The Challenges of Indigenizing Africa's Environmental Conservation Goals

by

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Abstract

This paper takes a critical look at a proposals which is increasingly gaining currency in sub-Saharan Africa: and that is, the suggestion that in order for Africa to cultivate an environmentally supportive culture, respective African governments — working in co-operation with the multilateral donor agencies, must thoughtfully reconcile imported environmental conservation interventions with the tried and time tested collective intelligence of Africa's village lore. As salutary as this goal is, I here nevertheless argue that its actual implementation will be more than a Herculean feat. Several obstacles will undoubtedly proliferate on the way. Amongst these obstacles, to mention a few, would include: the obviously predatory tendencies of the free market (knows best) ideology; behind-the-scene political power games of Africa's ruling elite; Africans fractured sense of self; Africa's crushing dependency on Industrialized Nations of the North and, last but not least; the technocratic paternalism ('expert-knows-best' mentality) of both African and non-African elite. This list of obstacles is, of course, not exhaustive; it is only indicative.

However, in a paper of this length, we cannot obviously fully explore how each of the aforementioned hurdles will hinder Africa's aspirations for indigenizing her environmental conservation goals. Consequently, we here only then direct our focus primarily on the extent to which the predatory tendencies of free market ideology will get in the way of Africa's determination of indigenizing her environmental conservation goals.

Introduction

Lately, in Africa, a consensus has been emerging around the idea of reconnecting Africa's environmental conservation goals with the reservoir of its up-to-now neglected indigenous lore. This task must, however, contends William Ochieng', "originate from within, not from outside."[1] In other words, solutions to Africa's accelerating environmental crises should, above all, come out of Africa's own roots, not through grafting on to Western implanted interventions.

Once Africans learn and begin to tenaciously embrace homegrown interventions — as the Chinese, Japanese and Malaysians did before they eventually acquiesced to America's *McDonaldalization* of the world — then, argues Ochieng', Africa's monumental problems, which are largely exacerbated by an over reliance on Western models, will also come to pass. Short of falling back on homegrown solutions, Ochieng' concedes, the continent of Africa and its people will continue to remain under the yoke of the all too often manipulative, exploitative and abusive tutelage of political and economic elites of industrialized nations of the north.

To be sure, Ochieng' is not the only person who has been in the forefront of raising this awareness. Other equally distinguished Africanists had earlier-on expressed a similar concern. For example, with an undue optimism, the celebrated Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, had forewarned Africans by insisting that "if alternative histories must be written, and the need is more apparent now than ever before, they must be written by insiders, not 'intimate' outsiders. Africans, Achebe counseled, must [without further ado begin to] narrate themselves in their own context and in their own voices…" Franz Fanon, an ardent critic of colonialism and imperialism, had too expressed a similar view. Pleading with Africanists to avoid the temptation of realigning third world discourse with the parameters of Western conceptual/ epistemic models, Fanon forewarned about the dangers of especially "paying tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions and societies which draw their inspiration from her." He noted:

> *Humanity is wanting for something other from us than such an imitation, which would be almost an obscene caricature. If we want to turn Africa into a new Europe…then we must leave the destiny of our countries to Europeans. They will know how to do it better than the most gifted among us. But if we want humanity to advance a step further, if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it, then we must invent and we must make discoveries. If we wish to live up to our peoples' expectations, we must seek the response elsewhere than in Europe. Moreover, if we wish to reply to the expectations of the people of Europe, it is no good sending them back a reflection, even an ideal reflection, of their society and their thought with which from time to time they feel immeasurably sickened. ...*[2]

Indigenous Wisdom: Its Exclusion and Impact

Despite Fanon and others' counsel, practically all governments in Africa – perhaps, with the exception of Tanzania under Julius Nyerere – have since securing their "political independence" continued to heavily depend on imported interventions.[3] It therefore comes as no surprise that externally generated (imported) ideas, which governments in Africa obediently turn to or are forced to implement by donor agencies and multilateral institutions, have in almost every case engendered mixed results is beyond dispute. While pushing Africa's poorer segments of society further deeper into poverty, and bringing a ton of discernible benefits for a few, they have least helped Africa in preventing, let alone reversing, its inexhaustible catalog of challenges.

Thus, against this grim background, one then begins to understand and even to appreciate why lately there has been an swelling interest in promoting a communitarian, village grounded, discourse of environmental conservation and socio-economic development. At the core of this discourse is a conviction that the poorer majority in Africa, whose lives and aspirations are dictated by the struggle for survival, should first be empowered if they are to indeed become savvy political actors and principal architects of their own socioeconomic development. In addition to this belated realization is also a recognition that the preponderant top-down approaches to socioeconomic development should henceforward be abandoned in favor of bottom-up, local specific communitarian discourses of socioeconomic development and environmental regeneration. Put into question as well is the "know-allism," the "fix-it" mentality, especially of Africa's ruling elite, senior government bureaucrats and international development consultants who typically decide and influence the direction of Africa's recovery.

Washington Post columnists, Stephen Rosenfeld, could perhaps not have put it better. Indicting international consultants who work (or previously worked) in Africa for their culpability in exacerbating most of the crises now bedeviling the continent of Africa and its people, Rosenfeld notes: "it is hard to look at black Africa without feeling that something has terribly gone wrong. It is not the spectacle of suffering that troubles us. It is the sense that we, we of America and the West, who thought we knew how to help these people, did not know well enough, although we acted as we did … our advice has been deeply flawed."[4]

Of course, there are other reasons that would account for the renewed interest in recovering and then putting into use the collective, cumulative intelligence of Africa's village lore, systems of governance and technologies of exploiting and managing natural resources. According to Ali A. Mazrui, the going back to Africa's roots movement seeks to also respond to at least two major perennial challenges: the debilitating impact of Westernization in Africa and the seemingly interminable Western arrogance of treating Africans as children, constantly in need of parental guidance.

The debilitating impact of Westernization, Mazrui observes, has occasioned a widespread cultural amnesia, as many Western educated Africans — ashamed of their tribal heritage — repeatedly scramble to imitate the West.[5] The latter, the never-ending Western arrogance of treating Africans as children, Mazrui notes, has clearly promoted a cultural nostalgia – a celebration, idealization and glorification of Africa's pre-colonial heritage and civilizations.[6]

Hence, following the trajectory of this formulation, one could then argue that the going back to Africa's roots movement is a form of protest, rebellion against two forces: the tyranny of Westernization and values that it has promoted and the condescending attitude of the West of treating Africans as children who are constantly in need of parental guidance. But there is even a more substantial goal sought by the exponents of going back to Africa's roots movement. And that is, "to shore up a viable sense of identity and selfhood in the face of the ruptures — real or perceived — which colonialism [and imperialism, of course] has wrought on the African psyche."[7]

In addition to this goal, it could be plausibly also argued that the dramatic turn around (from top-down to bottom-up strategies of socioeconomic development and environmental recovery) that is certainly gathering momentum world-over was fundamentally triggered put into motion by the recommendations of the Brundtland report of 1987. Immediately after this report was released, with a follow-up conference of world leaders in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, a new kind of imagination quietly but rapidly began to capture the attention of virtually every scholar and student of the African predicament. Stated in a fairly standard language, this imagination runs as follows: "while top-down interventions are more than welcome, genuine solutions to most (if not all) of the problems plaguing the continent of Africa and its people will really only come from the bottom-up."[8] Put in another way, the future of Africa, according to this logic, lies ultimately not so much in slavishly emulating Western models, skills and ideas but, rather, in developing and implementing homegrown, local specific, corrective responses. But such responses, as Chinua Achebe rightly points out, must fulfill, at the very minimum, three requirements. Firstly, they must come from Africans themselves — singly or in concert with one another — and not from 'intimate outsiders.' Secondly, they must be sensitive to long history of Africa's contact with the outside world, developmental challenges and values of Africa's versatile multiethnic composition. Thirdly, and perhaps more important, they must, while keeping on the front burner the survival needs and legitimate aspirations of populations that are locked in poverty and underdevelopment, not compromise the goals of environmental conservation. In short, envisaged solutions must not only accommodate legitimate survival needs of poorer populations in Africa but must also help bring to an end the excessive destruction and pillaging of Africa's asserts.

Rationale for Indigenization

Indeed, attempting to justify why, for example, Africa's environmental conservation goals ought to be principally grounded on the wisdom of how local communities in Africa traditionally managed and also exploited resources found within their surroundings, Darrol Bryant writes:

> *It is essential that this wisdom be recovered if Africans were to address the environmental problems and other challenges facing the continent and its people ... This is because, African traditions understood nature more than just matter for exploitation. Nature was a natural home. Being in harmony with nature meant living in close contact with the deeper sources of divine life... It was necessary to listen to the voices from nature [implicit as they indeed were in] the rhythm of the seasons, the coming of the rains, the flowering of crops and the fruits of the ear*th.[9]

Archbishop Desmond Tutu voiced a similar opinion. In a keynote speech delivered at the World Future Studies Federation conference held in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1995, Tutu argued:

> *We [Africans] need to re-awaken our memories, to appropriate our history and our rich heritage that we have jettisoned at such a high cost as we rushed after the alien and alienating paradigms and solutions. We must determine our own agenda and our own priorities. To recover our history and to value our collective memory is not to be engaged in a romantic nostalgia. [Far from it], it is to generate in our people and in our children a proper pride and self-assurance.*[10]

Moreover, drawing parallel insights from Judeo-Christian and Islamic religious traditions to vindicate his position, that Africans ought not be ashamed of reconnecting with their ancestral heritage and [perhaps] modern capacities, Tutu pointed out that:

> *Although the Jews live in the present (at least for the most part), they (often) look back to the Exodus and they have been shaped in their remembrances of the holocaust to become a peculiar people. Muslims (too) look back to Muhammad and his encounter with Allah, and they commemorate events that were significant for him. Christians [as well] look back especially to the death and resurrection of Jesus who commanded them to do this in remembrance of Him as what hope and theme distinguish them from those who do not have these memories.*

> *(Furthermore) nations and people have their common collective memory,*
> *official or historic, and we need to (therefore) remember where we come*
> *from to know where we are going (and) how to get to our destination.*[11]

Likewise, Basil Davidson offered an equally illuminating account as to why Africa's renaissance should and must be grounded on the recovered collective intelligence of Africa's village lore. He argued, "the facts as they come today suggests that there was and there remains, in the ethos of African communities, a fountain of inspiration, a source of civility, a power of self-correction; and these qualities may yet be capable, even in the miseries of today, of great acts of restitution.[12]

Projected Benefits: Localized Relevance

This far, the message is clear and cogent. Several benefits are indeed expected to flow from the going back to Africa's roots movement. Amongst such benefits would include:

- Empowerment of individuals, sub-groups and local communities in managing their own resources and affairs;
- Helping individuals and their communities to reasonably adapt to "the shifts and changes that are now taking place in our increasingly globalizing, mutually influencing world;
- Restoring the rapidly eroding kinship networks of solidarity
- Providing individuals and their communities with a "fountain of inspiration, a source of civility and a power of self-correction" as Basil Davidson observes;
- Overcoming the seemingly intractable limitations of western implanted ideas/models and the restrictive outlook, which they engender;
- Providing individuals and their communities with a more promising escape route from what Wendell Bell calls recalcitrant horrors of modernity: artificially induced economic inequalities, acute adulteration of the physical environment, despicable human rights violation, widespread indifference to the concerns of interests of future generations—born and unborn—and, last but not least, the triumph of rational, causal thinking;
- Cultivating a more genuinely grounded sense of belonging to a place;
- Boosting Africans pride in themselves and dignity in their hitherto immobilized cultural values;
- Strengthening virtues of collaboration, teamwork and cooperative problem solving mechanisms. And, last but not least;
- Providing individuals and their communities with a renewed sense of hope, audacity to dream new dreams and the confidence in not only creating their own futures but also in determining their own destiny.

Vortex of Suspicion

Notwithstanding these and many other anticipated benefits, several questions must first be fully addressed. Can Africans retreat, even if minimally, into their traditional worldviews and epistemologies under the conditions of current global regime without risking further impoverishment and marginalization? Can the back to Africa's roots movement genuinely take off given Africa's long history of contact with the outside world, its economic dependency on industrialized nations of the north and international donor agencies, and its infant (or lack thereof) of a techno-scientific culture? Given Africa's resistance to land reforms, increasing rural-urban migration, and conspicuous deficiency of visionary political leadership, will the going back to Africa's roots movement help Africans achieve the aforementioned anticipated benefits?

More poignantly, precisely who should steer the going back to Africa's roots movement? Should this task be entrusted to Africa's political elites who, as Franz Fanon aptly pointed out, "have nothing better to do than to take the role of managers for Western enterprises and often in practice set up their countries as the brothels of Europe"?[13] Should international non-governmental organizations and other Western funded development agencies facilitate, as it is the case today, the task of recovering and utilizing traditional Africa's knowledge and accumulated experience? In what ways would entrusting such an important task to 'Africa's outside friends' further deepen and even perpetuate existing paternalistic – although sometimes benign – relationships? Can individuals who work for non-governmental organizations and international development agencies, and who in the first place have in many ways generated and exacerbated the problems confronting the continent and its people, conceivably promote a genuinely grounded discourse of reciprocal partnership?

What, one might also ask, will Africans lose — now and in the future — by going back to their cultural roots in light of what we now know; our present world is increasingly shrinking and becoming more interdependent? Will the going back to Africa's roots movement not, in fact, further isolate Africa from the global body politic? Furthermore, given the predatory tendencies of free- market (knows best) ideology, will the movement of going back to Africa's roots not end up helping to further prepare the ground for the eventual penetration (takeover?) of global capitalism in Africa?

While there are no clear-cut answers to these many questions, Arif Dirlik, a prolific critic of post-colonialism, somewhat provides a more persuasive articulation regarding the predatory tendencies of contemporary global capitalism. Dirlik, in his book *The Post-colonial Aura*, for instance, notes:

> *Employing micro-mapping techniques and guerrilla marketing strategies, global capitalist elites have managed to manipulate consumption habits, to break down previously sacrosanct cultural boundaries, while also appropriating the local for the global. Different cultures have been admitted into the realm of capital only to be broken down and remade (again) in accordance with the logic of capital production and consumption. In addition, subjectivities have been reconstituted across local, national, regional boundaries with an eye to creating (a pool of) producers and consumers who would be more responsive to the operations of capital. Those who do not respond, the (so-called) "basket-cases" are, according to Dirlik, no longer coerced or colonized. They are simply marginalized... kept out of capitalists' pathways (or circuits).*[14]

If, as one is inclined to belief, Dirlik's assertion is correct, then one could reasonably argue that for capitalism to continuously enjoy legitimacy *ad infinitum,* its top managers must repeatedly tinker with its logic to realign it with local aspirations and feelings of being at "home" and secure. As Dirlik notes, the logic underpinning contemporary global capitalism "is the belief, which is nevertheless unstated, that the local is in no way a site of liberation but, rather, a site of manipulation."[15] This logic, Dirlik then contends, enables "global capitalism to consume local cultures while at the same time enhancing a pseudo-awareness that the local is a potential site of resistance to capital."[16]   And precisely because of this reason, Dirlik concedes, "(the) declaration(s) of pre-modern (especially) in the name of resistance to the modern rationalist homogenization of the world has resulted into a localism which, for the most part, is willing to overlook past oppression out of a preoccupation with the oppression engendered by global capitalism and its Eurocentric orientation."[17]

A brief detour into some of the earlier movements that sought to recapture and to thenceforward celebrate pre-industrial simpler lifestyles might here perhaps help in either vindicating or invalidating Dirlik's assertions. The 1960's hippie movement, especially in Anglo-America, and the Negritude movement in Africa, might offer special insights as comparative analogies. Let me begin with the hippie "counterculture" movement.

The 1960'S Hippie "Counter-Culture" Movement

In Anglo-America, followers of the hippie "counterculture" movement were obsessed with nostalgia for a better-than-present world. They looked for answers to the problems of their time by turning to India's religious sensibilities.[18] For them, India was not only a symbol of rebellion, a rejection of the terror of war and the 'straight politics' of that time, but it also signified the ultimate rebellious stance: the desire to become the other.[19] India, champions and followers of the hippie movement were somewhat convinced, was the 'uncontaminated' place; a place far removed from the skewed moral values and misplaced priorities of industrialized nations at the time.[20] As a living museum, India then provided followers of the hippie movement with the possibilities of transcending urban problems, suburban sameness and burgeoning materialism of their era. India also drew exponents of this movement closer to a kind of spiritual connectedness with all living creatures and life forms.[21] Consequently, India, in a cultural sense, typified a return to an innocence lost while in a biographical sense it symbolized a return to "childhood."[22]

The fascination with India and values that it apparently represented, did not however last long. What might have led to the downward spiral in the compelling force that India exerted on the minds of the followers of the hippie movement? Before I answer this question, let me briefly explain what the Negritude movement represented or sought to challenge.

The Negritude Movement

According to Ali Mazrui, the Martinique poet and philosopher, Aimé Césaire, invented the concept of Negritude, the celebration of African identity and uniqueness. But it's most prominent exponents in Africa, notes Mazrui, were Leopold Senghor, the founder-president of independent Senegal, Senghor's compatriot Cheikh Anta Diop, Kwame Nkrumah, Birago Diop and Ousmane Socé. [23]

The Negritude movement was "born out of the disillusionment and resentment of the dehumanizing oppression of colonial domination and suppression of the black people."[24] Primarily utilizing ideas and aesthetics, more than political activism, defenders of the Negritude movement sought not only to reject everything the colonizing powers stood for, but also actively and consciously sought to glorify and to idealize Africa's past traditions, not to mention extolling its communal virtues.

However, as a philosophy, the concept of Negritude was intended to counter the forces of history that sought to destroy African pride in themselves, their history, their culture and their traditions. Mainly contested were the Eurocentric prejudices attributed to, among others, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Lévy Brùhl. These now supposedly canonized European philosophers unashamedly insisted that Africa was outside of history and civilization and that its people, essentially lacking in rationality and logic, were more or less like under-achieving children.

Troubled by these racially motivated prejudices about Africa and Africans and the mentality they engendered, that Europeans were at the apex of human civilization and culture, exponents of the Negritude movement became convinced that Africa's truly liberating possibilities lay foremost in honoring and actively promoting Africa's pre-colonial humanistic ideals, collective qualities of decency and other moral ethos. As the African-American philosopher Lucius Outlaw succinctly notes: "the Negritude movement…attempted to distinguish Africans from Europeans by defining the African in terms of the complexity of character traits, dispositions, capabilities, natural endowments and so forth, in relative predominance and overall organizational arrangements, which form(ed) the Negro essence…."[25]

The promise of the Negritude movement before and during the struggle for independence notwithstanding, the fire enlivening its clarion call for back to Africa's roots was unfortunately extinguished soon after most African countries attained "political independence." The question that we must then ask is, if apologists of the Negritude movement could not reach out to as many people in the 1960's, in spite of the highly charged climate of colonial resentment, what positive indications exists today that the current resurgence of interest of going back to Africa's roots will triumph? What might have contributed to the swift demise of both the hippie and the Negritude movements? Was it because the vision informing these two movements was highjacked by the very societal forces its exponents were trying to discredit and/or rebel against? Was it because the champions of these two movements experienced a sense of fatigue and frustration, particularly after failing to attract as many disciples as they would have perhaps desired? Or, is it because these two movements did not as it were enjoy a more broad based legitimacy and could therefore not push their agenda forward? What lesson might individuals who are now drumming up the call for Africa's return to its roots learn from the failure/s of these two movements? How precisely might Africa translate this rhetoric of going back to its cultural roots into a more practical, more appealing vision of building economically viable, culturally sustainable and environmentally supportive lifestyles?

Challenges of Indigenization in a Rapidly Globalizing World

The combined forces of globalization – which include technology, religion, international trade, international treaties and protocols and the unprecedented intrusion and near-to-ready acceptance of American pop culture in virtually all corners of the world, including Africa — render the going back to Africa's roots movement appear more like a mirage, a flight of imagination. Our present world, we are often reminded, has now considerably shrunk and is increasingly becoming more interdependent – thanks, partly, to techno-scientific advances in electronic and print media advertisement, Hollywood entertainment, jet travel, international trade, global tourism and the almost instantaneous learning made possible by the arrival and rapid domestication of the Internet.

Singly and collectively, these forces render the return to Africa's roots movement appear more like a pseudo-rhetoric that is lacking both in substance and vision. Let me elaborate by directing my focus on the changes now taking place in the global economy.

In his article, "Where is world capitalism going," Nicholai S. Rozov argues that most students and scholars of futures studies, avoiding the problems now occasioned by global political economy, all too often turn to social and religious utopias, environmentalism, postmodernism, epistemology, interpretism and neo-mythology." [26] However, in doing so, Rozov points out, they (unknowingly, perhaps) fail to address the good old question *cui prodest':* for whom is it profitable?[27] Granted, the questions that we must now ask are: do exponents of going back to Africa's roots movement shy away from addressing the good old question: for whom is it profitable? If they do not address this question, as they should, would the goals that they envision then fail to materialize for, as Rosov points out, global capitalists are always a step ahead of everybody?

In subsequent sections of this paper, while searching for an adequate response to these questions, I propose to position this discussion within the context of the findings established by Scott Lash and John Urry, in their book *Economies of Signs and Space,* and by Krishan Kumar, in his book *From Post-Industrial to Post-modern Society*. I have selectively chosen these two books because they do somewhat resonate with the reservations that I have already expressed concerning the going back to Africa's roots movement. This is how, in different, they ways frame their concerns.

Lash and Urry: Economies of Signs and Space

Lash and Urry explicates how and the manner in which the top managers of "global casino capitalism" constantly seeks to redefine, re-secure and re-entrench capitalism.[28] They also seek an understanding of how the evolving world of global capitalism influences and is, in turn, influenced by social and religious utopias, environmentalism, post-modernism, interpretism and neo-mythology.

Either way, they point out how the constant attempts at re-structuring and/or resuscitating global capitalism has enabled global capitalism to inescapably enjoy an unprecedented monopoly control over money-capital, means of production, consumption patterns and labor relations. Market forces, they suggest, are now circumventing the crucial role that central governments have historically played in terms of planning, organizing, directing and coordinating relational exchanges between capital production, consumption, accumulation and labor processes.

That in our world today global capitalism has monopoly control over capital, technology, people and even ideas that are especially produced in the academy requires little or no elaboration. Academic institutions are, as an example, now concentrating on churning-out a work force that is best suited in furthering the goals of global capitalism. Knowledge of the almost always-evolving technology, which incidentally allows information to be mutually shared between and within global capitalists elite across local, national, regional and international divides, is today a must-know skill for students majoring especially in business oriented disciplines and other subjects as well. In fact, to be industry relevant, students majoring in the business-oriented disciplines are now required to learn micro-marketing skills to be able to, among other things, systematically manipulate and fragment consumers' psychic dispositions. Mastering the craft (or is it the science?) of how to ingeniously guide consumers in choosing what elites of global capitalism would like them to consume, and of knowing how to milk the most vulnerable, alienated, exploited and dehumanized populations of society to the bone, is certainly a must know skill in today's business world.

Presumably, Lash and Urry seem to celebrate and even endorse the entrenchment of the evolving, restructured, global capitalism. As they note:

> *Spatialization and semioticization of contemporary political economies is less damaging in its implications than many writers…[whom they do not specify] suggest. This is because the implication for subjects, for the self, of these changes, is not just one of emptying and flattening. Instead, these changes also encourage the development of 'reflexivity.' Such a growing reflexivity of subjects that accompanies the end of organized capitalism opens up many possibilities for social relations – for intimate relationships, friendship, work relations, leisure, and consumption.*[29]

Krishna Kumar: Postindustrial to Postmodern Society

Unlike Lash and Urry, Kumar is neither optimistic nor pessimistic about the potential benefits to the self, which are thought would accompany a resuscitated global capitalism. Instead, he opts to evaluate how post-industrial theories — and specifically the idea of information society, theories of post-fordism and postmodernity — give credence to the position that Lash and Urry, along with other scholars, take with respect to the so-called end of organized global capitalism.

While I may be oversimplifying Kumar's otherwise complex argument, it seems to me that Kumar is somewhat convinced that there has not been a substantial change in the logic of capitalism to warrant its celebration — in spite of the claims to the contrary. Listen, for example, to what he says with respect to the flexible specialization associated with post-fordism: "certainly (it) indicates continuity of purpose and outlook that casts doubt on the idea of a fundamentally new departure, a second divide, in the evolution of industrial societies."[30] Furthermore, referring to the phenomenon of postmodernism – a term that I am reluctant to use here because of its ambiguity – Kumar notes: "at the very least, it forces us to acknowledge in 'localism' and 'diversity'- a motive and force not very different from those forces that have propelled capitalism for most of its history."[31]

Indeed, the significance of Kumar's observation resonates with at least four structural shifts in today's consumption habits, identified by Macnaghten and Urry in their book: *"Contested Natures"* (1998). First, Macnaugten and Urry note, the internationalization of markets and tastes has led to a huge increase in the range of goods and services that are available to those who can afford them. Second, the rapidly increasing semiotization of products has made sign value – not use value – become a key determinant in choosing what to consume. Third, consumers' tastes have become more fluid and open especially after the breakdown of some traditionalized institutions and structures occasioned by contemporary global capitalism. And finally, the shift from producer power to consumer power, occasioned by increasing consumption patterns, has led to the formation of multiple identities.[32]

This granted, it would therefore seem plausible to argue that Kumar is correct — particularly when he agrees with Hamelink's view about the myth of information society. Hamelink, for example, asserts, "the information society is a myth developed to serve the interest of those who initiate and manage the 'information revolution'— the most powerful sectors of society such as the central administrative elite, the military establishment and global industrial corporations."[33] In yet another calculated stroke of 'genius,' Kumar reiterates Walker's idea about the information society. According to Walker, "industrial capitalism has not been transcended; it has been simply extended, deepened, and perfected."[34]

While I do acknowledge, with delight, the many new and exciting possibilities ushered in by the new evolving economic world system (read changes in people's attitudes to politics, leisure, work, family life, personal relations, identity formation and so forth) I do nevertheless find Lash and Urry's project seriously compromised.[35] From their thought provoking explication of economies of signs and space, I can immediately visualize (with ease) how a path to political, social, cultural and religious mobilization might lead to a blind cultural conformism which is unsustainable given the level on which capitalism has reorganized patterns of relationships in virtually almost all spheres of life. What I cannot however fathom is how an individual or group of individuals who are outside of the capitalist loop could, if they are indeed free as Lash and Urry seem to suggest, wage a counter-hegemonic struggle against the manipulative tendencies of what James Marsh, philosophy professor at Fordham University, New York, calls the 'capitalist ideological mobilization.'[36] If they cannot do so, then how can we unquestioningly buy into their analysis of reflexive subjectivity – despite its prophetic message of hope? Is Lash and Urry's optimistic analysis of economies of signs and space intended to sweep under the carpet imperialistic motives underpinning the new, evolving economic world order? To what extent, one might also ask, will this system foster surrogate relationships in human endeavors? Will it maximize or minimize existing forms of subordination and inequality in our societies today? Will the supposedly "freed individuals," those who are free from the "imprisoning social structures" and who are then capable of reflecting upon multiple possibilities in various spheres of human endeavors, be able to wage a counter-hegemonic struggle against the manipulative capitalist ideological mobilization?

Probably not! The truth of the matter is that these individuals can wage a counter-hegemonic struggle if, in the first place, they are liberated, empowered and centered, to use Ali Mazrui's words. But who are such individuals? Are they not those already situated at the very center, not the periphery, of capitalist class? In fact, Leslie Sklair (1995:71) considers, and I concur, the primary beneficiaries of the unfolding economic new world order to be transnational capitalist class (corporate executives of multinational corporations and their local affiliates: state bureaucrats, capitalist-inspired politicians, professional elites, merchants and media personnel). That granted, I would then like to believe that the new unfolding economic world order that Lash and Urry envisions carries with it a complex and hidden global capitalist agenda of subordination and exploitation. By shifting their emphasis from relations of production to relations of reproduction, circulation and exchange of goods and services in that order, they come up with a model of economic analysis that at best can be described as a camouflaged, manipulative and highly sophisticated form of neo-imperialism. This emerging form of neo-imperialism will, I submit, supersede in all its intentions, means of achieving its goals and its consequences thereof, all other forms of imperialistic maneuvers that humanity has thus far witnessed.

I, here, define imperialism, using Walter J. Raymond's *Dictionary of Politics,* as an inherent propensity on the part of some human beings to interfere, subvert, alter, influence, manipulate, control and regulate – through suggestive means or otherwise – a people's social, epistemic, cultural, religious, political and economic aspirations.[37] Perhaps, in this respect, Ngugi wa Thiong'o,' in his book *Decolonizing the Mind,* unambiguous articulates the effects of imperialism particularly on the vast majority of humans, whose lives and aspirations are dictated by the struggle for survival. This is how Ngugi puts it:

> *Imperialism presents the struggling peoples of the earth with the ultimatum: accept theft, or death. But the biggest weapon wielded and daily unleashed by imperialism against the collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people – (i.e., belief in their names, their language, their environment, their country, their capacity, and ultimately in themselves). It makes them see their past as one of non-achievement...Amidst this wasteland that it has created, imperialism presents itself as the cure and demands that the dependent sing hymns of praise with the constant refrain: 'Theft is holy!'*[38]

Ngugi's is quite correct in his observation. The unfolding economies of signs and space envisioned by Lash and Urry are nothing more than a new kind of neo-imperialism. This kind of new neo-imperialism will indeed adversely restructure (if it has not done so already) all human institutions – intellectual, social, cultural, religious, economic or otherwise. Despite its potential promise of fostering a pseudo-reflexivity and widening the space and scope of a people's choices, it will negatively affect people's habits, behavior, material and spiritual creations, institutions, laws and norms governing these institutions, visions of life individuals have had, and their religious convictions. With these changes taking place, the traces of environmental values that people still cling on to will become gradually eroded. And given the unstoppable entrenchment of cultural imperialism worldwide to which Ngugi alludes, will the path toward, for example, indigenizing Africa's environmental protection goals appeal to populations who are now bombarded – thanks to CNN and Hollywood images – with glamorous lifestyles from the West? Certainly not!

Conclusion

Granted the foregoing, what then can one say in conclusion? It seems to me that an 'exit option' or even a relative retreat into self sufficiency which would consign populations in Africa back to their cultural roots as a route to development (or ecological renewal) may not be a viable option for Africa's renaissance. Despite its salutary imperative, the going back to Africa's roots movement would be obviously impractical in today's Africa, given, among other concerns, the many challenges and tensions associated with living in our rapidly globalizing, mutually influencing, world. What scholars and students of Africa need to do, in order for Thabo Mbeki's prophecy of Africa's renaissance coming to fruition in this 21st century, is to figure out how a creative synthesis between Africa's village-level of cooperative ethic, system of local governance, indigenous technologies of managing natural resources and Western techno-scientific skills might be realized.

Endnotes

[1] William Ochieng' is the current director of research at Maseno University, Kenya.

[2] Franz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth,* Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1963, pp 254-255.

[3] According to Julius Nyerere, the philosophy and policy of Ujamaa was meant "to recreate a society premised on customary adherence to principles derived from traditional African cultures such mutual respect, mutual responsibility and equality in accessing the material needs of subsistence." For more details, consult Julius K. Nyerere' book: *Ujamaa: The Basis of African Socialism,* Dar-es-Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1968.

[4] Consult, for more details, Timberlake, L. *Africa in Crisis, the Cures of Environmental Bankruptcy,* London: Earthscan, 1985.

[5] Stephen Buckley has written an interesting article appearing in the Washington Post of September 28, 1997. This article explains how the youths of Kenya, in particular, have been "pulled away from the rural links that shaped their parents and grandparents" For details, consult, Stephen Buckley, "Youth in Kenya Feel Few Tribal Ties," <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/inatl/longterm/africalives/> (July 20, 2003).

[6] Mazrui identifies two forms of cultural nostalgia: Romantic Primitivism and Romantic Gloriana. The former, he argues, tries to capture and then defend with exceptional pride Africa's past life of simplicity. The latter, Romantic Gloriana, not only celebrates Africa's heroic ancestors ("kings, emperors, and eminent scholars of the past) but also salutes what these ancestors bequeathed to Africa and the rest of the world: their complex knowledge of the world and architectural accomplishments. For more details on these two forms of cultural nostalgia, consult Ali Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage,* Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1986, pp. 63-79.

[7] See, for more details, Ato Quayson, *Strategic Formulations in Nigerian Writings: Orality & History in the works of Rev. Samuel Johnson, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka & Ben Okri,* Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997.

[8] This position has now become a new mantra in Africa. It is even championed by the newly formed organization, in Africa, The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Under its umbrella, African Heads of States and Governments have agreed, based on a common vision and a firm and shared conviction, to eradicate poverty and to place their respective countries on a path of sustainable growth and development while also participating actively in the world economy and body politic <Http://www.nepad.org> (June 14, 2003)

[9] Darrol M. Bryant, "God, Humanity and Mother Earth: African Wisdom and the Recovery of the Earth," in Gilbert E.M. Ogutu, ed., *God, Humanity and Mother Nature*, Nairobi: Masaki Publishers, 1992, pp. 73 &76.

[10] Bishop Desmond Tutu, "Greetings: Congratulations to World Futures Studies Federation -African Future Beyond Poverty," in Gilbert Ogutu, Pentti Malaska & Johanna Kojola, ed., *Futures Beyond Poverty - Ways and Means Out of the Current Stalemate -Selections from the XIV World Conference of World Futures Studies Federation,* Turku Finland: Finland Futures Research Center, 1997, p.18.

[11] Ogutu and Malaska, *Ibid*.p.18.

[12] Basil Davidson, "For a Politics of Restitution," in Adebayo Adedeji. ed., *Africa Within The World: Beyond Dispossession and Dependence,* New Jersey: Zed Books, 1993, p. 26.

[13] Consult Franz Fanon's chapter "The Pitfall of National Consciousness" in his book *The Wretched of The Earth,* Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1963, p.123.

[14] Arif Dirlik, *Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticisms in the Age of Global Capitalism,* Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997, p. 98.

[15] *Ibid.* p.6.

[16] *Ibid*. p. 6.

[17] *Ibid*. p. 98.

[18] Julie Stephens, *Anti-Disciplinary Protest: Sixties Radicalism and Postmodernism,* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.51.

[19] *Ibid*. p. 51.

[20] *Ibid*. p. 53.

[21] *Ibid*. p. 57.

[22] *Ibid*. p. 58.

[23] Ali A. Mazrui. "Pan-Africanism and the Intellectuals: Rise, Decline and Revival," unpublished paper delivered as a keynote address for CODESRIA'S 30th Anniversary on the general theme, "Intellectuals, Nationalism and the Pan-African Ideal," Grand Finale Conference, December 10-12, 2003, in Dakar, Senegal.

[24] For details, consult Mafeje A, *In Search of an Alternative: A Collection of Essays on Revolutionary Theory and Politics,* Harare: Sapes Books, 1992.

[25] See Lucius Outlaw's essay "African, African American, Africana Philosophy" in Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed., *African Philosophy: An Anthology,* Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1998, P. 40.

[26] Nicholas S. Rozov, "Where is world capitalism going?" in the *Futures Bulletin of The World Futures Studies Federation,* (23), April 1997, p. 6.

[27] *Ibid*. p. 6.

[28] This phrase "global casino capitalism," is borrowed from Hazel Henderson. See his article, "A Looking Back from the 21st Century" in the *Futures Bulletin of the World Futures Studies Federation* 23 (April 1997): 10. While Henderson does not exactly define what it means, I believe he is referring to the new phenomena in the flexibility and mobility of international finance – a phenomenon, which is currently defying the logic of both national and regional boundaries and operates according to the dictates of global market opportunities.

[29] Scott Lash & John Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space,* Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1994, p. 31.

[30] Krishan Kumar, *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society: New Theories of the Contemporary World,* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1995, p. 61.

[31] *Ibid*. p. 58.

[32] Phil Macnaghten & John Urry, *Contested Natures,* Thousand Oaks: California: Sage, 1998, p. 24.

[33] Kumar, *Op cit*. p. 31.

[34] *Ibid*. p. 31.

[35] According to a ground breaking report presented to the International Labor Organization (ILO) entitled: *A fair Globalization: Creating Opportunities for All,* February 24, 2004, Globalization, it is argued, has opened the door to many benefits. It has "promoted open societies and open economies and encouraged a freer exchange of goods, ideas and knowledge…" More importantly, this report notes, "a truly global conscience is beginning to emerge that is sensitive to the inequalities of poverty, gender discrimination, child labor and environmental degradation, whenever these may occur." For more details visit <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/inf/or/pr/2004/7.htm> (February 24, 2004).

[36] For a detailed treatment of this subject matter consult James Marsh's essay on "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion II: Dialectical Phenomenology of Social Theory" in his book *Post-Cartesian Meditations: An Essay in Dialectical Phenomenology,* New York: Fordham University Press, 1988, pp. 200-238.

[37] Walter J. Raymond describes the three ways in which imperialism operates at the nation-state level: cultural or vertical imperialism, economic imperialism and territorial or horizontal imperialism. For him, cultural imperialism occurs when a people's language, cultural habits, religious beliefs, institutions, and politico-ethical values are by instrumental calculation subverted by others inside or outside of a nation state. Economic imperialism takes place when people are exposed to highly seductive, "new and more rewarding" modes of production, and distribution of goods and services. Territorial imperialism takes place when the sovereignty or territorial rights of a people are interfered with through external forms of manipulation leading to a blind cultural assimilationism. Walter J. Raymond, *Dictionary of Politics: Selected American and Foreign Political and Legal Terms,* Lawrenceville, Virginia: Brunswick Publishing Corporation, 1973, pp. 295-296.

[38] Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind,* London: Heinemann, 1986, p. 3.

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