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## Does Africa Need a Cultural Adjustment Program?

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The indicators of Africa's plight are staggering:

- Life expectancy is below sixty years in twenty-eight countries. Life expectancy is below fifty years in eighteen countries. Life expectancy in Sierra Leone is just thirty-seven years.
- About half of the more than 600 million people south of the Sahara live in poverty.
- Half or more of the adult populations of at least thirteen countries are illiterate.
- Half or more of women are illiterate in at least eighteen countries.
- Children under five die at rates in excess of 100 per 1,000 in at least twenty-eight countries. In Sierra Leone, the rate is 335 per 1,000.
- The population growth rate is 2.7 percent annually, almost four times the rate in the high-income countries.
- Among countries supplying such data to the World Bank (not all do), some of the most inequitable income distribution patterns are found in Africa. The most affluent 10 percent account for about 47 percent of income in Kenya, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, and about 43 percent in Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, and Sierra Leone.<sup>1</sup>

- And, obviously, democratic institutions are commonly weak or nonexistent throughout Africa.

Even in the face of all this human suffering, I cannot resist citing the story of an African government minister carried away in his remarks: "When we gained power, the country was at the edge of the abyss; since, we have taken a great step forward!"

I cite this anecdote in part because we can no longer reasonably blame the colonial powers for our condition. Several decades have passed during which we have been in substantial control of our own destiny. Yet today Africa is more dependent than ever on rich countries, more vulnerable than any other continent to maneuvers aimed at giving with one hand and taking back with the other. The World Bank, usually a great source of funds and advice, is itself short of ideas. Other than structural adjustment programs (whose efficiency has not yet been proven), there is silence.

The need to question our culture, the African culture, is evident. But what characterizes the African culture? Is this culture compatible with the demands faced by individuals and nations at the beginning of the twenty-first century? If not, what cultural reorientation is necessary so that in the concert of nations we are no longer playing out of tune? *Does Africa need a cultural adjustment program?*

### WHAT WE ARE

It is never easy to speak of one's self, to reveal one's soul, especially when, as is the case with the African soul, many different facets present themselves. There are at least three dangers in this. The first is idealizing and embellishing in order to appear to be more than we are. The second is to say nothing that exposes the mysterious halo that people from all cultures wear. Finally, who has the qualities and qualifications to speak in the name of us all? An African proverb is correct in saying that he who looks from the bottom of a well sees only a portion of the sky.

As legitimate as these concerns are, they should not prevent us from looking in the mirror. Do we dare to look ourselves in the face, even if it is difficult to recognize ourselves?

### *Fifty Africas, a Single Culture?*

We long ago got into the habit of referring to Africa as a diverse entity, and no one is surprised, in light of the balkanization of the continent, to see works with titles like *Les 45 Afriques*<sup>2</sup> or *Les 50 Afriques*<sup>3</sup> because, as

J. Ki-Zerbo noted in the introduction to the latter, "Africa is palpable. It is also profitable."

The descriptions of African diversity are enough to make an Olympic skating champion dizzy. First, to better oppose them, we like to emphasize white Africa and black Africa: one north of the Sahara and the other south of it. But how do we then classify the Republic of South Africa and Zimbabwe, each with a powerful white minority? Behind the racial screen, one quickly discovers a far more important source of diversity—language. There is an Arabophone Africa, an Anglophone Africa, a Francophone Africa, a Lusophone Africa, a Hispanophone Africa, not to mention the scores of languages that have no relation to the languages of the European colonizers.

What can be said if we then dare to transcend frontiers resulting from colonial dismembering of real nationalities such as the Yorubas, Hausas, Peuls, Malinkes, to mention only a few, that straddle several states? To continue the census of African diversity based on the color of the epidermis or on language could lead to several thousand Africas! Next, we must confront the anthropologists. Are there as many cultures in Africa as there are tribes? Does their number coincide with the states as outlined by the colonial powers? Does generalizing about African culture as a whole make any sense at all?

I believe that it does. The diversity—the vast number of subcultures—is undeniable. But there is a foundation of shared values, attitudes, and institutions that binds together the nations south of the Sahara, and in many respects those to the north as well. The situation is analogous to that of Great Britain: Despite its Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish subcultures, no one would question the existence of a British culture.

The existence of this common base is so real that some anthropologists question whether imported religions—Christianity and Islam—have really affected African ancestral beliefs or given Africans different ways of understanding the contemporary societies in which they live. Modern political power has often assumed the characteristics of traditional religious ritual powers; divination and witchcraft have even made their way into courthouses. Everywhere on the continent, the bond between religion and society remains strong. As Felix Houphouët-Boigny, the late president of the Ivory Coast, told us (and he, as a Roman Catholic, knew what he was talking about): "From African archbishops to the most insignificant Catholic, from the great witch doctor to the most insignificant Moslem, from the pastor to the most insignificant Protestant, we have all had an animist past."<sup>4</sup>

African culture is not easily grasped. It refuses to be packaged and resists attempts at systemization. The following typology is not wholly satisfactory, but it gives some sense of what the African cultural reality is.

### *Hierarchical Distance*

In the view of D. Bollinger and G. Hofstede, hierarchical distance—the degree of verticality—is generally substantial in tropical and Mediterranean climates, where the survival of the group and its growth depend less on human intervention than it does in cold and temperate countries.<sup>5</sup> In countries with substantial hierarchical distances, the society tends to be static and politically centralized. What little national wealth exists is concentrated in the hands of an elite. The generations pass without significant change in mind-set. It is the reverse in countries with short hierarchical distances. Technological changes happen because the group needs technical progress; the political system is decentralized and based on a representative system; the national wealth, which is substantial, is widely distributed; and children learn things that their parents never knew.

In the more horizontal cultures, subordinates believe that their superiors are people just like themselves, that all people have equal rights, and that law takes precedence over strength. This leads to the belief that the best way to change a social system is to redistribute power. In the more vertical societies, Africa among them, subordinates consider their superiors to be different—having a right to privilege. Since strength prevails over law, the best way to change a social system is to overthrow those who hold power.

To the extent that it covers many aspects of a society (e.g., political systems, religious practices, organization of enterprises), hierarchical distance would virtually suffice to explain underdevelopment. However, as Bollinger and Hofstede note, France, Italy (particularly in the south), and Japan are also countries of high hierarchical distance.

### *Control over Uncertainty*

Some societies condition their members to accept uncertainty about the future, taking each day as it comes. There is little enthusiasm for work. The behavior and opinions of others are tolerated because deep down people feel relatively secure in the status quo.

In other societies, people are acculturated to conquer the future. This leads to anxiety, emotionalism, and aggressiveness, which produce institutions oriented toward change and the limitation of risks.

Africa, except for the southern tip of the continent, appears to belong entirely to the category of societies with weak controls over uncertainty. To create secure societies, three levers are available: technology, jurisprudence, and religion. We might say that African societies are societies of strong control over uncertainty; unfortunately, the control is exercised only through reli-

gion. In the final analysis, if Africans immerse themselves in the present and demonstrate a lack of concern for tomorrow, it is less because of the safety of community social structures that envelop them than because of their submission to a ubiquitous and implacable divine will.

The African, returning to the roots of religion, believes that only God can modify the logic of a world created for eternity. The world and our behavior are an immutable given, bequeathed in a mythical past to our founding ancestors, whose wisdom continues to illuminate our life principles. The African remains enslaved by his environment. Nature is his master and sets his destiny.

This postulate of a world governed by an immutable divine order in a universe without borders is accompanied by a peculiarly African perception of the notion of space and time.

### *The Tyranny of Time*

The African sees space and time as a single entity. The Nigerians say, "A watch did not invent man." Africans have always had their own time, and they have often been criticized for it. As an example, Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber writes:

Time in Africa has both a symbolic and cultural value that are very important in the manner in which it is lived and felt. This is frankly both a benefit and a handicap—a benefit to the extent that it is satisfying for individuals to live during a period at a rhythm that is their own and that they have no desire to give up. But it is also a handicap to the extent that they are in competition with countries that do not have the same work methods and for which competition at the level of productivity, for example, passes through a more rational use of time.<sup>6</sup>

Servan-Schreiber is right. In traditional African society, which exalts the glorious past of ancestors through tales and fables, nothing is done to prepare for the future. The African, anchored in his ancestral culture, is so convinced that the past can only repeat itself that he worries only superficially about the future. However, without a dynamic perception of the future, there is no planning, no foresight, no scenario building; in other words, no policy to affect the course of events. There can be no singing of tomorrows so long as our culture does not teach us to question the future, to repeat it mentally, and to bend it to our will. In modern society, everyone must prepare. Otherwise, as Servan-Schreiber reminds us, there will be no more seats on the train, no more money at the end of the month, nothing in the refrigerator for

the dinner hour, and nothing in the granaries in between seasons.<sup>7</sup> All in all, daily life in Africa!

### *Indivisible Power and Authority*

Over the course of several millennia, societies in the West evolved substantially outside of the influence of religion, leading to the separation of the things of this world from the spiritual world. This evolution also led to the advent of the power of the state, which was certainly still spiritual but detached from supernatural forces that no longer intervened in the governing of this world. In Africa, however, the force of religion continues to weigh both on individual and on collective destiny. It is common for African leaders to claim magical powers.

It is difficult to explain African passivity other than by the fear inspired by a God hidden in the folds of the clothes of every African chief. If a king or president escapes an attack (even a simulated one), the entire population will deduce that he has supernatural power and is therefore invincible. This propensity to equate all power with divine authority does not concern only the “fathers of the nation”; it affects every citizen—even the most ordinary—as soon as he is given any authority whatsoever. Take an African, give him a bit of power, and he will likely become bumptious, arrogant, intolerant, and jealous of his prerogatives. Constantly on his guard and an enemy of competence (not a criterion for electing gods), he is ruthless until an inopportune decree designates his successor. He ends his career entirely devoted to the cult of mediocrity. (It is a well-known fact in our republics that to end the career of a technocrat or a politician for good, you need only point out his excellence.)

The African will not accept changes in social standing: Dominant and dominated remain eternally in the places allocated them, which is why change in social classifications is often condemned. We complain about the difficulties in promoting the private sector in our states. These difficulties are rooted in the jealousy that dominates all interpersonal relations, which is less the desire to obtain what others possess than to prevent any change in social status.

In Africa, you must be born dominant; otherwise, you have no right to power except by coup d'état. The entire social body accepts, as a natural fact, the servitude imposed by the strong man of the moment. It has been argued that the underdeveloped are not the people, they are the leaders. This is both true and false. If African peoples were not underdeveloped (that is to say, passive, resigned, and cowardly), why would they accept underdeveloped leaders? We forget that every people deserves the leaders it gets.

### *The Community Dominates the Individual*

If we had to cite a single characteristic of the African culture, the subordination of the individual by the community would surely be the reference point to remember. African thought rejects any view of the individual as an autonomous and responsible being. The African is vertically rooted in his family, in the vital ancestor, if not in God; horizontally, he is linked to his group, to society, to the cosmos. The fruit of a family-individual, society-individual dynamic, all linked to the universe, the African can only develop and bloom through social and family life.

How do we restore the degree of autonomy to the individual that is necessary for his affirmation as a political, economic, and social actor, while preserving this sociability that is the essence of the existence of the African? The suppression of the individual, the cardinal way of ensuring equality in traditional societies, is demonstrated in all areas—not only in economic matters, where the ultimate market price is a function of the presumed purchasing power of the buyer, but in cultural matters, where oral traditions have monopolized the transmission of culture. We might even wonder if it wasn't by design that Africans avoided the written word to assure the suppression of individualism. African thought avoids skepticism, another virus carried by the individual. Consequently, the established belief system remains absolute: As soon as ancestral beliefs are threatened, the only possible choice is between the established order and chaos.

The concept of individual responsibility does not exist in our hyper-centralized traditional structures. In Cameroon, the word "responsible" translates as "chief." Telling peasants that they are all responsible for a group initiative is to tell them therefore that they are all chiefs—which inevitably leads to endless interpersonal conflicts.

The death of the individual in our societies explains not only the culture of silence in which men like President Jerry Rawlings of Ghana rise up but also explains the contempt in which people hold all those that occupy an intermediate position in the hierarchy. Thus, in an African ministry, it is well understood that the only person who can solve any problem whatsoever, be it the most commonplace, is the minister himself. Supervisors, managers, and other officials are there only for show. Our ministers have no complaints. It is not good to delegate one's authority at the risk of encouraging the birth of a new political star who may eventually prove to be a competitor.

We must be realistic. Tribalism blooms in our countries because of both the negation of the individual and the precariousness of his situation in the absence of an operative set of individual rights and responsibilities. Should we then continue, while dancing and singing, to drift collectively toward hell

to safeguard a hypothetical social consensus? Or has the moment come to restore all rights to individuals?

### *Excessive Conviviality and Rejection of Open Conflict*

The African works to live but does not live to work. He demonstrates a propensity to feast that suggests that African societies are structured around pleasure. Everything is a pretext for celebration: birth, baptism, marriage, birthday, promotion, election, return from a short or a long trip, mourning, opening or closure of Congress, traditional and religious feasts. Whether one's salary is considerable or modest, whether one's granaries are empty or full, the feast must be beautiful and must include the maximum possible number of guests.

He who receives gives, but he who is received also gives in order to truly participate in the joy or pain of his host. Sociability is the cardinal virtue of all human beings; indeed, the African considers any person he meets a friend until the contrary is demonstrated. Friendship comes before business; it is impolite, in a business discussion, to immediately go to the crux of the matter. The African has an inexhaustible need for communication and prefers interpersonal warmth over content. This is the main reason for the inefficiency of African bureaucracies. Each petitioner, instead of writing, seeks to meet in person the official in charge of examining his file, thinking this eliminates all the coldness of writing letters back and forth.

Differences that are the basis for social life elsewhere are not perceived or are ignored to maintain ostensible social cohesion. It is the search for social peace based on a shaky unanimity that pushes the African to avoid conflict—although the continent is surely not free of it. In some African societies, the avoidance of conflict means that justice cannot be rendered in the daytime. In some Bamileke (West Cameroon) villages, the constituted bodies in charge of security and justice are secret and meet at night. Members wear masks to prevent being identified.

Conflict is inherent in human groups of whatever size, yet we try to sweep it under the rug—and have been highly unsuccessful in doing so.

### *Inefficient Homo Economicus*

In Africa, what classifies man is his intrinsic value and his birth. If the African is not very thrifty, it is because his vision of the world attributes very little importance—too little—to the financial and economic aspects of life. Other than some social groups like the well-known Bamileke of Cameroon or the Kamba of Kenya, the African is a bad *H. economicus*. For him, the



value of man is measured by the "is" and not by the "has." Furthermore, because of the nature of the rapport that the African maintains with time, saving for the future has a lower priority than immediate consumption. Lest there be any temptation to accumulate wealth, those who receive a regular salary have to finance the studies of brothers, cousins, nephews, and nieces, lodge newcomers, and finance the multitude of ceremonies that fill social life.

It should not come as a surprise that the urban elite embellish these spending traditions by behaving like *nouveaux riches*. They, of course, have access to large amounts of money, chiefly in government coffers, and to the relatives and friends who are the beneficiaries of our free-spending habits are added banks in Switzerland, Luxembourg, and the Bahamas. African governments are not, it is evident, any better at economic management than are African individuals, as our frequent economic crises confirm.

### *The High Costs of Irrationalism*

A society in which magic and witchcraft flourish today is a sick society ruled by tension, fear, and moral disorder. Sorcery is a costly mechanism for managing conflict and preserving the status quo, which is, importantly, what African culture is about. Therefore, is not witchcraft a mirror reflecting the state of our societies? There is much to suggest this. Witchcraft is both an instrument of social coercion (it helps maintain and perhaps even increase the loyalty of individuals toward the clan) and a very convenient political instrument to eliminate any opposition that might appear. Witchcraft is for us a psychological refuge in which all our ignorance finds its answers and our wildest fantasies become realities.

Contrary to what some might believe, the Christian religion, far from putting an end to witchcraft in Africa, has legitimized it. The existence of Satan is recognized by the Bible and the White Fathers, thus confirming the existence of sorcerers and other evil persons.

Sects, usually based on the magical power of the leader or prophet, are proliferating in Africa. In Benin, a particularly religious land that is the cradle of Haitian and Brazilian voodoo, fifty-eight new sects were born between 1981 and 1986, bringing the total number of denominations in the country to ninety-two. In Kenya, there might be as many as 1,200 sects; in some rural districts, there are more churches than schools. Some prophets, their "temples" on the street, become affluent because of their ability to detect bad spirits. Others can protect against disease. Still others can help you protect your job and enhance your income.

An example I particularly like is that of Kombo, a transporter with a fleet of trucks serving the Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso. Kombo believes that to

European precautions—the regular maintenance of vehicles—it is necessary to add African precautions. What do these include? Well, his witch doctor gives him some porcupine-fish powder that he pours into his tires in order to prevent punctures. Why, you might ask? Because, when attacked, this thorny fish has the ability to inflate until it doubles in volume. The powder of this fish is therefore perfect for maintaining tire pressure.

Sorcery also extends to government. Witch doctors surround African presidents, and nothing that really matters in politics occurs without recourse to witchcraft. Occult counselors, responsible for assuring that authorities keep their power by detecting and neutralizing possible opponents, have power that the most influential Western advisers would envy. The witch doctors often amass fortunes, and they sometimes end up with official designations, enjoying the direct exercise of power.

Football, the opiate of Africans, competes with politics with respect to sorcery. The story made the rounds that the Elephants of Abidjan lost their match against Egypt for the African Cup because the captain of the team lost a magic charm on the field a little before halftime. The entire team searched for it in vain. Everyone believed that the Egyptians had found it and had made it disappear. Thanks to this deceit, they won the match, two goals to one.

The fact that Africa is not alone in celebrating irrationalism at the outset of the twenty-first century does not excuse our propensity to delegate to sorcerers and witch doctors the responsibility for solving our problems. Jean-François Revel has asked, “Might man be an intelligent being that intelligence does not guide?”<sup>8</sup> In my view, the African is the intelligent being that uses his intelligence least—so long as he is happy to live life as it comes. In an Africa that refuses to link knowledge and activity, our authentic cultural identity is operating when we say, as Revel notes, “Give us development in the form of subsidies, so as to spare us the effort of establishing an efficient relationship with reality.”<sup>9</sup> That same culture lies behind our claim to the right to inefficiency in production, the right to corruption, and the right to disrespect basic human rights.

### *Cannibalistic and Totalitarian Societies*

What Africans are doing to one another defies credulity. Genocide, bloody civil wars, and rampant violent crime suggest that African societies at all social levels are to some extent cannibalistic. Those who write laws and those who are responsible for enforcing them are those who trample on them. Thus, in almost all African countries, the day after gaining independence, in-

vestment codes designed to attract foreign investment were promulgated. Yet affluent Africans jostle each other at the counters of Swiss, French, Belgian, and English banks, giving the impression that they have no confidence in themselves, in their country, or in what they produce. They appear to destroy with their own hands what they have built.

The truth quickly becomes apparent. Seen from the inside, African societies are like a football team in which, as a result of personal rivalries and a lack of team spirit, one player will not pass the ball to another out of fear that the latter might score a goal. How can we hope for victory? In our republics, people outside of the ethnic "cement" (which is actually quite porous when one takes a closer look at it) have so little identification with one another that the mere existence of the state is a miracle—a miracle in part explained by the desire for personal gain. There is rarely any vision of a better future for all. At the same time, initiative and dynamism are condemned as signs of personal enrichment. The sorcerer wants equality in misery. There are numerous cases in which someone who has built a house has been told not to reside in it; others who have begun construction have been told to stop the work if they value their lives.

Was African totalitarianism born with independence? Of course not! It was already there, inscribed in the foundations of our tribal cultures. Authoritarianism permeates our families, our villages, our schools, our churches. It is for us a way of life.

Thus, faced with such a powerful, immovable culture, what can we do to change Africa's destiny? We are condemned either to change or to perish.

## CULTURE AND CHANGE

Our first objective is to preserve African culture, one of the most—if not *the* most—humanistic cultures in existence. But it must be regenerated through a process initiated from the inside that would allow Africans to remain themselves while being of their time. We must keep these humanistic values—the solidarity beyond age classification and social status; social interaction; the love of neighbor, whatever the color of his skin; the defense of the environment, and so many others. We must, however, destroy all within us that is opposed to our mastery of our future, a future that must be prosperous and just, a future in which the people of Africa determine their own destiny through participation in the political process.

In doing so, we must be mindful that culture is the mother and that institutions are the children. More efficient and just African institutions depend on modifications to our culture.

*The Four Revolutions We Must Lead*

We need to undertake peaceful cultural revolutions in four sectors: education, politics, economics, and social life.

**Education.** The traditional education of the African child prepares boys and girls for integration into their tribal community. To the child are transmitted not only the habits customary for his or her age and sex, but all the values and beliefs that are the cultural foundation of the group to which he or she belongs. In a system in which education is perceived above all as an instrument of socialization, the traditional African child is educated by the entire community. The problem is that this system offers few incentives for children to improve themselves, to innovate, or to do better than their parents.

How then can we reform educational systems so strongly handicapped by both a conservative culture and a lack of infrastructure and pedagogical facilities? (It is, for example, not unusual for there to be 125 students in a single classroom.) Very simply, by asserting the absolute preeminence of education, by suppressing the construction of religious structures and other palaces to the detriment of schools, and by modifying the content of the curricula, accenting not only science but especially the necessary changes of the African society. This means critical thinking, affirmation of the need for sub-regional and continental unity, rational development of manual as well as intellectual methods of work, and, in general, the qualities that engender progress: imagination, dissent, creativity, professionalism and competence, a sense of responsibility and duty, love for a job well done.

The African school should henceforth mold future businesspeople, and therefore job creators, not just degree recipients who expect to be offered sinecures. From the time the child is in elementary school, the young African will have to be awakened to time management, not only in terms of production but especially in terms of maintenance of infrastructure and equipment. The teaching of technological maintenance is surely more important than courses on the role of the one-party system in national integration and on the infallibility of the "Father of the Nation."

But change must not stop there. The role of the African woman—the abused backbone of our societies—in society must also be transformed. Women do not have access to bank accounts, credit, or property. They are not allowed to speak. They produce much of our food, yet they have little access to agricultural training, credit, technical assistance, and so on.

In Africa as elsewhere, the emancipation of women is the best gauge of the political and social progress of a society. Without an African woman who is free and responsible, the African man will be unable to stand on his own.

**Politics.** Once education has been reformed, African political systems will change virtually by themselves. A new type of citizenship will emerge, one that gives more room to the individual, his worth as a social actor, his ability to adapt to his institutional environment, and the demands that progress puts on his community. African nations need to extend the pluralism that already exists in the diversity of their peoples to the political arena. They must cultivate tolerance and emphasize merit. Regional integration must replace nationalism.

**Economics.** To revolutionize our economic culture, we must understand that instead of depending on a world market that we are virtually excluded from, we must first establish integrated markets among ourselves. We must accept profit as the engine of development. We must recognize the indispensable role of individual initiative and the inalienable right of the individual to enjoy the fruits of his labor. We must understand that there can be no real or lasting economic growth without full employment. The entire African population must be put to work. It is impossible for anyone to be both unemployed and a good citizen, especially in countries with no social safety net.

**Social Life.** African civil society will not emerge without qualitative changes in behavior, first in the relationships among Africans and then with respect to behavior toward foreigners, to whom we generally feel inferior. We must have more self-confidence, more trust in one another, and a commitment to a progress that benefits all. We need more rigor and a systematic approach to the elaboration of strategies—and the implementation of decisions taken—whatever the costs.

## CONCLUSION

We are now at a crossroads. The persistence and destructiveness of the economic and political crises that have stricken Africa make it necessary for us to act without delay. We must go to the heart of our morals and customs in order to eradicate the layer of mud that prevents our societies from moving into modernism. We must lead this revolution of minds—without which there can be no transfer of technology—on our own. We must place our bets on our intelligence because Africans, if they have capable leaders, are fully able to distance themselves from the jealousy, the blind submission to the irrational, the lethargy that have been their undoing. If Europe, that fragment of earth representing a tiny part of humanity, has been able to impose itself on the planet, dominating it and organizing it for its exclusive profit, it is only because it developed a conquering culture of rigor and work, removed from the influence of invisible forces. We must do the same.