**Rethinking Culture: The role and relevance of culture to the Sustainable Development Goals, the AU 2063 Agenda and the National Development Plan**

**Introduction**

…It (is) impossible for Africa to develop without abandoning its traditional practices and assuming Eurocentric cultural values, beliefs and ideology.’

This view is recorded by Dr Ambe Njoh in his book, *Tradition, culture and development in Africa,* where he reflects the views of some development theorists in the post-colonial period who believed that

…traditional societies…are underdeveloped because of a lack of important propellants of development, including a work ethic, morals, innovative and entrepreneurial capacity, free market mechanisms, a propensity for taking risks and organisational acumen. The absence of these factors…is itself a function of flaws in the culture, customs and social mores of traditional societies….The leading cause of underdevelopment in traditional societies is the fact that such societies tend to place a lot of emphasis on kinship and family rather than on individual success and little or no emphasis on sophisticated technology and the acquisition of material wealth.

An economic model i.e. capitalism, based on individual wealth accumulation, necessitating the rapid and rapacious exploitation of natural resources, was fundamentally different to a social model where an extended family and community subsisted relatively happily by using from nature what served their foreseeable needs, allowing nature to replenish itself.

It was then, in the 1960s, that the notion of the cultural dimension of development first gained traction. While the neo-colonial approach called for the abandonment of traditional culture, the more progressive view – as promoted by UNESCO in its World Decade for Cultural Development – was that for development to be successful, it needed to recognise and respect the values, belief systems, ways of making meaning, traditions, personal and group identities; in short, the culture, of the intended beneficiaries of development.

It is not a little ironic then that a generation-and-a-half later, once more, economic models that are successful in entirely different conditions in the Global North – the neo-liberal creative and cultural industries paradigm – are being touted as significant drivers of development in the Global South where conditions are quite different.

There is, however, a counterview that recognises culture – along with the social, environmental and economic dimensions – as the fourth pillar of sustainable development, based on the premise that development itself is a cultural construct, that the dialectic between the culture of the intended beneficiaries and development strategies will see them acting on each other, and accordingly, development will be sustainable only if it recognises and respects – whether for negative or positive reasons - the values, belief systems, identity-making and traditions of the beneficiaries of development.

The two key faultlines in the world today are inequality and culture.

There are structural inequalities in economic, political and military means; instruments of “hard power” employed to pursue and secure national or group interests, while culture is the domain of “soft power”, but no less important in pursuing and securing interests. Whose values and ideas dominate, whose way of life is valorised, which perspectives on world events carry the most influence, which victims of terror are humanised, in other words, whose culture assumes hegemony, depends on who has global or regional reach through news and media outlets, audio visual products and distribution networks, and access to digital platforms.

It is through consuming media, creative and audio-visual products like films and television programmes, that citizens internalise values, ideas and perspectives that are embedded within such products.

As regards the second faultline, culture, people have different value systems, different traditions and histories, different religious beliefs, different languages, in short, different cultures. Conflicts rooted in inequality are often fuelled or given further texture by culture, by different belief and value systems. On not a few occasions, conflicts may be rooted in cultural differences.

All the development plans under discussion – the SDGs, Agenda 2063 and the National Development Plan – emphasise the empowerment of women – but this goal will never be realised without addressing patriarchy, the fundamental cultural premise of many societies.

Over a period of two years from 2014, there were more than 28 000 reported cases of Ebola in West Africa, and more than 11 000 deaths during the epidemic. It was only when health officials began to understand and address the cultural practices associated with treating and burying the dead, that the epidemic was controlled.

*iXeba* the movie and Brett Murray’s art work, *The Spear*, both fell victim to cultural arguments; the right to freedom of creative expression compromised by culture, as is the case with LGBTI rights in 37 African countries, who assert that homosexuality is contrary to African culture.

Boko Haram forbids any engagement with Western social and cultural practices. Besides the military costs, the 2016 costs for Nigeria to respond to the humanitarian needs as a result of Boko Haram’s insurgency was $2,6 billion; the estimated contribution of Nigeria’s film industry, the second largest in the world, is about $600 million per year. So, on the one hand, creative and cultural industries contribute to the GDP; on the other, a conflict with a cultural dimension consumes far greater resources, with adverse consequences for development through the destruction of infrastructure, the diversion of resources away from development towards military engagement and the adverse social and human effects of the conflict.

Given its transversal impact across many sectors of society, it is absurd that decision-makers have not factored culture into the SDGs nor the NDP. I suspect it is because for politicians culture is a “woolly” concept; it is difficult to measure (one can measure a decline in poverty, but how do you measure a decline in patriarchy?); it takes time to change and does not easily conform to five year electoral cycles, and progressives regard culture as the first refuge of reactionaries.

But if culture is a way of life, rather than the cultural dimension of development, should we not be speaking and analysing the development dimension of culture, of which the arts are but a manifestation or expression?

And if it is true that culture is integral to human, social and economic development, what are some of the policy implications?

1. First, cultural policy needs to move beyond policies for the arts and heritage, and begin to include culture.
2. Second, as with environment impact studies, we should have cultural impact studies to assess the potential impact of development on culture and vice versa, and to allow for the planning and implementation of mitigating strategies.
3. Third, for human and social development strategies that address poverty to be effective and sustainable, we need to undertake studies into the cultural impact of poverty, the effects that poverty has on the psyche of individuals and of communities, what those who live in poverty come to believe about themselves, how the psychological and emotional scars of poverty impact on social mobility, social integration and social cohesion.
4. Fourth, as opposed to culture being a low food-chain, silo ministry to which a political appointee is banished for patronage purposes, there should be a cultural desk or unit in every ministry/department to research, plan and implement strategies related to the cultural dimension of that ministry’s responsibility, and coordinated by a DAC with one of the brightest and most respected ministers in the cabinet.
5. Fifth, rather than the existing binaries of non-profit art versus creative industries, policy should recognise a continuum of practice each with its own, appropriate funding mechanisms. Art for human development, for psychological and emotional catharsis, intellectual stimulation and physical pleasure, with a National Arts Council non-profit type funding mechanism. Then, art harnessed for social development, an exhibition of gay women in loving embrace, an anti-Afrophobic music concert, an educational theatre piece about HIV/AIDS, funded by a Social Development Fund, where there are audiences, rather than markets. And then, art for economic development, the creative and cultural for-profit industries, funded through start up grants, low interest loans, etc.
6. And finally, ask not what the arts or culture can do for development, or for poverty alleviation, or for addressing inequality or for reducing unemployment; ask rather what should be done to allow our country’s incredible talent to be nurtured, to blossom and to realise its potential. In doing so, we will not only address the country’s key challenges, but will become a regional and global force in the market of ideas, values and aesthetics and our creatives will be organic cultural diplomats and contenders in the terrain of soft power.