

Is the “African Renaissance” a reality in 2007?

When we look at the social and economic indicators for Africa, we see the world's poorest continent with a large share of its population subsisting on less than a dollar a day, we see the only region in the world to have grown poorer in the past 25 years, we see a continent plagued by violence and diseases like AIDS and malaria, and where corruption is rampant, we see a continent which represents 13.5% of the world population with more than 840 million people, but responsible for less than 2% of international trade as well as Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). In such circumstances, the logical answer to the question “is the “African Renaissance” a reality in 2007 ?” should normally be no. And yet, as we shall see later in this paper, the answer really is yes.

But before I show this, we should ask ourselves what prevented Africa from starting its Renaissance at its independence in the 60s. The answer to this is the legacy of its history. If colonization accelerated the opening of Africa to modernity, at the same time it destroyed African pre-colonial institutions in an attempt to establish “Nation States” and a new system mimicking Western societies. Worse, it cut Africa in many places with artificial borders, thereby separating homogeneous populations into different States.

The greatest challenge Africa faced at its independence was to reconcile in its own way its traditions (including its pre-colonial institutions and its spirit) with modernity. Such a reconciliation would have been conducive, thanks to the restoration of African dignity, to economic and social development as well as to an authentic democracy. It is this reconciliation of tradition and modernity that would be leading to the African Renaissance.

Africa failed in this reconciliation because colonialism has swept aside the traditional elites of Africa. History shows us that a Renaissance needs always the support of an “enlightened” elite embedded in tradition. Only the guardians of tradition can abolish beliefs, behaviors and taboos, which are a brake on development. Such an elite exists in Africa; it is the chieftaincy or the African aristocracy. Through the development in Africa of decentralization, of the private sector and of civil society they are re-emerging as a new power together with both dynamic African women and a new class of African businessmen who acquired modern legitimacy in creating wealth and jobs.

The traditional elite possesses ancient knowledge in medicine, science and technology. One will be amazed to discover the strength of innovation in the African informal sector. Traditional chiefs are keen to rehabilitate the pre-colonial institutions like the “councils of the wise men”, which improved conflict resolution including clan or land property conflicts as well as natural resource management and the public trust. Pre-colonial institutions were participatory institutions where everybody had his say. Although they were not fully democratic institutions since aristocrats and elders had privileges, these inequalities were softened, on the one hand, by one of the greatest riches of

Africa, namely “the warmth of human relations”, and on the other hand, by the fact that in the old institutions there were provisions to topple bad kings.

It is clear that the modernization of pre-colonial institutions will reinforce democracy, human rights and good governance in Africa. In 2007 people have to be respected through their positive deeds and not because they are from the “right” family. However, during a transitional period and until the African Renaissance has succeeded, Africa should use the charisma and the vision of “enlightened” and honest chiefs to sweep away all barriers to development, like the fact that some well trained and experienced Africans in top positions are not yet accepted by their citizens since they are descended from lower class families in the pre-colonial period. Moreover, the fight against AIDS was a success in Senegal and Uganda, because in these two countries, programmes were channeled through traditional and religious chiefs.

On the other hand, the African aristocrats are the most zealous supporters of African economic integration since it will permit the reunification of their peoples divided into different countries.

The conciliation of tradition and modernity through charismatic and “enlightened” leaders, dynamic women and successful African businessmen will bring about the African Renaissance, the development of the continent and will consequently unify the traditional and modern elites into a middle and upper class which will be the main factor for the future stability of Africa.

With this new middle and upper class, relations will be as in the industrialized or emerging countries, governed by social class, and therefore ethnic differences will disappear. Foreign minorities will also be fully integrated with the same rights as the others, including political rights.

At that time, this will be the end of the historical mission of the African aristocracy, namely the socialization of their peoples as happened in other continents with their respective monarchies. In Africa, this historical trend was temporarily halted during colonization. But as in other continents, the fate of aristocrats in a democratic society is to be disseminated throughout all classes of society as well as the political spectrum.

To understand the role of traditional and religious chiefs in Africa, one has to visit countries devastated by conflicts and discover that when all modern institutions have been looted and destroyed, the only remaining institution is the chieftaincy. African refugees gather for protection around traditional and religious chiefs like in Europe during the “dark ages” when the population fled from barbarism to seek protection around castles or monasteries.

When the world started to hear about the African Renaissance and the role of the traditional elite in this movement, we also heard the following three reactions:

- i) Africa cannot reconcile tradition and modernity without losing its identity. This is wrong since Christianity and Islam have flourished on this continent yet the traditional belief systems, i.e. “ancestor

cult” are still solid and perfectly compatible with these important religions. This merger has been facilitated by the fact that Africa is the continent where the visible world meets the invisible one. This is fascinating although some crooks take advantage of the numerous non-educated people to spread superstitions;

- ii) The chiefs will use the Renaissance to restore their power and to take revenge. This is not correct, the Renaissance is a reconciliation between Africans, whatever role their ancestors had in colonial and pre-colonial times including the period of the slave trade. To access power nowadays everybody is obliged to go through the ballot box, even if in some places the chiefs are still considered as the natural “porte-parole” of the rural zones.
- iii) Aristocracy is synonymous with feudalism. This has to be balanced. It is true that authoritarian chiefs exist. But we always refer to “enlightened” chiefs.

In any case, by the end of the 80s, a few African countries had started the process of their Renaissance, and they are still considered the most stable in Africa. Two examples:

TANZANIA: Julius Nyerere, son of a Tanzanian king, was elected the first president at the country’s independence. He succeeded to unify and modernize a country composed of hundreds of ethnic groups as well as languages. An African language, namely Swahili, was accepted as the official and common language for Tanzania. It has to be noted that President Nyerere was among the first African heads of state to quit freely his function. Indeed, after his presidency and as a member of the chieftaincy he still enjoyed the prestigious status in Africa of “Wise Man”. In this continent, a wise man is still regarded as a holy man, because in ancient Africa, chiefs also possessed a religious dimension as intermediates between humans and God.

BOTSWANA: In 1966, the country had as its first president Mr. Seretse Khama, grandson of the King of Bechuanaland. The governing system of Botswana includes two main institutions, the National Assembly, elected according to the universal suffrage, and the House of Chiefs, which acts as a Senate and is composed of the leaders of the chieftaincy of the whole country. When the House of Chiefs confirms a bill from the national Assembly, it becomes a respected public law because it has the blessing of the guardians of tradition. Thanks to this system, which permitted the optimal use of the mineral wealth of the country, Botswana was able to put the modernization of its economy on a fast track and is now classified among the few emerging countries of Africa. On top of this, Botswana is one of the leading democracies in Africa.

I share the views of many African intellectuals that the African Renaissance reached the critical mass necessary to be globally acknowledged as the “African Renaissance” at the beginning of the 90s which saw a new wind of

freedom pass over the land, thanks to the end of the Cold War and the democratization of South Africa in 1994. April of that year saw the ignominious genocide in Rwanda, but also in the south of the continent the first multiracial ballot that enabled the election as President of Nelson “Rohlahla” Mandela, son of a Xhosa king, the “wise man” Africa had been waiting for years.

The leadership of Nelson Mandela has completely changed the fate of Africa and has given this continent its greatest hope yet to overcome the cultural barriers preventing its development. As a traditional chief, Mandela could, inter-alia, settle ethnics rivalries, allow the European and Asian minorities to be accepted as South Africans, render all South Africans proud of their common heritage. He could also re-establish in a modernized fashion ancient institutions like the “council of wise men” of which a particular form was the famous Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which enabled the reconciliation of the South African society. He could give South African women the great place they deserve in councils and society, push for the use of African languages and also allow the emergence of a new class of African entrepreneurs as well as a new civil society. Thanks to the strength of South Africa in the African continent, the changes made there have gradually influenced the rest of Africa.

Indeed, what happened in South Africa has since been disseminated in the rest of the continent, with members of traditional elites being welcomed in many African countries in political, economic and cultural circles.

The return to power of the educated descendants of the traditional elite is up to now geared by economic development goals, which will facilitate the reconciliation of society where needed.

Moreover, chieftaincy is now more and more open to women and promises further new horizons. House serfdom where it still exists is on the eve of being totally eradicated with the support of “enlightened” chiefs. African languages are acquiring legitimacy and a pan-African business elite has been created thanks to the African Business Roundtable (ABR).

Finally, in spite of persistent conflicts in some countries, free media, dynamic civil society groups, the private sector and consequently democracy, are growing all over Africa. Those who still have doubts about the reality of the “African Renaissance” should remember that when it happened in Europe in the 15th and 16th century, this continent was in the midst of conflicts, poverty and disease.

In this respect, two concrete realities of the African Renaissance are the creation in 2001 of the African Union (AU) and the elaboration of the New Partnership for the Development of Africa (NEPAD) by African leaders with vision. NEPAD includes a self-monitoring mechanism intended to foster political stability, economic growth, sustainable development and regional and economic integration, namely the Africa Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), which derives directly from the pre-colonial “Council of wise men”.

The AU on its side is striving to have Africa recognized as an important partner in the world. It also has in its programmes the involvement of the African diaspora in the African Renaissance movement. To this effect, AU intends to open the first “Africa House” in Haiti, which was the first Black Republic (1804) as well as the first country to liberate itself from slavery.

If Africa is the cradle of humanity, we are all of African origin and we should all be concerned about the success of the African Renaissance in a continent also representing the spine of the world.

What should the developed countries do to show human solidarity to their mother-continent? In addition to the ODA, I suggest two things mainly:

(i) accelerate the cancellation of the African debt to allow African states to invest the amounts earmarked for debt payments in education and health programmes, as well as in infrastructure (energy, transport, ICT, etc...) specifically in order to reduce production costs and render the continent more attractive to investment in the productive sector.

(ii) facilitate market access for African manufactured products and end subsidies in sectors where Africa has a real comparative advantage i.e. mainly in agro-industries and textile/garment. This solidarity to the benefit of Africa will sustain the realization of the African Renaissance and ease the entry of this continent among the emerging regions. The world will then become the famous “United World” predicted by philosophers as well as by the late President Senghor of Senegal in his “rendez-vous du donner et du recevoir” (encounter of giving and receiving).

I know the world will be surprised by what the African genius will bring to this “rendez-vous” the day it will succeed in its Renaissance, but I am sure that among its gifts to the world, there will be the “warmth of human relations”.

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