

THE BEAUTY OF IDENTITY IN AFRICAN CULTURE

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Naked woman, black woman
Clothed with your colour which is life,
with your form which is beauty!
In your shadow I have grown up; the
gentleness of your hands was laid over my eyes (Léopold Sédar Senghor).

In memory of the cultural and identity groups who are suffering from a meaningless sense of life caused by the predominant assimilating policies.

The Issue

Senghor's negritude poem reflects the beauty of original identity in African thoughts. Although the poet praises black women's elegance, in its spirit it asserts the idea that African culture is replete with the sanctity of the community, beauty of the nature, and perfectibility of the nature. Imperative in this culture is a deep mysterious appreciation of beauty striking everyone's heart. "Your beauty strikes me to the heart like the flash of an eagle". This exalted admiration of beauty connotes a spiritual journey touching the inner aspects of the life. "The spiritual song of the Beloved" with her "solemn contralto voice" is not a mere poem entertaining people. Rather, it reflects a deeper view of life around the apprehension of beauty of the beloved. This beauty is more than a word, a phrase, or a slogan. It is a manifestation of one's original identity attained through such a mysterious journey. Rumi, Persian poet says:

*Now the words are over
and the pain they bring is gone.
Now you have gone to rest
in the arms of the Beloved."*

Thinking about what the value of community is, and why communal life must be reckoned with the contemporary life, requires what are the constitutive elements of identity. Reflection on identity in the modern sense of the concept, as it is seen in the non-western cultures including Africa's view of life, cannot be abstracted from the communal context in which people express their identity characteristics. In fact, identity is constructed only in such a communal context where people express themselves. For this reason, the concept of identity is associated with cultural commonalities for self-expression.

This paper argues that the conception of identity is interwoven with people's right to express themselves. Such a connection provides an opportunity for people who suffer from assimilating policies to effectively accelerate the process of their liberation. This process, itself, is tied to the discovery of their original cultural identity. Africa needs to understand its originality, as Senghor beautifully and thoughtfully elaborates.

Identity and its Constituent Elements

In its simplest definition, the notion of identity depends on people's capability to express themselves as to who they are in a range beyond the abstract meaning of individualism. In this definition, identity, in the initial stage of its formation, originates from an attainment of oneself and proceeds towards the actualization of this perception through communication with others at the level of social relations. In fact, identity is not only a reflection of oneself at an individualistic level. Rather, it is a necessary requirement to express such reflection in the social context and in relationships with others. Such a definition of identity is accompanied by indicators and criteria that associate one's perception of oneself with cultural and social differences. For example, personal identity can be associated with ethnicity, race, religion, gender, language, and culture. At the intimate level of self-awareness, individual identity assumes the same, undifferentiated nature. This is why, for example, we say that we are all humans and have the same inherent dignity. This human dignity or value, which cannot be negotiated or bought and sold in the market, must always be respected in all circumstances. Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights presents this basic level of identity definition: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and human dignity. All have reason and conscience and must treat each other in the same spirit; behave brotherly".

It is natural that identity at the individual level is universal and applicable to individual human beings and forms the foundation of the principle of non-discrimination. But in its social dimension, that is, the realisation of individuality in social relations, identity is associated with unique characteristics that are different from the first level. This second level is also explained in the second article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone may, without distinction of any kind, in particular as to race, colour, sex, language, religion, belief, or any other opinion, as well as origin, national or social, wealth, birth, or any other status, enjoy all the rights and all the freedoms mentioned in this declaration". Identity is understood through the connection of these two cognitive dimensions, individual and social.

Therefore, the constituent elements of identity can be defined by referring to three questions. "Who am I" and "how do I know who I am"? The answer to this question requires an intimate touch with one's unknown attained selfhood. This contact make sense through an inner dialogue with oneself, whereby the self tries to discover oneself. This inner (intuitive)

dialogue with oneself is the first stage in attaining one's selfhood, hence has an internal nature and impartial subjective individualism. According to Rousseau, at this level of attaining one's selfhood, the goal is only to perceive and feel one's being in order to find peace with oneself; a feeling that includes the sweetest and vital aspect of human being.

Le sentiment de l'existence dépouillé de toute autre affection est par lui-même un sentiment précieux de contentement et de paix qui suffiroit seul pour rendre cette existence chère et douce à qui sauroit écarter de soi toutes les impressions sensuelles et terrestres qui viennent sans cesse nous en distraire et en troubler ici bas la douceur. (Rousseau, 2012, 428).

There is a phenomenological interdependence tied with this sense of oneself, which is not still developed in the direction of becoming a social person in the outer space. This means that the inner self-perception reflects attainment of the selfhood without a social direction. The self is not yet placed in the horizon of group and collective meanings and values. This primary stage in understanding "who I am" lacks a historical dimension. I know only myself from within, and I attained my selfhood only, while not able to expand it to the social life. This is a primary theoretical "me" very far away for an "I" as part of a "we". This attainment of oneself assumes an impartial status free from moral and judgment about others since it has not still been able define itself as a social person. Such moral impartiality carries its connotation for the life in all moments and horizons. In fact, it is a human characteristic that is consistent with an intuitive feeling, but it is still far from being embodied in a social identity. Rousseau interprets this effort to perceive and feel as "self-love" and considers it a natural feeling and necessary for the authenticity and reliability of individual perception because it is an innate and primary feeling that always accompanies human beings (Rousseau, 2010, 363). This is as if a voice from the depths of the silence calls one to a sincere and direct concern for self-understanding.

Persian mystical literature is replete with this intimate dialogue with oneself and calls empathy; an inner co-linguism in the mystical sense of the term. Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi, for example, says "Sharing the same heart is better than sharing the same tongue." or says "Stop the words now. Open the window in the center of your chest, and let the spirits fly in and out."

The second question pertaining to identity is: "Where I am"? This question guides us to delve into another constituent element of identity to know how to pass from one's inner attainment of selfhood toward the construction of social identity. In this move away from inner to outer layers of identity formation, the dialogue with oneself also switches towards a social dialogue with other selves; better to say a social dialogue.

This dialogue calls an active presence by the self at the heart of social interactions and binds him to a certain rights and responsibilities. In fact, with this dialogue, which takes place at a higher level than the intimate contact with oneself, individuality is dressed as a social actor

and elevates the inner selfhood to an outer interactive personhood as the complementary constituent element of identity. While in the first intimate dialogue the one seeks to attain one's selfhood and the inner discovery of oneself, in the outer dialogue, cultural identity and social characteristics are constructed, consequently the social personhood is formed and recognized. The first one is a direct and intuitive relationship with oneself, while the second one is a relationship with others to define and stabilize one's social position. At the individualistic level of dialogue, a person calls himself for his perception through a deeply internal and valid attitude. At the social level, this perception or self-discovery is achieved through interaction with others. At this second level, the potential characteristic of the individual is realized so that it can improve its inner talents as a social and continuously evolving being. It is for this reason that the second level of dialogue is an inevitable tool for the flourishing of individuality, and in better words, the formation of social identity.

Considering this move, one can approach a better understanding of the relationship between the sense of oneself and its social realization, and then, the evaluation of oneself with the social interlocutors in a joint horizon of meaning. This evolutionary stage in the development and construction of identity leads one from the direct field of dialogue with oneself to the definition and establishment of a concept of life through interaction with others, and in fact, it promotes the hypothetical "me", a disengaged self, to the presence of an interactive "I" which is part of a "we". As Ortega puts it, the one becomes oneself and others. (Ortega, 1969). Through this joint horizon of meanings and values with interlocutors, social identity is created; the self turns to be a socially constructed person and one's selfhood develops into a dialogical personhood. Indeed, this is a fundamental feature of human life that presents oneself as an inherently dialogical being and provides oneself with a true sense of being human.

The move from a pure and subjective sense of selfhood to development of personhood, transforms one's ability to act socially, accept roles, hold rights and bear responsibilities, and builds the foundations of social identity. In this definition of identity, human beings are to be considered inherently dialogical beings who transform their individuality into social identity through interaction with their interlocutors in the horizon of the shared meanings and values. This feature of dialogical being does not conflict with one's ability to express oneself authentically and in the original sense of being but is a fundamental and undeniable aspect of realization one's potential. Indeed, beyond the attainment of the sense of its selfhood in its originality, one can express oneself authentically if there is framework of interlunation through which one believes and can truly act as a social being. Through this framework, the sense of oneself, the selfhood, is extended to a social personhood, and a common space is created, where people not only recognize each other as the interlocutors, but also acknowledge the differences that characterize them. The existential dignity of man is aware of this omnipresent personality because this characteristic is the characteristic of human perception.

The third question raised is: “Where should I go”? The response to this question constitutes the third element in the definition of identity. This element reflects the mediating cultural explanation, which is related to the people's orientation in understanding common values in the very horizon of interlocution in the social context. Social life requires one to be in an interactive relationship with one's fellows to not only a proper understanding of oneself and the interlocutors is achieved, but also an opportunity is created to define an appropriate and constructive framework for a meaningful life. Therefore, the concept of identity cannot be defined solely based on individualistic grounds and cut from the social context, because even the authentic knowledge of oneself, which forms the foundations of human rights in its contemporary sense, cannot be independent of the field of social interactions. Therefore, the formation of social identity assumes a fluid nature and changes according to the requirements of the public sphere and its needs.

For this reason, it is not possible to abstract people from the social context and its requirements, or to put the immediate intuitive perception of one's originality in contrast with the collective and a consensus-based understanding of oneself. Human life cannot be understood solely from the point of view of intimate perception of oneself. Nor its realization can be reduced to representative systems, because a large part of the concept of human being depends on the individual's beliefs which are part of a more inclusive and organic whole, i.e., reliance on the "we". "Human beings are members of one body...".

Identity in the Global Community

The three elements that make up identity brings about a fourth question to the fore: "In which time horizon can social identity be maintained?" The answer to the question is more related to the second and third elements of the definition of identity. This means that if evolving the intimate dialogue with oneself is supposed to pave the way for the construction of personhood, its realization depends on the framework of the shared values in which everyone can enjoy the inherent value and the rights included in it. This social evolution empowers selves to express themselves in line with the shared norms and values in the horizon of meaning in which the framework of interlocution of actualized.

In fact, talking about a field beyond one's perception requires social conditions in which a person can play roles that lead to the formation of social life independently and in accordance with their own will and capabilities. In other words, the time horizon for the realization of social identity is associated with the enjoying the basic rights and freedoms of people providing them with the opportunity and motivation to choose. This is the condition provided to members of different frameworks of interlocution, horizons of meanings, cultural identities, and communal setting in which they can express themselves differently. As a matter of fact, in the current context of global community, the questions of "who I am", "where I am", and "where I am going" has become inextricably linked with the question of

"who I, as a member a larger we, am ". This "we" cannot be abstracted from the horizon of meaning through which the “we” constructs and express itself.

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