PAPER DIGEST. CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT AND RACISM IN AFRICA: AN APPLICATION OF INTERPRETIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH.

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Introduction.

I elect to start with a cluster of asides. Firstly, I have two confessions to make though I am not asking for absolution. I must confess that it is with deep respect and extreme trepidation that I accepted to share with you the following reflections on the burning issue of racism. Happily my focus is located on the other side of the Atlantic.

Secondly, I like to confess my confusion about the English language. While a student in Rome, I ran into an American Vietnam war veteran at a bookstore outside the Basilica of St. Mary Major. He lived in Beda College, the English seminary for late vocations. His complaint was: “those guys cannot speak English. No guy in New York will be able to understand them”. I reported this complaint to my course mate in the other English College at Piazza Farnese. And his response was abrupt and crisp: “But Americans do not speak English”. So if you have some difficulty with my accent, remember that I was once the arbiter of who really speaks the English language. But then, since the America of the founding fathers is fascinated with and cultivates diversity, we have cause to welcome and celebrate the colorful ensemble within it of the varieties of the spoken English.

Thirdly, the annual celebration of the death of Martin Luther King Jr. here in the United States of America reminds us that the phenomenon of racism is not yet history. At the beginning of his Metaphysics, Aristotle called for collaboration in the human effort to obtain knowledge. Hence for a fuller appreciation of the phenomenon of racism, this paper presents an inside and alternative view of racism as it emerged and was experienced on the African continent. By “racism” I understand any policy that assumes the superiority of a particular race or any theory which teaches that human abilities are determined by race. (This definition comes from The Concise Oxford Dictionary). How sensitive people are to distinctions predicated on the basis of superiority or inferiority can be gleaned from the on-going controversy around the President of Harvard whose statement about women’s capability to do science has come under considerable fire.

My thesis is this: Africans never accepted any superiority claim based on race. This thesis is the defense of the meaning of an African (Igbo) proverb: Ebe onye oso ruru, onye ukwu ga erukwa. In effect, the proverb says “however swiftly the trained athlete runs to the destination, he does not have any advantage over the pedestrian who will eventually reach the same goal. The insight this African wisdom opens up is based on the distinction between being and having. The European visitors to the continent had a superior technology which overawed the Africans but which did not entail, according to the African wisdom, their possessing a higher form of humanity. The yawning gap between Europeans and Africans created by science and technology is not unbridgeable.
As far as being human is concerned, the Africans regard themselves as inferior to nobody. (The Ashantis of Ghana have a symbol that says: we fear nobody else except God). As far as the control of nature and the comforts of life is concerned, Africans believe that the scientific and technological achievements of their white visitors gave the whites a head-start. While they struggle to catch up with the whites in that field of experience they believe that such achievements would not constitute valid foundations for assuming a posture of racial superiority.

My method is historical, descriptive and interpretive. It probes the mentality of the Africans through an investigation of their oral wisdom so as to uncover their original response to European presence embedded in their oral tradition. Their lack of written documents made it difficult for the white visitors to engage African culture in intelligent and intelligible dialogue. In the absence of such a dialogue, Africans were frivolously seen as having no culture. Today a certain cultural renaissance has become necessary. This renaissance intends to go beyond the accretions and interpretations of African life handed down by foreigners to Africa and to excavate that hitherto excluded indigenous knowledge unavailable to them because of their ignorance of the native lingo and idiom. The validity of the interpretation, of course, depends on the reading of the data. My reading of the data, I shall argue, is authentic since it is vindicated by the development of events subsequent to the period of European activity on the African continent.

The aim of this enterprise looks to the hermeneutical method of Martin Heidegger. To understand the concept of man among the Greeks as it was dramatized in the first chorus of Sophocles’ Antigone, he went back to Parmenides’ dictum: “thinking and being are the same” as his hermeneutical tool. (See An Introduction to Metaphysics, p.146ff.). In the same way I propose to go back to the sources of Africa’s self-understanding as transmitted in their wisdom literature, which happens to be oral. I will explore the sources of the phenomenon of racism by reverting to the attitudes and prejudices of first European visitors to the continent. My approach is theological: a stance of faith seeking understanding. My purpose is to further the healing dimensions of Christology namely, to contribute to the breaking down of the walls of partition which block the way of incarnating “God’s dream” for humankind namely, the situation that would reflect on earth “as it is in heaven”. It is geared to increasing understanding between the peoples and to accelerate the momentum of the process of building up a one people of God where the distinctions founded on ethnicity, gender, social status or race are recognized but are no longer permitted to divide.

A scientific model offers me the point of departure. The discovery of the cosmic background radiation was the evidence scientists needed to support the Big Bang Theory of the birth of the universe. Geologists speak about earthquake’s aftershocks. Analogously, the suspicion of racial discrimination continues to vibrate as a sort of cosmic background, as a sort of aftershock throughout all of the relations Africans enter into today with their white fellows. Are these suspicions justified? Since I am unable to leap over my shadow, the style of presentation will mirror Africa’s language game of direct talk. They do not speak in the accents of a Delphic oracle nor were they schooled in politically correct language. But they were diplomatic as shown in Chief Moshweshwe of Lesotho and the Ashanti cultural Council that donated a fake Golden Stool to the
British Museum. My historical approach combined with a certain hermeneutics of
suspicion tries to uncover the reality of the case.

The paper proceeds in six stages: It
1) explores the legacy of Africa’s explorers
2) examines Africa’s Colonial Experience
3) describes a selective pattern of African resistance thereby questions the assumed
passivity of Africans to European occupation of the continent
4) vindicates the sense of the dignity of Africans’ self-worth known already in
African tradition but now confirmed through the Gospel preached by Christian
missionaries. Paradoxically this affirmation subverts the posture of cultural
arrogance arguably adopted by the early Europeans.
5) Articulates the impact of Catholic Social Teaching in building up the self-
confidence and competence of the Africans. The Africans took steps after national
independence to reverse the direction Europeans gave to their future, and finally
6) There is a  prognostic look at the future of racism in Africa.

The Legacy of Africa’s Explorers.

The first two novels of  Chinua Achebe namely, No Longer at Ease  and Things
Fall Apart dramatically document, as both titles announce, the disarray of traditional
indigenous cultural cohesion introduced by European presence on the continent. Not
everybody, however, sees the situation as he does, in terms of unmitigated disaster and
the dissolution of customary certainties. My The Reshaping of African Tradition is one of
the dissenters because I see European presence in terms of enrichment and as an
opportunity for wholesome growth. But Joseph Conrad’s The Heart of Darkness remains
a picturesque description of the shock of difference which led the first white explorers of
the continent to assume that Africans were not on the same level of cultural evolution as
themselves. That novel ironically shows off the insensitivity of the explorers to appreciate native ingenuity and enterprise. Consequently the author taught his readers to undervalue the humanity of the Africans. This attitude was, of course, wide-spread in the
europe of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For example, the famed debate in
Valladolid, capital of Castile (August, 1550) was called to determine the racial status of
the Indians discovered in America. The defender of Spanish racial superiority, Juan Gines
de Sepulveda and the champion of the Indians Bartolome de Las Casas both argued from
Aristotle’s teaching in his Politics that some people are by nature slaves. They did not
argue from the bible, even though the Spanish King was “most Christian” and the
Conquistadores were claiming the New World for Christ. It was therefore not totally
unobvious that when the first African visitors to Europe arrived in Lagos, Portugal in
1444, it was as a group of 200 slaves captured by an expedition sent out by Prince Henry
the Navigator. Later explorers and cartographers of the nineteenth century imbibed a
version of “social Darwinism” to justify their disdain of the Africans. Philosophers like
Hegel, who depended on the stories of missionaries and the tales of the explorers as
source (arm-chair philosopher, if any there was) concluded that European misuse of
Africans introduced the Africans to culture. One of these explorers, and his testimony is
not an odd one out. Joseph Thomson wrote of the East Africans: “the barbarian Negro has
not the power of rising to the level of the civilized man either in his lifetime or in the
second or third generation.”

Modern Africans who read such ancient but negative assessments of their
ancestors cannot but be excused from suspecting that there is still some hang-over halo or
aura of such assumptions, that the whites still regard them as children of a lesser god. The
establishment of *Apartheid* as a system of government in South Africa was an extreme
eexample of the disdain which cemented the white man’s appreciation of the African.

The Colonial Experience.

The explorers mapped out the continent and renamed its rivers and mountains in a way
Europeans could pronounce them. (I have earlier mentioned Lagos in Portugal. The
former capital of Nigeria was named Lagos by the Portuguese explorers even though the
native Yorubas still call the city Eko). They also exposed the military deficiency of
African kingdoms as well as the great potential for industrial resources and for trade to an
Europe hungry for markets. The missionaries took pity on the miserable state of the
people and invited the European monarchs to shoulder “the white man’s burden”, a
mission of civilizing the Africans according to European standards of what it meant to be
human. This re-civilization mission came in the heels of the era of “the Scramble for
Africa”, in the late nineteenth century. European nations almost went to war (remember
the Fashoda Incident?) against one another in their scramble for areas of influence in
Africa, areas that were to be the sources of raw materials for servicing the new industries
springing up all over Europe. Bismarck had to call a Conference in Berlin (1884-85) to
settle the African problem without inviting any African representative. The countries of
Africa as we know them today are European creations. People are separated by artificial
boundaries. The colonialists had no qualms in turning machine guns on defenseless
natives who dared to question their intrusion. The massacres of Carl Peters in the then
Tanganyika and the atrocities of Lord Kitchner in the Sudan are legendary. If ever
exposed as the Nazi Holocaust was and still is, as the celebrations today confirm, they
would rate higher in the scale of crimes against humanity. David Lamb assessed this
period of European activity in thoroughgoing negative terms: “The Europeans built
artificial foundations for Africa’s fledging nations, and when the tide changed, they
crumbled like sand castles. Only one aspect of colonialism was strong enough to survive
the transition to independence – economic enslavement.” He then goes on to add: “The
colonialists left behind some schools and roads, some post offices and bureaucrats. But
their cruelest legacy on the African continent was a lingering inferiority complex, a
confused sense of identity. After all, when people are told for a century that they’re not as
clever or capable as their masters, they eventually start to believe it.”

Patterns of African Resistance to Racism.

In the face of an awesome foreign and intimidating presence (I almost said “shock
and awe”) with a well-oiled administrative machinery and a ruthless superior fire-power
to maintain it, the Africans turned to indigenous wisdom as survival mechanism. They found that when they refused to cooperate with the white visitors, they were either imprisoned, shot or carried away into slavery. Their experience is carried by one of their proverbs: *the ka nte batakuru nte!* Some thing more powerful than the cricket has entered the cricket’s domain. The situation became very uncomfortable: the cricket became homeless in its home. What was to be done? How should one cope with the unwilled situation? Another proverb was invoked: *Chi inchi gwara umu ya. Nwenu ndidid! the di oku ga emesia di oyi.* It was a plea for patience in a situation that was perceived as unbearably constrictive but nonetheless transitory, an invocation of hope for a future of freedom and rehabilitation. The bedbug is said to have counseled its brood to live in hope because what is presently hot will eventually become cold. The visitor will eventually take his leave. (*Onye biarabia ga emesia laa.*) They had always wondered at, and suspected that there was a hidden agenda on the part of the Europeans. How could they leave their country of origin to come, as the cartographers did, only to admire their rivers, lakes and mountains! Moreover, European technology fascinated them and in deed overawed them. The guns of the Europeans and their proved damaging potential had no precedent in their world of experience. There is the totally marvelous case of the town-crier at the first appearance of the European motor-cyclist: “My eyes have seen my ears! How can somebody be sitting down and running at the same time?”, he exclaimed. The white man had made the impossible possible! Even they could remove their teeth and put them back again! That awe has continued to fascinate and to hold the Africans in bondage. *Onyibo bu agbara!* The white man: he is an evil genius!, is a common exclamation at the imposing magic of the white man’s technology.

**The Leaven of the Gospel.**

The missionaries opened up to them the word of God. They learnt about themselves as the *imago Dei* and that God does not discriminate among peoples. The Gospel teachings confirmed their traditional self-understanding about equality of human beings. (For example the idiom, *Igbo ama eze* namely, every Igbo is a king to himself). What was new was that the Gospel taught them they were gods. The missionary schools and hospitals were academies of freedom and of formation in justice. Social services communicated the sense that everybody had the right to the bounties of creation. Service to fellow humans and gardening the world of nature are seen as signs of social and ecological responsibility. The prophetic passages of Sacred Scripture were incentives to revolt against perceived injustices, deprivations and oppression. The Biafra war was a testimony to struggle against injustice and deprivation. The same is true of the *Mau-Mau* guerilla expeditions in Kenya.

Christian influence was, however, not always positively assessed. Some think Christianity was purposively introduced to break down African military resistance (Ali Masrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*), while some suspect its moral code of obedience was fashioned to control Africans and thereby deprive them of their land. It is credited to Jomo Kenyatta, the first President of Kenya that “the missionaries gave us the bible to pray with eyes closed; when we opened our eyes, we discovered they had taken our lands!”
Impact of Catholic Social Teaching.

In his acceptance speech of the Nobel Prize for Literature in Oslo, Sweden (October,1986) the Nigerian Playwright Wole Soyinka, attributed the grace of forgiveness extended to the imperial powers after political independence to the transformation effected in Africans by African Traditional Religion. There is no doubt about the traditional hospitality which Africans extended to the explorers and missionaries. It is debatable, however, to unilaterally attribute to African Traditional Religion the forgiving attitude of African governments to the former colonial powers in its post- independence era. Ethnic pogroms as we experienced it, above all, in Rwanda would contradict that position. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission at the end of Apartheid in South Africa testifies, Christian teaching on peace and forgiveness had much to do with it.

There are three different trajectories in which African governments tried to retrieve the African identity left in a sort of suspended animation at the period of colonial rule. There was the policy of Authenticity propounded by Mobutu namely, the reversal of African cultural life-style to the situation it was in before the Europeans intruded. Secondly, there was the re-education policy aimed at “restoring the dignity of man” (University of Nigeria, Nsukka). Thirdly, there was the call for compensation issued to the former colonial masters to financially amend the loss in man-power to the continent eventuated by the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Mugabe’s current draconian seizure of white-owned farms in Zimbabwe is an extreme form of the execution of that policy. On the Church level, Protestant Church Assembly in Lusaka, Zambia (1971) called for a Moratorium on foreign missionaries to demand that the African Churches be self-directing and thus be enabled to exercise the type of native leadership of the Church in Africa which the continued presence of foreign missionaries had continued to block. Anglican prelates, as a sign of their independence, have recently resolved not to send their ministers to study in the United States as long as the Episcopal Church continues to ordain professed homosexuals.

The Future of Racism in Africa.

Europe met Africa when Africa south of the Sahara had not developed a written literature as a basis of conversation with the Europeans. On account of that lack, they were mistakenly framed as lacking in culture. With political independence and a new generation of Africans educated and armed with the white man’s knowledge and savoire-faire, Africans have the remarkable opportunity to determine how they have to run their affairs. Unlike China, they did not build a Great Wall to ward off foreign influence and foreign disdain. But they have the unique opportunity, after the model of Japan, of having been enriched by the cultures of other peoples and above all, by Christianity. They know that in apostolic Christianity, there was a bitter debate as recorded in The Act of the Apostles about the status of Gentiles in the Jewish Church. Even the great defender of equality of Jews and Gentiles in the Church, Saint Paul, had to be reminded of the implications of his theory of Church membership and the demands of Christian baptism against discrimination by that bold businesswoman Lydia of Thyatira. Hence by a
process of dynamic osmosis, Africans have the singular privilege of being the custodians of the world’s cultures and, since globalization has become the rage of the age, they stand at pole position in the unfolding direction of the new era of world history. Hebrew literature would exalt: “the pit they dug for me, they fell in it themselves!” Africans look forward to the time when, even in the Church, theory translates into practice, a time when Africans could be pastors and bishops in the white man’s country just as whites had been pastors and bishops in Africa. Their wisdom and perspicacity in bringing from their storehouse riches both old and new, would certainly enhance their personal dignity, win them the respect they have been craving for from their fellows. They will as well enrich the heritage of our common humanity. For those who continue to look down on them in disdain, they can only respond with the aid of their Christian heritage: “Father forgive them, for they know not what they are doing!”