



**Plenary Session: Cultural Rights and Responsibilities**

**'A Long Way Gone – Cultural Rights, Identity & Citizenship:  
How Africa and Europe Are Impacting Each Other in Practice'**

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## **A LONG WAY GONE - CULTURAL RIGHTS, IDENTITY & CITIZENSHIP: HOW AFRICA AND EUROPE ARE IMPACTING EACH OTHER IN PRACTICE**

In his seminal play *Death & the King's Horseman*, Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka explored the relationship between cultural rights and responsibilities. In this work based on a real life story in Colonial Nigeria 1946, Soyinka stated through the character of Elesin, the King's horseman, how colonialism had disempowered the colonised, as well as without their realising it, also diminished the colonisers.

It is interesting to note that such power dynamics, fuelled by a resilient affiliation to Enlightenment principles, even today renders the West by virtue of its economic prowess and ownership of modern mass media platforms, still predisposed to dictate cultural standards of what is considered 'the norm'. This predisposition, which admittedly is even often subconscious, has been a source of enduring tensions between the great continents of Africa and Europe, characterised often in resentments by Africa towards Europe, and disdain by Europe towards Africa. It is also interesting to note that in recent times, a more fundamental shift in this power dynamic has been occurring, as an increasingly confident Africa is finding a voice and level of confidence which is resulting in a newer understanding and re-interpretation of her peoples' cultural rights and responsibilities. This is having and will continue to have a profound resonance in the way Africa and Europe relate to each other through the rest of this century. It is imperative that we all understand and appreciate this resonance, as it has the potential for better life-enhancing revelations and opportunities for both continents.

In this paper, I will briefly explore some of the contemporary characteristics and platforms for this repositioning and newer assertions of cultural rights, responsibilities and identity, and also how newer globalised popular culture with a distinctly African flavour is impacting on the social identities of young Africans, both on the continent and in Diaspora. I will also suggest some ways in which cultural rights can be developed and be better promoted through institutional cooperation policies, including how they need to focus within as an integral part of the process of engaging with each other.

I borrowed the title of this essay from the riveting novel by the former Liberian child soldier Ishmael Beah<sup>1</sup>. In this book, the shred of humanity that the young boy held on to in very difficult situations and in the face of various atrocities he was witness or party to, was reggae music. Indeed music was to play a significant role in his eventual rehabilitation and today many child soldier rehabilitation centres utilise the arts as a means of empowering the youths to confront and expunge their past demons. This is not just a tale of the redemptive power of music, but also indicative of a need for cultural rights to be enshrined in the psyche of all. Moreover, the assertion of this cultural right to access culture served as a catalyst for reconnecting Beah to his higher self and assertion of a new identity and sense of citizenship. This right (to access culture) is a core Cultural Right within the human rights framework. As Beah and his fellows considered themselves a 'long way gone' during the war, so indeed is the

history of cultural cooperation between Europe and Africa, by virtue of its troubled colonial and post-colonial history 'a long way gone', now re-emerging into something that will be stronger and of immense mutual benefit.

A key point to note is that in neither Europe nor Africa is the concept of cultural rights widely accepted or understood. Different understandings of the applicability and limits of implementing human rights does not help. In both continents, but especially in emerging democracies, human rights understandings within the context of recent national histories and traditional cultures, makes discussions of cultural rights and responsibilities and their intersectionalities with related issues of citizenship and cultural and social identities seem superfluous.

### **Whose rights, whose responsibilities?**

A key aspect of the difficulty of accepting and implementing the legitimacy of cultural rights is the perception that has been allowed to thrive that these are groups-based rights rather than individual rights, i.e. Cultural rights are vested not in individuals but in groups, such as religious and ethnic minorities and indigenous societies. Rather than be seen as integral aspects of the various articles of the Human Rights Convention, the separation of cultural rights as an amorphous mass of subsidiary adjuncts has marginalised them in most rights-based conversations. This is detrimental not just to the cause of cultural rights as a distinct body of rights, but indeed to the entire human rights framework, as it is in such areas of obfuscation that attacks on the credibility of the entire human rights framework is justified.

This separation of cultural rights is in fact very much a semantic and practical difficulty, as groups consist of a collection of individuals and therefore the rights of a group would automatically mean the rights of an individual. It is therefore more useful for the conversations on these rights to also be reframed as the cultural aspects of human rights. Similarly, where there are cultural rights there are also now deemed to be cultural responsibilities - responsibilities seem more readily attributable at the individual level than rights, which constitutes a disconnect.

This is certainly a lesson that Europe can learn from Africa. In most 'traditional' African societies, there is an enduring presumption of cultural right and responsibility in and of the collective, which is normalised and implemented by the individual. Indeed, context-based variations of these rights through time is usually predicated on the activities of key individuals, usually after a cultural encounter that disrupts their normal pattern of thought and behaviour. This was particularly obvious in colonial and immediate post-colonial times, both in Africans and

### **Different understandings of rights framework**

The notion of Human rights still has different connotations in Africa and Europe. In the West, rights are deemed 'inalienable', natural and inherent in every person, as this concept arises from ancient Greek and Roman ideas of natural law and democracy and strengthened by liberalism and Enlightenment thinking. Many African languages do not have a translation for human rights, but

concepts of cultural belonging and responsibility abound in many traditional knowledge systems and cultural understandings. In Yoruba, for instance, the closest to a direct translation for cultural responsibility will be

the concept of 'ẹtọ'. We must acknowledge that the wholesale adoption of western conceptions of liberty and rights has not always had a positive impact for many African communities. Cultural rights is a product of historical development and as we have different histories, we will have no unanimity about these rights.

### **Africa in Europe**

What is particularly interesting about this situation is that there is now a lot of Africa in Europe - numerically, there are almost certainly more Africans now living in Europe than Europeans ever lived in Africa. Every major city in Europe has an active and increasingly affluent African Diaspora, especially in the old seats of colonial power (i.e. Paris, London, Brussels, Lisbon). It is interesting to see what the impact of this immediate proximity to Africa is having on Europe. There is an increasing amount of inter-marriage and mixed relationships, and therefore mixed-race children in all these cities (e.g. in UK, the mixed race category is the fastest growing population sector). Nevertheless, the areas of increased African presence are generally targets for Far Right political groups, with a usual tendency to express their disaffection violently. It is also increasingly obvious that an arena of increasing African influence on European culture is going to be in religion.

While the focus of discussions on religion in Europe has in recent times focussed on Islam, a more subtle and potentially more culturally significant shift is occurring in Christianity. From all indications, Africans are generally more likely to attend [churches than Europeans](#). Especially with Pentecostalism, there is a delicious irony to Africans exporting their own brand of Christianity back to Europe, who not too long ago introduced Africa to this religion, generally with a Bible in one hand and a gun in the other, which Fela Kuti would have enjoyed, as this was focus of his classic song, '*Shuffering and Shmiling*'. As these new African churches become more politically competent and confident in their new environs, they will certainly assert more of an influence in European cultural life. Indeed, an indication of this was seen last year, when the Anglican Church in Nigeria flexed its increasingly powerful muscles to almost single-handedly jettison the move to ordain gay [\(homosexual\) bishops](#).

The flip-side of the living experience of Africans in Europe especially amongst young people who are first or second generation born there, is the sense of identity dislocation that many of them experience. Physically and psychologically remote from Africa, yet never quite fully accepted into European society (as evidenced by the effects of racism in every aspect of life), many young African-Europeans are growing up confused of who they are and their place in this new world order. Questions of *Who Am I?* are never deemed as relevant as when you are repositioned as an outsider i.e. the 'Other', as occurs in Western societies.

## **Africa Reintroduced through new Cultural Products**

Increasingly, institutions such as the Equality & Human Rights Commission in UK are beginning to encourage exploration of these identity dynamics in young people, as is evident in its Young Brits at Art<sup>ii</sup> competition. A better understanding of the cultural relations and identity dynamics of these young Diasporans can be fostered by ensuring a parallel invocation of interest in the countries of origin that still hold a strong sway on the imagined and claimed identities of these young people.

In this sense, it is interesting to observe how recently, newer popular cultural forms from Africa are helping to reintroduce young people to their sense of Africa. The vehicles of these cultural seismic shifts are mainly African HipHop and other popular music, and more importantly, Nollywood films.

The impact of the Nigerian film industry, (popularly called Nollywood) bears further exploration. Now officially the third largest film industry in the world, this dynamic industry has had a massive impact on culture in Africa both on the continent and in Diaspora, albeit with slightly different connotative effects. All across Africa, Nollywood films are capturing the imagination. It is having the impact of allowing Africans to re-imagine themselves, by bringing the different Africas (East, West, South) together in a shared cultural experience, and making different cultures more accessible and understandable. Professor Ugochukwu and other commentators from the Open University have commented on various dimensions of this phenomenon<sup>iii</sup>.

This has had some interesting unintended consequences: a Kenyan female friend told me how nowadays Kenyan women wear more colourful clothes in a way that was unimaginable just 5 years ago, and this is directly a result of them copying the elaborate fashion designs of Nollywood films. Separately, another Kenyan male friend told me that the women had also adopted a 'Lagos woman' mentality, resulting in them becoming more assertive and 'bossy'! This is an object lesson in how popular cultural forms impact a sense of identity and awareness of cultural rights.

Interestingly, Nollywood films has been a very powerful cultural mobilising force for Africans in Diaspora. Nollywood as a cultural rallying point is allowing for second and third generation Diasporan Africans to reacquaint themselves with their own sense of African identity. Nollywood and African music has found a globalising platform for undertaking this cultural evangelism role through mass communication media of satellite television. These stations mean that the latest dance moves, fashions and subtle changes in lived culture are now being beamed directly into the minds of young Africans in Diaspora, who do not now have to rely on the imagined histories and selective memories of their parents to understand what being African actually means.

Many 'educated' Africans suffer as a result of their colonial miseducation from what Sibusisu Bengu called '*negative ethnocentrism*', whereby a person or group having its own values goes full out to adopt cultural values and habits of other groups. This has resulted in Africa being the only continent where children are obliged to learn a different language than that which is traditionally spoken by its

family. Hence, I now have nephews and nieces who have lived all their lives in Lagos who cannot string two sentences of Yoruba together, speaking in fake American accents from a young age as a status symbol, and adopting mannerisms of the lowest common denominator American culture, as propagated through Hollywood films and especially gangster rap hip hop. And yet, my 10 year old niece who is born, bred and raised in London can speak and understand fluent Yoruba as a result of not just her family speaking to her in this language since birth but also her own wholehearted embrace of Nollywood films! So while being visited by family last year, I was confronted with the bizarre sight of a London born girl teaching her Lagos-based cousins their own language!

The popularity of these films in Europe is also impacting on aspirations of educationally and socially marginalised young Black people, as it provides them with more varied cross-section of role models, imagery that is not particularly prevalent in western media. Nollywood films in presenting a different reality of living in the west and the opportunities now increasingly available at home is indeed also beginning to have a massive impact on migration patterns, i.e. more Diaspora Africans are moving back home and fewer people are as desperate to leave Africa as they were in say the late 80s and early 90s. While the increasing economic opportunities are a major factor, these cultural vehicles are also very important in conveying a sense of the alternative reality and lifestyle that could await in Africa and makes selling returns to Africa far more palatable to especially younger people.

A question of cultural rights and responsibility is therefore propagated here: how will we preserve the rights of children in Africa to access their cultural heritage fully and without impediment? What responsibilities do we all have in ensuring that these rights are preserved and protected? And how do we pass these responsibilities along with a body of rights to the individuals concerned? In the examples given above, of the impact of Nollywood and music videos in fostering an assertion of rights and identity, what does an increased understanding of this mean for TV programmers, film-makers and artistes?

Apart from Nollywood, the recent play between Cultural Rights and identity in the relationship between Africa and Europe is found not so much in institutional policies but in practical cultural programmes. In particular, events still matter a lot – attention is a scarce property and events such as conferences, festivals etc provide a focus of attention and avenue for exploration of changing cultural contexts. Organisations such as London-based Cultural Co-operation<sup>iv</sup> has in the past few years concentrated efforts on fostering understanding and development of positive cultural relations between Europe and Africa by organising various themed festivals. These have recently been some of the most vibrant festivals in London in, as they are not about cultural voyeurism, but seeks to respectfully introduce the culture behind the music as well. The Director Prakash Daswani states that they have brought the continents together *"to maximise inter-action between different world views and lived experience."*

In these exchanges, there also needs to be a closer and more intimate sharing of a broader perspective of Europe towards Africa, as this will also have benefits for the Europeans beyond impacting its Diaspora communities. Economically, the world increasingly shrinks and the business,

capital and labour markets converge ever tighter. This means that especially in these post credit crunch days, competition for the best positions will indeed be more globalised than local. An awareness of and respect for culture and cultural rights across the globe will be ever more important as part of the whole cultural competences package and should be more of an integral part of the education curriculum. This becomes an important point for cultural competency education of youths in Europe, - failure to promote discussion and debate by youths is not preparing them to compete effectively as global citizens.

I sit on the board of the only African-British theatre in UK, Tiata Fahodzi, which has recently completed a successful West-End run of its original new play, '*Iya-Ile*' (i.e. First Wife). Interestingly, the theatre had a hard selling job with receiving venues, who were insisting that the name of the play be changed from its Yoruba title to something more accessible to their venues' usual crowd (of mainly White audiences). This excuse of accessibility could actually be deemed a fig-leaf with which they sought to cover their own cultural nakedness, but in the process they were actually compromising the cultural rights not just of the theatre, but also of their own audience. As it happens, the play was opened to packed audiences for its full 6 week run.

This makes clear that there needs to be a mutuality of respect for values we do not necessarily understand. In cooperation, Africa and Europe need to create a discursive space where the discovery of our similarities counteracts our differences. This should result in the minimisation of emphasis on differences when confronting the 'other', especially as difference has been taken to signify inferiority in Western intellectual thought.

This is a question of cultural responsibility for Europe, as this has a direct impact on the cultural rights of others.

### **Responding to the Challenge**

So what should be done to minimize bureaucracies and promote cultural rights across Africa? I will offer the following broad suggestions:

1. *There should be increased support for cultural cooperation programmes as a vehicle for promotion of rights.* Successful cooperation however requires institutional autonomy, intercultural competence and mobility, and imagination. Therefore a prime area of investment should be in capacity development in these areas.
2. *Both Africa and Europe need to engage in a process of identity questioning within and across the continents.* What does it really mean to be a Modern European when there is so much of Africa within that we have not explored? What does a contemporary Africa mean when issues of rights and identities are still largely premised on and dictated by European cultural sensibilities and imposed or adopted understandings? Such critical cultural introspection would have benefits beyond the realm of cultural rights and responsibilities – hopefully to include a revision of the ingrained power dynamics that still permeate Euro-African

relationships and which see differential usage of language (e.g. in Africa we have tribalism. In Europe, they call it sectarianism. Language as Foucault reminds us still, is never neutral).

3. *Public policy agenda in Africa and Europe should focus on strengthening the relationship with Diaspora communities as well as the home countries on the continents, through both bilateral and multilateral cooperation activities.* There seems to of recent have been a more major shift to multilateral forms of cooperation, which are more difficult models for national governments, and emerge more validly from cultural operatives themselves. Such near- spontaneous development of co-operations and exchange among cultural practitioners and artists should be further harnessed and developed.
4. *There needs to be a keener sense of cultural responsibility by both Africa and Europe.* Cultural responsibility means cultural leadership. Tools for such effective cultural leadership include passion for and respect of community, cross-cultural communication skills, developing a firmer sense of accountability, and the provision of a facilitating environment.
5. *A key area of mutual concern in cultural cooperation between Africa and Europe is the seemingly intractable problem of developing cultural indicators.* This is an area of activity where African and European cultural practitioners and theorists can cooperate and learn from each other. A useful area for intervention would be the re-emphasis from developing separate sets of cultural indicators for culture and development to developing cultural indicators for all development-based activity. We need to understand the cultural impact of economics and economic impacts of culture and marry the two in public policies (including defending these rights from international instruments that have systemic biases that result in the protection of existing hegemonies).
6. *Alliances for the development of cultural creative industries are important and need to be fuelled by cultural diversity, in terms of both the diversity of cultural products and also diversity of human existence.*

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this presentation, I have cross-referenced main points to Death and the King's Horseman, so it seems apt that I end on a point for reflection from that text. At the end of the play, the western-educated Olunde sacrificed himself to uphold not just his family honour but also to protect the cultural integrity of the people. While I am not advocating ritual suicide of all cultural practitioners in the room, we should note that Olunde's act is a powerful example of cultural responsibility. In promoting cultural rights and responsibilities in Africa and Europe, and in identifying and implementing cooperative acts to empower the peoples in the two continents, we should bear in mind always that cultural responsibility does not fall on anyone else, but on all of us who work in this area. What is at stake is nothing less than the difference between the world we have against the world we know we, and our children, deserve.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.alongwaygone.com/>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/fairer-britain/youth-projects/young-brits-at-art/>

<sup>iii</sup> The Nollywood Film Industry and the African Diaspora in the UK -Open University  
2007

<sup>iv</sup> Cultural Co-operation is an independent London based arts and education charity with an "*unparalleled 20 year track record of promoting cross-cultural contact, dialogue and understanding*". See  
<http://www.culturalco-operation.org/>