

## AFRICAN CULTURE

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### PART I : African Culture

**SPATIAL SETTING OF AFRICAN CULTURE:** Africa is not only a geographical and political region of the world that constitutes the African continent but also is the homeland of peoples who are racially black and have a distinct culture compared to peoples of Europe and Asia. Thus, a course on African culture has to begin with defining where African culture is practiced within the African continent. What will be studied as African culture applies to the ways of life of black peoples of Africa and they are mostly located in the sub-Saharan section of the continent. While much of North Africa is now Arab and Muslim, there are still large black African minorities in Egypt, Libya, and Morocco. These blacks are indigenous to those areas where majority Arab populations now live. There are also whites, of British and Dutch origin, in South Africa as well as a white minority population in Zimbabwe. What is going to be studied as African culture in this course therefore relates to the culture of black Africans in Africa. It should also be noted that Africa has so many ethnic groups and each ethnic group or people has rather unique cultures. Thus, one must understand the diversity of African culture and it should not be seen as monolithic or homogeneous. However, despite the diversity of ethnic groups that make African peoples and culture, there are commonalities that make them as variations of the same way of life; hence African culture.

**ANCIENT ORIGIN OF AFRICAN CULTURE:** African culture is the oldest of cultures, bearing in mind the scientific consensus to date that the first humans originated from Africa before dispersing to other regions of the world such as Europe and Asia that also claim relatively old cultures. As Ali M. Mazrui puts it in the widely acclaimed BBC documentary "The Africans," African culture evolved as man adapted to his environment. The antiquity of Africa should not blind one to think that African culture is fixed and unchanging. The inevitable evolution of man and society and the agency of history have come to bear on African culture to make it dynamic. Like other comparable cultures worldwide, African culture is dynamic and has to adjust to so many factors and these have bearings on the different aspects of the culture to be discussed in this course.

**EUROPEAN DENIGRATION OF AFRICA:** Despite the acknowledged scientific origin of man in Africa, there were European thinkers such as G.W. F. Hegel and Hugh Trevor Roper who claimed that Africa had no culture and no history. One of the rationales for the colonization of Africa by the European powers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was that Africa had no culture and no history; a so-called tabula rasa that had to be filled with European civilization and history. European authors saw Africa as the "Other," the antithesis to European civilization to affirm their humanity. A European writers such as Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* portrayed Africa as a wild cultureless expanse that was outside the realm of culture and civilization. The renowned Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, had to write two novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, to present African culture as Africans lived it and not as Europeans perceived it from their own Eurocentric positions. In fact, Achebe in an essay, "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation," writes that "African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans. . . Their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty . . . they had their poetry and, above all, they had dignity" (qtd. in Killam 8). From Achebe's first novel, one sees that Africans, as represented by the Igbo people, had a way of life that ensured harmony. Nobody was above the law and there were institutions to regulate human behavior. In the African traditional society, the wellbeing of the community supersedes that of the individual,

a point that Nigerian Literature Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka, also affirms in his canonical play, *Death and the King's Horseman*.

**AFRICAN CULTURE THROUGH AFRICAN EYES:** One has to understand African culture as Africans practiced and still practice it and not as others see it. This way of looking at it is to avoid foreign derogatory descriptions of it as barbaric and uncivilized. There is nothing that is uniquely African in barbarism or uncivilized when one knows that there was human sacrifice in Roman times and there are many past and present European practices that the African would see as uncivilized. Let me give two examples of how looking at African culture through European/Western eyes could distort the understanding of African culture on the arts and the practice of polygamy. In Europe, painting is regarded as High Art while sculpture is Low Art. On the other hand, Africans generally see sculpture as the highest form of artistic production. So while a European or Westerner will see the Mona Lisa as the greatest form of art, the African will rather see a sculptured figure such as the Benin Queen Mother as the highest form of art. Frank Willet puts it thus: "The greatest contribution Africa has made so far to the cultural heritage of mankind is its richly varied sculpture" (26). We will learn in this course that culture conditions our perspectives of cultural productions. The second point is on polygamy practiced by traditional Africans in their agrarian societies to have enough hands to farm and also to have children to overcome the high rate of infant mortality. Over the decades, polygamy has reduced drastically because of the new realities in Africa in which farming is no longer the main occupation together with better health systems and the men's inability to cope with multiple wives. Culture has to be seen through the eyes of those who practice it and not by others who see it as an exotic thing.

**BALANCED VIEW:** However, much as Eurocentric and Hegelian views denigrate Africa and reduce the Continent to the margins, one should not take the opposite view of an exaggerated Afrocentric or Negritudist view to romanticize Africa. In this course, the middle ground will be followed, acknowledging Africa has a culture that has its strengths and weaknesses but not the wild gyrations of history, as Hugh Trevor-Roper, Joseph Conrad, and their likes would see it. The point continues to be made that if Africa were left alone, it would have developed in its own way.

**AFRICAN FOREIGN CONTACTS:** While the current age is touted as the age of globalization, Africa's contact with the rest of the world, for good or bad, has brought changes to its people and inevitably to its culture. Through the early contacts with Europeans, especially the Portuguese, then colonization by the Western powers of Britain, France, and Portugal, and the prevailing globalization, African culture has been changing due to factors from outside. At the same time, African culture has been changing due to internal factors. Populations grew, land became scarcer, and the exploitation of minerals has impacted the traditional occupations of farming, hunting, and fishing. African culture is dynamic; hence this is reflected in this course. The third unit of this course focuses on the changes which have taken place on African culture in modern and contemporary times. African culture is unique and continues to change according to the dynamics of human needs, relevance, and forces beyond the people's control.

**MODERNITY AND POSTCOLONIALISM** impact on African culture and will be emphasized in Unit Three of this study. The coming of Europeans through colonialism brought new political and economic institutions that were strange to the African continent but would gradually become part of the living process of the people.

**THE TOTALITY OF AFRICAN CULTURE** will be studied in the areas of family and kinship, religion and spirituality, oral traditions, political and economic structures, as well as the music and the arts, the health, environmental, scientific and technological aspects. The last

unit will focus on how changes have affected different aspects of the culture and the challenges of remaining African in the face of the multifarious onslaughts of globalization.

Each week is introduced with a guide on what areas of the topic to look out for in your study. These introductory remarks may not always be comprehensive enough and students should endeavor to read from more sources for a fuller grasp of the specific topic.

### **Discussion Questions and Activities**

1. What constitutes African culture?
2. How should we see African culture?
3. How has African culture adjusted to foreign influences?
4. Watch Ali A. Mazrui's BBC Documentary, "The Africans: A Triple Heritage" especially Segment 1 and any other relevant segment in the series  
<http://dickinsq.intrasun.tcnj.edu/films/mazrui>

### **Readings and Viewing**

Mario Azevedo, ed. *Africana Studies: A Survey of Africa and the African Diaspora*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2005.

April A. Gordon and Donald L. Gordon, eds. *Understanding Contemporary Africa*. Fifth Edition. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2013.

Killam, G.D., ed. *African Writers on African Writing*. London: Heinemann, 1978.

Phyllis M. Martin and Patrick O'Meara, eds. *Africa*. Third Edition. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1995.

Ali Mazrui. "The Africans," Segment 1. BBC documentary on DVD.

Frank Willet. *African Art*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2002.

## PART II : **The Future of African Culture: Prospects and Challenges**

CHANGES in political organizations, economic life, religious practice, social conditions, and values have impacted on African culture in various ways. As noted from the introduction to this course, culture is dynamic and is ever-evolving. Happenings outside and within drive the course of any culture and African culture is no exception. The knowledge (or rather lesson) from this course is that people always have a way of life and as long as Africans live, they have a culture which will continue to change according to internal necessities and pressures from outside and within.

MODERNITY has impacted on African culture and one can now talk of modern African culture in place of traditional African culture. The postcolonial condition has impacted on the culture which is no longer a pristine aggregate of ideas/customs, institutions, and practices but have been changed over time and will continue to be changed in an ever-evolving manner. It is true changes have become more rapid with modernity in the postcolonial era but that is expected of similar cultures worldwide.

EXTREME RELIGIOUS FORMS from outside, especially Pentecostal Christianity and fundamentalist Islam, are some of the threats to African culture in its evolution. Pentecostal Christianity has increased exponentially in Africa during the past two decades. The growth could have resulted from the failure of political leadership with its corruption that has led to the failure of governance. Poverty has become widespread despite the resources available in most states. Those belonging to the political and sometimes military elite classes embezzle the resources of state and leave the majority of the people in abject poverty. The rise of new churches of pastors preaching how their congregations could achieve prosperity can thus be explained in the desire of the poor to seek their socio-economic desires in these churches. Also many folks who feel insecure psychologically put their trust on miracle workers for solace. Many of these Pentecostal pastors organize crusades to destroy symbols of traditional African religions. Similarly, extreme Islamic groups are also gaining ground and attempting to subject men and women to rules that are not part of the African culture.

GLOBALIZATION has its advantages and disadvantages as far as African culture is concerned. If it were an open and fair playing field, it would be great. However, globalization seems to be more of a one-way traffic than a two-way one; it favors the developed countries more than the developing nations of Africa. Globalization has encouraged migration from Africa to the West and much of African literature today appears to be written by Africans living in the West who may be looking at Africa through the prism of the West. However, instruments of globalization such as Social Media like the Internet and You Tube help to make African culture available to the rest of the world. One can thus say that globalization is a double-edged sword that hurts and helps the culture of less powerful peoples of the world.

SYNCRETISM appears to be the realistic future of African culture. Though not new, since it has been a part of Africa's postcolonial condition, it has been reinforced by globalization and the new partnerships at all levels in the world. Africa's cultural identity will be ever-changing in the midst of internal and external dynamism.

UNENDING CONTINUUM: African culture thus renews itself in an ever-continuing flux. As some artistic and other traditions such as the Nigerian Urhobo *udje* poetic performance decline, hip-hop groups are springing up in major cities across Africa with the content and form of the songs and performance steeped in indigenous oral poetic performance traditions. New literature continues in new poetic, narrative, and dramatic forms that incorporate forms and techniques of the oral tradition. As many traditional religions decline

or disappear, there is the emergence of new churches infusing Christianity with traditional African religious content.

### **Study Questions and Activities**

1. How do the concepts of tradition and modernity apply to African culture?
2. Take a specific aspect of African culture and trace its dynamism over decades.
3. Go to You Tube and watch some contemporary African artistic production. What influence has Social Media had on contemporary African culture?

### **Readings**

April A. Gordon and Donald L. Gordon, eds. *Understanding Contemporary Africa*. Fifth Edition. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2013.

Kwame Gyekye. *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*. Oxford/New York: OUP, 1997.

Phyllis M. Martin and Patrick O'Meara, eds. *Africa*. Third Edition. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1995.