

## **CHAPTER 13**

### **RE-VISIONING CULTURAL STUDIES FOR DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA: THE INTERPLAY OF LITERATURE, CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT**

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#### **Abstract**

The development of human society can be conceived in two ways: at the individual level, it implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being; at the social level, it implies an increasing capacity to regulate both internal and external relationships. Culture, similarly, is a twofold process: an ‘inner’ process specialised to its presumed agencies in ‘intellectual life’ and ‘the arts’ and a general process specialised to its presumed configuration in ‘whole ways of life’. All of these conceptions are evidently human-centred, i.e. man (and his society) assumes the meeting locus of culture and development. Thus, on the one hand, this study delineates ‘culture,’ and indeed ‘cultural studies,’ and ‘development’ in very broad terms, foregrounding their core essences that provide the means for transcending conventional approaches and understanding

of these terms. This semantic extensiveness of the concept of cultural studies, on the other hand, has been re-tooled to re-echo the social functionality of cultural studies in Africa as a great and powerful mechanism for tackling headlong Africa's current developmental challenges in the twenty-first century. The human-centredness is projected as the coalescing-agency which justifies cultural studies as an integral component of development in human society. Since cultural studies would then entail both artistic creativity and criticism, in this case, in the African context, it is being re-visioned in this study as a panacea for Africa's contemporary developmental challenges; cultural studies being a pursuit of our total perfection and imperfection by means of stark exposure to all the matters which most concern us as a distinct people.

**Keywords:** Africa, African Literature and Criticism, Culture, Cultural Studies, Socio-cultural Development

## **Introduction**

The idea of culture brings to mind social standards, traditions, values, patterns and models that define a people, a group, an organisation or a nation. To this end, it has been described from numerous and diverse perspectives. What is particularly central to these conceptions is captured in the configuration 'whole ways of life'. Accordingly, Williams (1977, p. 17) argues that "the idea of a fundamental process which shapes specific and distinct 'ways of life' is the effective origin of the *comparative* social sense of 'culture'".

Similarly, a reference to ‘cultural studies’ easily directs attention to the field of theoretically, politically and empirically engaged cultural analysis whose central purpose is twofold: (i) “to produce detailed, contextualized analyses of the ways that power and social relations are created, structured, and maintained through culture; and (ii) to circulate those analyses in public forums suitable to the tasks of pedagogy, provocation, and political intervention” (Rodman, 2015, pp. 39-40). This conception understandably underscores the ease with which cultural studies can be taken to be the study of culture within the anthropological frame. This immediate conception is conventional but, within the context of this discourse, it is considered rather restrictive in the sense that the term ‘cultural studies’ can rewardingly be made to apply to rich and varied spectrum of literature and criticism. This would be justifiable considering the literary-critical-perspective of culture which regards it as the “outgrowth of ‘experience’ in the sense that ‘experience’ ... is where ‘all the different practices [of culture] intersect”” (Hall, 1990 cited in Con Davis & Schleifer, 1991, p. 229).

The above implies that “a particular culture at a particular moment produces ‘experience’ in a specific configuration” (Con Davis & Schleifer, 1991, p. 229). In all cultures, it would not be out of place to assert that such an ‘experience’ is primarily crucial to the enterprise of literature and criticism. Hence, the literary enterprise can be equated with ‘cultural studies’. Blurring of the distinctions of ‘culture’, ‘art’ and ‘literature’ is one of the critical feats the Welsh socialist writer, Raymond Williams attained throughout his analysis of culture in his major works: *Culture and Society* (1951), *The Long Revolution* (1961) and *Marxism and Literature* (1977). Thus, the blurring of such distinctions; largely

driven by his extensive exploration of the relations of language, literature and society, has expanded the scope of culture and, by extension, cultural studies, to encompass the capacity to initiate and strengthen social development in all ramifications.

On the foregoing, therefore, in the context of this discourse, since cultural studies would entail both artistic creativity and criticism, and in this case, rooted essentially in the African context and worldview, the paper moves to re-echo, on the one hand, the semantic extensiveness of the concept of cultural studies and, on the other, the social functionality of cultural studies in Africa as a great tool for tackling headlong Africa's current developmental challenges in the twenty-first century. This is against the backdrop that cultural studies has been conceived and established as the "pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world" (Arnold, 1865, cited in Williams, 1958, p. 115). Hence, through this knowledge, there is a patent presence of the process of "turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits" (Williams, 1958, p. 115). Indeed, the historical background of Africa proves that it has a vast and abundant cultural endowment. Thus, 'cultural/literary studies' in Africa is projected in this study as an integral component in the collective pursuit of development in Africa. The reason being that culture, and indeed cultural studies, beyond the relatively simple anthropological conception, is "both a body of knowledge and a mode of behaviour" (Con Davis & Schleifer, 1991, p. 37).

## **Culture, Society and Development: A Theoretical Synthesis**

Moves toward attaining sustainable development are a paramount and inevitable stride in every society. Societies often look into potential avenues with which to drive their developmental goals. In recent times, available reports have shown a growing shift in the understanding of culture as a substantial tool for sustainable development. In this way, a functional link is being emphatically established between culture and the development of a society. Marana (2010) observes that culture and development are two concepts which have not always gone together, or been worked upon within the same context. However, in recent years, new elements, instruments and ideas have surfaced which place increasing emphasis on the pair of these concepts, largely because culture has been studied as an indispensable element for the full development of people and communities. Accordingly, this view is shared in the report of the United Nations System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda:

The Outcome Document of the 2010 MDG Summit, published ten years after the Millennium Declaration, emphasized the importance of culture for development and its contribution to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. These crucial messages were reiterated in two consecutive “Culture and Development” UNGA Resolutions in 2010 and 2011, which called for the mainstreaming of culture into development policies and strategies, and underscored culture’s intrinsic contribution to sustainable development. (p. 2)

Establishing this link within a socio-developmental frame forms the major objective of a study by Iyaji & Gomment (2011). Bearing in mind that the debate on the relationship between culture and development has been on for quite sometimes, and now that people have attributed the development or underdevelopment of societies to their cultures, the study specifically dwells on the identification of how the different components of culture can be harnessed to stimulate development in human societies. Williams (1977), quoting the Italian philosopher, Giambattista Vico, clearly provides a foundational hint on such a symbiotic relationship. He offers that the specific interpretations and description “of a mode of development which was at once, and interactively, the shaping of societies and the shaping of human minds is probably the effective origin of the general social sense of ‘culture’” (p. 17). Similarly, echoing Williams (1958), Jardine (2008, p. 10) asserts that: “The more we understand how individual engages with culture and finds his or her place within it, ... the better we will understand how change takes place in the social and political structures that bind individuals together into communities by its means.”

The foregoing presupposes that within the cultural frame or structure of a society, changes are inherently ascertainable. Keeping pace with such changes is fundamental to the growth processes of a society, specifically because the society is consequently exposed to how people adjust and adapt to new realities and values as the world evolves. To this end, furthermore, a short history of the relationship between culture and development that has been established over time, as chronicled by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), is explicitly insightful:

**1980s and early 1990s:** international efforts at modernization and development recognized the need to place people at the centre of development processes.... **1982:** The World Conference on Cultural Policies in Mexico constituted a landmark for the acknowledgment of the indivisibility of culture and development.... **1988-1998:** UNESCO launched the World Decade on Culture and Development to advocate for the contribution of culture in national and international development policies.... **1998:** Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development in Stockholm recognized cultural diversity as essential for development emphasizing t.... **2001:** UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity recognized culture and cultural diversity [...] as vital to achieving economic and social development. **2005:** UNESCO's Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions acknowledged culture's contribution to sustainable development.

<http://www.seameo.org/language/mdgconference2010/doc/LC2010-Power-of-culture-development.pdf>

From the above, it is evident therefore that the phenomenon of culture has indeed attained global recognition and acknowledgement as an essential tool that is capable of driving developmental processes in every human society. Hence, to a considerable extent, it can be posited that optimum utilisation of cultural components in Africa, within which the shape of literature and criticism occupies an essential space, would indeed drive, secure and safeguard

developments on the continent at large, bearing in mind the distinct place and primacy of cultural studies in Africa.

### **The Primacy of Cultural Studies in Africa**

In the context of this discourse, it is pertinent to reiterate that the conception of culture has gone beyond the conventional and relatively simple anthropological sense which sees it as “a configuration of learned behaviour whose component elements are shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society” (Linton, 1952, p. 32), to a more transcendental and all-encompassing scope which sees it as “the shared knowledge and scheme created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them” (Lederach, 1995, p. 9). It is in this latter expansive scope that the ‘intellectual life’ and ‘the arts’, as conceived by Williams (1977), pertinently come in; hence, we can speak of the practice of literature and criticism as cultural studies within the larger frame of humanistic studies. On a general note, Habib (2005, p. 1) draws a specific attention to humanistic studies vis-à-vis its instrumentality in articulating social vision in the modern time:

It has become indisputably clear that the study of humanities in general is no longer a luxury but a necessity, vital to our very survival as an enlightened civilization. We cannot form an articulate vision of our own moral, educational, and political values without some knowledge of where those values come from, the struggles in which they were forged, and the historical context which engendered those struggles.

Indeed, on a specific note, literary creativity in Africa, in the modern time, is largely consequential of the socio-cultural, political and economic experiences by which the African world has been characterised since the arrival of the Europeans in the sixteenth century (Mowah, 2005). Most African countries shared the common historical experiences of colonialism and neo-colonialism with the by-products of capitalist economy, colonial education and religion which further culminated in cultural alienation and culture-conflict (Onochie, 1991). This holds because the colonial project; except for few African nations that were not colonised, took similar shape, structure and approach on the continent. Nkosi (1981) captures this experience vividly thus:

... it seemed to me that, ultimately, what linked the various African peoples on the continent was the nature and depth of colonial experience; and this was the final irony. Colonialism had not only delivered them unto themselves, but had delivered them unto each other, and provided them, so to speak, with a common language and an African consciousness; for out of rejection had come an affirmation. (cited in James, 1986, p. 34)

This experiential homogeneity specifically provoked African literature, as writers began to react and explore the struggles of Africans against the oppressive colonial rule. Hence, the criticism of the artistic products has taken divergent dimensions over the years, especially during their early development, with the medium and style of expression constituting the focal point of critical and meta-critical engagements. Prominent in this circle, though not limited to them only, are the great and foremost African literary minds – Soyinka, Achebe, wa Thiong'o, Awoonor, among others. They have passionately offered

convergent as well as divergent views and visions of what should constitute the literary enterprise in Africa.

Indeed, especially in the area of determining value and moderation of creative outputs in Africa, literary criticism in Africa is still in the business of espousing the above ideals, as Nwahunanya (2013) would have us believe. In terms of medium of expression, for instance, Nnolim (2013, p. 32) insightfully offers that the “debate over the proper language of expression still lingers among our critics, and establishment of what constitutes the accepted aesthetic of African literature is still unresolved”. In view of this, in an earlier essay, while advocating for a break from the literary atmosphere of the twentieth century Africa, in order to make a case for the twenty-first century realities, Nnolim (2006, p. 3) had declared that “a new image of the African personality needs to be fashioned to reposition Africa for the take off of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We need a new spiritual reorientation, a new creative hope to give artistic impetus to a new world order.”

However, delving into the foregoing long-drawn-out debate is far from being a concern in this discourse; it is rather brought up in order to underscore the primacy of cultural studies in the African context. Unarguably in Africa, cultural studies play significant roles in all the facets of development. It is therefore not surprising that Africa’s great minds have passionately offered their long-standing opinions with a view to defining a distinct African literary-cultural tradition.

## **Cultural Studies in Africa: A Play of Value Re-orientation and Developmental Vision**

The concept of ‘development’ has been a recurrent word in the African lexicon. In fact, more than any other continent in the world, it has assumed a collocation with Africa. For instance, it is reported that since decolonisation of Africa became a goal, among others, for the United Nations (UN) during the middle of the twentieth century, the development of the continent had also become a priority. ([www.un.org/en/sections/priorities/development-africa](http://www.un.org/en/sections/priorities/development-africa))

In his seminal work, Rodney (1972) describes development in human societies as a many-sided process, specifically at two levels – the individual and the social groups. At the individual level, “it implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being” (p. 1). At the latter level, development “implies capacity to regulate both internal and external relationships” (p. 2). Understandably, this capacity will necessarily include strengthened and stable democratic institutions, economic and social growth, peace and security, among others. Similarly, Williams (1977) describes the concept of culture in a more complex way, specifically at two levels – “a noun of ‘inner’ process specialised to its presumed agencies in ‘intellectual life’ and ‘the arts’ and a noun of ‘general’ process specialised to its presumed configuration in ‘whole ways of life’” (p. 17). These conceptualisations are evidently human-centred, with man (and his society) assuming a holistically unifying centre of culture and development. This is adducible in that the formative process of a society’s culture is through shared practices, patterns of behaviour and belief systems that are brought out by human activities. Moreover, upon accumulation, over a considerable period, they could

assume established norms and knowledge repository, from which novel ideas and/or innovations can be generated as tools to drive the development of a society.

Given the foregoing, thus, this discourse delineates ‘culture’, and indeed ‘cultural studies’, and ‘development’ in very broad terms. It foregrounds their core essences that provide the means for transcending conventional approaches and understanding of these terms. Specifically, the human-centredness is projected as the coalescing-agency that justifiably underlie the emphatic consideration of cultural studies as an integral component of development in contemporary Africa. To lend credence to this, Ntagu (2010, p. 197) sees the human-centredness in this light:

Man as a noble rational creature, is placed at the centre of the universe. The life given to him flows in a cycle. For every human society, there are particular norms, which not only characterize such society but determine the life of its member. The reason being that man has a pre-eminence over the beast in being capable of abstracting and transferring the knowledge and experience acquired over a prolonged period of time in a concise and meaningful manner.

Moreover, paying keen attention to the view of Con Davis & Schleifer (1991) on Raymond Williams’ exposition of culture, it is revealing that William’s conception offers a significant dimension to this discourse. For Williams, according to Con Davis & Schleifer (1991, p. 233), “culture encompasses an individual subject’s ‘inner’ world and a society of individuals conceived as a whole greater than some of its parts.” Hence, this discourse vehemently moves

to demonstrate that ‘culture’ as both ‘inner’ process and ‘general’ process can be a springboard for transformation and development in Africa. That is, culture and by extension, cultural studies, as conceived in this discourse, is no doubt where the custodianship of African values lie. Thus, cultural studies is being positioned at the centre of development in Africa, with the advocacy for practical utilisation of the insightful and ideological configurations underlying such literary/critical products. To this end, it is noteworthy that the body of cultural studies in Africa remains a critical reservoir for the best and unsurpassed visionary ‘ideas’ emanating from Africa’s great minds, which are capable of driving the continent developmentally. This hold in that Africa is understandably as “a site of enormous, long, and ongoing creativity in relation to orality as a vector for the production of social life, religious beliefs, and the constant constituting and reconstituting of society, ideology, and aesthetics” (Gunner, 2007, p. 67).

The above interest primarily underscores the functional status of writers in African societies which has been established as early as the evolution of ‘criticism’ of African literature. This is reminiscent of the African-Scandinavian Writer’s Conference in Stockholm in 1967 themed “The Writer in Modern Africa”. The conference was the first of its kind since the evolution of African literature. It is significantly considerable as an intellectual gathering at which the wave of African literary tradition was formally and distinctly channeled and shaped. The subject of the summit, the discussions and the resolutions are a great pointer to this, bearing in mind that the issues raised, addressed and resolved at are what have indeed shaped the phase of African literature today.

At the core of Soyinka's lead paper was the declaration that "the artist has always functioned in African societies as the record of mores and experiences of his society and as the voice of vision in his time" (1968, p. 21). Similarly, Achebe (1968, p. 45) emphasizes social commitment on the conviction that the artist occupies "a sensitive point in his community", hence he "should march right in front" in "the task of re-education and re-generation that must be done". Achebe is clearly assertive in this regard, stressing the place and role of the literary artist in his society. For Awoonor-Williams (1968, p. 31), "an African writer must be a person who has some kind of perception of the society in which he is living and the way he wants the society to go". Hence, Soyinka (1968, p. 21) further maintains that "when the writer in his own society can no longer function as a conscience, he must recognize that his choice lies between denying himself totally or withdrawing to the position of chronicler and post-mortem surgeon". Apparently, at the heart of these views are value re-orientation and developmental vision. This specific and urgent task of African literature is explicitly pointed out by James (n.d.) thus:

Our literature must be seen as part of the struggle for the liberation of Africa, politically and morally. It must reflect a full respect for the value of human life, our aspirations and that of humanity in general...Any creative writing by an African where the writer is motivated not by the desire to speak his mind about the African dilemma but by the desire to please a foreign audience deserves not to be classified as African literature. (cited in Nwoga, 1973, p. 26)

The foregoing apparently aligns with Njoku's (2015, p. 26) assertion that "the core of every human culture or ethos of any culture is a mark of its fundamental values". Considering the fact that there is no place in the world where 'culture' is accorded greater value than Africa, the search for cultural values constitutes developmental drives. This is because "the more we understand how the individual engages with culture and finds his or her place within it... the better we will understand how change takes place in the social and political structures that bind individuals together into communities by its means" (Jardine, 2008, p. 10). This presupposes that the body of the literary enterprise in Africa – cultural studies – is a vehicle that traverses the contexts of value re-orientation and social vision. With this, it is capable to stimulate both human and societal development, bearing in mind that literary works are "products of a time, a place, a culture and an individual and that they have the capacity to affect, and perhaps, even change the world into which they are introduced" (Dobie, 2012, p. 15). No wonder the Ghanaian philosopher, Williams Abraham states:

Just as African scientists undertake to solve some of the scientific problems of Africa, African historians go into the history of Africa, African political scientists concern themselves with the politics of Africa; why should African literary creators be exempted from the services that they themselves recognize as genuine? (cited in Achebe, 1968, p. 45)

The foregoing, therefore, presupposes that African literary artists are traditionally positioned at the centre of strategy-drafting and policy-making in their respective socio-cultural milieus. Hence, their visionary outputs, like the

scientists' innovations, are expected to be goal-oriented and/or development-driven.

### **Cultural Studies in Africa and the Tradition of Narrating, Dramatising and Poeticising Value Systems**

The term 'value system' signifies an aggregate of consistent values – ethical, ideological and physical – used for the sole aim of stimulating development in a society. This is inferable from the all-encompassing implication of the term 'values' as "preferences, enduring qualities, beliefs, norms and standards of behavior that define and guide a people, their conducts and attitudes towards what is right or acceptable" (Obro, 2021, p. 66). Since profound and productive intellectual and social visions in cultural studies in Africa draw upon and contribute to this value system, it follows therefore that the narrated, dramatised and/or poeticised value systems, in their manifold variants, constitute a distinct 'culture' as a tool which enables the pursuance of developmental goals on the various regions of the continent. This holds in that values and value system essentially "provide direction to people's activities and lifestyles in a nation and likewise, serve as tools that could be utilised to evaluate the worth and level of growth and development of the people and nation" (Obro, 2021, p. 66).

The evolution of values in African societies patently reveals that artistic creativity and criticism are joint partners in the establishment of these value systems. This is because the foundation of African thought and social visions, which is being pursued in our cultural studies, is rooted in African oral traditions. This implies that modern African thought, which is extremely value-laden, constantly refers to and builds upon this foundation – oral traditions.

Accordingly, Akporobaro (2012, p. 69) traverses this foundation of modern African thought:

Although non-literate, the traditional [African] man is also a thinker, a reflective being who responds to situations, especially to the harsher aspects of nature, and tries to formulate his thoughts, ideas and reflections into stories capable of conveying his point of view. Thus, although he has not written out systematized philosophical works, human experience and his perception of the tragedy all around him has led him to develop creatively his unique and original ideas about divinity, supernatural forces, causality, life after death, justice and good and evil. These ideas are often implicitly expressed in his poetry, myths, narratives, ritual songs and proverbs.

The above implies further that the body of African cultural studies, from oral to written traditions, is certainly the most powerful medium for communicating values and establishing value systems. Thus, in the task of establishing, preserving and promoting value systems, cultural studies in Africa, from the foundations to the modern forms, are functionally and discernibly analytical and retrievable. Perhaps the most practical and referential explanations are those that are identifiable with social visions and developmental ideals as patterns in their creative as well as critical works produced in the various regions of the continent. For instance, in Awoonor & Adali-Mortty's *Messages: Poems from Ghana* (1971), referring to what he describes as the second phase of his human development, marked by the poetry of *Night of my Blood*, Awoonor clearly demonstrates this visionary mind and developmental ideals:

I have gone through the trauma of growth, anger, love, and the innocence and nostalgia of my personal dreams. These are beyond me now. Not anger, or love, but the sensibility that shaped and saw them as communal acts of which I am only the articulator. Now I write out of my renewed anguish about the crippling distresses of my country and my people, of death by guns, of death by disease and malnutrition, [...] of the misery of the poor in the midst of plenty. What can you describe me? A marxist? A communist? A dilettante? I am none of these. I am a human being possessed of the normal sensibilities of all human beings. Hence my songs. My self-recognition is my personal redemption realized through so much that is sad and destructive; I still cling on to hope for man, African man, black, silent and vulnerable. (p. 183)

Evidently from the above, the poet provides an insight into the plight of the common man in his immediate Ghanaian society vis-à-vis his anguish as an advocate of social justice. It is against this backdrop that he can be said to have largely written, as others in that class of creative capacity, with human sensibility, hope and vision, not just for his countrymen but for the entire black race.

## **Conclusion**

This study has attempted to reveal and reiterate that the primacy of cultural studies in Africa cannot be over-emphasized. The specific context in which cultural studies in Africa is being re-visioned lies in the study's attempt at blurring the distinctions of culture, arts and literature, relying on their semantico-conceptual extensiveness, to making 'cultural studies' synonymous with African literature and criticism. Hence, an understanding of how artistic creativity and criticism in Africa is being re-visioned as essentially a backbone of development in contemporary Africa, underscores the fact that culture, in all its conceptual dimensions, is fundamentally a component of sustainable development. This understanding, therefore, emphatically calls for a renewed shift of attention to a discipline that genuinely educates the young, youths, elites and the political class on rapid development strategies at both the human and societal levels. This becomes imperative in that therein resides a great factor-agency for development in all ramifications. This is because considerable instances abound in cultural studies in Africa on how African cultural values; through social vision, upon accorded ultimate or paramount priority, can greatly enhance identity formation, nationhood and nation-building.

The foregoing expressly provides justification for Awoonor-Williams' (1968, p. 13) assertion that "the African writer finds himself in a particular society at a particular time, and whether he writes poetry or he write a piece of drama or whether he writes fiction, he must, through his writings, provides a vision for those who are going to order his society". Ultimately, this discourse emphasizes that practical and effective utilisation of these literary-ideological resources should be renewed and dutifully taken into cognizance in order to drive the

continent developmentally in all ramifications. It is indeed a trend which has an antecedent that dates back to the dawn of cultural studies in Africa that was concerned, at first, with freedom and nationalist struggles and, later, to human and societal development. This is evidently ascertainable in the ideological commitments and social visions of the various literary artists. Hence, this visionary approach is necessary for proper individual and social development in the twenty-first century Africa.

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