Cultural Essentialism: A Sordid Boon at the Shores of Sub-Saharan Africa

Andrew Nyongesa
Department of Literature
Kenyatta University

Correspondence: nyongesaandrew55.@gmail.com ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3926-1585

Abstract

In our Gikuyu tradition, it is the lead woman who urges the husband to marry again. "Get me a companion." […] The management of a polygamous household is a matter of individual liberty. Each woman has her own hut…entirely under her own control. When age set peers visit, the wives exercise their freedom, which amounts to something like polyandry. Each wife is free to choose anyone among the age group and give him accommodation for the night. (Kenyatta, 1938, P. 181)

The above quote from Jomo Kenyatta's book underscores the passion with which most independent leaders in Africa desired for a return to past traditions and culture. From Leopold Senghor in Senegal to Aime Ceisar, the clarion call was the rejection of foreign culture and a return to a lost past to restore the African person. At this time, it is probable that none of them realized that the fixed identities they elevated would arm Africans with the much needed arsenal to fight each other. A few years after independence, ethnic conflicts arose as consequence of cultural difference. Favouritism of people of certain ethnic communities in government appointments, employment in companies and promotions in places of work became norms. Today, political mobilization is ethnic- based the competition of which degenerates to violent factions that destroy the social fabric of these nations. Ethnicity is politicized and politicians return to their people to form a formidable base before they seek support from other ethnicities in the country. In the event of allegations of corruption leveled against a politician, members of his community rally behind them. Vernacular media stations behind the mask of promoting African languages and culture perpetuate hate against those communities perceived as enemies to the privileged community. Okogu and Omudjere (2002) observe that tribal groups in African terrain have different cultures with different ideologies with inherent discrimination that evolve series of wars and terrorism (94). They therefore suggest that any tendency to encourage diversity exposes these nations to hostility and political strife. This paper interrogates the efficacy of cultural essentialism on African nations. Using postcolonial theory, the researcher analyses the effects of cultural essentialism on the social fabric of Sub-Saharan Africa. The ideas of Edward Said, Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha will form the theoretical basis of interpretation.

Introduction

Soon after independence, African nations resolved to go back to their past cultures. Africanization programes were introduced to restore African identities that colonialism had destroyed. African leaders of the time were inspired by Negritude Movement to hate everything Western and glorify anything African. Literary and political writers encouraged Africans to return to their culture. Kenyatta (1938) in his work *Facing Mount Kenya* attacks western culture and encourages his people to return to their past traditions. The book has sections of initiation, kinship, marriage, traditional religion and magic. The final chapter insists on unity and integration of Gikuyu life. The chapter on initiation gives graphic details and ethnic justification of female genital mutilation. The chapter on marriage defends polygamy as aforementioned in the abstract. Unlike Nyerere who writes to defend the ways of Tanzanians, Kenyatta's work defends the interests of one ethnic community: Agikuyu. In her review of the book, Celarent Barbara writes:

> The powerful critical passages, sometimes angry, sometimes wry-surface when Kenyatta's forbearance has been exhausted and ethnographic detachment disappears into Gikuyu passion. I should underscore that the passion is first and foremost Gikuyu, not African. It is his tribe and its practices that Kenyatta discusses and defends here, not African customs in general. He only mentions the Masai…he had Masai ancestors. (723)

Ensnared in the colonial divisive policies, most African leaders at this time could not discover that such tendencies indirectly perpetuated colonial legacy. The more steeped African communities remained in their traditions, the more divided and weaker the continent would be, and a weaker Africa would be a fertile ground for neocolonialism. Literary writers picked the thread to glorify Africa's past. Negritude poets denounced anything Western and lauded even the every aspect of African civilization. In the Poem, "New York," Senghor writes:

> New York! At first I was confused by your beauty, by those great golden long legged girls so shy at first before your blue metallic eyes, your frosted smile so shy…two weeks without rivers or fields, all the birds of the air falling sudden and dead on the high ashes of flat roof tops. (318)

The poem reveals Negritude's rejection and spite for anything Western. The white girls are "long legged" and therefore ugly to the persona; their eyes the blue but "metallic," which suggests that they have no human feelings. Their smile is far from warm; it is "frosted" instead. New York has no fields and rivers like Sub Saharan Africa and extreme pollution is a death sentence to the birds. Playwrights and novelists also elevated African tradition. Francis Imbuga in *Burning of Rags* romanticizes the beauty of Luhya culture and condemns the modern intelligentsia embodied in Denis Agala for abandoning aspects of African culture such as circumcision. Although in *Aminata*

Imbuga attempts to raise the position of women, the heroine's failure to inherit land at the end of the play shows the playwright's reverence for African tradition.

When it came to the language of African literature, those with a weak spot for cultural essentialism sanctioned the use of African vernaculars in writing true African Literature. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, for example, had set himself against the use of foreign languages in African Literature. With Obi Wali and Chinweizu, they proposed that African writers should write literature in African languages to ensure that literature is connected to a people's revolutionary struggle against colonialism. For them, the use of African languages would make African writers dangerous to colonial powers because they are directly speaking to the people but writing in European languages would be crippling. Ngugi holds that language was at the centre of imperialism. In his work, *Decolonizing the Mind*, he notes that whereas the bullet was the means of physical subjugation, language was the means of spiritual subjugation (9).

Nonetheless, there were writers who opted for the middle ground. Christopher Okigbo was one the most talented hybrid poets whose work is steeped in mythologies of Asia, Europe and rural Igbo. Robert Fraser describes him as poet of "[w]ide and voracious reading in literatures if Greece and Rome," (177). For him to be a writer was to partake in an international community of letters, not being narrowed down to Igbo culture in Nigeria. He therefore rejected what Bhabha terms as 'fixity and fetishness of identity' (9). In this connection, Okigbo turned down a prize at the first festival of black arts in Dakar, Senegal because he did not consider himself exclusively as an African writer. He did not embrace negritude because he thought it was just too simplistic. "It's not that I dislike it," he said, "it is because when you have read a lot of it, you begin to have the feeling that it is so easy to do it." Okigbo's poetry was therefore a departure from that of Okot P' Bitek and Leopold Senghor. K.L. Godwin (1964) observes that Okigbo constructs poems following European musical compositions in a series of movements with themes, developments, repeats and reminiscences.

Statement of the Problem

Emphasis on past African traditions and customs dominated post independent politics and literature in Africa. Leaders and great thinkers of the sixties made a clarion call for Africans to abandon foreign cultures and return to their pre-colonial traditions. In Kenya, some leaders fought for a federal constitution that would allow different regions to practice their culture to celebrate diversity. This paper interrogates the efficacy of cultural essentialism on African nations. Using postcolonial theory, the researcher analyses the effects of cultural essentialism on the social fabric of Sub Sahara Africa. The ideas of Edward Said, Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha will form the theoretical basis of interpretation.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The following concepts of postcolonial theory are invaluable in analysis of cultural essentialism in Africa in this paper:

Orientalism

i) The Creation of Binary Opposition

In his work, *Orientalism,* Edward Said observes that European orientalist scholars divided the world by creation of two binary factions: the occident and the orient. That the occident is the West and comprises of the Europeans and the orient is the East, comprising of Arabs, Chinese and Japanese.

ii) Skewed Definition

Orientalist scholars, according to Said, construct the factions as different within the perimeter of their knowledge. They create the West and East as fixed unequal blocs. They construct the West as strong, rational, humane and powerful as opposed to the East that is weak, cruel, irrational and sexually unstable. He writes:

> Europe is powerful and articulate. Asia is defeated and distant. It is Europe that articulates the orient, this articulation is a prerogative not of puppet master, but of a genuine creator whose life giving power represents the otherwise silent and dangerous space beyond familiar boundaries. The orient insinuates danger. Rationality is undermined by Eastern excesses. (57)

Expounding Said's ideas, Yegenoglu Meyda observes that by using diverse works from literary, scientific and historical disciplines, orientalist scholars draw a distinction between the West and the East, of which knowledge they used to subjugate the East (17).

Orientalism is invaluabe to this study because by creation of West/ East, strong/ weak; superior/inferior, civilized/ backward; chaste/ sensual, rational/sentimental factions, orientalist scholars posited a polarity or duality that is typical of cultural essentialism, a strategy of political mobilisation in African nations. Orientalism is an essentializing discourse same as NASA/ JUBILEE political formations we find in Kenya. Said implies that the two factions, created by orientalists are static and distinct hence in an eternal state of tension devoid of any prospect of peace. The minorities, viewed as inferior and 'backward', seclude themselves from the dominant group that drool in a false image of superiority, strength and rationality thereby polarizing the host nation.

Nationalism

i) Colonialism Destroys National culture

Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth,* looks at national culture in new independent nations. He observes that colonialism, steeped in prejudices, erodes national culture after centuries of colonial exploitation. It becomes a conglomeration of behavioural patterns and creativity and passion are eradicated (172).

ii) Creation of National Culture

The leaders of independent nations should embark on creation of national culture. Fanon defines national culture as all efforts made by people to describe and improve their situation via thoughful selection of practices that will bolster their existence (168). During the formation of national culture the new leaders should work in step with the people to shape the future. They should not reject those new

practices and customs that the people have opted for.

iii)   National Culture is not African Culture

Fanon emphasizes that in their efforts to create national culture, revolutionaries and native intellectuals should not relive precolonial past. National culture does not mean a return to precolonial traditions and so leaders should not concentrate efforts on resuscitating traditions to erect a tradition similar to negritude with a delusion to dicover a people's aspirations. He writes, "[n]ational culture is no folklore where an abstract populism is convinced it has uncovered the popular truth. It is not some congealed mass of noble gestures, in other words less and less connected with the reality of the people," (168).

Fanon's concept of nationalism is beneficial to this paper since it expounds on cultural essentialism and true nationalism, which are subjects in this study. That the creation of national culture should not be a license to embrace cultural fixity. His refusal to return to precolonial traditions is a warning against cultural essentialism, which will proceed contrary to the people's wishes. That the people, who have fought for liberation, have created a new platform to create a national culture and so the leaders should be careful to work "in step with the people," (168). At this point, Fanon refers to cultural hybridity since the people desire to adopt that which is good from the modern ways of life. He asserts that African leaders that are still striving for African culture will do no more than compare coins and sarcophagi. Fanon lays the foundation of cultural hybridity and true nationalism.

Cultural Fixity

In his work, "Cultural identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall comes up with models of cultural identity that define transition of identity of the Caribbean populace. First, he postulates the traditional model that views identity in terms of one shared culture, hiding inside the many. Hall refers to it as artificial for cultural values are imposed on people because they share a history and ancestry. Citing the Caribbean example, Hall asserts that Caribbeans use this model to seek rediscovery of identity in Africa given their African origin (393). He likens this to what Frantz Fanon calls "passionate research," (393). Hall points out that such identity was crucial in postcolonial struggles but is not relevant in the contemporary, cosmopolitan world.

In his work "Comitment to Theory," Bhabha expounds on the concept of cultural fixity. He observes that fixity is a barrier to positive change. Referring to Fanon, he stresses that perpetual insistence on past traditions hinders transformation. He asserts that Fanon's metaphor that the people are in "[f]luctuating movement of occult instability," is not plausible without acknowledging the third space (9-23). The 'flactuating movement' for Bhabha refers to the peoples desire to hybridize the values with emerging changes in science and technology, which will remain a mirage if they choose the path of cultural fixity. The leaders of the independence movements are the torch bearers of hybridity where they spearhead cultural exchanges and transformation of people into mutants. At the third space, Bhabha holds that there is no stagnation. He gives

the example of Algeria, a people's traditions only protected them against colonialism. After the struggle for independence, they are free to establish a new national culture by hybridisation. Those native intellectuals who want to return the people to precolonial traditions should brace for disappointment because during the struggle Algerians,"[d]estroyed continuities and constancies of the nationalist tradition.They are now free to negotiate and translate their national identities," (9-23). Cultural fixity is central to this study as it sheds light to the true meaning of cultural essentialism, which is the subject of this paper.

Said's Orientalism and the African Reality

Most African leaders after independence underscored cultural essentialism in the guise of celebration of their cultural heritage. African communities returned to their traditional cultures to distinguish themselves from each other. Knowledge of differences emerged as ethnic communities interacted. As a result, they began to realize weaknesses in each other's cultural practices. The Luo perpetuation of non circumcision contrasted with Kikuyu emphasis of the rite and within no time the two cultures stood in binary opposition. Those communities that circumcise men start seeing themselves as superior to others. Said asserts that the two factions are in constant state of tension as one community views itself as more superior to the other. In Andrew Nyongesa's *The Endless Battle* there exist Bantu communities and Somali in a binary opposition. Somali characters think they

are better than Bantus and Nilotes because of their curly hair and the islamic religion. Eugene, the prime mover is shocked at the otherness prevalent in the Somali society. Bantus and Nilotes are called names: *Ngurale, mathomatho, adhon,* derogatory words that describe their tufty hair and black skin. The cause of the tension between the Somali and the Bantus is the desire to glorify own culture and refusal to appreciate the Other. Eugene refuses to integrate in the dominant Somali culture while Somalis likewise reject the incoming novelties that Christian immigrants bring. Extreme love for one's culture which most Africans see as the back bone of patriotism is the embodiment of orientalism, an essentializing discourse that propagates tribalism in Africa.

Julius Nyerere foresaw the rise of cultural essentialism in his country and proceeded to prevent it. He referred to it as "ideologisation and politicisation of tribe" that was poised to hinder the buiding of new nation states in Africa. He insisted that the new African nations had to weave together nations out of tribes and ethnicity of which orientalist discourses were a barrier. When in 1991 he was questioned as to why he saw tribal identities as inherently negative when he himself is a proud Mzanaki, he replied:

> I am a good Mzanaki, but I won't advocate a Kizanaki- based political party. So I am a Tanzanian, and ofcourse I am Mzanaki. Politically I'm a Tanzanian, culturally I'm Mzanaki (2).

How many nations in Africa followed Nyerere's contempt for orientalist tribal

mobilisation? On the contrary many adopted the Negritude stance that ideologised and politicied the tribal identities. Everything African was beautiful: everything from the West was ugly. Anything from the self is beautiful: everything from the Other is ugly. Read the following extracts from the poems of Okot P' Bitek:

> You kiss her on the cheek
> As white people do
> You kiss her open sore lips
> As white people do
> You suck slimy saliva
> From each other's mouths
> As white people do (53).

The self, a diehard of African culture, casts aspersions at kisses just because he feels that it came from the West. He uses a macabre tone to describe it, for instance, "suck slimy saliva/ from each other's mouths". Should a deep kiss be obnoxious for the sheer reason that Europeans were the first to use it in Africa? The self-proceeds:

> Butter from cows milk
> Or the fat from edible rats
> Is cooked with *likura*
> Or itika
> You smear it on your body
> And the aroma
> Lasts until next day. (68)

In the above instance, he dismisses European body lotions and advocates a return to traditional oil made "cows milk" and "fat from edible rats". The persona seems to be speaking out of personal vendetta for the West rather than reason. The audience wonders how wrong it is to buy a more convenient body lotion from a modern industry. He now shifts to another aspect:

> I confess
> I do not deny
> I do not know
> How to cook like a white woman
> I cannot use the primus stove
> I do not know how to light it
>
> Electric fire kills people
> They say
> It is lightning
> They say
> The white man has trapped
> And caught the rain cock
> And imprisoned it

The self refuses to use modern cookers and prefers the parochial cooking stones. He rejects the electric cooker because it exposes him to electric shocks and does not know how to light the kerosene stove. The reasons given for the rejection are terribly flimsy and unconvincing. Look at the poem below:

Viral attitudes
Andrew Nyongesa

> I live in the north: you live in the south,
> like North Pole and South Pole,
> We cannot meet.
>
> I have curly hair: you have tuft hair,
> like goat and sheep,
> We cannot meet.
>
> You eat pork: I hate pork,
> like gentiles and Jews,

We cannot meet.

I have smooth skin: you have rough skin,
Like hippo and crocodile,
How can we meet, midget?

I live on the mountain: you live near the lake,
like China and Japan,
How can we be same?

I am a farmer: you keep livestock,
like Cain and Abel,
How can we meet?

I am brown: you are blue black,
Like G and Boy blue,
How can we be same?

I am many: you are few,
Like the Allies and the Axis
How can you fight me?

I am wise: you are foolish,
like Hare and Hyena
How can we be same? (Nyongesa, 2013, 67)

The self in the poem above expresses his self-importance over the Other. He views his culture as better than the other. Their land, their hair, the complexion and population are better than the other. This poem depicts the actual demerits of cultural essentialism to a society. Said's concept is brought to the ground, the self-bragging of her wisdom while the Other is foolish. While cultural essentialism was pertinent in the fight against colonialism, it becomes destructive in the building of nation states in Africa. After independence, African communities turned hostility against Western culture to other African cultures. The result was dilapidation of the national fabric, particularly with the emrgence of of tribal political formations in Rwanda, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan and Uganda. The failure to appreciate anything in the Other will no doubt erect Said's Orient and Occident within an African nation. In Rwanda, the Hutu/Tusi essentalializing discourse degenerated into bloody genocide after which nearly one million lives were lost. The tribal, political formations, Party of National Unity and Orange Democratic Movemenyt in Kenya led to expulsion of Agikuyu from the Rift Valley following a polarizing election in 2007. Other ethnicities rallied behind ODM against the Agikuyu (PNU) bacause of the love for their culture and language. There were many complaints about their tendency to start estates in foreign lands with names from their mother culture. Boubock and Faist (2010) refer to this aspect of cultural essentialism as the concept of iconography, where diaspora preserve symbols of their culture, for example, churches, mosques, synagogues, theatres, sports clubs, conference rooms, monuments and other elements that perpetuate memory of the motherland (38). They observe that it is iconography that enables diaspora not to be diluted into the host society, and so maintain their distinct identity. This distinct identification makes the diaspora more vulnerable to hostility by the host community. It emphasizes *difference*, which creates a duality with the host community. While cultural essentialism was appropriate for the struggle for freedom, it is an eyesore for nationalism in many African countries. Appiah A. K

(1992) observes that "for political purpose of acquiring independence after experiencing European colonialism, Pan-Africanists articulated themselves with their shared African ancestry to build their racial and political solidarity" (32). Pan- Africanists emphasized the beauty of African race and culture, a type of national pride that pitted African civilization against Western civilization in colonies hence a recipe for armed conflicts. It would however be absurd to perpetuate cultural essentialism in a cosmopolitan African nation.

Fanon's National Culture and the African Quandary

Fanon defines national culture as all efforts made by people to describe and improve their situation via thoughful selection of practices that will bolster their existence (168). National culture, for Fanon, is not traditional African rituals and ways of thinking, but those new and old practices that the people opt to have after independence. The choice of food, old and new; the choice of rites of passage, old and new; the choice of national language; the choice of behaviour patterns, old and new. Fanon cautions the independent leaders to move "in step" with the people to avoid the danger of being left behind in quest of modernity. National culture does not mean a return to precolonial traditions and so leaders should not concentrate efforts on resuscitating traditions to erect a tradition similar to Negritude with a delusion to dicover a people's aspirations.

Fanon therefore casts doubt on the ability of cultural essentialism to establish strong and united African nations. Western culture had already made its impact on the African continent in matters education, medicine, engineering, religion, mode of dress and much more and it would be delusion to make an obsolute return to what Hall refers to as the traditional model. He therefore urges Africans to create some sort of hybrid culture by inculcating values from within and without. The choice of Kiswahili as a national language in Tanzania contributed greatly to the creation of a cohesive nation. Achebe echoes Fanon's ideas in his contribution to the language best suited to African Literature. He observes that colonialism left the language of communication. Africa has more than two thousand languages and it would be very difficult for readers to understand literature if it was written in vernaculars (98). Most scholars agree that emphasis on vernaculars will underscore the ethnic divide that already haunts African societies. The more different societies become, the weaker the social fabric, which was the desire of British colonialists in Africa. Weber A. (2009) observes that ethnic animosities existing in Kenya today can be traced back to the adminstrative approach used by colonial rulers. He writes:

> Although the two countries were at one point colonized by the British, colonialists' attention was focused on Kenya as the centre of East African development. Measures were taken to build up a strong Agricultural export sector that involved exproriation of Kenyan farmers and prevention of Kenyan communities to unite against colonialism. British administration in Kenya followed "divide and

rule" policy. British rulers set out to divide the population and create ethnically homogeneous entities. Through this policy formerly fluid and contextual ethnic identities were frozen and tribes deliberately invented. (11)

Weber reinforces Fanon's rejection of the return to African traditional culture to evade the temptation of sliding back to the divisive existence of the colonial era. The British colonilists knew that the more steeped Kenyan communities were in their cultures, the more distant they would be from each other. Ogot (2005) notes that the aim was to create "self sufficient closed static and homogeneous linguistic and ethnic units" (267). Ogot's use of the term static is a reference to Said's orientalism. The two factions created by cultural essentialism are fixed and in a binary opposition. Ogot notes that Meru tribe was deliberately invented to underscore otherness and subsequent division in the African society.

> They combined Tigania, Igembe, Imenti, Miutini, Igoji, Mwimbi and Muthambi into Meru ethnic group and settled Europeans in between neighbouring ethnic entities to prevent inter ethnic co-peration. (ibid)

Ogot's claims suggest that African communities co-existed quite peacefully and united in the precolonial era. Communities that had similar language patterns lived in unity and intermarried to forge ties that were benevolent to the two sides. The advent of colonialism planted a wedge among them, for instance Agikuyu, Embu, Meru and Akamba. The British oppressors emphasized the need to stick to one's community and culture to retain a weak social fabric to facilitate easy conquest and domination. It would therefore be absurd for African leaders today to perpetuate such legacy. Weber writes:

> The creation of closed and cut off ethnic units enabled the British colonialists to effectively rule the Kenyan population without having to fear a united resistance. Attempts of Kenyans to organize a cross-ethnic resistance, for example in the East African Association, were immediately banned by the colonial rulers stating that they would only allow an association with members from one ethnic group. Through the prohibition to organize nationally, the Kenyan population was left with the option to develop locally restricted ethnic associations (Chweya, 2002; p.91). Thereby, ethnic nationalism was encouraged and the foundation for today's ethnic representation in politics sowed by the British administration. (11)

These divisions have continued in Kenya today, with the rise of vernacular radio and television stations that some communities use to insult other communities to destroy national consciousness. Prior to the 2007 general election, Kass FM, a Kalenjin based radio station was allegedly involved in inciting one community against another. Contrary is the case in Tanzania where the Germans used a less vigorous approach that

allowed for hybridity of sorts. Tripp (1999) observes that although they maintained homogeneous units, the communities were governed by *Maakidas*- well educated Muslims from the coast that spoke Kiswahili (38). Their use of Kiswahili inspired many Tanzanians to start to abandon their traditional cultures and appreciate other communities. Jerman (1997) contends that when the British took over Tanganyika to administer it on behalf of the League of Nations, they rejected *Maakidas* because "they accelerated the disintegration of tribal customs". Progressive administrators like Charles Dundas broke away from ethnic based administrative boundaries and called for regional policies rather than the scientifically advocated creation of tribes (227).

With these different colonial legacies, Kenya and Tanzania took different trajectories after independence. Mwalimu Julius Nyerere found it simpler to tend a national consciousness given that Dundas and maakidas had laid the foundation of hybridity. Tanzania birthed a national culture with Kiswahili as the official and national language. Vernaculars were discouraged in offices and business premises (Weber, 2009, 18). The president himself spoke the language in his home and statehouse. He discouraged ethnic consciousness and united Tanzania in one strong nation. In Kenya:

Experts stress that Kenya's first President Kenyatta sometimes addressed the population in his mother tongue, Kikuyu even if people did not belong to the Kikuyu ethnic group and hence were not able to understand him (Appendix B4, Kenya, 2.). In addition, the liberalization of the media in 2002 and the spread of vernacular radio stations, such as Inooro FM and Kameme FM (Kikuyu ethnic group), and Kass FM (Kalenjin ethnic group), is seen to pronounce the use of vernaculars and thereby to increase ethnic consciousness and animosity (Wamwere, 2008; p.41). In the post-election period, these radio stations provided a platform for hate-speeches and thereby crucially contributed to the ethnic violence experienced in 2008. (Weber, 18)

The use of vernacular by the leader distances other ethnic groups because as Ngugi asserts, language transmits the culture of that community to others who may be unwilling to learn it. Such an action is also an attempt to make one ethnic community ineligibly superior to the rest. It therefore encouraged other Kenyan communities to compete with Kikuyu by nurturing their own languages. It became apparent after liberalization of the media during the Mwai Kibaki era (2002- 2012). Many radio stations sprang up throughout Kenya some of which entrenched national disintegration. Steeped in their traditions, most Kenyan communities view other ethnic groups as the Other and it can easily degenerate to violence. There is talk of the Kikuyu nation, Luhya nation, Luo nation, Akamba nation, Somali nation living in one place, Kenya. Is the Kenyan dream real? Is national integration plausible? Is this a celebration of diversity of a celebration of disintegration?

Political mobilization is purely ethnic and so the competition between different ethnic groups degenerates to political violence. Halakhe (2013) observes that ethnic protagonists have abused Kenya's voting rules to influence the outcome of elections. He writes:

> Because Kenyans must cast a ballot in a location where they had registered to vote, one strategy is to incite violence to displace "outsiders" who based on their ethnicity vote for certain candidates. (7)

"Outsiders" tag is the reference to otherness, which is the essence of cultural essentialism. Fanon warns that cultural fixity underscored by Negritude is not national culture. He writes: "[n]ational culture is no folklore where an abstract populism is convinced it has uncovered the popular truth. It is not some congealed mass of noble gestures, in other words less and less connected with the reality of the people," (168). The cultural populism in most African nations is enhanced by the media. The untrained journalists in vernacular radio stations flout the code of ethics of journalism to incite violence among communities. Oyaro K. (2008) in his report writes, " [t]he ethnic hate our radio stations were propagating about those outside their community was unbelievable. The unfortunate thing is we let these callers speak vile and laughed about it". The Other laughs at the insults of the self because Otherness is entrenched in this society. The habit of cherishing one's own and disparaging the other is so common place that taking offence is not just self destruction, but an exercise in futility. Fanon foresaw the possibility of cultural essentialism (propagated by Negritude) politicizing ethnicity in African nations. Those nations that ignored his ideas took this bearing and do experience political animosity in most electoral seasons. Halakhe observes that electoral violence in Kenya stems from politicisation of ethnicity (6).

Bhabha's Hibridity and the Ethnic Divide in Africa

In his work, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha observes that sticking to past histories and cultures would bring about dangers of fixity and fetishism of identities (9), and it would deny people insight into experiences beyond the borders. He writes:

> Fanon recognizes the crucial importance for subordinated peoples asserting their indigenous cultural traditions and retrieving their repressed histories. But he is far too aware of the dangers of fixity and fetishism of identities within the calcification of colonial cultures to recommend that roots be struck in the celebratory romance of the past by homogenizing the history of the present. (9)

In this text, Bhabha suggests that cultural fixity is asserting past traditions and reliving repressed histories. It lauds fixed identities and denounces mixed ones, which is a threat to national cohesion in Africa. This was witnessed in Rwanda when the colonialists and post independent government perpetuated traditions that pitted one culture against the other. During the pre-colonial era, the

Rwandese had a monarchy that was socially stratified in league with the cultural differences. At the top of the social stratum were the Tutsi, followed by Tutsi Banyaruguru, Tutsi Hima, and then Hutu at a lower cadre and the Twa at the very bottom. Uvin P. (1999) writes:

> Colonialists acted through the kings to reinforce the stratification… the colonizers reserved education and jobs almost exclusively for the Tutsi. By the 1950s thirty one of the thirty three Africans in the legislative body were Tutsi. Five hundred and forty four of five hundred and fifty nine sub chiefs were Tutsi… political, social and even economic relations became more rigid, unequal and biased against the Hutu while Tutsi power greatly increased. (255)

The social stratification that was prevalent in traditional Rwanda is a reference to Bhabha's fixed spaces where the two essential groups occupy. The dominant group, which condescendingly regards the marginal group gloats in a vain superiority to cause disharmony in society. Using the divide and rule policy like the British in Kenya, the Belgians reinforced the duality with cash economy. It would be absurd to assume that the Tutsi- Hutu rivalry was purely economic given that before the advent of cash economy, the culture elevated the Tutsi to the highest stave. The colonialists simply returned to the past ways of life of the Rwandese people and reinforced it. It is no wonder Bhabha warns cosmopolitan societies against such tendencies as they would polarize their communities and cause political animosity. The struggle for independence in Rwanda was the struggle of the relegated Hutu against the oppressive Tutsi despots and their Belgian Big brothers. Goehrung R. (2017) writes:

> Permeable social class boundaries of the pre-colonial times were institutionalized and racialized first by colonial authorities and then under the government of Habyarimana. The 1959-61 Hutu revolution was fought along ethnic lines to dethrone Tutsi privileged class … it established the relationship between ethnicity and power as a foundation of independent Rwanda and cemented the antagonistic notion that one group is in a position of authority excludes the Other. (81)

In Bhabha's perspective, Habyarimana, the first president of Rwanda, would have broken away from the tradition of cultural fixity or essentialism and opted for a third space to encourage cultural exchanges between the Hutu, Tutsi and Twa. Using a national language, like Nyerere, Habyarimana would have encouraged brotherhood to metamorphose the cultural diversity to a united nation state. Bhabha observes that the leaders of the independence movement are the torch bearers of hybridity, which enhances the creation of national culture and character in the cosmopolitan Africa. On the contrary, most independence leaders took the path of cultural essentialism by elevating the culture of their ethnic communities to create many nations in one. Habyarimana elevated the Hutu majority and excluded the Tutsi as a

retaliatory measure. The aforementioned mess is based on the essentialist delusion that either Hutu or Tutsi is superior to the other owing to the tendency to return to past cultures. Ethnicity was thereby politicized and the death of Habyarimana was just but a trigger to the Rwanda Genocide of 1994. The Hutu accused Tutsi of shooting down the plane and the nation plunged into chaos.

Hall (1990) defines cultural identities as temporary forms of identification within dialogues of history and culture (394). For Hall, Africans need not glue themselves on a certain foundation of culture. He writes, "[c]ultural identity is not a fixed essence at all lying unchanged outside history and culture... it is not once-and for-all. It is not a fixed origin on which we can make some final and absolute Return", (395). Hall questions Edward Brathwaite's yearning to recover a lost Africa because with the fluid nature of cultural identity, the original Africa is no longer there. To imagine that Africa is same is colluding with the West in the delusion that Africa is a timeless zone of primitive and unchanging past (399). He contends that cultural identity is a process that keeps changing from state to state and given that history interrupted through slavery and colonialism, Caribbeans should ask themselves what they have become, instead of who they were.

Habyarimana and other independence leaders, in Hall's perpective, erred to return to precolonial traditions and colonial policies that polarised the African people. After colonialism, they would have realized that the cultural identity of their people had changed. They were no longer Hutu, Tutsi, Twa or Kikuyu, but Rwandese with a new touch of western ways. The major question was what they had become instead of who they were and now had a responsibility to buid a united state rather than unearth superiority contests of pre and colonial times. Bhabha asserts that past traditions protected the people against negative colonial influences. Nonetheless, during the struggle for independence Algerians,"[d]estroyed continuities and constancies of the nationalist tradition.They are now free to negotiate and translate their national identities," (9-23). During the struggle for independence in African nations, essentialist "continuities" of colonialism that nurtured tribalism by divide and rule; the essentialist "constancies" of the African traditions, which exposed African communities to binary existence: Kikuyu/ Luo, Hutu/ Tutsi, Somali/ Bantu; were razed to the ground. Africans were free to build new nations by selection of beneficial values from the maze of cultures at their disposal. Nelson Mandela opted for Bhabha's perspective after his release in 1994. His vision for a Rainbow Nation is indirect reference to a hybrid nation with a mosaic of cultures, which resulted in reconciliation and peace. Bhabha (Cited from Ashcroft et al) notes that hybridity eludes the politics of polarity. He asserts that hybridity reduces "disharmony and hostility between minority and dominant group" (209). In other words, it deals a blow to fixity (cultural essentialism) thereby reducing cultural tensions between the two groups. Hybridity makes this possible because the Self is closer to and learns the attributes of the Other and the Other is closer and understands the attributes of the Self.

Bhabha observes that the "interweaving of elements of the colonizer and colonized challenges the validity of any essentialist cultural identity" (Meredith, 2). And by pursuing hybridity we elude the politics of polarity because we are better informed of the attributes of the other, which gives way for negotiation and diplomatic settlement of disputes. Rumours, suspicions and unfounded fears are dispelled when one essentialist group moves closer to the other. After years in the fight for freedom, Nelson Mandela only got it by resolving to close ranks with his colonialist persecuters and oppressors.

Conclusion

The researcher set out to interrogate cultural essentialism in Africa. Using the ideas of Edward Said, Frantz fanon and Homi Bhabha, it is evident that cultural essentialism has tattered the social fabric of many African societies. The essentialisation of the Other has resulted in politisation of ethnicity that threatens national cohesion in countries such as Kenya, Somalia, Rwanda and Nigeria. Hybridity stands out as the better option for creation of national culture in African nations as it gives them a chance to select the best values after destruction of "continuities" and "constancies" during the struggle for independence. Tanzania stands out as the model of hybrid African nation, whose founder rejected cultural essentialism and politicisation of ethnicity. Nations that opted for cultural essentialism such as Kenya and Rwanda have politised ethnicity and faced ethnic animosities that threaten their very existence.

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