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Abstract

There are many ways of becoming famous, and you are famous as the man who quarrels with Soyinka. That takes a lot of courage; Soyinka has a reputation for being a formidable quarreller. However, you have a reputation for being equally formidable, so that when the two of you quarrel it is really a matter of the quick or the dead. What is it about your views that makes them so controversial?

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June 1993, Aarhus, Denmark.

There are many ways of becoming famous, and you are famous as the man who quarrels with Soyinka. That takes a lot of courage; Soyinka has a reputation for being a formidable quarreller. However, you have a reputation for being equally formidable, so that when the two of you quarrel it is really a matter of the quick or the dead. What is it about your views that makes them so controversial?

Well, I don't consider my views controversial. But from what I gather from those who join in the controversy I think that what they object to is my challenging their world view. They have a world view that in my judgment is thoroughly Eurocentric. Whilst it is perfectly fine for Europeans to be Eurocentric, as far as I am concerned, I don't think it is perfectly all right for Africans to be Eurocentric. So I tend to argue for the need for Afro-centricism in Africa, and those who are committed to the European world view object to my point of view. Their world view is the one which has been entrenched during the last 100 years of colonial intervention in Africa. They hold the opinion that modernisation means Europeanisation; that modern culture must be European culture or as close an approximation to it as possible. Those of us who believe in cultural pluralism and insist that the various civilisations of the world have their own particular flavours and that diversity is a good thing, argue that it is proper that if I am in Japan I should get the flavour and feeling of Japanese tradition and culture, if I am in India I should expect the equivalent of Indian culture, not a bastardised version of European culture, and in Africa we should also present ourselves as Africans to whoever cares to come by to see for themselves.

What is the particular 'flavour' of African culture?

Well, it's not something you can describe in a few words. I think the important thing is that our values are not the same as the Christian European values. Our religious beliefs are not the same as the monotheistic beliefs of Christianity, for instance. Most African societies tend to be polytheistic. Our traditional ways of building houses and towns are not the same as those which have come out of the temperate zone of Europe.

If we had not had colonial intervention the towns and villages of contemporary Africa would not look the way they do now; they would be developments of traditional African architecture. We used mud to build houses of certain shapes and sizes which adapted well to our tropical climate. I would expect those approaches to technology to be continued instead of putting in concrete blocks, which are too hot, and then importing air-conditioners to cool them down. Our traditional architecture is such that in the worst of the heat the houses stayed cool because of the material they were built with. However, from a Eurocentric view point these things are looked upon as primitive or uncivilised and can therefore not serve as models for new developments.

In the realm of literature, which is your area, how does this apply?

Let us leave the issue of language aside, because we are for the moment in the cultural trap where for whatever reasons we have to express ourselves to one another in imported European languages. But even within that restriction the flavour of a people's literature reflects their literary tradition: the way they use images, the kinds of themes they discuss, the idioms, the framework of historical references. To take an example: if someone is writing from the European tradition and makes references to the sagas of his community, to the epics of his people then that is understandable, but if an African in his writings ignores all of the African oral tradition, the African epics and the historical characters of African fiction from before the colonial era and fills his book with references to Zeus, then you ask yourself, 'Out of which tradition is this chap writing?' Is he an African? He may be by citizenship, but in terms of his mental outlook? If we find that themes, characters and references from the African literary and intellectual tradition are absent from his work I think that we are justified in asking questions about the mentality and orientation of such a writer.

Are you not worried about the charge of being prescriptive? What if I was to say that you are sitting here telling writers how they should write and what they should write about?

All critics do that, but the good thing about it is that the writers do not have to listen to them. The charge of being prescriptive is usually directed against those whose prescriptions you don't like. When you like their prescriptions you simply go ahead and write.

I am going to play the Devil's Advocate. Obviously the idea of finding your roots and building on traditional aesthetics is a very natural pursuit, but in your Nigerian context it is a slightly different matter. All your traditions are tied to your African languages and to a pre-scientific and very local outlook. The point

here is that this did not slowly continue and develop and change, it was cut off suddenly and brutally by colonialism, and it seems that from that point onwards development has always been a process of learning European or British norms. How can you go back to that world which was cut off?

That is how the Eurocentrics like to present it, but I think that their description of the situation is misleading. Let me give you a few examples. I thought I heard you use the word 'pre-scientific'?. If I understand that word correctly it does not apply. There has been science in every society, incorporated in techniques of agriculture or food processing or architecture, so I don't think that there is any pre-scientific society in the world.

The presumption in that description of the African situation is that African traditional (pre-colonial) cultures have died out and therefore you have nothing to build upon. But that is not true. Traditional healers are still operating; traditional houses are still being built, in the villages, for the most part; traditional techniques of agriculture are still practised, and the stories which the Eurocentric academics dismiss as folk tales or folklore are still being told, traditional music is still being played. In every department of life these things are still going on. What has happened is that they have been cut off in the mentality of the Eurocentric Africans. I can illustrate this with the case of literature. Most of it they dismiss as folklore and refuse to treat it as literature. It is there, it is being practised, but they deliberately refuse to accord it its proper status. Therefore they can imagine that it has been cut off, that it is dead, and therefore there is no need to refer to it any more. What I am really pointing out is that the picture is one produced by ideology and propaganda. The reality is different from that image, and those of us who argue for a return to traditional foundations simply have to say 'open your eyes, the damned things are all around you; recognise that they are valuable and use them as a building block'.

This is a question of class. It seems to me that while the educated part of the population is eager to retrieve its African heritage the uneducated part, on the other hand is busy becoming as westernised as possible and putting as much distance between themselves and their traditional past as they can. A good example of what I am talking about is the use of the term 'bush'

That use comes directly out of the British colonial attitude. Those who have inherited that vocabulary keep using it. They still use the word 'native' as a pejorative. What I am pointing out is that it is not a class matter, because within the elite there is also a division of attitudes between those who are Eurocentric and those who want to become Afrocentric. You find the same division down the line. If you go to any village gathering in Nigeria you will find that people will practice aspects of traditional culture; at the same time as they will also bring in transistor

radios, etc., but these are artifacts which they integrate into that milieu. Basically, the problem arises for that fragment of the elite which rejects the notion of integrating whatever foreign element we introduce into an African place. They perpetuate the myth that it is only educated Africans who have been abroad and returned who want to return to the traditions which they regard as primitive and backwards. But that is not so. If you talk to people at all levels of society they recognise that they have to live their lives within their own traditions, adding whatever they find advisable or necessary, but there is a fraction who insists that the only way forward for Africa is to 'modernise', 'Europeanise', and they are hell-bent on trying to make that happen. They rest of us still want to modernise Africa, but so that it becomes a modern Africa, not a carbon copy of Europe.

The features you want to preserve as African are all within the cultural sphere. Is there not here a danger of being cut in two in another way? On the cultural side you remain African whereas on the production side you use high technology, because that is competitive; is there not a clash between the two?

No, I don't think that is a risk at all. I happened to use examples of that sort because of the context of our discussion. If we turn to areas like agriculture the techniques that have been recommended by aid agencies and those who want to sell us tractors are causing part of the disaster. In fact in those areas we have enough evidence from the last forty to fifty years to suggest that most of our old techniques which were developed in that environment and were cognizant of the dangers and the fragility of that environment are the wiser techniques to use. Talking about the Sahel and the drought and the resultant famine, part of the cause for all that was precisely new techniques. Recommendations were made to dig wells so that more cattle could graze as there would be more grass; but what happens when you do that is that you abandon the old habit of moving your cattle to where there is more abundant grass, and that eventually led to overgrazing of the local spots, which led to the erosion of the very fragile top soil, so a technique which was supposed to increase production led to more desertification. If people had respected their traditions they would have asked 'what were the reasons behind the methods which have been used for so long' before they simply discarded them.

You must be in opposition on the question of development?

I call it mal-development. I may be in opposition, but the other side has to give up because what they are bringing about is not development. The attempt has been going on now for thirty years, and we have not seen any development. Instead, we have seen desertification, we have seen famine, we have seen declines in agricultural and industrial production, and at

some point people have to face up to the fact and realize that this is the wrong way to go about it.

What are the consequences of the views you have just expressed with regards to your relationship with Europe? Would you like to simply say to Europeans 'Go home, and we will do things our own way', or can you foresee some form of co-operation which would not just be hurtful?

Let me put it this way. Our main problem to day is not Europe. Our main problem is the Europeanised African elite who are committed to a Eurocentric version of Africa. If we could solve that problem Europe could no longer continue to impose its views on us. The agents of perpetuating the European view point are entrenched in powerful positions, and they are Africans. Culturally, their mentality is shaped by colonial attitudes.

How do you suggest setting about solving that problem?

We are dealing with it. There are all kinds of ways. In Nigeria we have debates in the press. When the issues crop up we provoke a debate. The more you change people's minds the better are the chances that those in power might act differently. So ultimately it is a matter of changing attitudes, using every possible opportunity whether it be through books or through articles in the press, through theatre or through discussion to get more and more people to continue the criticism of the entrenched order. It is not something which can be done over night, it may take a generation or two or perhaps some severe crisis or other to compel people to actually move from thinking about something to doing something about it. Such historical processes take a while, and you just have to keep doing it.