

Attempts to create an Inter-ethnic and Inter-generational 'National Culture' in Kenya

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The last several years in Kenya have been particularly traumatic. There was a Presidential election in December 2007, preceded by a campaign in which the ethnic divisions of Kenya played a big role (as usual), pointing to the fact that divisions persist that hinder Kenyan citizens' national unity. About 1,300–1,500 people died in the violence in the immediate aftermath of that election, and around 300,000 were internally displaced. Additionally, there was also a disputed outcome to that election, and the interference of the international community (including African elder statesmen like Kofi Annan) who told Kenyans of all ethnicities and political stripes that they had to live together, and work together in a power sharing arrangement at the level of government, in order to avoid civil war and bloodshed. They authored *Acting Together for Kenya: Agreement on the Principles of Partnership of the Coalition Government*, in which they emphasized the need for partnership and reform. Many Kenyans were frustrated at the imposition of such a solution (which they think should have instead been resolved by a more accurate vote count, or a second election). In addition to the practical problems that come with lack of effective governance (such as corruption, police violence, incompetent courts, lack of services provided for citizens), the underlying problems have not been resolved. The perennial problem of Kenyan identity and national harmony remains unresolved (Presbey 2003, 2002b; Makokha 2009; Houreld 2009; Baldauf and Crills 2008; Reuters 2008; Bengali 2008).

There is some good news insofar as a recent August 2010 referendum vote for a new Constitution was conducted mostly peacefully. Much of that was due to extensive work building community after the election violence. As Mike Pflanz of the Christian Science Monitor explains, 'Hundreds of organizations, funded with millions of dollars from within and outside Kenya, ran workshops in village squares, organised meetings in church halls, and arranged peace programming on local FM radio stations' (Pflanz 2010). As Rev. Maritim arap Rirei, an Anglican Community Services Officer from Eldoret, explained, 'We gathered people from all communities [tribes], we called meetings of ordinary people, we focused on ways to show that only unity and peace will bring growth to Kenya' (in Pflanz 2010). While the recent news is good, it is a sign that one must always be vigilant and pro-active in order to discourage ethnic animosity before it can grow and become dangerous.

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The challenges of building community based on a common identity that also respects differences have two different kinds of chasms to cross. There is the division of ethnic groups, already alluded to, and there is also the generational gap. Can contemporary young Kenyans build community, coming to common understanding with their forebears on issues such as value and identity? This is not a new problem. It has in fact been a key theme ever since the 1960s when Kenya had just gained its independence. It has often been expressed as the need to develop a common Kenyan 'national culture.' This is a theme that has been explored by many Kenyans. After a survey including Okot p'Bitek, Frantz Fanon, Bethwell Ogot and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's contribution to the topic in the context of the 1960s and 70s, I will then go on to discuss the contribution of Kenyan philosophy professor Henry Odera Orika, who was greatly influenced by the ongoing discussions regarding national culture when he began his sage philosophy project – a project he clearly described as being able to play a role in the creation of Kenyan national culture. Chaungo Barasa has continued this project. I will move on to survey how current academics in Kenya are working to describe and forge national values as a meaningful alternative to ongoing Kenyan government endeavors to promote culture as a tourist commodity.

Introduction to national culture

But first, some definitions. What is culture, and what is national culture? Kenyan oral literature specialist Naomi Kipury draws on a series of definitions of 'Culture' to explain that 'culture is a weave that keeps society together,' and it includes norms and models of behavior, thoughts and beliefs, as well as works of art and literature (both oral and written), performances, ceremonies, languages, and in general 'tools by which we adapt to the physical environment' (Kipury 2002). For Okot p'Bitek, the Ugandan writer who spent many years at University of Nairobi (1971–1982), 'Culture is philosophy as lived and celebrated in a society.' He criticized the idea that culture might be understood as apart from the way of life of a people. He thought Western society marginalized culture by considering it something to be performed in theatres and to be bought and sold. He thought that African Ministries of Culture encouraged an impoverished view of culture that catered to tourists. P'Bitek wanted to emphasize the social philosophy aspect of culture (p'Bitek 1986: 13).

Why is culture so important? P'Bitek explains that culture shapes people's ideas and influences people's actions. A ruler who relies on threats and force has a difficult job getting people to comply. The artist's approach is different. By using music, song, dance, and other media, the artist conveys an idea which motivates people. Instead of using law to frighten people into behaving well, the artist (and here he does not intend an elitist idea of the artist) conveys moral guidance in a way that is riveting to his listeners. P'Bitek quotes Charles Davis who said that 'An author, if he is big enough, can do so much for his fellow men. He can put words in their mouths and reason into their heads; he can fill their sleep with dreams so potent that when they awake they will go on living them' (in p'Bitek 1986: 39).

Since culture can be so powerful, there has been a concern that colonial powers have destroyed African cultures, and that Africans have either been forced or encouraged to give up their cultures, or they have internalized disdain for their own cultures and therefore cooperated with their deterioration. Such deference to Western culture goes hand in hand with being politically dominated. At the same time, adopting the culture of the West has not been easy. Also while Western culture may have seemed an improvement to some Africans who first embraced it, it has as many or more shortcomings as it does good points. Coextensive with the political movements for independence have come the struggles over African culture and identity.

A key source for understanding the ‘national culture’ emphasis in newly independent African states is Frantz Fanon’s chapter ‘On National Culture’ in his famous work, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon first presented his ideas at a conference in 1959. Colonialism not only exploited but also degraded Africans, by suggesting that their cultures were backward and savage. Progress lay in forgetting the traditions and customs of the past and taking on European ways as a new universalism. Fanon follows the stages of the ‘native intellectual’ who first embraces Western culture and ideas, but upon later realizing that such an embrace contains within it an unbearable criticism of his or her own identity, decides to cast off the trappings of Western culture and instead champion their own roots. By showing that their own history and culture are as good as or better than those of Europe, they intended to shock their colonial masters and noncooperate with a system of subjugation.

Fanon goes on to point out the incredible ambiguities that accompany the project of the native intellectual to revive the past glorious history of their country, and to create art and literature expressing a national culture. The native intellectual is already in some ways cut off from his or her own people, and so is trying to recapture something they have already personally lost. Their attempts to refashion the national culture by retrieving parts of a ruined past are always clouded with the tools and perspectives gained by Western education. Also, colonial structures have already done great damage to the previously existing culture, so they are trying to revive something that is already gone. There is indeed a need to create a new national culture that builds on the old but adapts to current contexts. Fanon thinks this national culture is created by the people in the midst of their struggle for independence, a new birthing in which the native intellectual can take part, but he or she will not necessarily be the main agent of this creation (Fanon 2004: 145–180).

It was around this time, in the 1940s and 50s, when key thinkers, who would soon become activists in the African movements for independence, devoted themselves to writing ethnographic works on their people. For example, Jomo Kenyatta spent 1931–46 in England, during which time he attended the London School of Economics and wrote a thesis on Kikuyu customs and traditions, *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938). As Simon Gikandi explains (2002: 161), the book is a restorative narrative in which Kenyatta’s goal was ‘not only to reaffirm the African values in the same way the African ethnographers had done, but also to challenge and revise the biased image of Africa they encountered in the colonial archives and the fictions of white narratives, most notably Karen Blixen and Elspeth Huxley, while at the same time appropriating those positive values and systems that modernity had bestowed on the continent.’

Paulin Hountondji thought that ‘national culture’ was manipulated by despotic African rulers to subjugate people. In his recent book he explains how his experience of teaching at a university in Kinshasa in 1970 during the reign of Mobutu soured him to the idea of promoting a national culture. As he explained, ‘Nowhere more than in Zaire had I felt this collusion between cultural nationalism and dictatorship. Nowhere had I seen power take such massive recourse, and so openly, to traditional “philosophy” to justify or hide its worst excesses, its most atrocious violations of human rights. By appealing to Zaireans to be themselves, and to reclaim a threatened cultural identity, the “philosophy of authenticity,” the state’s official doctrine, managed to reduce this identity to the most superficially and abjectly folkloristic level.’ (Hountondji 2002: 111–112). African tradition was called upon to insist that any criticism of one’s leader was not authentically African, and dissenters were jailed. Hountondji then explained that he saw a direct connection between Mobutu’s philosophy of authenticity and the practice of ethnophilosophy (ibid.: 113).

While Hountondji only mentioned Mobutu, we could look at the examples of Kenyatta and Daniel arap Moi, and show some concern that they had each created and perpetuated single party states in which they wanted no challengers to themselves or their power. Each rejected multiparty

paradigms stating that such competitive democratic setups were not part of African tradition, whereas single parties would be devoted to the common good of all the people. We could say with the benefit of hindsight that they manipulated concepts of unity and community to serve themselves.

What were the trends in Kenya at the time? Kenyan historian Bethwell Ogot says that at the time of independence, the government wanted to encourage national unity. Since there are 42 ethnic groups in Kenya, and since the inherited borders of Kenya were due to European arbitrariness, it was a real challenge to get Kenyans to feel devoted to the nation. Lack of national feeling could degenerate into a tribal solidarity that would make Kenya ungovernable. As Ogot explains, the 1950s and 60s were a time when Kenyans wanted 'cultural decolonization' so as to escape a destructive colonial heritage and create a new social order. Government leaders saw African cultural heritage as a vehicle for promoting national unity. In 1965 the University of Nairobi started the Institute for Development Studies. It originally had two parts, Social Sciences and Culture. The latter was turned into the Institute for African Studies in 1970. The Ministry of Culture and Social Services devoted itself to collecting material culture from 1977–82. Finally in 1981 the Ministry of Higher Education added Oral Literature as a subject in secondary school. Others like Okot p'Bitek approved but cautioned that oral literatures should not be presented as from the dead past (Ogot 1995: 217–220, 230).

Some Kenyan critics thought that emphasizing oral literature was introducing 'tribalism' into the curriculum. There needs to be a way to study the cultures of ethnic groups while not promoting a narrow ethnicity. The goal would be for all Kenyans to become culturally literate about and proud of their country's many cultures. But it is not easy to imagine what 'Kenyan' culture is apart from its aggregate cultures.

But whether national unity requires appreciation of differences or forging new commonalities is debated. For example, the role of KiSwahili as a national language has been, while mostly widely popular, somewhat controversial. While it serves as an antidote to dependence on English and other European languages, it tends to minimize the role of the various other 'mother tongues' in Kenya and the other countries (like neighboring Tanzania) that have embraced it as a national language. M.M. Mulokozi (2007) is concerned that nowadays Tanzanian parents would rather send their children to English-speaking schools, because they think it will give their children more economic opportunity. He bemoans the re-emergence of *kasumba* or slavish aping of Westerners that was so roundly defeated in Tanzania in the 1960s. He thinks such backtracking on KiSwahili as a national and international language is due to the lack of a strong national economy which then becomes dominated by foreigners.

Novelists and African intellectuals have pondered in recent decades the dilemma of the African who has been exposed to Western ideas, perhaps in their education, but who tries with difficulty to synthesize the two seemingly divergent value systems in their own lives. Ogot (1995: 230–232) suggests that the only way for such a person to overcome alienation is through a 'homecoming.' But in the meantime, those who have stayed home may not be comfortable with the traditions there. Cultures are supposed to be living and flexible, but if they have in fact become stagnant, what can be done with them?

No discussion of national culture in Kenya could be complete without a discussion of the contribution of Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o to the debate. While Okot p'Bitek had emphasized the ways in which colonial thinking had distorted and reified African cultures, Ngugi added to this concern how the postcolonial African state manipulated African culture for its own ends. Simon Gikandi (2001: 60) has explained that Ngugi as well as other East African writers were introduced to Fanon's ideas while they were at Leeds in England. Patrick Williams' discussion of the author

notes that Ngugi mentions ‘culture’ in almost every book of essays, either in a chapter or section title, with a constant theme being that Kenyans should create their own culture. Williams’ thorough essay (1999) is an important complement to a study of the topic.

Henry Odera Oruka and sage philosophy

A contemporary of Ngugi’s at the University of Nairobi was philosophy professor Henry Odera Oruka, well known for his proposing the sage philosophy project, which involved going into the rural areas and interviewing rural elders, thereby writing down what he characterized as ‘oral philosophizing’ (Oruka 1991; Presbey 2007, 2002a). Odera Oruka (deceased 1995) had received much of his education in philosophy in a Practical Philosophy curriculum at Uppsala University in Sweden. There he learned to emphasize the importance of addressing contemporary social problems from a philosophical perspective, with the emphasis of putting good ideas to work. Oruka’s sage philosophy project, to be fruitful and relevant, has to avoid the pitfalls of a politically reactionary use of ethnophilosophy, such as the kind described earlier by Hountondji, while still championing useful insights into African traditions. Oruka wrote about the disappointment and danger involved in failed independent governments of Africa which replaced colonial rule with another kind of unfreedom (Oruka 1996: 99–107). Oruka’s own idea of the role of philosophy was critical and evaluative, focusing on the deliberating responsible individual.

While Odera Oruka began interviewing the elderly in the rural areas, it is important to emphasize that he did not plan for his project to be limited to the elderly and rural only, but that it should start there because there was a danger of losing the ideas of the elderly upon their deaths, and he knew that their insights were being marginalized by the colonial-structured University system and Western-style governments. What many may not know is that Oruka described one of the key goals of his project as helping to build a Kenyan national culture. There was a research proposal which I had first heard about when F. Ochieng’-Odhiambo (2002) mentioned it. Since then I have received an undated copy of the unpublished proposal. In his 2002 article, Ochieng’-Odhiambo said that Oruka wrote the proposal in 1979 (2002: 29), but later he changed the date to 1976 (see Ochieng’-Odhiambo 2006: 21). I think Ochieng’-Odhiambo’s first date of 1979 is most likely accurate, since the proposal mentions events that happened in 1977 and proposes to begin research in 1980. In this proposal, Oruka explained that by studying the cultures of certain ethnic groups and/or regions of Kenya, the project could help to formulate a national culture by finding threads of commonalities in the philosophies of the differing Kenyan cultures. If Kenyans from different ethnic groups would become conversant with a common heritage of wise persons from a variety of ethnic groups beyond their own, and regard these wise persons as a common heritage, then the sage philosophy project would have succeeded in its goal of forging a sense of common identity as Kenyans.

In his unpublished proposal entitled ‘The Philosophical Roots of Culture In Western Kenya’ he begins by noting: ‘To some people culture is no more than music and dance. But culture really has many facets. One of them is philosophical and it is the most fundamental facet ... Culture like any other practice always requires a justification, a philosophy. If culture is taken, as I shall treat it, as a general way of life of people, then to talk of the philosophy of a people’s culture is to talk of the basic reasons justifying the people’s general way of life. And for anyone to argue that culture needs no philosophy is to admit that there is no need for any people to justify and intellectually defend their way of life’ (Oruka n.d.: 1–2). He gives the example of current Kenyan practices of harambee (fundraising) needing philosophical justification.

He explains to his readers that not every political state has a unifying national culture. He claims that developing a national culture is a way of defending one’s nation from the ‘invasion by foreign

ideas' which cannot be stopped by guns but instead must be combated on the level of ideas. (ibid.: 5). He follows with examples that illustrate this idea of cultural invasion. In contemporary Kenya, he is worried that 'worship' of technology is eroding moral decision making in Kenya, as people jump to the conclusion that if something can be done technologically, then it is moral to do so. He gives a concrete example of Kenyans modifying their looks in search of a certain standard of beauty through the use of technology. He is also concerned that love between a man and a woman is no longer spiritual, but has become based upon material possessions, and marriage is considered a stepping stone to personal enrichment (ibid.: 6). Oruka bemoans the fact that African traditional morality was already eroded by European colonialism, and their replacements, Christianity and Islam, are incapable of standing up to the cultural erosion of values.

Odera Oruka then tackles a problem of the other extreme – those who hold negritude-like ideas about Africans not engaging in detached and rational mental activity, because they are caught up in the immediacy of bodily experience and emotions of the performing arts. He complained that when he attended the FESTAC II (The Second World Black and African Festival of the Arts and Culture) in Lagos, in January 1977, and each country staged its traditional arts including song and dance, the performers did not give any background that would have helped the audience to understand the philosophy behind the movements. It was this lack that partly provided the impetus for his suggestion that further research needed to be done, to investigate and 'unearth' the philosophical principles that lie behind cultural practices. His study would focus on regions rather than ethnicities because he wanted to focus on ideas which are 'inter-ethnic' to help in 'cementing national unity' (ibid.: 8). In Western Kenya, he asserted, there has always been much cross-cultural mingling and borrowing. Through prolonged discussions with sages where they are asked about the justifications for cherished cultural practices, for example those related to marriage, funerals, religious practices, law and punishment, a clearer idea of the value of the practices will be recorded. He hoped that his regional study would be complemented by other regional studies so as to develop a Kenyan national culture. He proposed that this research could be carried out from 1980–1982. It is not clear from the document who it was submitted to or whether it had been approved.

Works similar to those that Odera Oruka had been envisioning were not wholly absent. Regarding his own ethnic group, the Luo, a Kenyan anthropologist, A. B. C. Ocholla-Ayayo had just published in 1976 through Uppsala a detailed work called *Traditional Ideology and Ethics among the Southern Luo*. The book claimed to find Luo ideology and ethics not just in direct verbal expressions, but implicit in aspects of their lives such as in the religious practices and social relationships, legal systems and political and economic behavior (Ocholla-Ayayo 1976: 11–12). But Oruka's approach was different. He wanted to engage in deliberate reflection and thinking on meaning, not to deduce what was a probable rationale for observed behavior. That is why he insisted on engaging sages in deep conversations about the topics.

Oruka's works on sage philosophy have evaluating the traditional culture as one of its main themes. Oruka cannot agree with abandoning the traditional culture wholesale to take on foreign ways, because that makes an illegitimate presumption that foreign ways are always better. In some cases the African tradition may be more fair, just and rational than a European belief or practice. So, he thinks evaluations should be made on a case by case basis. But he is not an advocate of enshrining the African past as if it were perfect. He himself criticizes many sages for holding views which he thinks are denigrating to women, for example.

Elders, due to their great experience, often counsel caution, and that emphasis on caution can seem conservative. For example, Sultan Somjee promotes the ideas of a wise Kenyan sage called Mzee Ababuya Afoka, of the Munyoyaya community of Tana River. His ethnic group has the tortoise as its totem animal, and Afoka explains that the tortoise withdraws when disturbed, and

patiently waits until danger passes (Somjee 2001) One can imagine that today's folks who want to cruise the information superhighway would not like the tortoise as their mascot; even bus companies use the greyhound (racing dog) as their emblem. Is admiring the tortoise hopelessly out of date? Still, Somjee quotes Afoka as going on to say that both customs and authorities enforcing customs and laws change, and that they change together – either the change in custom forces a change in authority, or vice versa.

In an article he wrote in 1991 called 'A Philosophical Conception of Cultural Development,' later published posthumously in *Practical Philosophy: In Search of an Ethical Minimum* (1997), Odera Oruka pointed out the negative effects in Kenya of members of an ethnic group thinking their own convictions and beliefs are 'noble' while those of other ethnic groups are 'absurd' (1997: 192). Problems of attitudes like these within Kenya have been compounded by the international scene and past colonial encounters which dismissed Kenyan cultural traditions as morally inferior. And yet Europeans promoted a value system that over-emphasized economic and technological development, even using military might to subdue others (robbing them of their freedom and dignity) in order to pursue material gain. A more humble and fair approach would be for each culture to patiently learn from others, engaging in cultural exchange and deepening cross-cultural understanding.

A further sage philosophy study which attempts to apply the insights gained from sage philosophy to the topic of a new national culture for Kenya is written by Chaungo Barasa, who helped Oruka conduct his sage philosophy interviews, and was included in Oruka's book as the youngest sage. He argues that cultural practices need to be connected to consistent thoughts and belief systems. He suggests Kenyans must re-examine their lives and cultures in five areas: the intersection/harmonization of tradition and modernity; death and burial ceremonies; marriage and inheritance; inter-family and clan relations, and leadership and role-modeling. All of this can be attained with the help of sage philosophy, which encourages people to pursue wisdom and reflect on their beliefs. The family teaches moral behavior; however, in Kenya's modern families (making up about 35% of the population), there is a lack of morality. 'Modern' Kenyans hold a flawed concept of modernity, equating it with European culture and religion, and their understanding of that culture is rudimentary and incoherent. The modern Kenyan also has a stunted understanding of indigenous cultures and traditions; in its place are materialism, and consumerism, and status. They barely mask their distaste for rural folk and environment; yet they engage in gender oppression which is contradicting modernity. Also, modern Kenyans are easily manipulated and bought by various politicians. Such a description shows that philosophical reflection upon tradition is mandatory in order for society to become productive and coherent (Chaungo 2002).

Contemporary Kenya

Now, in the twenty-first century, African countries have their political independence, but true freedom is still far away. Many problems plague current African states, both from without (their role in the global economy still dominated by former colonial powers) and within (ethnic strife). Does it make sense to say that a project of national culture is still helpful? Naomi Kipury, in the context of discussions on 'constitution-making' in 2001 reflected that Kenyans are no longer sure that they are supposed to respect their cultures. She states baldly, 'We do not have a national culture.' There has been a long history of cultural suppression. Politicians are banned from wearing traditional dress in Parliament, and Judges, even in 'independent' Kenya, must wear the British wigs. When people think of Kenyan culture, she says, they think of matatu culture, kitu kidogo, corruption, and police harassment. She said (in 2002) that the semblance of cohesion in Kenya is fragile, and there

are constant threats of ethnic conflict. Recent events in Kenya seem to have confirmed her fears. Still, in this very context Kipury (2002) thinks that 'awareness of our origins and experiences and beliefs that have molded us' are important preconditions for enabling Kenyans to make the decisions of which practices to keep and continue, and which to leave behind. Also, pride in one's own culture will help one to empathize with others' pride in their respective cultures. Therefore, cultural pluralism does not have to lead to ethnic strife, but rather a better unity.

In 2004 three Kenyan MPs (Ministers of Parliament) were banned from entering Parliament because they were wearing Agbadas, a Nigerian dress. Rules say that MPs must wear a suit and tie. The fact that MPs could be ejected for such a reason so many years after independence encouraged the government to join with Unilever Kenya to create a National dress. Since the 1980s there had been a national dress competition overseen by Margaret Atumu Gould (who had worked with the Ministry of Culture and Social Services as well as the Kenya Tourism Foundation). The only problem seems to be that the new national dress, which was unveiled in October 2004, is too expensive for most Kenyans to buy. So it is mostly bought by *mzungu* (mainly tourists). Kenyans continue to wear *mitumba* (second-hand clothing from the US and Europe) (BBC News 2004, Mail and Guardian 2004).

All the emphasis on 'national dress' might get us waylaid into thinking that culture is primarily a case of material artifacts. A recent UNESCO Convention document written in 2003, which Kenya has signed, refers to protecting 'intangible cultural heritage' which includes languages, oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, craftsmanship, and 'knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe' (UNESCO 2003). This Convention emphasizes that culture involves beliefs and ways of life as much or more than created objects that we would call works of art. So, can we say in our modern world that there is a Kenyan way of life? Or should Kenyan national culture entail knowledge of varieties of beliefs and practices among a variety of Kenyans, with tolerance of and pride in differences?

Several authors who came together recently to write a book on civic education took upon themselves the task of trying to articulate Kenyan national values. The occasion for such an articulation was a survey of the continued political strife that Kenya had been experiencing from colonial days through the successive governments of Jomo Kenyatta, Daniel arap Moi and Mwai Kibaki. Headed by UNESCO Chair at the University of Nairobi, Mary Omosa, this team of development professors, a sociologist and a philosopher got funding for their study from UNESCO as well as the Ford Foundation, and they put together what they call a 'training manual' for civic education. The manual begins with reflections on national core values, seen as the foundation for any evaluation of current politics and political activism to follow. It begins by outlining key universal moral values which it suggests Kenyans should also uphold, which are: hard work; prudence; discipline; integrity and justice. I find it somewhat interesting that a book which purports to outline 'universal' values leads with hard work as the first value (possibly suggesting that it is the most important value).

Omosa's book also explains that nationalism and patriotism are values. One should love and be loyal to one's country and defend that country from ridicule or contempt. Nationalists engaged in self-sacrifice and discipline in order to free Kenya from the colonizers. It suggests that Kenyans who fight today's problems of corruption and injustice are also 'nationalists' (Omosa et al. 2006: 6).

The book goes on to question whether there is such a thing as Kenyan national core values. While the lack of articulation of these values had led to crises in governance, the authors think that the core values can be articulated. Then, if people internalize these values, they can demand more ethical actions from their rulers. The values are gleaned from 'cultural values, government publications, leaders' verbal discourses,' although it is admitted that politicians often fall short in living up

to their own stated values (*ibid.*). The list includes core values in Kenyan culture and tradition that are considered to be helpful for the current political crisis. Here is the list of Kenyan values from their book, in three categories according to where the values had been found (*ibid.*: 4–6):

Values from Culture & Tradition: Hospitality; Generosity to others; Truthfulness and honesty in public and private lives; Parenthood or full family life; Love for children; Respect for the elderly; Respect for women; Wealth creation; Working hard. 2. Values from Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965: Social justice; Equitable distribution of national resources; Equity irrespective of race, colour, religion or creed; Human dignity to live a full, satisfying and respectable life; Absence of poverty and deprivation; Nation building; Unity in diversity; Mutual social responsibility; Self-reliance. 3. Values Common to most Political Party Manifestos: Zero-tolerance to corruption; Wealth and employment creation; Nation building; Self-reliance; Working hard; Social justice; Respect for labour; Unity in diversity; Equality; Human dignity; Truthfulness; Self-esteem.

One can almost feel the performativity in creating such a list. The list is gleaned from observation. These traits are said to be there, already. But by cataloging and repeating them, there is also an attempt to reinforce them, to advocate for them, to bring them into being.

The list, and the book, does not go into the question of whether there are traditional values that would make governance more difficult or less just. But it is just such a problem of evaluation that Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye explores in two of his books, *African Cultural Values* (1996) and *Tradition and Modernity* (1997). Gyekye thinks that traditional values are important for contemporary Africa. He catalogues many positive features and values of African societies such as emphasis on family, humanity and brotherhood. But he thinks that excessive deference to ancestors has stifled the innovation needed for modern Africa (Gyekye 1996: 171–178).

Painstaking evaluation of various aspects of traditions seems to be a necessary task for African societies. Purposeful exploration of values like the chapter in Omosa's book is a good start. But without constructing a Kenyan identity and culture, the vacuum will be filled by foreign imports. An account of this cultural invasion, with wry humor and comments on the recent elections in Kenya, was made in an editorial by Buri Edward in *The Nation* (May 18, 2008):

Due to the economic affluence and political influence of the West, it has become a kind of centre of gravity that sucks Africans towards it. With the overwhelming presence of Western ways in Africa's televisions, kitchens, wardrobes, classrooms, offices, political ideologies and economic systems 'African ways' have been infested and weakened. So corrosive is the invasion that one need not travel to Europe or America to experience and gain Western culture. This acute presence of the West in Africa is nurturing a generation that can sadly but correctly be described as non-Western Westerners. Politically, we propagate an ideology whose spare parts are available only in the West. Once a country adopts a democratic government, then the service contracts of governance automatically go to the West. Such was the case following the disputed elections where emissaries or 'political engineers' from the West were dispatched to fix the complication. But there is ample evidence that, as potent as it is, democracy will not settle well in the African dynamic without contextualization. Without making it work for our specific needs, our people will continue to suffer in its name and die in its blind spots.

While this passage insists that democracy is valuable, it also notes that the 'transplant' of a foreign system has not yet taken good root in its new context. The need for cultural synthesis, through articulating and promoting values, is apparent.

While not mentioned yet, it is important to note that narrations of nationalism can be helpful (in providing unity) or hurtful (in that they exclude others from the story of the nation). Homi K. Bhabha explored this quandary in his book *Nation and Narration* (1990). Bhabha put forward the

thesis that nations are temporal, transitional social realities. They come into being by narrations, which are interpretations of events. The language used in such narrations thus becomes performative: the nation comes into being through being talked about. This performative narration is ambivalent, insofar as it both produces, creates, forges and guides as well as subordinates, fractures and defuses what has happened in history, in order to create its narrative. Bhabha prefers to situate his account of the role of narration in between two poles, each of which he considers extreme: one the one hand, Foucault and Bakhtin's functionalist accounts of nation as the ideology of state power, and on the other hand, nation as based on national popular sentiment or memory of 'the people' (Bhabha 1990: 2–3.) Bhabha is cautious about nationalism since it can be abused (and I share his caution). The idea of the 'Nation' and the emphasis of 'out of many, one' could go too far and end up in totalitarianism. The idea of 'the people' is a rhetorical strategy. Who gets to describe or speak for 'the people'? (Bhabha 1994; Makos 1995). This should lead us to be cautious when we say that we are going to try to build a national culture. We want to build a national culture to the extent that Kenyan citizens, for example, can act in concert for their common good while still respecting their internal differences. Also, the point of building consensus on Kenyan identity is not to build a bulwark against (or make war against) those who are not Kenyan.

It seems to me that this emphasis on performativity, while seen from one perspective negatively as ideology-pushing or distorting historical evidence, could be seen in a positive light (as long as it is done carefully) as activism for justice. The writer by writing and spreading their works of art challenges and changes consciousness (as p'Bitek mentioned earlier), as people interpret their history differently and therefore come to a different understanding of themselves. This activist side of narration was certainly sensed by the Kenyan government, as they decided to arrest and imprison Ngugi wa Thiong'o for the public performance of plays which challenged the status quo (Gikandi 2001: 191).

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I think that the sage philosophy project and examples such as Chaungo Barasa's work in this area are greatly needed. They would provide a nuanced, careful understanding of the need for a national culture that would not have as its goal the erasure of pluralism, but the appreciation for diverse views while actively evaluating traditions and foreign influences for their appropriateness in contemporary Kenya. Likewise, the work of Omosa and others in educating Kenyans for citizenship while reflecting on core Kenyan values will also be helpful.

However, the disjunct between these kinds of projects for building national culture, and the Kenyan government's national culture programs could not be greater. Government programs tend to reduce culture to performing arts, with an emphasis on the apolitical past. For example, in June 2008 the government launched a new initiative to establish community cultural centers. The goal of the centers would be 'to promote national culture' so that they could aid in 'tourist product diversification' (*Daily Nation*, June 10, 2008). The Kenyan government does have a National Culture Director, currently Silvers Anani, who is involved in researching US President Obama's Kenyan lineage, and overseeing a weekly Obama Culture Week to take place in Obama's home town of Kogelo Village in Nyanza from June 16–20 annually (Olita 2009). Such initiatives are bound to do little to address and heal Kenya's deep ethnic rifts that are often exacerbated by unjust distribution of resources like land and jobs. This kind of 'national culture' is nothing like the national culture advocated by Frantz Fanon, Okot p'Bitek or Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

Not everyone thinks the Kenyan government's record on national culture is as bleak as I have pictured it. Professor Olubayi Olubayi of Rutgers University presented a paper in 2007 entitled 'The Emerging Culture of National Unity in Kenya.' He included what he considered to be signs

of progress stemming from the government's Ministry of Gender, Sports, Culture and Social Services, in which there is a Department of Cultural Affairs. This department has been promoting government slogans centered on 'Kenyaness,' and the saying 'twajivunia kuwa waKenya' [We are all proud to be Kenyans] (Wanyama 2007). They have a magazine, *Mambo: The True Kenyan Story*. While these propaganda initiatives may only go so far, more promising was the Constitutional Development Fund which was intended to ensure that all 210 of Kenya's constituencies obtained the same level of funding for development projects, thereby undermining ethnic favoritism. That such processes were already underway before election violence shows that while each step may be good, they were perceived as too little, too late, and were not enough to stem the eruption of violence.

Olubayi argues that Kenyans need to share faith in their constitution despite any differences they may have in their religions, and that is the kind of cultural unity he is aiming at. He draws on Amartya Sen's important point that each of us has multiple identities, and by acknowledging the many facets to our identities, we can find unity at a national level while still respecting the differences (Wanyama 2007.) On these points, I agree with Olubayi.

While this paper cannot go as far as to suggest implementation of a concrete program to help Kenya's current situation, it has been the goal of this paper to clarify a conception of national culture that could be seen as helpful to Kenya's deep-seated problems, and to point to those involved in implementing projects that are harmonious with that conception.

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