

THE TRANSFORMATIVE ROLE OF CULTURE AND THE ARTS AND ITS IMPACT ON AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT

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For most Africans, culture is embedded in our souls. It is an intrinsic quality that connects us. It talks about the collective; it addresses our heritage and roots, and it is something that pre-colonial Africa depended on for survival. In Ghana, we have cultures that shared a common agenda in spite of differences in ethnicity. This has united us throughout our history but has also been divisive. By and large, culture and heritage is something that most Africans have revered.

With the advent of the colonial era, culture came under siege – Europeans, opportunists and their local collaborators exploited ethnicities and differences, which lead to tragedies like the slave trade. The colonial era in particular was very divisive and it remains a hindrance to our development.

During the post-colonial era, culture and the arts played a vital role in defining the independence movement and African leaders were astute in using elements of culture and the arts, like painting, poetry, music and theatre, to rally their people around a common cause. This was one of the great strengths of leaders like Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, Kenneth Kaunda in Zambia, Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, Joao Kenyatta in Kenya, and Leopold Senghor in Senegal. These leaders built a whole industry around culture, and used it successfully to develop a strategy of national development.

In 1960s Ghana, for example, the development of a very distinct art scene was focused around young artists who were charged with defining what the new Ghana would stand for. We can still see their influence in our cities, where tropical architecture evolved, inspired by both tradition and European avant-garde movements like Bauhaus. These buildings today are heritage buildings, and studied by architecture academics and students who visit Africa just to see them. This post-colonial cultural movement is one of the great legacies of the era and helped to transform our burgeoning economies. A proud sense of identity, built through the arts and culture, played an important part in creating confidence for young nations to develop themselves.

In order to understand the dynamic of culture and development, we need to examine 'culture' beyond the dictionary definition. We sometimes simplistically confuse culture with heritage. For me, the following ideas are crucial to the nature of Culture itself.

The culture of the collective

Culture as a collective idea is potentially transformative; it is important for us to reorganise, regroup and become energised around a single vision and a single goal as a group, rather than as individuals. The collective is what traditionally made Africa strong, and it is something which we are steadily losing as a lack of cohesion is clearly evidenced in African cities.

The culture of productivity and efficiency

As African nations evolve, African people aspire to new ways of living. In order to compete internationally and to grow our economies, in education, engineering and manufacturing, and popular culture, we need to be productive and efficient by focusing on quality. We need to become highly organised and merge our indigenous ways with western approaches to create our own contextual responses to the global economy.

The culture of 'imno-native' approaches and solutions

'Imno-native' is a word I coined many years ago. It means being inventive and innovative without losing our indigenous approach. This approach is truly sustainable.

A culture that recognises that identity and heritage matters

We need to know who we are as a people, what we stand for and how we believe humanity will flourish. We must develop a habit of constantly redefining the word 'culture' itself. Culture, as both the intuitive and the learned, is an organic, dynamic condition of change. Often we interchange the word tradition with culture. Tradition, by nature, is under constant siege, but culture must and does evolve. These are issues that Africans need to define ourselves, before we can begin to assess how the fundamental elements of tradition can have an impact on Africa's development. Africa needs to develop solutions that are sustainable on our own terms.

A culture of sustainability

What does this mean in the African context? African cultures and traditions are at root sustainably minded and our respectful and sensitive daily interactions with the planet and each other have ensured our survival for generations. This was not about gadgets and gimmickry, but rather an intuitive response to nature and the resources that we have, recognising that we need to handle these resources with absolute care and reverence for our own survival. Growing up in Ghana in the 1960s we would hear

Living Legacies **The Gambia** 2014 Tunde Jegede (left) interviewing the writer, scholar and politician Sidia Jatta (right) © Living Legacies



folklore about why fishermen fish only on certain days, or why farmers only farm on certain days or in certain seasons. This was to protect the environment and prevent over-fishing, yet there were wonderful narratives and mythologies to describe this sustainability in vivid terms. If you broke the sacred rules, there would be consequences. This mythology, which is part of our culture, acted as a policing entity of sorts, and is also being lost. I would love to develop a whole slew of narratives from across Africa that spoke about this mythology that protected the environment. We need to engage these kinds of discourses using our own language. Africans must believe and promote the culture of the collective and these traditional narratives are powerful tools to bring the community back into the African development agenda.

Development in Africa

Development often refers to modernity, and emphasis has always been on the African city which represents fast growth, huge infrastructural developments, migration from the rural to the urban – all of the western markers of modernity. It is true that Africa is developing, but for who? And does Africa need to develop in this direction? Why are we not talking more about the towns within the provinces and the villages in our regions and how we can use these areas as growth poles or centres? I am not saying we should focus less on cities, but we should focus equally on the less-developed regions. After all, the majority of Africans do not live in the cities – contrary to popular belief – rather, most Africans live in rural areas. We must begin to examine why this fast rural migration is taking place. What are the factors creating this phenomenon?

One of the reasons is that our governance structures are over-centralised and this stems directly from the relics of the colonial administration structure. By that I mean mayors and regional leaders are appointed by the presidency, which means that the people of these small towns and villages do not have a say about who governs them or allocates their resources. They are not able to generate revenue that they control themselves. I think this phenomenon has a huge psychological impact on the majority of Africans, who feel that they need to be dependent on a central government based in the cities. Therefore, many feel that they have to go to the seat of power, from which the distribution of resources stems.

We need to develop our provinces. In Ghana, all of our resources, our cocoa and diamonds, are not in Accra, our capital. These resources exist in the small

towns of Obuasi or Tarkwa, amongst many others. How do we use culture and the arts to bring attention to the fact that contemporary culture and economic wealth does not reside alone in the cities but also in the regions? How do we use this idea as a trigger for development?

In the same vein, our traditional systems are valuable to development. Our traditions and culture are embedded in our traditional rulers and the seats that they hold, which are still revered to this day. Our local chiefs and elders must be engaged because our culture is embodied in their leadership. We need to look at ways of galvanising people on the local level, using tradition and using culture to begin to address issues that have previously been dealt with efficiently. Ghanaians are, and have always been, very hardworking people who understand the land and who have tilled it, using resources efficiently and distributing them evenly to the benefit of the community. So why has modernity truncated this tradition of sharing, of dedication, of using resources rather than exploiting them?

There is a big difference between exploitation and sustainable use of resources. Exploitation means we are not putting back what we take out and this is what we need to reverse. Exploitation affects all aspects of our development agenda, be it education, healthcare, infrastructural building and economic planning. The economic planning tools that are available to us need to be recalibrated to fit our local needs. This will require a great deal of hard work from our leadership, who often follow models from the West because it is easy. But we need to also recognise that these solutions, historically, have not benefited us and we need to develop our own methods through hard work. Ultimately, constructive and sustainable development of the African environment will come from the local level, harnessing our culture and our heritage. Independence era leaders understood the power of the arts and building institutions to promote and revitalise the arts because they have a direct link to the soul of Africa. Now this soul is under siege.

In the arena of design and architecture, there has to be a big push to describe who we are in our built environment. The built environment symbolises our contemporary culture. It is one of the ways of understanding and describing a people's contemporary culture. I believe it is very important that we embrace the idea of an indigenous inspired narrative so that our cities and urban areas do not become places that we do not relate to.



Film Festival: Image Of Liberia Liberia 21 February 2014 Sayetown Community screening preceding the Festival © Kriterion Monrovia

This will eventually affect tourism, a potentially thriving source of income. Most of us travel to experience the culture of Rome, or the culture of Venice, and come away with the incredible architecture of historical Europe and its open spaces. Development must include both built space and also the open, negative spaces. This is where Africa has a great deal to offer. It is difficult to talk of 'African Architecture', but what we can talk about are the interstitial open spaces between the built forms. It is our climate that could ultimately define an African architecture.

We need to work at encouraging our designers and the population at large, the purveyors of taste and design, to appreciate who we are, and be inspired by what we stand for historically. We need to come up with products and environments that can actually assist Africa's growth. Our cities and towns need to be designed using local materials and our culture and influences should create innovative spaces. One of our continuously ignored talents lies in the crafts arena. The crafts are a great opportunity to grow our economies, create employment, and connect with our past in a positive way. The crafts need to evolve to reflect contemporary Africa intellectually, physically and financially. In manufacturing, why are we not tapping into our huge natural resources and adding value with good design to produce new products for the world market?

Conclusions

Creative people need to engage in the economic development process of Africa. African cultural entrepreneurs must become the custodians of this sector of development and look at it as an economic engine of growth. This is the vital missing link between how we transition from being entrepreneurs of culture and arts to supporting the economic engine of growth. There are quite a few good examples around the world to emulate. I always look at the example of Cuba: a living, organic museum without walls. Culture is embedded in the soul of its people, it is embedded in its architecture, be it colonial or modern, it is embedded in its way of life. There is no separation between, tourism, way of life and economic regeneration.

There are very good models to emulate as a way of getting people to participate in, and engage with, what is already there as living culture. Our foods need to be packaged in a way that reflects the competition of the modern world. The key is to showcase and highlight our great achievements rather than always complaining about the lack of public funding for cultural endeavours. We the people need to recognise that, through our culture, there is wealth in who we are.

In closing, I want to return to the role of arts and culture in development. What kinds of voices are being listened to in this new Africa, and where are the alternative voices? For so long Africa has depended on certain groups to shape the agenda. I am appealing to the creative community: we need to engage; we need to be part of the change. We will not be listened to if we do not take our rightful positions in the economic development agenda, because, after all, we can offer development clear advantages: conceptualisation, intuition, and the ability to visualise and document ideas. This is what Africa needs: vision, documentation and most importantly, culturally enhanced passion to deliver tangible change. Development will happen with or without us. It is up to us to bring culture, heritage, arts and traditions into a truly 'inno-native' response.

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