# TWO WORLDS – INTEGRATION, SYNTHESIS OR CONFLICT?

# PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURAL IDENTITY IN AFRICA

## *Abstract*

*Educational curricula in African countries are predominantly influenced by Western cultural assumptions and methods, and take insufficient account of each African country's unique social and cultural contexts.  Professional and more affluent people in African countries are also often educated in Europe and America, further superimposing the assumptions, norms and beliefs of Western cultures upon the African cultural beliefs of their childhood.  This mixed cultural background can create internal psychological conflict in terms of identity, and many Africans find themselves  "between cultures".*

*It is argued that this personal experience of the" two worlds", and the challenge of establishing an individual identity which encompasses very different cultural belief systems, exactly mirrors the socio-cultural processes taking place in emerging African nations.  This paper explores some psychological perspectives on identity and loss as means of understanding the impact of cultural change on cultural identity, from both individual and societal perspectives.  It is suggested that these psychological perspectives on cultural identity be considered essential components of the leadership initiatives now being developed in many African countries.   Some suggested practical contributions to such initiatives are proposed and discussed.*

## Introduction

Being between the "two worlds" of African and Western values and cultural belief systems can sometimes have profound psychological effects on a person's sense of belonging and rootedness.  Internal uncertainty or conflict in relation to individual identity can result in anxiety, reduced self confidence, denial of childhood experience and cultural roots, and secret adherence to beliefs and rituals.   It is the theme of this paper that such personal experience of cultural conflict directly mirrors conflicts in cultural identity within emerging African nations, and that the understanding of one can aid in the understanding of the other.

## Personal identity

Personal identity can be defined as an individual's own sense of who s/he is. It has two sources - an individual's unique history, experiences and perceptions, and membership of, and affiliation with, various social groups, including national groups.   Thus a person's sense of self/identity is

simultaneously both individual and social (Searle-White, 2001).  It therefore always encompasses a number of different "selves", including, inter alia, those based on family, territory, class, religion, occupation, ethnicity and gender.   Everyone experiences parts of their personal identity differently depending upon the social context – for example a woman will experience one part of her identity when she is being a mother with her children, and another, probably quite different part when she is in a work context.    A particular "self" can be evoked and become more salient in some situations and not others, and particular social circumstances also reinforce certain parts of personal identity more than others.  Because inside each person there are many different selves/identities, there will be occasions when some of these internal "selves" may be experienced as being in conflict with each other.

**National identity**

The concept of a nation/nationality as the primary means of defining collective identity is a Western, relatively modern view.   This Western model of national identity can be defined as "a named population sharing a historical territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all its members" (Smith, 1991, p.14).  The process of colonisation, in which Western countries defined and divided territory in Africa into "nations" with limited regard for tribal affiliations, has resulted in the Western notion of national identity being the primary influence on how African nations have formulated the development of their own national identities after independence.

This Western, historically recent, concept of national identity is fundamentally different from the understanding of national identity in non Western cultures.  In this very different cultural viewpoint, a nation is regarded predominantly as a community of common descent, in which **common ancestry** and genealogy are of paramount importance, rather than boundaries or a common economy.  The establishment of national identities in emerging African nations after independence is also made more difficult because tribal identities, which were based on specific belief systems, historical narratives unique to a tribal group and indigenous languages, have been subject to consistent erosion.   This erosion has been exacerbated by the imposition of other cultural belief systems and languages by Christian missionaries and, more recently, the onslaught of cultural globalisation.   The secure personal and national identities of the past which were expressed in specific tribal and language groups have been threatened, and, in many contexts, lost.   Within all African nations this loss has been exacerbated by the development of an education system based on Western cultural assumptions and the development of an elite whose cultural background is predominantly Western.   Members of this elite may no longer teach their children the cultural understandings or language of their tribe and thus each generation is further removed from parts of their own traditional cultural identity.

**Threats to personal and national identity**

Personal identity, and the different "selves" of which it is composed, cannot exist without social context and validation by others. Identity is thus sometimes experienced as fragile and potentially at risk, and can be threatened and changed in very different ways. For example – new problems or challenges in someone's personal circumstances may initiate changes in personal identity, for example becoming a parent for the first time; change may occur through gradual influence and interactions with others, for example if someone goes to live in another country; or change can be imposed on both individuals and societies by deliberate social re-engineering and control, for example the passing of laws which forbid behaviour or customs which were previously considered socially acceptable. A number of significant changes in African countries have been of the latter kind; they have been imposed - by colonialism, by missionaries, by Western technology and now by the process of cultural globalisation.

Examples of the imposition of cultural change can be seen in relation to many African government institutions. According to Smith (1991) the administrative apparatus of the colonial state was a "hybrid", "an alien executive instrument from a culturally different political community" (p 106). Even today, most independent African countries still have formal institutions which were transplanted from a European cultural context by the colonists. These institutions were superimposed upon the existing indigenous, tribal based traditional authority structures and informal historical networks. In many instances this has resulted in a profound disconnection between formal institutions, which have their roots in European cultural traditions, and the informal traditional networks which still powerfully affect people's lives and their sense of cultural identity.

All cultures evolve and change over time, but it is of extreme significance that recent and present immense cultural upheavals are not taking place gradually and organically as in earlier periods of history. Colonisation of other cultures has taken place throughout history, but advanced communications technology now enables the images and cultural value systems from the dominant American/European global cultures to be transmitted to every country in the world. Power and influence can now be exercised on a world wide scale, thus threats to cultural identities are now greater than at any time in history.

**Loss and change**

Irreversible social and cultural changes in individual and cultural identity can result in acute experiences of emotional loss. According to Marris (1996), experiences of loss fundamentally disrupt the ability to find meaning, and can be evoked by any situation where the ability to make sense of life is severely disrupted. The resulting psychological processes are therefore extremely similar to the processes experienced in reaction to the loss experienced in personal bereavement.

Attachment is essential to a sense of emotional security for all human beings, and therefore any loss which robs someone of an attachment profoundly disrupts their ability to experience life in the same meaningful way as before. This occurs no matter how "rational" or "beneficial" changes may seem to another person who does not have the same intensity of attachment.  The process of grieving in reaction to the loss of something to which a person has been intensely attached can be seen in all cultures (Murray Parkes, 1998), and can be a reaction to change in any area of someone's life, not only in response to death.  The severity of grief is directly dependent upon the person's **intensity** of emotional attachment to what has been lost, not the actual object of attachment.   For example people can experience grief regarding the loss of their old home, even when, in a material sense, the new house may be thought of by others as an "improvement"; people can experience grief from the loss of religious rituals which they have carried out since their own childhood and to which they are intensely emotionally attached, although to others without such attachments, they may have little meaning; some parents experience grief at the end of their own children's childhood as the meaning of their own lives has to be renegotiated; grief can also be experienced at the loss of employment by which someone defined their  identity.  This painful loss of meaning can also occur in circumstances where someone's language, customs or ways of living are altered by social and cultural change.   Adaptation to new circumstances in which something to which a person has been emotionally attached has been lost, requires psychological reintegration - previous meanings by which a person has made sense of a part of his/her life are no longer valid, and new meanings to make sense of new life situations have to be reconstituted.


**Reactions to loss**

If change is understood as a process of loss of meaning which requires psychological integration, what reactions can be expected?   Normal processes of grief contain intense anxiety and despair.  If the predictability of events has been invalidated by loss, continuity of meaning has to be restored before life will feel manageable again.  A person who has suffered loss engages in active psychological searching for **threads of continuity** in their experience which will help to restore a sense that what has been lost can still give meaning to the present.  Somehow, the purpose and feeling that the particular attachment expressed has to be abstracted from its past setting and reformulated so as to make sense in the present and the future.  Feelings of grief cannot be assuaged by a substitute because meaning has been inextricably bound up with the **specific** attachment that has been lost.

In seeking to predict how people will cope with loss, in relation to both personal and socio-cultural identity, some of the essential questions to be considered are as follows:  Do the changes "make sense" to the person? Can meaning be attributed to the changes in light of the cultural meanings and attachments within which the person has grown up?   Can any purpose be derived from the changes?   If one asks these questions in the context of cultural change in Africa, some of the ambiguities, contradictions and conflicts

which engender feelings of loss become apparent, and, in addition, some of the inherent contradictions within Western culture are also illuminated. (What follows are only very brief examples of some fundamental questions).

What effects does the promotion of Western cultural and economic value systems including materialism, wasteful consumption and ecological damage have on those who have been brought up with cultural values which are very different? What effects might the promotion of these very different cultural values have on an individual's experience of his own cultural identity? Does s/he feel a sense of belonging or alienation? How is a villager to make sense of the gross inequalities in nutrition, life expectancy, education, and material standard of living between what is portrayed in media images of Western countries and his/her own experience? How does someone make sense of the meaning of his/her own life? Does the exposure to the two worlds make someone feel more certain and attached to their own culture or do they experience anxiety and anger? How does someone feel when the language in which their deepest feelings are expressed is considered irrelevant, and the customs by which the person's own community has made sense of life and experience are implicitly devalued by the "development" in his own country? Marris (1996) describes some aspects of the experience as follows:

> "What do wealth, status, marriage, honour mean for an African villager in a society where traditional, colonial and autonomous national institutions overlay each other in such rapid succession that the values and symbols of three different periods in history, each derived from a different framework of assumptions, are present all at once? The loss of meaning is not as abrupt and overwhelming as in bereavement, but it is **cumulative** (my emphasis), as the implications of the creation of nation states work themselves out. . . . . . In these circumstances he is caught between the same conflicting impulses as the bereaved – to return to the past, which seems in retrospect a haven of security and meaningful satisfactions; to realise at once a new self, a modern man confidently handling the possibilities of a progressive nation. Each impulse provokes its painful reaction; the attempt to revive tradition only exposes its decay; the pursuit of modernity leads to humiliating frustrations and bewilderment, and a sense of betrayal of his true identity." (P 67-8)

Attempts to superimpose a different set of cultural assumptions on traditional ways of being and thinking ignore the reality of earlier fundamental structures of meaning, the conventions used to express them, and the processes of loss involved in such changes. **Enforced** and extremely rapid changes in cultural identity, both national and personal, are likely to produce acute experiences of loss and bereavement, particularly in relation to cultural and language frameworks. Although the processes of change and loss are continuous within every culture, and every generation has specific losses and changes to which it must adapt, the recent processes of cultural change in Africa have been far more rapid, of a greater magnitude and much more profound than in earlier historical time frames or in other cultures. It is therefore not surprising that enforced social change at many different levels has brought disorder, disorientation, anger and resentment.


**Nation or tribe? the tolerance of ambivalence**

As mentioned above, the resulting process of grief from the loss of perceived earlier cultural identities, is very similar to bereavement, and contains a conflict between two contradictory impulses - to return to the past to recover the part of one's (the society's) identity that has been lost, or to behave as if it had not existed.   Returning to the past denies the reality of the changes in the present, but conversely, denying the past betrays the past experiences and meanings on which personal and national identity has been built.   These conflicting impulses are experienced both nationally and personally, and to find ways forward for the future the conflict and ambivalence has to somehow be reconciled

The question of tribalism in African nations illustrates this ambivalence. When an individual defines him/herself by tribe, superficially this would seem to be inconsistent with the desire to establish a single nation.   However, the problems which arise from tribalism in African nations represent the crucial questions - the conflicting impulses which must be reconciled.   The larger social processes of establishing cultural identity are reflected in individual experience – each is a reflection of the other.  Both individual and national responses to the passing of traditional society and cultural change are often ambivalent.

A recent workshop for university staff in Ghana facilitated by the author revealed clearly that, even though all the participants had completed Western style education to post graduate level, most still defined their **primary** personal identity by tribe, and the majority preferred to speak their mother tongue.   At the same time, all also accepted and believed in the need for Ghana to be a single nation with English as the common language. Participants were also very explicit in their feelings of loss regarding traditional aspects of their own culture.   Discussions illuminated this state of ambivalence – nostalgia and deep attachment to their own tribal and traditional cultural identities, but simultaneously a commitment to the ideal of a single nation.

Defining identity by tribe can be seen as an expression of the need to maintain the threads of cultural continuity from the past and to find a relevant strategy for dealing with modern life.   Attachment to tribe is both a challenge to emerging nations and a search for meaning in individual identity in the face of losses from the past and confusion regarding identity in the present and future.   The conflict between establishing a single national identity and maintaining allegiance to tribe can thus be understood as a means of protecting both individuals and nations against what can seem unbearable contradictions.   It is also an essential part of the ambivalent process necessary in loss and mourning whereby threads of continuity in meaning between past, present and future have to be established.

If the search for reconciliation and threads of continuity between past and future is abandoned, the political risks are likely to be one of two extremes – division and conflict on tribal lines or uncompromising nationalism which ignores tribal loyalties.   Both are problematic.   The struggle for cultural identity, in both individuals and nations, can only be worked out through a

long process of reinterpretation, by which essential understandings of life are abstracted from traditional contexts and reformulated (Marris,1996, p67-8). Because these processes in reaction to loss are essential, attempts to pre-empt conflict or ambivalence by rational planning, or by the imposition of political systems, will be unsuccessful. Demands by Western institutions for African nations to develop their cultural identities in ways which are similar to the dominant Western global culture can be profoundly disrespectful. Such demands do not sufficiently take into account different cultural meanings, value systems and language, and also deny the processes of loss which automatically occur with the imposition of Western global culture.

## Cultural identity and "development"

How do individuals and emerging African nations forge cultural identities which encompass the ambivalent processes of loss and bereavement and incorporate sufficient threads of continuity from their own past to survive the onslaught of American/European global culture?

Smith (1991) states that "every nation has its particular "genius", its own ways of acting, thinking, communicating, and emerging African nations must work to discover that unique genius wherever it is lost" (p73). However, according to Mabawonku et al, (2001), basing cultural identity on African ways of approaching life and specifically African cultural values is conceptually and practically difficult because of the institutional disconnections caused by the "two worlds" (discussed previously) and the problems of hunger. Even though much of Africa has abundant natural resources many government policies are now driven by the effects of hunger and poverty, making the cultural values of people and nations even more difficult to define.

The concept of "development" in relation to the cultural identities of African nations, and by implication individuals, is a further confounding factor. As a concept it seems misleading and patronising. "The idea of Development stands like a ruin in the intellectual landscape. Its shadow obscures our vision." (Sachs 1992, p1). Inspite of "aid" and so-called "development" projects, problems in Africa continue to worsen and the gap between rich and poor countries is actually greater than it was 50 years ago. It is questionable whether the concept of "development", with its implicit assumptions of Western superiority and devaluation of other cultural belief systems is actually useful for emerging African nations, and the expectation from international organisations that African countries must have a national identity and similar societal systems to Western countries show little recognition, acceptance or respect for different cultural understandings.

Western science and technology can benefit African countries in many ways, but in other respects the price paid is very high. In too many instances science and technology have not been adapted to fit specifically African contexts, and what is to be treasured in uniquely African traditional cultural values has not been sufficiently clearly identified, articulated and retained. The arrogance underlying Western scientific methodology that all problems

can somehow be "solved" by technological "progress", has not only had deleterious and destructive social and environmental effects worldwide, but also explicitly devalues different cultural understandings such as the intuitive wisdom and knowledge within the oral traditions characteristic of African cultures.

Excess consumption by affluent countries is depleting the world's natural resources and contributing to environmental degradation, and the adverse effects of technology on human relationships are only now being fully recognised.  Unfettered market forces and the power of global business corporations have been catastrophic for trade in much of Africa, and the ideology of materialism which translates all areas of life into commodities that can be bought and sold, is the major cause of depersonalisation and spiritual emptiness in the West (Moore, 1997).  The questions then become, in addressing the onslaught of American/European cultural globalisation in African nations, will there be integration, synthesis or conflict in the process of adaptation?   Can the mistakes of Western cultures - environmentally, socially and psychologically – be recognised and addressed and the necessary efforts made to avoid their replication in African countries?   Can African countries maintain their own unique "genius" – their own ways of acting, thinking, communicating, without succumbing to the new colonialism of American/European cultural globalisation?   Recovery from grief, at both personal and national levels, depends on restoring a sense that lost attachments can still give meaning to the present, not on finding new substitutes.   The purpose and feelings which past attachments and meanings expressed have to be somehow abstracted from past settings and reformulated.  This transition must incorporate the past and continue its ideals.  Integrating elements and meanings from the past will enable continuity of meaning for the present and future.


**Integration, synthesis or conflict?**

At present there seems little hope that the ever increasing dominance of American/European culture and values can be halted, so is an integration or synthesis with African cultural understandings possible?   Integration might be thought most likely to achieve the best of the "two worlds", but the following apparently "simple" example by Mabowonku (2001) describing the integration of traditional medicine with orthodox medical practice in Primary Health Care in Nigeria is given to briefly illustrate some very profound difficulties.

At present 58% of Nigeria's population utilise traditional medicine, and, on the surface, it seems very reasonable to attempt to integrate this into the Primary Health Care system based on orthodox Western medicine.   However, the integration of one with the other is inherently problematic on many levels.    As examples of this emerging integration Mabowonku (2001) describes the increasing use of  Western based  medical systems by traditional healers in Nigeria, including marketing, public relations, packaging and standardization of traditional herbal remedies – practices which are alien to traditional African culture.   However, the fundamental incompatibility between the institutional

frameworks of traditional medicine and those of Western systems of knowledge remains.   The problem with attempting integration of the two in the example described by Mabowonku (2001) is that, because of the supposed "superiority" of Western scientific methodology, there is enormous pressure for traditional knowledge and understandings to be "packaged" to fit Western systems of knowledge.   Thus, Western methodology is still paramount, and there is a great danger that the **scientific** model (a model totally at variance with other cultural understandings of disease and illness) underpinning Western medical practice will simply be replicated, and the essence of specifically African understandings, preserved orally through generations within very different knowledge frameworks, will be lost.   Even the "simple" translation of traditional approaches to medicine from indigenous languages into English also automatically results in the loss of complex cultural understandings.   If integration of traditional and Western medical systems assumes the "superiority" of Western methodology, there are real dangers that the experience of healing is itself then fundamentally changed. By attempting to fit traditional medicine into Western knowledge frameworks, rather than Western systems adapting to African cultural understandings, the unique and culturally specific African gifts of healing may be lost (Gilbert, 1999).


**Proposed contributions to African leadership initiatives**

Continuing globalisation of American/European culture means that ongoing cultural change within Africa is inevitable and that the issues of integration, synthesis or conflict between the "two worlds" will further affect all African people, both individually and nationally.   Continuing cultural change requires leaders able to straddle enormous cultural divides and provide a clear vision of national identity for their peoples.   The complex demands of leadership have been recognised by many African countries and specific leadership initiatives have been set up.   It is suggested that the psychological perspectives discussed in this paper and their implications in practice could make a potentially valuable contribution to the curricula of such programmes.

In summary, it is suggested that the following fundamental principles in relation to loss and socio-cultural change have to be acknowledged and accepted:
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- All human beings have a profound need to maintain consistency and to sustain familiar attachments and understandings which make life meaningful.

- Some socio-cultural changes, at both individual and societal levels, involve the irretrievable loss of important attachments, thus the processes of grief will occur.

- Too many changes in too short a time break down emotional resilience. In terms of the rapidity of social change and the onslaught of cultural

globalisation upon African nations, it is imperative that the human need for continuity between past and present is recognised.

- It is essential to make clear what crucial purposes and attachments seem threatened by changes and then explore how these purposes can be retrieved and reformulated in different contexts in the future.

- What is familiar needs to be made to serve a purpose and attempts be made to rehabilitate familiar forms when possible before decisions are made as to what to destroy.

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- The process of change must always expect and even encourage conflict. Whenever people are confronted with change they need the opportunity to react, to articulate their own ambivalent feelings and work out their own sense of it.

- Change requires time and patience because conflicts involve not just the accommodation of different interests but the establishment of an essential continuity in the structure of meaning.

- In conflict it is essential to respect the autonomy of different kinds of experience, to accept that individuals and groups will react to change differently, and accept the need of every group to find its own sense of continuity.

- It must be acknowledged that all individuals love particular places, people, language, rituals, kinds of work, and cannot readily substitute for them by any generalised calculation of well being.

- If adaptation to change inhibits and does not explicitly acknowledge the need for these enduring attachments, a satisfying meaning to life will not be achieved and there will be nagging doubt about identity.

- If people are not able, and are not helped, to react in articulate ways to the threats of disintegration of their own culture and identity, their sense of loss will turn inward resulting in apathy, depression, cynicism guilt and violence.

- If changes are disruptive and frequent people lose confidence that their own lives have a meaningful continuity of purpose.

- If people cannot make sense of changes in terms of their own experience, they will become aimless or cynical even when changes may be intelligent and necessary.

These principles need to be placed within the context of an historical study of the contributions of the visionary leaders that Africa has produced in the past. Greater understanding of the qualities of African leaders of the past may help

to identify what factors could be utilised in the present.   In addition, incorporating psychological perspectives on loss and identity within African leadership initiatives could be facilitated in the following ways:

### Individual mentoring

The individual examination of a leader's own experiences of psychological cultural conflict.   This would include, in particular, reflecting on the culture of their own childhood, subsequent education and experience in other cultures, and identifying their own internal strategies for dealing with internal psychological conflict.   Participants would develop increased confidence through this personal knowledge, be able to articulate and share their understandings with others, and further develop their own strategies for integrating the diverse aspects of their cultural backgrounds.

### Participative workshops

Workshops would review the processes involved in individual internal cross cultural psychological conflict, but apply this to societal perspectives on their own tribe and nation. The psychological effects of cultural globalisation could be considered in terms of different social groups within their own societies.  Participants would consider how the process of cultural globalisation might be contained, develop greater clarity regarding the disadvantages of Western global culture, and articulate more clearly what is to be treasured in African traditions.

## Conclusion

The larger socio-cultural processes of change are directly reflected in individual experience, and individuals and leaders must confront and negotiate cultural transformations within themselves which used to be experienced in generational change.  It is imperative to search for new ways to interpret the past, provide a clear vision for the future and enable processes of change to be respectful and humane.

With the worldwide onslaught of American/European culture, threats to national and personal cultural identity have never been greater and ever increasing numbers of people within Africa will experience the internal psychological conflict of the "two worlds".  It seems essential that potential leaders in African countries examine such psychological perspectives, that facilitation is provided such that internal psychological processes can be examined and discussed openly, and that strategies for increased mental well being are developed.  Through understanding their own experiences of cultural conflict, and becoming more articulate in describing this process, potential leaders would have increased self knowledge, leading to greater self confidence.   This personal understanding would also ensure a greater

sensitivity to others, and leaders would be more adept and personally equipped to actively facilitate change within their own countries.

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