

Chapter 11

Return to The Source? Challenges and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

Every human society has a history that it takes pride in. In times of despair there could be invocation or calls to return to that history either as an informant of correct practice or as an inspiration of what current practice should be. Hence some African scholars and politicians have made calls that seek to return to that source. At least three problems pose some significant threat to the project of the return to the source. Firstly, there is a problem of interpreting what the exact nature of that traditional set up was, secondly there is a problem of working out how the traditional mode can fit into the modern, and thirdly there is the problem of the possibility that different sources existed in that pristine past. Without an adequate response to these threats, the return may not be as smooth as its advocates have thought it to be.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of returning to some known or interpreted historical fact of our past existence before the misfortunes of conquest were visited upon us is neither new nor scantily considered. It is an idea that is well documented with various reasons being offered in support of such a return. There are at least two aspects of that return that have been advanced. The first has to do with a revival of general modes of life and existence that are cast as genuine rendition of being African. The second aspect has to do with how these traditional modes can serve as an inspiration to our current stagnation. In this paper I wish to focus on the political aspect of a return to the source. I seek to show that while there is value in the notion of returning to the source in and of itself, there are some difficulties that cannot be ignored in the very attempt of working out the detailed nature of the source we are supposed to be returning to. Since these difficulties are of a significant degree, I seek to propose that it could be more profitable not to be dogmatic about the need to return to this said source. While I acknowledge that such a source could indeed have a plausible existence either in its past or in our current interpretation of what it could have

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been, trouble really lies in attempts at tailing its specific relevance or use for our current situation. This paper is divided into three parts; in the first part I outline the varying political attempts at the return to the source, in the second section I show how the problem of interpreting this source may prove a challenge and in the third section I advance what I consider to be a less objectionable manner of relating the source to our present political conditions. I take this project to be a contribution towards developing a critical appraisal of how our indigenous knowledge system may be understood as an informant of modern practice. My critical approach objects to the style of approaching indigenous systems with a dogmatic revivalist attitude.

THE POLITICS OF THE RETURN TO THE SOURCE

A clear advocacy of the return to the source is to be found in Amilcar Cabral's title of his work which is given as '*Return to the Source: Selected Speeches*'. Cabral argues (1998) in detail that any effective manner of getting rid of colonial oppression is essentially to be tied to the culture of the formerly oppressed people. If these oppressed people were to get rid of their colonial masters but were to fail to get rid of the foreign culture their victory would only be hollow. He writes:

A people who free themselves from foreign domination will be free culturally only if, without complexes and without under-estimating the importance of positive accretions from the oppressor and other culture, they return to the upward paths of their own culture, which is nourished by the living reality of its environment, and which negates both harmful influences and any kind of subjection to foreign culture. Thus, it may be seen that if imperialist domination has the vital need to practice cultural oppression, national liberation is necessarily an act of culture... (p. 262)

He goes on to argue that the coloniser does not only seek to destroy the cultural life of the oppressed but he also actively seeks to alienate some sections of the colonised population through either assimilation or by creating a distance between the indigenous elites and the ordinary masses. Through material benefit and belief that they are associated with a superior culture, the indigenous elites, according to Cabral begin to look down upon their culture and increasingly begin to adopt the culture of the colonisers. In this manner, the coloniser becomes more powerful as he also begins to appoint chiefs and other apparatchiks who act on his behalf. Cabral (1998), therefore, argues that there is need for what he calls re-Africanisation in the struggle for freedom. Cabral shows impatience with racist theories that sought to show that the African had no culture. On the contrary, he argues that Africa has a rich cultural endowment. Hence he states that "...we can say that the accomplishments of the African genius in economic, political, social and cultural domains, despite the inhospitable character of the environment, are epic – comparable to the major historical examples of the greatness of man" (pp. 263). However, Cabral is quite hesitant to point out what exact elements of that culture are. On the contrary, he holds that there is no essence in culture that is determined by racial or continental realities. This is due to the fact that "as with history, the development of culture proceeds in uneven fashion, whether at the level of a continent, a "race," or even a society. The coordinates of culture, like those of any developing phenomenon, vary in space and time, whether they be material (physical) or human (biological and social)" (pp. 264). What Cabral explicitly argues for is the idea that this notion of culture must be understood within the universal framework and any subsequent comparison of the African culture to other cultures must not

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