

# Some African Cultural Concepts

This paper was delivered by Steve at a conference called by Idamasa (Interdenominational Association of African Ministers of Religion) and Asseca (Association for the Educational and Cultural Development of the African People) at Edendale, Natal in 1971. This conference proved to be a staging post on the way to the formation of the BPC in Johannesburg in December 1971.

One of the most difficult things to do these days is to talk with authority on anything to do with African culture. Somehow Africans are not expected to have any deep understanding of their own culture or even of themselves. Other people have become authorities on all aspects of the African life or to be more accurate on BANTU life. Thus we have the thickest of volumes on some of the strangest subjects — even "the feeding habits of the Urban Africans", a publication by a fairly "liberal" group, Institute of Race Relations.

In my opinion it is not necessary to talk with Africans about African culture. However, in the light of the above statements one realises that there is so much confusion sown, not only amongst casual non-African readers, but even amongst Africans themselves, that perhaps a sincere attempt should be made at emphasising the authentic cultural aspects of the African people by Africans themselves.

## "Fusion"

Since that unfortunate date — 1652 — we have been experiencing a process of acculturation. It is perhaps presumptuous to call it "acculturation" because this term implies a fusion of different cultures. In our case this fusion has been extremely one-sided. The two major cultures that met and "fused" were the African Culture and the Anglo-Boer Culture. Whereas the African culture was unsophisticated and simple, the Anglo-Boer culture had all the trappings of a colonialist culture and therefore was heavily equipped for conquest. Where they could, they conquered by persuasion, using a highly exclusive religion that denounced all other Gods and demanded a strict code of behaviour with respect to clothing, education, ritual and custom. Where it was impossible to convert, fire-arms were readily available and used to advantage. Hence the Anglo-Boer culture was the more powerful culture in almost all facets. This is where the African began to lose a grip on himself and his surroundings.

Thus in taking a look at cultural aspects of the African people one inevitably finds himself having to compare. This is primarily because of the contempt that the "superior" culture shows towards the indigenous culture. To justify its ex-

plorative basis the Anglo-Boer culture has at all times been directed at bestowing an inferior status to all cultural aspects of the indigenous people.

I am against the belief that African culture is time-bound, the notion that with the conquest of the African all his culture was obliterated. I am also against the belief that when one talks of African culture one is necessarily talking of the pre-Van Riebeeck culture. Obviously the African culture has had to sustain severe blows and may have been battered nearly out of shape by the belligerent cultures it collided with, yet in essence even today one can easily find the fundamental aspects of the pure African culture in the present day African. Hence in taking a look at African culture I am going to refer as well to what I have termed the modern African culture.

## Man

One of the most fundamental aspects of our culture is the importance we attach to Man. Ours has always been a Man-centred society. Westerners have on many occasions been surprised at the capacity we have for talking to each other — not for the sake of arriving at a particular conclusion but merely to enjoy the communication for its own sake. Intimacy is a term not exclusive for particular friends but applying to a whole group of people who find themselves together either through work or through residential requirements.

In fact in the traditional African culture, there is no such thing as two friends. Conversation groups were more or less naturally determined by age and division of labour. Thus one would find all boys whose job was to look after cattle periodically meeting at popular spots to engage in conversation about their cattle, girlfriends, parents, heroes, etc. All commonly shared their secrets, joys and woes. No one felt unnecessarily an intruder into someone else's business. The curiosity manifested was welcome. It came out of a desire to share. This pattern one

would find in all age groups. House visiting was always a feature of the elderly folk's way of life. No reason was need as a basis for visits. It was all part of our deep concern for each other.

These are things never done in the Westerner's culture. A visitor to someone's house, with the exception of friends, is always met with the question "what can I do for you?" This attitude to see people not as themselves but as agents for some particular function either to one's disadvantage or advantage is foreign to us. We are not a suspicious race. We believe in the inherent goodness of man. We enjoy man for himself. We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us but as a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life. Hence in all we do we always place Man first and hence all our action is usually joint community oriented action rather than the individualism which is the hallmark of the capitalist approach. We always refrain from using people as stepping stones. Instead we are prepared to have a much slower progress in an effort to make sure that all of us are marching to the same tune.

## Music

Nothing dramatises the eagerness of the Africans to communicate with each other more than their love for song and rhythm. Music in the African culture features in all emotional states. When we go to work, we share the burden and pleasures of the work we are doing through music. This particular facet strangely enough has filtered through to the present day. Tourists always watch with amazement the synchrony of music and action as Africans working at a road side use their picks and shovels with well-timed precision to the accompaniment of a background song. Battle songs were a feature of the long march to war in the olden days. Girls and boys



never played any games without using music and rhythm as its basis. In other words with Africans, music and rhythm were not luxuries but part and parcel of their way of communication. Any suffering we experienced was made much more real by song and rhythm. There is no doubt that the so called "Negro spirituals" sung by Black slaves in the States as they toiled under oppression were indicative of their African heritage.

The major thing to note about our songs is that they never were songs for individuals. All African songs are group songs. Though many have words, this is not the most important thing about them. Tunes were adapted to suit the occasion and had the wonderful effect of making everybody read the same things from the common experience. In war the songs reassured those who were scared, highlighted the determination of the regiment to win a particular encounter and made much more urgent the need to settle the score; in suffering the Black slaves derived sustenance out of a feeling of togetherness; at work the binding rhythm makes everybody brush off the burden and hence Africans can continue for hours on end because of this added energy.

#### Property

Attitudes of Africans to property again show just how unindividualistic the African is. As everybody here knows, African society had the village community as its basis. Africans always believed in having many villages with a controllable number of people in each rather than the reverse. This obviously was a requirement to suit the needs of a community-based and man-centred society. Hence most things were jointly owned by the group, for instance there was no such thing as individual land ownership. The land belonged to the people and was merely under the control of the local chief on behalf of the people. When cattle went to graze it was on an open veld and not on anybody's specific farm.

Farming and agriculture, though on individual family basis, had many characteristics of joint efforts. Each person could by a simple request and holding of a special ceremony, invite neighbours to come and work on his plot. This service was returned in kind and no remuneration was ever given.

Poverty was a foreign concept. This could only be really brought about to the entire community by an adverse climate during a particular season. It never was considered repugnant to ask one's neighbours for help if one was struggling. In

## ON BLACK MUSIC

The Black indigenous sound is beautiful, soulful. Miriam Makeba, our own personal musical Ambassador-in-exile, made a plea recently that Blacks should not allow their sound to die. For centuries the whites have been taking on Black sounds and converting them, making as though they were their own sounds.

People in the Black ghettos want us to reach them and we simply refuse to reach and communicate with them. What determines our music is how wide the market is. I am not for one moment suggesting that Black musicians should not play for money — that's how they earn their keep, but what I am saying is creativity and Black development should be the foremost factor. Attainment of our longed-for aspirations is our initial goal and all things will follow. We can't afford to play like we do not see the injustice around us; we can't afford to deceive the world and let it believe that all's well in our ranks, and we can't afford to mirror to the world ourselves as a hopeless, hapless and helpless people. We've got power with us, and this power we must use.

Today people want to sing like Elvis Presley — absurd. He is the epitome of "white music" and this is where we have been led to. We've been led to imitate whites and think theirs is better and more cultured. We aim for the top in the hit parade by playing "white" sounds and saying "white thoughts". This kills our sound and stifles rhythm and cramps our free-flowing style. Let us refuse to be used and let's refuse to be exploited. We are ex-

ploited all the way and it is a great God-given right that we should exercise — refuse to be exploited any more. Let's play like Malombo and Dashiki, let's play like Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba and Letta Mbuli, let our music throb with the gentle, passionate beat of Ravi Shanker, Assaggai and Osibisa. Let's play like the ebullient gumboot dancers from the mines and keep our sound virgin and pure.

At the present moment there are reports of white people living in Chatsworth with the intention of learning to play the sitar and other oriental instruments. This has been going on for ages. They lived in Harlem and stole Black sounds, took them to Europe and termed them their own original sounds. They then ridiculed Black artists calling them "Negro" musicians or "Coons" as happened in the Cape to the so-called "Coloured" artists in the so-called "Coon Carnival" shows.

Joe Cocker plays the music of Ray Charles and he's honest to admit it. Eric Clapton plays B.B. King; Kenny Burrell plays Wes Montgomery and this is ample proof of the musical prowess of Black people the world over. Let's capture the tears that flow down our cheeks in anger from oppression, the joys we experience when the sun sets and we own the night and all that is Black experience in the music of our own sitars, tambouras and flutes. Let's capture the approach of a new Black day and the thunder over Afrika skies from the deep throb of our drums. From our music let's re-create true Black humanity.

almost all instances there was help between individuals, tribe and tribe, chief and chief, etc. even in spite of war.

#### Problems

Another important aspect of the African culture is our mental attitude to problems presented by life in general. Whereas the Westerner is geared to use a problem-solving approach following very trenchant analyses, our approach is that of situation-experiencing. I will quote from Dr Kaunda to illustrate this point:

The Westerner has an aggressive mentality. When he sees a problem he will not rest until he has

formulated some solution to it. He cannot live with contradictory ideas in his mind; he must settle for one or the other or else evolve a third idea in his mind which harmonises or reconciles the other two. And he is vigorously scientific in rejecting solutions for which there is no basis in logic. He draws a sharp line between the natural and the supernatural, the rational and non-rational, and more often than not, he dismisses the supernatural and non-rational as superstition . . .

Africans being a pre-scientific people do not recognise any conceptual cleavage between the natural and supernatural.



They experience a situation rather than face a problem. By this means they allow both the rational and non-rational elements to make an impact upon them, and any action they may take could be described more as a response of the total personality to the situation than the result of some mental exercise.

This I find a most apt analysis of the essential difference in the approach to life of these two groups. We as a community are prepared to accept that nature will have its enigmas which are beyond our powers to solve. Many people have interpreted this attitude as lack of initiative and drive yet in spite of my belief in the strong need for scientific experimentation I cannot help feeling that more time also should be spent in teaching man and man to live together and that perhaps the African personality with its attitude of laying less stress on power and more stress on man is well on the way to solving our confrontation problems.

### Religion

All people are agreed that Africans are a deeply religious people. In the various forms of worship that one found throughout the Southern part of our Continent there was at least a common basis. We all accepted without any doubt the existence of a God. We had our own community of saints. We believed — and this was consistent with our views of life — that all people who died had a special place next to God. We felt that a communication with God, could only be through these people. We never knew anything about hell — we do not believe that God can create people only to punish them eternally after a short period on earth.

Another aspect of religious practices was the occasion of worship. Again we did not believe that religion could be featured as a separate part of our existence on earth. It was manifest in our daily lives. We thanked God through our ancestors before we drank beer, married, worked, etc. We would obviously find it artificial to create special occasions for worship. Neither did we see it logical to have a particular building in which all worship would be conducted. We believed that God was always in communication with us and therefore merited attention everywhere and anywhere.

It was the missionaries who confused our people with their new religion. By some strange logic, they argued that theirs was a scientific religion and ours was mere superstition in spite of the biological

discrepancies so obvious in the basis of their religion. They further went on to preach a theology of the existence of hell, scaring our fathers and mothers with stories about burning in eternal flames and gnashing of teeth and grinding of bone. This cold cruel religion was strange to us but our fore-fathers were sufficiently scared of the unknown impending anger to believe that it was worth a try. Down went our cultural values!

### Detribalised

Yet it is difficult to kill the African heritage. There remains, in spite of the superficial cultural similarities between the detribalised and the Westerner, a number of cultural characteristics that mark out the detribalised as an African. I am not here making a case for separation on the basis of cultural differences. I am sufficiently proud to believe that under a normal situation, Africans can comfortably stay with people of other cultures and be able to contribute to the joint cultures of the communities they have joined. However, what I want to illustrate here is that even in a pluralistic society like ours, there are still some cultural traits that we can boast of which have been able to withstand the process of deliberate bastardisation. These are aspects of the modern African culture — a culture that has used concepts from the white world to expand on inherent cultural characteristics.

### Black culture

Thus we see that in the area of music, the African still expresses himself with conviction. The craze about jazz arises out of a conversion by the African artists of mere notes to meaningful music, expressive of real feelings. The Monkey Jive, Soul, etc. are all aspects of a modern type African culture that expresses the same original feelings. Solos like those of Pat Boone and Elvis Presley could never really find expression within the African culture because it is not in us to listen passively to pure musical notes. Yet when soul struck with its all-engulfing rhythm it immediately caught on and set hundreds of millions of black bodies in gyration throughout the world. These were people reading in soul the real meaning — the defiant message "say it loud! I'm black and I'm proud". This is fast becoming our modern culture. **A culture of defiance, self-assertion and group pride and solidarity. This is a culture that emanates from a situation of common experience of oppression.** Just as it now finds expression in our music and our dress, it will spread to other aspects. This is the new and modern black

culture to which we have given a major contribution. This is the modern black culture that is responsible for the restoration of our faith in ourselves and therefore offers a hope in the direction we are taking from here.

Thus in its entirety the African Culture spells us out as people particularly close to nature. As Kaunda puts it, our people may be unlettered and their physical horizons may be limited yet "they inhabit a larger world than the sophisticated Westerner who has magnified his physical senses through invented gadgets at the price all too often of cutting out the dimension of the spiritual." Thus close proximity to Nature enables the emotional component in us to be so much richer in that it makes it possible for us, without any apparent difficulty to feel for people and to easily identify with them in any emotional situation arising out of suffering.

The advent of the Western culture has changed our outlook almost drastically. No more could we run our own affairs. We were required to fit in as people tolerated with great restraint in a western type society. We were tolerated simply because our cheap labour is needed. Hence we are judged in terms of standards we are not responsible for. Whenever colonisation sets in with its dominant culture it devours the native culture and leaves behind a bastardised culture that can only thrive at the rate and pace allowed it by the dominant culture. This is what happened to the African culture. It is called a sub-culture purely because the African people in the urban complexes are mimicking the white man rather unashamedly.

In rejecting the Western values, therefore, we are rejecting those things that are not only foreign to us but that seek to destroy the most cherished of our beliefs — that the corner-stone of society is man himself — not just his welfare, not his material well-being but just man himself with all his ramifications. We reject the power-based society of the Westerner that seems to be ever concerned with perfecting their technological know-how while losing out on their spiritual dimension. We believe that in the long run the special contribution to the world by Africa will be in the field of human relationships. The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the great gift still has to come from Africa — giving the world a more human face.