

Exploring the Effects of Cultural Attrition as a Recipe of Lost Human Dignity and Dented Identity the Case of Selected African Cultures

S.M. Kang'ethe

University of Fort Hare, P/B X1314, Alice, South Africa
E-mail: skangethe@ufh.ac.za

KEYWORDS Cultural Renaissance. Cultural Resuscitation. Cultural Erosion. Cultural Decadence. Eurocentrism. Westernization. Virginity Testing. Rites of Passage. Male Circumcision

ABSTRACT Painstakingly and unfortunately, Africans have lost most of their cultures they cherished some yester years through a relentless process of cultural attrition, erosion and decadence. This paper, through a review of literature methodology, aims to discuss and debate some pertinent effects of cultural attrition on the value, dignity of Africans as well as their identity. Findings indicate the following manifestations of lost dignity and dented humanity: African perceptions and illusions that things from the west are superior to those from Africa; Africans demeaning and relegating their cultures to take second rate position; tendency for some Africans to view their identity through western world lenses. The paper documents the following appreciable efforts to resuscitate and strengthen African cultures: Resuscitation of the cultural rites of passage of *Bojale* and *Bogwera* in Botswana; and resuscitation and concerted campaign of virginity testing in South Africa among the Zulu tribe.

INTRODUCTION

Indubitably, a people without a strong culture is a people whose dignity and identity is at stake (Afolayan 2004). It is a people who may not command a stronger historical, ideological and social dignity (Ani 1994). This is because the lenses from which other people may see them are likely to be biased, tilted, weak, and loaded with beliefs that such people do not command any significant value among other communities. Perhaps this assertion is informed by the fact that cultures constitute the mirrors of the societies to retrospect the past and introspect the future (Kang'ethe 2009; Kluckhorn 1951).

Cultures, therefore, inform people's thinking, identity, their dos and don'ts (Kang'ethe 2009). They form people's historical and ideological heritage, are a source of societal pride and constitutes immense social capital that gives the societal membership happiness, bliss and a hope of what the future is supposed to bring towards their lives (Kang'ethe 2014a; Ani 1994). Importantly, culture is the navel of societies and without it, perhaps man can be reduced to a state of an animal (Wahab et al. 2012). Perhaps this introduction takes the researcher to unearth the situation of the African cultures and perhaps the effects of cultural attrition and erosion of human dignity and identity (Afolayan 2004; Ani 1994).

Cultural attrition and erosion constitute phenomena in which a group of people are influenced either through coercive forces such as colonialism, slave trade, socialization, modernization, Eurocentrism, westernization and globalization, to abandon their cultures and adopt other new cultures (Ani 1994). This usually happens when the power of influence against a particular culture or ways of life is very strong, either materially, socially, or ideologically etc. This connotes the influence and wave of imperialism and capitalism (Ani 1994). During the epoch of colonialism in which many African countries were dethroned by the mightier countries of the western world such as Britain and Spain, they were stripped of their resources, made slaves and made to adopt the lives of their colonizers (Afolayan 2004). The colonized countries had to dance the tune of their new masters, not on their own volition, but through coercion. The colonizers also put in place a strong socialization wave to convince the Africans that their cultures were blind, had no vision, were barbaric, satanic, savage, and that it was important that they see the light by following the culture of their colonizers (Kang'ethe 2013). This had a huge negative impact to cultures because slowly the Africans threw in the towel and started dancing the cultural tune of their colonizers. Ironically and shrewdly, most colonizers used the religious power of Christianity to make Africans

abandon the cultures of their fathers, the cultures they knew, the cultures they were used to, and the cultures that had immense social capital that gave their lives a significant meaning (Kang'ethe 2014a; Ani 1994). Perhaps the colonizers knew that once they succeed to obliterate or completely annihilate African cultures, the process of discipleship was complete. This is why many African cultures were lost through the process of abandonment. This has had an immense effect of Africans slowly losing their dignity (Ani 1994). Perhaps this can be explained by a swahili adage that indicates that "*mwacha mila ni mtumwa*" that literally translates that he/she who abandons his/her culture becomes a slave (Ndalul and King'ei 1989). This state of servitude manifests itself in many ways, for example, by the people from the west viewing themselves as superior, or people of superior race compared with the Africans, or generally the people of the third world countries.

Allowing this researcher to borrow from the sacred Judaeo-Christian dictates and values, and therefore use those religious lenses, God created man in his image and therefore equality in terms of dignity and resources should be everyone's rights, irrespective of which corner of the globe one hails from (MacArthur 1997). Perhaps this is why many countries' constitutions and Bill of Rights indicate that people have inalienable rights of equality irrespective of sex, gender, socio-economic position, race etc. (Republic of South Africa (RSA) 1996; Barret-Grant et al. 2001). Unfortunately and contrastingly, the concept of equality remains a utopian one because the westerners have defied this norm and instead have put in place capitalistic and imperialistic waves that determines the economic and social niche of the poor African countries, whether through skewed international policy frameworks, unfair trade practices, imposition of new western rich cultures such as the culture of homosexuality, and generally many things of global importance (Kang'ethe 2014b; Masoga and Kaya 2008; Mulinge and Mufune 2003). With no political, social and globally decision making might, many African countries have had no better option but to stick and embrace many of the western world whims and dictates. This constitutes the perfidious aspects of globalization (Kang'ethe 2014b; Masoga and Kaya 2008). To this end, Masoga and Kaya (2008) caution African countries against being hoodwinked by

unfolding globalization process, but should allow globalization to take place in tandem with their cultural development that strengthens their cultural heritage, including African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). Indubitably, cultures constitute a fundamental dimension of the development process that helps to bolster people's state of independence, sovereignty and identity of nations. Masoga and Kaya (2008) also admonish against viewing development from quantitative aspects and disregarding other important qualitative attributes such as the social capital embedded in cultures.

This author wonders when the globe will espouse an environment of fairness, if not equality between the rich and the poor countries. This is because in the global lenses, the people from poor African countries have lost dignity, more so due to the increased pace of cultural attrition and erosion (Ani 1994). This needs to be stopped through a serious paradigm shift in the minds of the Africans. It is the only affordable option and avenue to reclaim the lost cultural glory and humanity. Optimistically, it is interesting and appreciable that some African cultural architects such as the current South African Zulu King, Goodwill Zwelithini have defied this dispensation and are advocating for a cultural paradigm shift, cultural come back, cultural renovation, cultural resuscitation, cultural renaissance and cultural emancipation by challenging the South Africans to reverse the cultural gear and reclaim their cultural lost glory through revisiting cultures such as virginity testing. Amid opposition by a cross section of elites who have been instrumental in the process of cultural sell-out and a host of human rights based NGOs, Zwelithini's bid has made significant inroads in that the government has considered funding the construction of virginity testing village in the tune of many millions (Kang'ethe 2014c).

Problem Statement

Inarguably, African cultures have undergone serious state of attrition, decadence and erosion to an extent that some cultural architects and pragmatists think that this has immensely undermined people's dignity and dented their humanity. This, some suggests is a state that needs to be reversed so that Africans can reclaim their cultural glory and therefore strengthen their identity. There is therefore a need to

discuss and debate some of the pertinent underpinnings that have contributed to this state of quagmire as well as assessing any evidence of efforts in some countries to resuscitate the cultures, fight their growth, and to ensure cultural emancipation, renaissance and recuperation.

METHODOLOGY

The paper has utilized a review of literature methodology to discuss and debate the effects of cultural attrition on the dignity and humanity of the Africans. The paper has benefitted from cultural based books, publications and has also immensely tapped from the author's intuition and experiential knowledge.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Manifestation of Lost Dignity and Dented Humanity in Selected African Countries

African Perceptions and Illusions that Items from the West are Superior to Those from Africa

Unfortunately and surprisingly, some people from Africans more so those who are educated like to identify themselves with eurocentrism, or doing what can be appears to be appreciated by the people of the western countries, at the expense of doing what is afrocentric and what Africans may appreciate culturally, socially and psychologically. This is the process in which cultural erosion and attrition has assumed (Wahab et al. 2012). In the process of following Eurocentric values, some Africans have even chosen to relocate from their African domiciles to the western world. This is because they feel that the western world has socially elevated their status, making them feel different from their African brothers. This is a manifestation of cultural attrition, and a denial of one's culture and heritage. Infact, it has not been uncommon for some Africans to even pretend they cannot even speak their mother tongue in the event they come back to Africa for some reasons. This is also an aspect of cultural betrayal and suicidal. Since language is an integral component of culture, disdaining and holding one's language with contempt heralds a serious state of culture attrition and erosion (Wahab et al. 2012). This is a manifestation of how their thought systems have been skewed to react, or how their brain systems are inclined to internalize and to appreci-

ate. Perhaps it is this crop of people who have made a score of Africans to think that what is from the west is always good and what is from Africa takes a second place (Kang'ethe 2013). This is mythical and an illusionary reaction to cultural attrition. While the few elites who view Eurocentric kind of life as a life full of modernity, civilization and globalization, it is a pity that some of these people have been looked down upon by the westerners. This reminds this author of a classmate who had to come back to Africa after his son was verbally abused by the white children in the class to an extent of being called a monkey. This was a manifestation of racism and of course reflected how the children had heard many times from their parents. This therefore indicates that the African people with a mentality that one can abandon his/her culture and force an integration with another simply because one feels the new culture is superior or presents good things, are misplaced and had better undergo a paradigm shift in their thinking that will see them yearn to respect and uphold their cultures with the respect and dignity they deserve. This is because culture, according to Wahab et al. (2012) constitutes people's identity as it affords them due recognition by any other society anywhere in the globe.

Perhaps this is why Nyaumwe and Mkabela (2007) advise the Africans to strengthen and embrace various African philosophies such as ubuntuism that have the capacity to carve a stronger sense of identity, foster peace and tranquillity, and make people proud of their cultures, origins, customs and traditions. It is a way of blocking further process of cultural attrition. Perhaps other philosophies that have worked well in some African countries such as Kenyan *Harambee* (Kenyan philosophy and a tradition of communities coming together to pursue a developmental goal together instead of each getting involved alone) and *botho* (a philosophy that promotes the common good of society and includes display of humanity among one another) of Botswana, need to be strengthened and advocated to the other Africans to adopt (Kenyatta 1948; Government of Botswana 1997).

Africans Demeaning and Relegating Their Cultures to Take Second Rate Position

Indubitably, no culture is supposed to be superior that the other (Wahab et al. 2012). In fact, ethnographers have attested the fact that no two cultures even when juxtaposed are ab-

solutely identical to one another. Each culture espouses its own unique special attributes from one another and that in order for a society to operate optimally and effectively, they must respect and overwhelmingly embrace the various components of their culture (Wahab et al. 2012).

Superiority of a culture should depend on the loyalty of the user to it, and also how proud one is to be associated with it. While all the people should be proud of their cultures, no one should be allowed to undermine another person's culture and any attempt should be repelled by all the seriousness it deserves. Undeniably, it is the uniqueness of a culture that gives specialness to its adherents. This is because cultures have the characteristics and quality of bonding its subjects and adherents together to give them a sense of collective identity. It is this identity that renders the people to be duly recognized (Ani 1999).

This is because under normal circumstances, one's culture reflects one's life. It is a reflection mirror indicating where people have come from, where they are and what their future destination holds for them (Kang'ethe 2009; Kluckhohn 1951). Therefore, one should hold his/her culture dearly and derive happiness and bliss from following its whims and dictates. While there is undeniable tendency for cultures to influence one another naturally through interactions, this should not in any way negate and demean the value of what may be perceived as a lesser culture, or the culture followed by fewer people in a particular geographical locale. However, it is inarguable that forces such as slave trade had a huge impact in destroying African identity. It is therefore critical that every "Dick and Harry" who wishes his/her society's recognition and identity to be bolstered needs to work towards the process of cultural resuscitation. This is because of the need for a society to be cohesive enough to be respected and perhaps strengthen its bargaining power in the globe. It is also likely to increase collective consciousness (Nyaumwe and Mkabela 2007; Ani 1994).

Even amidst people from one region tending to follow the culture of the majority, it is still culturally desirable for even the minority people to cling and respect to the dictates of their cultures (Ani 1994). This is because cultures connote a life roadmap designating where people have come, how far they have covered and, how far they are going. It is therefore a mirror to re-

flect all the historical processes a society has followed and passed. Unfortunately, many people have not embraced these tenets and principles, but instead they have sacrificed their cultures by allowing other cultures that they cannot fathom to unfairly take first place position in dignity to control their lives. This is an epitome of lost glory of their culture as well as a dent on their humanity. While many Africans try to explain their position of having demeaned or abandoned their cultures after the episodes of colonialism, this is not adequately convincing because other countries such as India were also colonised by the Britons and yet they have richly clung to their cultures. Infact, Indians have held their cultures close to their chests, and interpret their lives immensely using their cultural lenses. This has not stopped the country of India to be one of the strongest technologically advanced countries of the globe. Therefore, a people should not seek scapegoat of demeaning their cultures simply because they were colonised. After many African countries attained independence, the countries, if ever they wished, should have fast reclaimed their cultures. However, all is not lost, especially after a few cultural architects have reneged on massive campaign for Africans to undergo a paradigm shift to value their cultures, to position themselves for cultural recuperation, cultural renaissance and cultural development (Kang'ethe 2014c).

Tendency for Some Africans to View Their Identity through Western World Lenses

It is pathetic that the adoption of the western education, the processes of eurocentrism, westernization, and today globalization have been strong agents of cultural attrition (Amukowa and Ayuya 2013). Perhaps the greatest danger is the loss of identity among the Africans, making the Africans view themselves through the lenses of the people from the western world. It is no wonder to hear in the normal conversation in this author's Kikuyu community one commending another person's task well done by indicating that "you have done it perfectly as a white man", "you have kept time like a white person." While there is nothing wrong in having emulable benchmarks in life, but it is demeaning if people cannot own their cultures and make cultural benchmarks that they can use for crediting such personalities, but instead credit someone through the culture of the people

from the west. This is a serious manifestation of cultural attrition and erosion, and has seriously dented the image, dignity and humanity of the Africans. Perhaps this is what makes people to view anything from the west as superior than that from Africa. This kind of stereotypical thinking has been found to be riddled with mistruths and myths. This is because many Africans who have held their cultures dearly alongside embracing modernization have been found to enjoy life appreciably. This author thinks that it's time sense dawn on Africans to undergo a serious paradigm shift and start seeing their identity from their cultures, and not the cultures of the people of the west (Wahab et al. 2012).

Perhaps the Africans need to borrow the disposition of most societies from the Eastern part of the globe who have held and clung dearly to their cultures in tandem with making significant inroads in development and modernization. Africans, for example, need to emulate the country of Japan which is very developed and yet its people have strongly clung and held their cultures dearly. They have maintained their cultural identity and dignity. This author thinks that it is not too late for Africans to remedy the situation (Afolayan 2004; Kang'ethe 2014c).

Examples of Appreciable Efforts to Resuscitate and Strengthen African Cultures

Resuscitation of the Cultural Rites of Passage in Botswana

Perhaps there is no case scenario that demonstrates the nostalgia and gusto to resuscitate cultures than the resuscitation of cultural rites of passage among the Bakgatla Ba Kgafela tribe of Botswana in the year 2009 (Kang'ethe and Rhakudu 2010). Although the tribe of Bakgatla Ba Kgafela was the only known tribe traditionally and customarily practising the rite of circumcision through the ceremonies of *Bojale* (for females) and *Bogwera* (for males) today the resuscitation of this rite has come with them the impetus to involve the other Batswana in male circumcision (Kang'ethe and Rhakudu 2010). This was also due to the concerted efforts by the government to urge the Batswana to undergo the male circumcision as a clinical intervention to mitigate the effects of HIV/AIDS (Kang'ethe 2013). This has followed a sterling campaign from the western world for countries seriously beset by the epidemic to consider undergoing male circumcision because the clinical operation is believed to

lower the vulnerability of HIV/AIDS prevalence by about 60 percent. This had empirically been validated using the 2003 Kwazulu Natal research endeavour that proved that those who were subjected to the male circumcision through the removal of the penile foreskin stood less chances of the infection than those who were not (Kang'ethe 2013; Peltzer et al. 2007). However, although the wave of encouraging male circumcision has been a campaign orchestrated by both the government of Botswana and the western world, it has in some ways encouraged the strengthening of cultures and therefore the need to work against cultural attrition.

Resuscitation and Concerted Campaign of Virginity Testing

Another case scenario that has really demonstrated the need for cultural resuscitation is the campaign for the culture of virginity testing among the South African Zulu young women. Its proponent, the current Zulu King, Goodwill Zwelithini has defied the odds by emphasizing the need for the Zulus to resuscitate and uphold the culture of sexual virginity testing as a way of ensuring sexual chastity. Although the human rights bodies and the government operatives have been drawing the daggers against the culture by stating that it violates the human rights of the women, Zwelithini supported by some cultural architects such as this author feels that it is time Africans regain their cultural glory in maintaining and fighting to restore the culture that ensures that women can be married while they are virgin (Kang'ethe 2014c). This war has not been in vain because in recent times, the government of South Africa has accepted to fund the construction of the virginity testing village in the tune of millions and millions of Rands in Kwazulu Natal. This is a demonstration that the government has changed its stance and realised the need to resuscitate cultures to avoid further attrition. The process and the results of virginity testing would also be a plus in the war against HIV/AIDS, STIs and other undesirable illicit behaviours. It is good to point out that the ushering in the resuscitation of these cultures sets the stage for the societies to regain the immense social capital that is associated with these cultural operatives (Kang'ethe 2014a).

CONCLUSION

Though the cultures of Africa were dented and misconfigured, some irreparably by the

waves of colonialism, eurocentrism and modernization, it is never too late to expedite a cultural come back, cultural renovation, cultural renaissance, cultural growth and cultural paradigm shift to ensure that they bounce back to their rightful domain niche. Africans need their cultures to reflect and reflex upon their histories and trajectories. They need to show the world that with the coming of political independence, cultural independence is also imminent. Apparently, understanding is slowly but surely dawning upon many Africans that one does not have to abandon his/her culture in order to achieve civilization and modernization; and that he who abandons his/her culture is like a slave, to mimic the Swahili proverb, *mwacha mila ni mtumwa* (he who abandons his/her culture becomes a slave).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ♦ People from developing countries especially from Africa should strive or endeavour to maintain and cultivate their cultural identity. Embracing modernization and civilization should not be a scapegoat of demeaning or condescending their cultures.
- ♦ African governments should invest handsomely to ensure that all the institutions of learning have the component of culture in the curricula. Children right from when they are young should be made to understand the role of cultures in shaping their identity and vision for the future.
- ♦ Elites in developing countries need to learn that embracing modernization, civilization and globalization should not be a scapegoat to demean or look down upon their cultures. They should use their education to advocate and lobby for cultural strengthening, cultural reawakening and cultural revival.

REFERENCES

- Afoloyan F 2004. *Culture and Customs of South Africa*. Westport, Connecticut. London: Greenwood Press.
- Amukowa W, Ayuya CV 2013. The 21st century educated African person and the loss of Africans educational identity: Towards an Afro education model. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*. Doi:10.5901/ajis/2013.v2n1p269.
- Ani M 1994. *Yurugu: An Afrikan-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior*. Africa, New Jersey, USA: Africa World Press.
- Barrett-Grant K, Fine D, Heywood M, Strode A (Eds.) 2001. *HIV/AIDS and the Law: A Resource Manual*. 2nd Edition. AIDS Law Project and The AIDS Legal Network. Johannesburg, South Africa: University of the Witwatersrand.
- Government of Botswana 1997. *Vision 2016. Towards Prosperity for All: Presidential Task Group for a Long Term Vision for Botswana*. Gaborone: Government Printers.
- Kang'ethe SM 2009. Inadequate male involvement in health issues: The cause of gender skewed HIV and AIDS situations in Botswana. In: T Maundeni, BZ Osei-Hwedie, E Mukaamambo, PG Ntseane (Eds.): *Male Involvement in Sexual and Reproductive Health: Prevention of Violence and HIV/AIDS in Botswana*. Cape Town: Made Plain Communications, pp. 7-28.
- Kang'ethe SM 2013. The panacea and perfidy of cultural rites of circumcision in African countries: Examples from Kenya, Botswana and South Africa. *EASSRR Journal*, xxix(1): 107-123.
- Kang'ethe SM 2014a. Social capital in informal networks can be a fertile niche to mitigate HIV/AIDS and poverty effects: Examples from South Africa and Botswana. *J Hum Ecol*, 47(2): 185-192.
- Kang'ethe SM 2014b. Panacea and perfidy of globalization as an engine of social development in developing countries. *J Hum Ecol*, 47(2): 193-200.
- Kang'ethe SM 2014c. The need to resuscitate the cultural rite of virginity testing as a tool to strengthen the campaign against HIV/AIDS and moral decadence in South African region. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 5(8): 484-489.
- Kang'ethe SM, Rhakudu M 2010. *Religious Education Book for Form 2*. Gaborone, Botswana: Heinemann Publishers.
- Kenyatta J 1948. *Facing Mount Kenya: Garden City*. NY: Doubleday Publishing Group.
- MacArthur J 1997. *The MacArthur Study Bible*. Dallas: Word Publishing.
- Masoga MA, Kaya HO 2008. Globalisation and African cultural heritage erosion: Implications for policy. *Indilinga: African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems*. 7(2): 141-154.
- Mulinge MM, Mufune P 2003. *Debt Relief Initiatives and Poverty Alleviation. Lessons from Africa*. Pretoria: African Institute of South Africa.
- Ndalu A, King'ei KG 1989. *Kamusi Teule ya Kiswahili*. Nairobi: East African Publishers.
- Nyaumwe LJ, Mkabela Q 2007. Revisiting the traditional African cultural framework of Ubuntuism: A theoretical perspective. *Indilinga. African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems*, 6(2): 152-163.
- Peltzer K, Niang CI, Muula AS, Bowa K, Okeke L, Boiro H, Chimbwete C 2007. Editorial review: Male circumcision, gender and HIV prevention in sub-Saharan Africa: A (Social Science) research agenda. *Journal of Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS*, 4(3): 658-667.
- Republic of South Africa 1996. *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa No. 108 of 1996. Government Gazette*. Cape Town, South Africa.
- Wahab EO, Odunsi SO, Ajiboye OE 2012. Causes and consequences of rapid erosion of cultural values in a traditional African Society. *Journal of Anthropology*. Paper ID 327061, 7 pages. doi:10.1155/2012/327061