

NEPAD's Dream of Africa: Writing in the Gap, or Questing the Forgotten Component

In the past few years of high political maneuverings, organizations and multilateral relations among a number of African countries, the idea of an African Renaissance has become relatively popular and fashionable to the effect that it has become the cornerstone, or touchstone and mantra for the formation of the African Union (AU) and the creation of NEPAD, the acronym for 'The New Partnership for Africa's Development'. In this presentation, I am interested in the provisional document of the NEPAD, hereafter referred to as 'the Document'. In the main, I shall be focusing on what is considered a dire omission, or rather a simple disregard of the significance of Culture (and the cultural) as one of the 'four components' available for the systemic transformation and development of Africa in the twenty-first century. I would argue that this relatively collective Document is both necessary and incomplete for the ultimate revolutionary project of decolonizing and empowering the continent. Precisely, I would argue that the cultural propagation and interrogation as well as the education of the African mind is at the heart of any necessary 'renewal' act. In the Document, Culture is infinitely postponed in relation to 'Science' 'Economics' 'Technology' recognized as the more 'tangible' components of the process of Renewal whereas it is the 'soft' logical lubricant at the base of all histories and acts of Renaissances. In conclusion, I would caution that the 'African Renaissance' should not be imagined as a romantic or cosmetic idea for a political moment or convenience; an African Renaissance cannot be legislated nor can it be left in the hands of politicians or predictable economists; the drive for an African Renaissance must come or be taken up by the cultural intelligentsia and the practical arm of the academe.

At least two events in the recent political history of Africa lead us to the popular term, 'the African Renaissance'.¹ In September of 1998, a coterie of scholars and activists gathered in Johannesburg, South Africa, for a conference called 'The African Renaissance Conference'. A year after the conference, the Organisation of African Unity, meeting in Sirte, Libya, seizing the occasion to discuss the politico-economic fate of the continent, mandated Presidents Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria to engage Africa's creditors on the issue of the total cancellation of the continent's debt. The historic conference, the book it produced², and the OAU meetings which held in Pretoria, Lusaka and Abuja form important reference points for the recent development of the vision of a pan-

¹ Ali Mazrui had employed the term 'African Renaissance' in a 1994 paper presented at the Central State University, Wilberforce, Ohio in which he talked about the 'seven pillars of the African Renaissance' see Mazrui, A. 'Shifting African Identities: The Boundaries of Ethnicity and Religion in Africa's Experience' (153-175), chapter 10 of *Shifting African Identities* (2001), edited by Simon Bekker et. al. Another earlier reference to the currency of this term was a conference in Abuja on July 27, 1998; it was called 'Symposium on the African Renaissance'. In October 1999, the 'African Renaissance Institute' was established in Pretoria with headquarters in Botswana.

² *African Renaissance: The New Struggle*. Ed. Malegapuru William Makgoba. Sandton/Cape Town: Mafube/Tafelberg, 1999; containing thirty essays with a prologue by Thabo Mbeki, then Deputy President of South Africa, *African Renaissance* resets the historical and intellectual agenda for the location of Africa at the centre or in relation to other worldviews in global discourse with special sessions on 'Moral Renewal and African Values' 'Culture and Education' 'Political and Economic Transformation' 'Science and Technology' and 'Media and Telecommunications'.

African renaissance contained in the ratified project plan called 'The New Partnership for Africa's Development', NEPAD.

Next to terms like OAU or AU, HIV and AIDS, the most prominent and important acronym in focus in the African world now is NEPAD. To repeat a cliché with a difference, from Cape Town to Cairo, from Senegal to Somaliland, the idea of an African Renaissance right at the beginning of a new millennium is taking shape with so much official gusto, gradually seeping into the daily lexicon of businessmen, academics, technocrats and the media. NEPAD, to be sure, is the other acronym given to NAI (New African Initiative), the final culmination of (MAP) 'The Millennium Partnership for the African Recovery Programme' and 'Omega Plan for Africa', initiatives of Mbeki of South Africa and Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal respectively.³ With Nigeria's Obasanjo, Algeria's Bouteflika, and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, the original team, otherwise known now as the 'initiating Presidents' of the African dream of a 'new' Renaissance is assured. I said 'new' because the first suggestions of a re-invention of Africa intellectually sown by the philosopher, Cheikh Anta Diop, politically mooted by Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Patrice Lumumba of Zaire and Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria either failed out of petty rivalries and jealousy or was discredited by political immaturity and interventional conspiracy.

From its highlighted objectives, NEPAD is no doubt a fair textual intention to come to grips with the intractable problems of Africa's underdevelopment, the challenging of the paradox of world-living in which the richness of a continent in resources and heritage equals, in geometric degeneration, unparalleled poverty and denigration. NEPAD is an attempt to activate a relative correctitude in the inequality between all of Africa and the nations of the Northern hemisphere, the so-called First World through partnership, collaboration rather than dependency on aids and volunteerisms; it is also a call to greater closing of ties among nations of the Southern hemisphere. NEPAD is defined as 'a holistic, comprehensive and integrated strategic framework for the socio-economic development of Africa. The NEPAD document provides the vision for Africa, a statement of the problems facing the continent and a Programme of Action to resolve these problems in order to reach the objectives'.⁴ At increasing and encouraging pace, conferences, workshops, interministerial meetings, and binational commissions in the spirit of a new African partnership, have been held⁵; other organizations are working the theme of renaissance into panel sessions especially as the OAU is gradually transforming into the AU, a veritable sign of a political transformation, still forming. But the question to be posed here is: 'where is the nucleus of a real Renaissance in the NEPAD Text?' Or what is absent in NEPAD?

No doubt the document is rich, well articulated with objectives and supplemented with action plans for the 'recovery' and the 'development' of Africa. Its foci and logic are in accurate precision to assure confidence and hope in a gradual, if not swift, recuperation from years of colonial servitude, dependence and dispossession. In presenting the cardinal and natural resources of the continent from which strength of purpose and direction can be pulled, four components are highlighted: the mineral-oil-gas-deposits; the ecological heritage; the paleontological and archaeological potential; and the cultural-artistic heritage.⁶ For Africa

³ The integration of the two documents as the NAI took place in Pretoria on July 2-3, 2001; it was presented and adopted as Declaration 1 (XXXVII) of the OAU Summit in Lusaka, Zambia on July 11, 2001; its final presentation as the NEPAD document was made in Abuja, Nigeria on October 23, 2001.

⁴ Quoted from page 2 of NEPAD Pamphlet; also available on www.nepad.org.

⁵ Perhaps the most crucial of such meetings held recently in April 2002, in Dakar, Senegal; it was titled 'Conference on Financing NEPAD'.

⁶ Page 3 of the NEPAD Document, 2001; further references are to this issue, hereafter called *The Document*.

then, available are the material for scientific development, technological breakthrough, and economic empowerment in the global order. But as it seems, the fourth component, that is the cultural - the artistic and the literary - does not command much contemplation as an important channel to the heart of any continental renaissance that is worth that name. One is tempted to ask "What is a Renaissance, and what has Culture Got to Do with it?"

So succinctly in its preamble, the Document states *inter alia*: "Africa has already made a significant contribution to world culture through literature, music, visual arts and other cultural forms, but its real potential remains untapped because of its limited integration into the global economy." (4) Several pages after this, under the subtitle "Sectoral Priorities," "Culture" is broadly addressed as:

an integral part of development efforts on the continent it is essential to protect and effectively utilise indigenous knowledge that represents a major dimension of the continent's culture, and to share this knowledge for the benefit of mankind. The *New Partnership for Africa's Development* will give special attention to the protection and nurturing of indigenous knowledge, which includes tradition-based literacy, artistic and scientific works, inventions, scientific discoveries, designs, marks, names and symbols, undisclosed information and all other tradition-based innovations and creations resulting from intellectual activity in the industrial, scientific, literary or artistic fields. The term also includes genetic resources and associated knowledge.

(B5, 140; p.35)

In interrogation, it must be noted that of the 204 main paragraphs of the Document, only two refer directly to the importance and function of Culture as a necessary part of the dream of an African Renaissance. Here lies the aporia, the inflexible point of contradiction in the Document and in the vision of NEPAD as conceived. Culture is everything but the cultural. It is everything but nothing close to the cultural re-memorization and reorientation of the African subject and image in people who have long been familiar to being regarded as "third-class" citizens of the world. In this, there are echoes of all that the continent needs for progress (knowledge) but barely any distinctive reference to "actions" or procedures of achieving it. As it were, in statements after statements, and from workshops to other dialogues, the main vision of NEPAD as an economic force of the OAU/AU to engage the industrial world is coming to view.⁷ In a lecture delivered at the University of Copenhagen's Centre of African Studies, Adebayo Olukoshi delineates his critique of NEPAD as an essentially neo-liberal economy and political initiative, suggesting even at the end that "the approach taken to address this need in the NEPAD document does not, however, seem to promise a viable path towards the desired framework."⁸

Thus, as the practical and demonstrative arm of the OAU/AU, NEPAD has fallen into the usual error of such similar initiatives which privilege science and technology over the arts,

⁷ A recent "Work-in-Progress Review Workshop held in Benoni, South Africa (January 24-27), 2002, does not make any direct reference to "Culture" the main issues tabled include "Infrastructure," "Agriculture and Market Access," "Human Development," "Health and Communicable Diseases, Education and Poverty Eradication, and "Capital Flows" also, an analytic commentary by Ravi Kanbur, Professor of Economics at Cornell University predictably but critically discusses the Document within the econometric ordering of what he calls "the four domains of policy" "The New Partnership for Africa's Development: An Initial Commentary," November 2001, <http://www.people.cornell.edu/sk145>.

⁸ A. Olukoshi, "Governing the African Developmental Process: The Challenge of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)." *Occasional Papers*, September 2002, Centre of African Studies, University of Copenhagen, p. 27.

or which think of the cultural as soft, and thereby dispensable or repressible power. Indeed, NEPAD has touched upon the need for the re-invention of the continent in a way that no other document has. Its argument is that with economic power, Africa will be. The analysis of its logic is that prosperity, in ‘partnership’ with the advanced, developed world, can be achieved by virtue of a trinity of resources – a stable economy, a stabilized political system, and a stabilizing technology. I would like to assume, as I guess the proponents of the vision had imagined, that NEPAD is not only about international relations across continents but also it is about relations among African nations. NEPAD is thus to be conceived as the hope to cement communities and nationalities, to overcome limitations, and to connect with and operate viably in a larger global world. And if we must cease taking the declaration in the Document as only a ‘pledge by African leaders’, or as a sacrosanct text for the process of development, then it must be put under serious scrutiny, a simple crucible of cultural interpretation. It is time to be involved in the struggle for the real soul of renascent Africa!

By its structure and its intention, NEPAD is about institutional empowerment, the plan to harness the resources of the continent in the transgression over underdevelopment and search for sustainable growth. The cue words, which embody the idea of NEPAD, include ‘investing’, ‘partnership’, ‘stakeholders’, and ‘packaging’.⁹ These are revealing, ergonomic terms of the Vision as a product, merchandise, or artifact, something to be marketed, to be bartered, possibly. Whereas the idea of economic growth and the attainment of full democratization of governance on the continent is desirable, the lack of/or submergence of real cultural revolution, starting off as radical cultural policies, would continue to point leadership and the people the way of backwardness. What is a scientific, economic or political renaissance without a cultural reawakening? And more problematically, is it possible to legislate a renaissance without the collaboration of a cultural intelligentsia? Writing about Pierre Bourdieu’s *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, Randal Johnson notes the dialectic imperative when he writes that the ‘possession of economic capital does not necessarily imply possession of cultural or symbolic capital, and vice versa’.¹⁰

Closely defined, the ‘cultural’ is the sum total of a nation’s lore, moral and aesthetic values and heritage faithfully reposed in its people, in its artist(e)s, writers, performers, griot(tes) to hold and behold, to reproduce and display, for memory, for posterity and for prosperity. I have searched the over two hundred-paragraph text and I do not find any pound of real specifiable reference or connection to the strategic and catalytic potential of the cultural apart from the two main passages on page 35 the bulk of which is quoted above (B5, 140-1). So where is the writer’s relevance, the philosopher’s stone or the artist’s tenor in this text?

The writer in Africa and its diaspora has always functioned as an unacknowledged conscience and soul of communities and nations; s/he has negotiated a precarious, if not romantic, presence in the building of nations, in the conflicts of states, in the intellectualization of peoples and in the criticisms of policies. In a Fanonist echo, Mahmood Mamdani puts it tellingly in an essay entitled ‘There Can Be No African Renaissance without an Africa-focused Intelligentsia’ where he defines ‘intelligentsia’ as ‘all those who drive

⁹ A new term recently used in advertising a NEPAD conference scheduled to hold at the University of Pretoria, South Africa is ‘unpacking’; this ingenious word provokes the picture of a branded product about to be displayed at an exhibition or auction. By inference, ‘Africa’ thus gets configured as a sprawling asset, a real estate its ‘agents’ leaders - in search of viable ‘brokers’ partners.

¹⁰ Randal Johnson, ed. and intro. Pierre Bourdieu’s *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Columbia UP, 1993. p.7.

forward creative thought and frame debate, whether in the arts or culture, whether in philosophical or social thought and adds that "the locus of identity formation is not just political, it is also cultural and academic."¹¹ The revolutionary aesthetic of the new African state/union cannot be envisioned as a continental political construct without a cultural base; neither can it be imagined as an unproblematic economic system based helplessly on the dictates, coordinates or the endorsement of Western mega-nations. The revolutionary aesthetic of a renascent Africa must begin with the recognition and harnessing of its cultural systems, values, and heritage; its philosophies and its literatures - oral and written, traditional, modern and modernist - must be the inevitable and symbolic basis of the imagined rebirth.

The Document diminishes the conventional drive of the writer/artist as one of the most essential determinant characters of the continent's significance, but instead it foregrounds the politician (statesman to give a classical name), the technocrat, and the economist, as the indispensable agencies of Africa's development. Of course, the apparent insignificance placed on the cultural, the literary, and precisely the writer, stems from the historical misconception of the artist as a mad revolutionary to be feared, a cultural interrogator to be ignored, and at predictable times, the brash (ir)rational voice to be silenced. There exist the strange and real hegemonic tensions between the authority of the artist on the one hand, and on the other hand, the absolutism of the politician, the fatalistic gospelism of the economist and the antiseptic distance of the technician. Ngugi wa Thiong'o speaks about the dialectic oppositional relationship between "Art" and "The State" in postcolonial Africa: The performance space of the artist stands for openness; that of the state, for confinement. Art breaks down barriers between peoples; the state erects them. Art arose out of human struggle to break free of confinement. Art yearns for maximum physical, social, and spiritual space for human action.¹²

And here is the paradox: the devaluation of the cultural started surreptitiously at the inception of colonialism as a confirmation of the "barbaric" African, the Bantu, the native, whose work of art was condemned as idolatrous and too ritualistic to be "artistic" civilization meant the expeditious removal (burning and stealing) of cultural objects and the deprecation of the indigenous artist and the philosopher up till moments of independence. Of course, the devaluation theory has manifested itself in different forms in many African states especially where autocracy and military regimes (and apartheid) had thrived. The cultural - artistic and literary - is therefore a suspicious component of the transformatory project. And since perhaps the Document emphasizes secured and assured investment relations, the cultural had better be put in check. Yet, the cultural is at the centre of Western civilization. Much of classical and Western literary movements and traditions like Romanticism, Expressionism, Cubism and Avant-gardism developed parallel to or as reactions against particular political and social moments in the modern nations of Europe and America; for instance, the golden Renaissance Age of English literature which spawned Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare, or the Beat Generation, the Lost Generation and the Black Arts Movement which produced monumental works of art in the United States were deliberative acts of conscious "nationalistic" artists who operated in peculiar relationships with patrons, cultural institutions and critics of the epoch.

¹¹ Mahmood Mamdani, "There Can Be No African Renaissance without an Africa-focused Intelligentsia." In *African Renaissance*. Ed. Malegapuru William Makgoba. p. 130.

¹² Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998. p. 68.

The problem of the idea of the 'partnership' is that it lacks a measure of critical historical sense. As a result of an overarching mimicry of the West, African failures have been connected simply to bad politics, bad economies and a backward technology; unfortunately, the practical analyst does not recognize the devaluation of the cultural as a crucial reason for a lot of 'disjunctures' in the world-view of (the) African peoples. The road to development does not permit the traffic of the literary, or perhaps the artistic is too ingrained, innate or, to claim the Senghorian primer, too 'proclamatory' in the African that it does not add up to any significant development or modern advancement in the context of globalization. Therefore, the gap provided by the absence of a determinate 'action plan' for a cultural revolution of the continent is truly indicative of the stage of High-colonialism (and false modernity) Africa is in at present time. This is the continent perpetually under explorations of all sorts; the Afro-pessimist would call it 'the continent of discontent' the 'Afro-optimist' might also wonder why we pose such abstractions (or flimsy questions?) about the dialectic of culture and development. But the reality, in spite of so called achievement of democratization, is that this is still a world in which politicians and the crudely political are given primacy over and above the philosopher and the philosophical, the place where artists are reduced to the indignity of dissidents? It must be added that in its clarity, the (NEPAD) Document tends to reduce the cultural and the artistic (not to mention even the literary) into a part of the Tourism project; quartered now into insignificance, 'Culture' is practically safari, is flea-market sales, is airport dance troupe; thinned and ossified, Culture is raffia palm, naked women dancing, initiation rites, and infibulations; reductively, Culture is only the exotic artifact of the voyeur. Is 'culture' not the magical word for everything but nothing? The fount of the new African Renaissance is one which must understand and process Culture ó the artistic and the literary ó as a politically symbolic creative act with a high potential of mobilization for greater breakthrough and achievement in economics, science and technology in Africa for Africans.

Perhaps, it may be considerate to admit that the biggest limitation of the idea of 'the African Renaissance' as it stands now goes back to the process of the making of the NEPAD document as a blueprint for development. The MAP vision of Mbeki, Obasanjo and Bouteflika on the one hand and the Omega Plan of Wade are documents of high diplomacy to engage the industrial North in a game of investments and debt rescheduling. Actually, the original mandate for the MAP vision (and which is the NEPAD's core text) was to confront the burden of Africa's external debt. In very comprehensive terms, the conditions described as 'initiatives' to discuss the chart for sustainable development ó *Peace, Security, Democracy, Economic and Corporate Governance* ó are indicative of such 'conditionalities' as set out by the IMF for adjustment programmes and global partnerships in the 'Third World'. Therefore, in formulating the vision and the project, focus was on the crucial dialogue between African states, the G8 and the Bretton Woods institutions, as it were, between the inveterate debtor and the calculating creditor. And it is for this reason too that the other question must be asked: does the NEPAD seek merely to launch or succumb to a new benevolent process of *recolonization* in the unwitting cloak of an unequal and uncritical 'partnership' with the West? I would add that to lose sight of the cultural imperative is to succumb and encourage the shortsightedness of the political technocrat, to embrace the easy seduction of the essential economist.

What is to be done? The process towards an authentic renaissance begins in cultural representations and transformations; it begins in a concerted formation of sets of cultural policies similar to other declarative policies in the Document; it begins in a sincere focus on the mind before the market; the site of the truest African Renaissance is in the mind from where real decolonization must begin before any international engagement or global

partnerships can bring real benefits to the people. And how else can we attain re-education without prioritizing the cultural, the artistic, and the literary productions of the people as an essential sector of the renaissance? The studies of African histories, geographies, economies and technologies must be prioritized. The deployment of the cultural resources and dynamisms of the continent must be central to the practicalities of the Renaissance whereby added to the vision of economic recovery, there must be a collective will to indigenize the arts, the sciences and technology, and for instance, to deploy Africa's various indigenous knowledges in developing systemic pharmacologies, medicine, architecture, and philosophies as part of the inevitable process of revolutionizing the African mind.

This main argument of this piece was first made by Remi Raji at a conference of political scientists, writers and thinkers in Pretoria, South Africa in 2002.