

# African Renaissance Conference

28-29th September 1998

## Education and Culture Report-back From Session 2

HSRC RESEARCH OUTPUTS

1429

Rapporteur: Catherine A. Odora Hoppers

### Introduction

Session two on "*Culture and Education*" addressed itself to the questions of:

- ✓ firstly, how African education could provide the necessary capacity and conditions for sustainable development in Africa;
- ✓ secondly, why the institutions in African imploded in the post Uhuru;
- ✓ the missing link between culture and the curriculum. The question here was "Are we still not chasing gods who are not our own?"

These questions were not addressed in any particular sequence, but one of the anticipated outcomes of this conference, which is to consolidate and elevate the conscience of African people about African Renaissance, was kept very much in focus.

- True to this commitment, Session 2 sustained a spirit of vigilant rebirth that was witnessed from the word go with the vivid approaches employed in the actual presentations.
- Our line-up could not be better. Brains, acumen, and obstinacy of the most astute degree were not wanting what-so-ever.
- In some instances, African history was not only recounted in great detail, but various analytical webs too intricate to summarize here, were drawn between Eurocentrism and colonialism, the construction of the "African", and the types of silences maintained in presenting credits due to the continent by way of its civilizations.
- History is pertinent to the forward movement not least because of the need to understand WHEN, and in some instances, even HOW come the rain began to beat us.

- What hit everyone right away however, was that clearly, the African paradigm simply had to enter the academia, not as a hypothetical proposition or plea, but as an urgent imperative.
- We have to jog our evasive conscience and make this our last passive moment.
- The session was therefore treated to African participatory and anti-podal culture in practice through a series of *Rhetorical Orature Interludes*.
- ◆ At issue, to cite the presenter, is *the sheer fatigue from talking...talking... till our words have turned into static verbs in our mouths.... We have heard others speak, just remaining sufficiently awake to hear the end of their speeches before yawning with relief... We have read volumes of books till their pages threaten to drop off in sheer fatigue from schizophrenic fingering...*
- ◆ And so with regards to the session's theme, and by way of definition, education and culture are perceived to be closely linked institutions of the superstructure, brought into being as people address the issues of personal and collective survival as well as perpetuation.
- ◆ Within this, education is a key institution for inculcating and promoting cultural values and practices. It is a communicator as well as reservoir of culture. In its liberative sense, education includes the right to self-definition/naming, self naming, self-knowledge, and self-determination.
- ◆ To talk of education is to talk of community culture and cultural communities. Culture acts to unify and order experience so that its members perceive organization, consistency and a world view.
- ◆ It "tells" members what to do, thereby creating a "voice of prescriptive authority". It provides the creation of shared symbols and meanings, and is therefor the primary force of collective consciousness
- ◆ However, in the context of African Renaissance, culture should not close itself in the past, but rather, has to be located in the "realm of the beyond".

### Some Diagnostic Insights

- A core insight was the acknowledgement, arising from the slave trade, of a state of *deep trauma* (in the psychiatric sense) for the people of the entire

world, particularly for those who were directly involved in the dehumanization of Africa whether as perpetrators, victims, or as witnesses.

- This trade not only turned the African into a semi-animal, but confused the notion of what a human being is - culminating into a profound identity crisis that became lodged in the psyche of modern men and women.
- With Africa denied the status of a civilization (unlike the Orientals), a psychic knot emerged, linking Africa and the West in a twisted bond of underdevelopment and poverty on the one hand, and moral and spiritual illness i.e the ‘social character’ of capitalist civilization on the other.
- The success of Western powers in effecting world domination, it was stated, was predicated on its use of *culture as ideology* - in which Christianity was used as a subtle battering ram to gain hegemony over the rest of the world.
- Mission schools forbade the natives from the use of “their” language. At the same time, nuances of communication in the colonial language could not be grasped with in all its subtleties...
- Where complementarities existed, binary thoughts were introduced which began with Plato’s suspicions of emotions, leading to the Cartesian imperative to instrumental reasoning.
- Africans were said to be animistic... victims of tokenism, and all the descriptors we are all too familiar with.
- In the area of education, the clash of world views is evidenced in the gap between the living culture and the way we were taught and/or expected to teach.
- African universities, the point was made in various ways, have failed to fulfil their role as the guiding light of the continent and of the societies within which they are located.
- A failing of the South African government in the new dispensation was its omitting to introduce a university of relevant scholarship capable of bargaining for or seizing the space, and undertaking to quality, the type of work that African renaissance demands of tertiary institutions.
- However, there was also a need to deconstruct the notion of “elites” - that odious vermin - and attempt to distinguish those who are really not supinely sitting by endorsing the status quo, but who struggle with the masses.

## Way forward

- ▶ Because education is linked to the productive process and economic system, the starting point for addressing the issue of education and culture must begin with a fundamental reconstruction, or overhaul of the entire economic-political system. This overhaul must begin with
  - a re-institution of an explicitly people centered conception of development
  - developing a sense of commitment and loyalty to the development of the “whole” human being (spiritual, mental, social... as well as other aspects such as economy etc.)
  - an emphasis on collective development rather than individualistic accumulation of wealth.
  - a conscious learning from African philosophies and putting that wisdom to overt use.
- ▶ Mental and psychological re-conditioning to be undertaken in the manner and scale of *national reconciliation* projects. The objective here is to re-educate and rehabilitate the lost historical memory of victims of “mis-education”, validate African cultures, and create the “guerrilla intellectuals” who know his/her terrain so well that he/she is able to use the enemy’s weapons to subvert the invader.
- ▶ Education should be consciously shifted from a banking concept (master/servant) to one that has a productive component. This is the way to rescue the victims of neo-colonial education in the face of unemployment and other forms of rampant deprivation.
- ▶ This draws attention to the issue of “who exactly are writing the curricula in Africa?”
- ▶ African languages, multilingualism, and especially lingua francas should be promoted to avert the privilege by default given to English at the moment.
- ▶ African renaissance debates should be offered in as many different local languages as is possible to enable the actual bearers of culture to partake and participate effectively in it.
- ▶ while on this issue, funders of this conference should consider continuing to support satellite efforts at articulating the concept of African renaissance beyond the big shows such as this one, to the satellite micro settings of

community fora.

- ▶ Education should have a cultural component which specifically draws upon African indigenous knowledges and culture. An *Oracy revolution* that recognizes that Africa's civilization was based on the *orate* as opposed to *literate* culture could provide the starting point for this turnabout. Oracy and literacy should go hand in hand with the implication that we abandon once and once for all the assumption that orateness is equal to ignorance, or that the two traditions are antagonistic and incompatible.
- ▶ African scholars in Africa and the diaspora, and African institutions such as universities must take a stand now, and confront the problem of poverty and come up with a programme of development to inform policy formation and formulation, and help pull the continent out of this poverty into food self sufficiency. This requires a renewed focus on agriculture and rural development as an antidote to the prevalent urban-centric bias.
- ▶ In this regard, African renaissance cannot happen without fundamental re-adjustments to, and re-alignments of the existing sectoral ministries in such a manner that the link education and culture, for one, can be clearly seen and operationalized.
- ▶ Counter-hegemonic discourses must be generated in order to enable the triple agenda of de-construction, re-construction, and regeneration to be realized.
- ▶ At stake here is the battle of world-views and the conceptions of reality, and the role of higher education and that of intellectuals generally in shaping the direction toward a more culture specific or culturally relevant curriculum is a critical one.
- ▶ The following are critical objectives and priorities in this regard:
  - to create a body of African knowledge systems (both contemporary and indigenous), and a directory of experts in African indigenous knowledge systems.
  - create courses on the African Renaissance perspectives in all faculties.
  - create linkages between institutions, government structures and the community in order to enable the latter to make meaningful contribution to policy development.
  - develop the philosophy of UBUNTU and create programmes for its application in practice.

- ▶ An African Renaissance decade must be declared in the fashion of the Women's Decade for the sole purpose of focussing on means and methods of battling Afro-pessimism, putting to appropriate perspective Eurocentrism, and celebrating African culture and knowledge forms.
- ▶ However, it may also be time to take stock and conduct some kind of evaluation of the actual achievements of the various movements such as the cultural identity movement in order to determine their contribution to the re-birth of the continent.
- ▶ Whether we like it or not, we are of two worlds, both Western and African, and the success of our renaissance will depend on how we position ourselves and reconcile the world views we have inherited.

In other words, are we still chasing gods which are not our own? The answer appeared to total a "yes" indeed. The only difference is that now such an admission is not an empty rhetorical trope, but part of a call for action NOW.