ethnological discourse of African people and their traditions, Makang argues that what Tempels’ saw as a degeneration of a “true, authentic” African tradition, whereby irrelevant elements to the modern world were abandoned, was in fact a signal of the dynamic nature of those Africans and their ability to adapt their traditions to the changes in time and space or changing historical contexts. Hence that such an ability to adapt to new situations is critical to survival of traditions and their enrichment through learning from other traditions and assimilation of some relevant elements thereof, and also that it signifies flexibility of the African people and their traditions (Makang, 1997: 328).

A further criticism leveled at this perspective was directed at its tendency to draw dichotomies such as “open/closed” and “modern/traditional”, whereby the West is seen as having open and modern societies and Africa as having closed and traditional societies. Peter Amato (1997) is one of those in the forefront advancing this criticism. In his article entitled “African philosophy and modernity”, Amato dismisses such dichotomies within the Western intellectual thought as simply rhetorical and having a tendency to both undermine African philosophy while allowing Western

culture to subsume others in a “homogenous, self-serving narrative” (Amato, 1997: 75). The main pitfall of this discourse, he argues, is its failure to acknowledge the role and contribution that different intellectual cultures may play in producing overlapping conceptualizations of social reality and human nature. Hence, that there is a need for a shift from putative universal horizon to differentiated horizons of different cultures and writers, which allows for a mutually free discourse (Amato, 1997: 75).

Arguing for a multi-cultural or inter-cultural intellectual approach, Amato (1997) further dismisses the view that religious-inspired ideas and accounts of social reality are necessarily regressive. On the contrary, he argues, philosophical reason is not independent of mythic or religious life of the people. He thus sees this view as likely to perpetuate the stereotypes towards other intellectual discourses, while simultaneously upholding the Western intellectual discourse’s claims of understanding the direction that human history should take. Hence the tendency to measure the success of societies categorized as traditional or pre-modern on the basis of their ability to follow similar path of development as the West i.e. scientific progress, technological administration, and capitalism as the advanced stage of human development. What he terms “European self-described modernity” (Amato, 1997: 74).

Amato’s argument that philosophical reason is not independent of mythic/religious life of people and criticism of Horton’s open/closed or traditional/modern dichotomy is upheld by Barry Hallen (1996) on the basis of the findings from his interview with the Nigerian Yoruba herbal doctor he simply calls Chief Z. In advancing his critique of Horton’s claims, Hallen employs Karl Popper’s thesis of the criteria which could be used to assess whether or not, the thought system is reflective and critical. According to Popper, whom Hallen argues, believes that traditional thoughts are essentially non-critical, the appropriate criterion would be to identify the following three aspects or stages within the thought system:

- People’s ability to identify tradition simply as a tradition,

- Their awareness of the functional significance of the tradition to their day-to-day living and activities, and
- Awareness of at least one significant alternative to the tradition, and on some critical basis then can choose to reaffirm or not reject it (see Hallen, 1996: 219).

Hallen argues that Chief Z's responses to the interview on indigenous herbal practice satisfied all of these three stages, thus that there is criticality and reflectivity within the traditional Yoruba thought. In his response, Chief Z told Hallen that although he and other herbalists know very well that patients are actually cured and healed by the potency of the medical herbs they prescribe to them based on their specialist knowledge, they are careful not to attribute the effectiveness of the herbs to their potencies and their own insight about the herb, but to some divine powers known as *orisa*. Hallen found out during his research that the Yoruba people believe strongly in the *orisa* as their protector and guardian as well as source of power and wisdom, and thus have to show allegiance to this divine force/s. Hence that in their *orisa* worship, the Yoruba believe that one's skill and successes should be attributable that individual but to the divine agency which is *orisa* (Hallen, 1996: 221). Failure to attribute the patients' recovery and healing to *orisa*, Chief Z argued, could have detrimental consequences for the herbalist such as development of jealousy and envy from amongst the member of the community as well as detesting of the herbalist's perceived pride. Thus, making reference to *orisa* helps to deflect and discourage of all these.

Another advantage highlighted by Chief Z in response to Hallen's interview questions was that mentioning *orisa* in prescriptions helps to conceal common sense element always associated with remedies and thus getting patients to take herbalist's advice and prescriptions seriously, with good outcomes in terms of recovery from ailments. These responses, Hallen argues, not only reveal Chief Z recognition and appreciation of the functional significance of traditional beliefs to the herbal practice and to the community, but also satisfy all of Popper's three criteria. Contrary to Horton's claim that in traditional societies (which he characterizes as having no developed awareness of alternative world views) people are non-critical and non-reflective,

Hallen argues that it is possible even in the contexts of a single world-view to have significant critical and reflective powers. This is well captured in his argument as quoted below:

“It may well be the case that many societies that are classified as ‘traditional’ contain different and competitive ideological groups that are normally kept in relative balance. Some of these groups...are in a position to develop significant and rival powers of critical awareness.” (Hallen, 1996; 222)

This line of view held by, for instance Amato and Hallen, is also shared by other later contributors to the debate on African traditional cultures and value systems, whose analyses not only present a further a challenge to the view that traditional African thought and cultural systems are incompatible with the science and progress, but also introduced a different dimension to the debate. Note here the contribution by Sogolo (1998) in his examination of the nature and function of explanatory models and the notion of causality in traditional African thought systems in which he employed a qualified use of the Horton (1970) concepts of “primary” and “secondary” theories or levels of thought. For Horton, “primary theory” level of thought is characterized by common sense explanation of day-to-day events by layman and “secondary theory” level of thought is characterized by theoretical explanation involving hidden mechanisms unsusceptible to observational language (quoted in Sogolo, 1998: 178).

Subscribing to the view that a single event and phenomenon in the society can invoke different but complementary and non-mutually exclusive explanations, Sogolo dismisses the tendencies by Horton and other theorists to classify the traditional African thought systems, on the one hand, as constituting a primary theoretical level of thought, and on the other, the Western thought systems as constituting a secondary thought level. Rather, he argues, the explanatory models provided by both the traditional African and the Western thought systems have common features in their approach. For instance, he argues that while there are tendencies to refer to conceptions of illnesses that appeal to supernatural forces as

animistic, those with such tendencies fail to realize that conceptions like these are common in the history of every society. This, he argues, can be seen in the case of Scotland's early medical practice whereby "healing lay in propitiating the powers (supernatural) against which the patient might have offended." (Sogolo, 1998: 182 quoting from Clough, 1981: 183) Such accounts, he argues, are improved when scientific principles are uncovered to provide scientifically-based accounts.

Sogolo thus argues, like Wiredu, that the accounts provided in traditional African thought fall into both primary and secondary categories just like is the case with the Western thought explanatory models. Hence that accounts in these categories of thought levels, rather than being in conflict as Horton suggests, are in fact complementary and non-mutually exclusive. He argues that this non-mutual exclusivity and complementary nature is often missed despite the fact that the connections between the accounts are often difficult to deny. He illustrates the complementary nature of the accounts (i.e. primary and secondary) provided in both traditional African thought explanatory models and Western thought explanatory models by citing an example of causes of illnesses and methods or approaches used to heal them. He argues that in traditional African thought, causes of illnesses fall into both the primary and secondary categories.

To illustrate this, he makes a specific reference to the relationship between stress and human body's natural resistance to illnesses. He argues that while the traditional African thought and the Western thought have different conceptions of stress<sup>2</sup>, they however both acknowledge and agree that stress reduces the body's ability to resist illnesses. Hence that in both thought systems, when seeking to heal or cure such illnesses, priority will be given to the adoption of an integrated approach whereby both medication (e.g. herbs or drugs) and stress relieving techniques are used in order to facilitate healing and recovery from illness. Sogolo

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<sup>2</sup> Sogolo (1998:183) argues that in traditional African thought, stress is attributed to factors such as strained relationship either with one's spiritual agents or with other persons within one's community. In contrast, in the Western thought, and citing an example of a business executive, he argues, he/she could suffer from stress due to the imminent collapse of business, a heavy load of a day's work, or anxiety over possible contingencies.

further illustrates the parallels in integrated approaches in both traditional African medical practice and Western medical practice in his argument that:

“The well known *placebo* in orthodox medicine, in which confidence and positive belief – on the part either of the physician or the patient – produce a favourable effect, is well-nigh indistinguishable from the dual-approach of the African healer. Belief, here, must be distinguished from the mere unquestioning faith of the religious type. It has a psychological overtone which leads to physically effective results. Both in African and modern medicine, the patients’ belief that the physician is competent, and that the drug works, helps to restore his/her body to a state of harmony with the applied drug. Psychological states, attitudes, and beliefs have been known to play significant roles in traditional African medicine; they now provide acceptable explanations for some of the ailments that have in the past been attributed mainly to supernatural forces.” (Sogolo, 1998: 183-184)

Sogolo’s view that the traditional African medical conception of illnesses is different from that in the Western medical practices but common in approach, and that the primary and secondary accounts are complementary and non-mutually exclusive, is shared by Sertima (1999). This can be noted when he argues that while African medical practice is characterized by knowledge of plant science, anesthetics, antiseptics, vaccination, and advanced surgical techniques; it however also has a element of ritual and magic. Sertima’s view is based on the observation by Finch, a medical doctor at the Morehouse School of Medicine, that:

“Traditional medical practice is intimately acquainted with the psychic, social and cultural nuances of the patients” and that “... the traditional African doctor is often an expert psychotherapist, achieving results with his patients that conventional Western psychotherapy cannot” and that “The use of suggestion and hypnosis and the placebo, in addition to internal and external treatment,..., is becoming more and more appreciated in Western medicine.”(Sertima, 1999: 326)

The view that African traditional cultures are not conducive to development and progress is also challengeable in the light of the research outcomes which point to an evidence of scientific and technological progress in pre-colonial Africa. One such evidence is presented by Sertima (1999) in his outline of a wide range of technologies developed in different parts of pre-colonial Africa. Those scientific technologies included amongst others the carbon steel-making industrial sites on the Western shores of Lake Victoria in Tanzania and the neighbouring Rwanda and Uganda; the astronomical observatory in Kenya; a complex knowledge of astronomy amongst the Dogon people in West Africa – the Republic of Mali; the use of mathematical knowledge in the Congo (former Zaire) and amongst the Yoruba farmers and traders in the city of Benin in Nigeria; massive architectural stone structures such as the Great Zimbabwe and Egyptian pyramids; boat making technology in West and Central Africa and the use of nautical science in the Sahara desert; agricultural crop and cattle-rearing science; knowledge of medicines and herbs; and the systems of communication and writing (for details refer to Sertima, 1999).

Not only does the evidence of these technologies present a challenge to the views held by Horton and others about African traditional cultures, but also counters those accounts advanced to explain the historical failure and inability to further develop, expand and sustain these technologies. Those counter accounts effectively challenge Horton and others' blaming of the "regressive deeply religious, secretive and unscientific" nature of African traditional cultures and thought systems for having inhibited the further expansion of the founded technologies. Central to those counter accounts, is the argument that Africa's capacity to develop and progress was disrupted and interrupted by European colonial expansion which resulted in the subjugation and domination of the indigenous traditional practices, economies and institutions of the colonized world. Note for instance remarks by Magubane (1999) on the destructive impact of European colonialism on the colonized world, which he argues, contributed significantly to the European Renaissance:

“It was during the era of the high Renaissance that the pattern of the entire history of Europe’s devastation and exploitation of the world was set through the Crusades and the so-called voyages of discovery in search of Eastern spices.” (Magubane, 1999: 17)

Further:

“...To remember all this is to ponder the nature of Western civilisation ushered by the Renaissance and celebrated by the Enlightenment philosophers. Unless we remember this, we shall understand very little of the contemporary world. How can we forget that European capitalists appropriated everything in Africa they could lay their greedy hands on – the continent’s able-bodied labour, which they systematically drained away for their own purposes for the better part of 500 years, and, in the imperial period, Africa’s natural and human resources which they still control? Who can forget the looted cultural resources of Africa, like the treasures of Egypt and Ife bronze sculptures, now scattered in their museums and priceless collections? Even worse, they stole our history and our humanity by propagating their racist ideas. The destruction of the humanity of the African, the European belief in white supremacy, was more degrading than anything else. Nothing is more injurious to human relationships than for one group of people to have absolute power over others, as the white world had over Africa and its people.” (Magubane, 1999: 30)

To further emphasize the point, Magubane went on to quote Churchill’s statement on how Britain benefited from colonizing the West Indies:

“Our possession of the West Indies ... gave us the strength, the support, but especially the capital, wealth, at a time when no other European nation possessed such a reserve, which enabled us to come through the great struggle of the Napoleonic Wars, the keen competition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and enabled us .. to lay the foundations of that commercial and financial leadership which enabled us to make our great

position in the world.”(Magubane, 1999: 30, quoted from Peter Fryer, 1993: 11)

Another dimension to this debate on traditional African cultures, which further supports Sogolo’s analysis, arises from the creolist perspective advanced by amongst others Ulf Hannerz (1970). In terms of this perspective, the growing contact between people with different cultural experiences owing to movements around the globe under globalisation, has an impact that changes the previously self-contained national cultures. This contact, he argues, results in cultures ceasing to be stable and coherent systems and rather becoming cultural ‘work’ in progress (see Hannerz, 1997:14). Hence, it would be misleading to treat culture/s within complex differentiated societies as simply homogenous and coherent. This process of change undergone by national cultures has been described by Hannerz and others as “creolization” and that it results in creole cultures i.e. those cultures that draw from two or more widely different historical sources (Hannerz, 1997: 14).

Hannerz (1997) also attributes the emergence of cultural complexity to the role of “cultural apparatus”; a term he adopts from C Wright Mills (1963), which he argues arises from division of labour with the society. Some examples of cultural apparatus are formal education, the mass media, the arts, sports and religion which, he argues, are often used by the relative few to control the flow of meanings the many with the society (Hannerz, 1997). Citing education as example, Hannerz shows that this type of cultural apparatus facilitates the division of labour amongst people and determines their life chances as well as their perspectives. It is around those different perspectives that sub-cultures of different occupational and status groups are constructed. This view that cultures are complex and diverse is shared by Appiah (1997) in his critique of Afrocentrism, a cultural movement led by African-Americans. Appiah’s main criticism is directed at the claims by Afrocentrists that Africa has a single unitary culture with a common origin in ancient Egypt. He finds the major weak point of this view as lying not only in its overlooking of the rest of Africa and African history, but also in its failure to avoid similar pitfalls as that of the European prejudice against cultures without writing (Appiah, 1997: 730). An example he cites

is that of the nineteenth-century European curriculum which claimed that Western civilization's roots are traceable to the ancient Greece. This, he argues, failed to acknowledge the Egyptian influence on the Greeks, the Jewish contribution to Western culture and the Arabic intellectual influence of Plato's links with the Renaissance. Thus, for Appiah, Afrocentrism is nothing but simply "Eurocentrism turned upside-down." (See Appiah, 1997: 730)

While Hannerz acknowledges that the Third world cultures are to some degree influenced by First world cultures – e.g. that their technologies and genres which are not completely indigenous – he however dismisses the view that First world cultures necessarily pose a threat to Third world cultures. He argues that rather than openness to foreign cultural influences being seen as necessarily leading to an impoverishment of local and national culture, it should be seen optimistically. That is, that it could provide people in other cultures with access to technological and symbolic resources which could enable them to deal with their own ideas and to manage their own culture in new ways (Hannerz, 1997: 16)

Furthermore, Hannerz sees the contact between the Third world and First world cultures, facilitated through various cultural apparatus, as being mutually beneficial to both worlds. In his own words, he says "Along the entire creolizing spectrum, from First World metropolis to Third World village, through education and popular culture, by way of missionaries, consultants, critical intellectuals and small-town story tellers, a conversation between cultures goes on. One of the advantages of the creolist view ... is its suggestion that the different cultural streams can create a particular intensity in cultural process." (Hannerz, 1997: 16) Hence, that diversity is a source of cultural vitality and that rather than complexity and fluidity being seen as a threat to be avoided, they should be seen as an intellectual challenge (Hannerz, 1997: 17).

Hannerz's viewpoint on creolism, cultural diversity and conversation between cultures would clearly be shared by Makgoba et al (1999) who, in the introductory chapter of their edited text entitled "African Renaissance", argue:

“African culture is but one major contributor to the tapestry of world culture. While the process of creolisation has affected and impacted on all cultures, the histories, the consciousness of the bearers of a culture, the differing world views and the role of the intelligentsia and institutions in filtering the external or the influence of the other so-called cultures has been vital in maintaining distinctiveness between the differing major cultures. We still today recognise European, Oriental, American and African cultures. So, in the midst of complexity there is simplicity, in the midst of order there is chaos, just as there is distinctiveness in the midst of creolisation or blurring in cultures. When European powers carved Africa up into small territories, tribes and nations and imposed their languages and cultures, they forgot that the roots and essence of African culture would largely remain in the consciousness of the people despite speaking different colonial languages. French-speaking, English-speaking, Spanish-speaking or Portuguese-speaking Africans are still able to relate, share the same world view and interpretation as Africans despite all these real, but artificial, colonial impositions. The roots, history and consciousness of our culture are the same.” (Makgoba et al, 1999: xi)

These views on cultural diversity and creolism in the context of growing contacts as part of globalisation processes also support Senghor’s urgent appeal to Africans to re-cultivate African values so that they could make a positive, unique and rich contribution to what he calls *Civilization of the Universal*. Hence Senghor (1963)’s concept of *Negritude* by which he means “the awareness, defence and development of African cultural values” and defines it as “... the whole complex of civilized values – cultural, economic, social and political – which characterize the black peoples ....” (Senghor, 1996: 46) In his defence of the idea of negritude against strong criticism that negritude is a myth, he argues that while indeed it is a myth, it is a true myth and the “awareness by a particular social group or people of its own situation in the world, and the expression of it by means of the concrete image....” (Senghor, 1996: 49) Pointing out to the real urgency for the need to cultivate negritude, he argues:

“With us, or in spite of us, the Civilization of the Universal is growing up before our eyes, thanks to scientific discovery, technical progress, the increase in international exchanges ... It will be monstrous unless it is seasoned with the salt of *negritude* ... [*N*]egritude is the sum total of the values of the civilization of the African world ... You must agree that the *Civilization of the Universal* will be brought about by the fusion of ‘differing civilizations’ .... But all these peoples and races must first re-discover the profundity of life; they must not only know it but ...be reborn with it.... Today our Negritude no longer expresses itself as an opposition to European values, but as a *complement* to them. Henceforth, its militants will be concerned ... *not to be assimilated, but to assimilate*. They will use European values to arouse the slumbering values of Negritude, which they will bring as their contribution to the Civilization of the Universal ....”(Senghor, 1996: 50)

### **Concluding Remarks**

While the period prior to political independence in Africa i.e. during colonialism, intellectual and political interest in indigenous African cultures and thought systems was informed by the liberation struggle priorities aimed at toppling the oppressive, exploitative Western colonial powers as well as at asserting the African identity, the post-colonial era saw a shift in that interest towards understanding and identifying the developmental role of those indigenous cultures and thought systems, in particular in the context of increasing globalisation and diversity. This point is better captured by English (1996) in his outline of periodisation of Senghor’s idea negritude, the idea that partly represents intellectual interest shown in indigenous African thought and cultural value systems. According to English, Senghor’s conception of negritude (the idea that first introduced by Aime Cesaire in 1939), as was analysed by Spleth (1985), went through three main historical phases. Note here his remarks:

“During the thirties and early forties, Senghor and other black intellectuals in Paris were feeling that their African ways of understanding were not fully compatible with their French ways of understanding...Negritude became each individuals’s search for a personal identity that would sort out these

incompatibilities. During the second period, from the end of Senghor's service in the French army of World War II to Senegal's independence in 1960, Senghor advocated more other-directed causes: independence and cultural pride. He described negritude as an 'anti-racial racialism', aimed at European racism and colonialism. Since independence, the third period, Senghor has used negritude with calm self-affirmation as a constructive instrument of national and cultural growth. Now, negritude is not only 'the awareness, defence, and development of African cultural values,' but also it 'welcomes the contemporary values of Europe.'" (English, 1996: 57-58)

It was, however, noted from the above review that this shift in interest in the indigenous African cultures and thought systems did not proceed without debate. The resultant debate is characterised by two main contrasting perspectives, which use mainly comparative analysis whereby African cultures and thought systems were compared and contrasted with those in the West, in effort to examine and determine the role and the relevance of African cultures and thought to societal development and progress.

On the basis of my review of those two main perspectives, I wish to argue that the perspective led by amongst others Gyeke, Horton and Temple, which holds the view that indigenous African cultural values and thought systems are regressive and incompatible with development, is difficult to sustain in the light of the counter analysis provided by amongst others Amato, Sogolo, Wiredu, Hannerz and Hallen. Claims, for instance, that deep religiosity and reliance on spiritual powers by Africans are inhibitive to the development of the spirit of rational inquiry and scientific approach are strongly countered by the empirical evidence which shows that, in fact reference to spiritual forces/powers (e.g. ancestors) does not have such inhibitive effects. Rather, and as Hallen has shown with the study of the Yoruba herbal practitioners, the continual reference to the significance of the reference to spiritual and divine powers, is appreciated for its functional significance to the further growth and development herbal practice and the community.

Another major weakness within this perspective lies in its tendency to present the traditional as peculiarly and intrinsically African and the modern as intrinsically Western. Wiredu, dismissing this tendency as misleading and incorrect, argues that when drawing useful distinctions between the traditional and the modern thought systems, cultural values and beliefs, it is imperative to note that in all societies there are both traditional and modern practices. This, together with Sogolo's argument that the traditional and the modern values and practices are not mutually exclusive and incompatible, and Hallen's argument that even within the context of a single world view, it is possible to have significant levels of critical and reflective capacity, present a serious challenge to Horton's dichotomous thesis i.e. traditional/modern and primary/secondary. Also challenged here is Gyeke's suggestion that, for scientific and technological progress to be achieved, both science and technology should be separated from culture.

This suggestion is also difficult to defend in view of the creolist theory, whose implication is that the danger of such separation, especially in the era of increasing contacts between different cultures owing to globalisation processes would inhibit the mutual benefits and cultural vitality that could emerge from Hannerz's conversation between cultures. This is particularly so as Gyeke himself, and contradictorily so, admits that technology is a cultural product and therefore that the benefits of technology transfer would best be enhanced where the recipients actively participate in the innovative integration of technologies to realise their specific needs. If indeed technology is a product of culture, the view I agree with, Amato is then correct to argue that religious-inspired ideas and accounts are not necessarily regressive as philosophical reason is not independent of mythic, religious life of the people. This, together with Magubane's argument that the history of colonial disruption of indigenous African traditions and the evidence of scientific and technological developments and discoveries in pre-colonial Africa (see Sertima), further discredit the view that religiosity and mysticism in African cultures constitute majors obstacle to socio-economic and technological progress and development.

Both Gyeke and Wiredu, nonetheless, make a valid point that the West has made significant advances in the development of strong scientific base and principles for rational inquiry, and that for Africa to achieve the similar levels of scientific development, she has to rid herself of some of the backward customs and practices.

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