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# Re-Engineering Pan-African Cultural Studies in the Black Atlantic

**David Lishilinimle Imbua, Ph.D<sup>1</sup> and Grace M. Brown, Ph.D<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of History and International Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar - Cross River State, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt Rivers State

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**Abstract:** *As a place and state of mind, the black Atlantic refers to African homelands and other corners of the Atlantic world to which black people have been dispersed over time, either voluntarily or forcefully. The history of Black people in the Atlantic community is much more than oppression and discrimination. Of even more importance is the survival and tenacity of African culture despite a harsh plan of cultural extermination. Indeed, the story of Africans in the Black Atlantic is a stunning achievement in cultural history. Africans demonstrated that they were Africans wherever they were dispersed- whether in North America, Jamaica, Cuba, Brazil, Britain or elsewhere. Unfortunately, though the importance of the African experience and its crucial role for the resolution of the cultural and identity crises that have engulfed the African world was one of the major concerns that informed the staging of the World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in 1977, there has been no systematic effort to convert the concerns into concrete educational and cultural programmes for Africa and the Black world. With Nigeria as a case study, this paper argues that cultural and educational policies of Black nations must explicitly incorporate Pan-African concerns since any development paradigm that ignores the African cultural framework is bound to fail. This is the surest way of consolidating the modest achievements that the Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization has recorded through its various programmes.*

**Keywords:** *Democratic project, history, last man*

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The Black Atlantic is a place and a state of mind. Geographically, it includes African homelands as well as the places in Europe and the Americas to which black people have been dispersed over time. Mentally, it refers to the sense of commonality among black people around the Atlantic based on their common origins, their shared physical and cultural traits, their common oppression and their need to unite to gain equality (Northrup 1).

Forced migration was the parent of Black Atlantic. The dispersal of peoples of African descent on a massive and culturally significant scale to places in the Americas and to a lesser extent in Europe occurred during the Atlantic Slave Trade period between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. From this point of view, it could be admitted that the Atlantic Slave Trade, with all its barbarities, was a force in the weaving of the cultural tapestry of the Americas. By throwing Africans, Amerindians, Asiatics, and Europeans together in one societal complex, the slave trade played a role not only in the physical and human transformation of the new lands but also in injecting African cultural elements into the emerging syncretic cultures of the New World. In a paper titled: "The Cultural Presence of Africa and the Dynamics of the socio-Cultural Process in Brazil", presented at FESTAC' 77, Fernando A. A. Mourao admitted that

“African culture has so much penetrated in Brazilian society that today it will be difficult to understand Brazilian culture without understanding African culture” (qtd in Uya African Dimensions 47).

The Black Atlantic has had its cultural achievements either heavily criticized or completely rejected, by outsiders. There was the misconception that Africa had no culture, no history and no civilization prior to the advent of the Europeans into the continent. In the view of many Eurocentric writers, “African culture and civilization was barren, empty, backward, unproductive and un conducive for any intellectual stimulation” (Ajayi 16).

Because of this assumption, African peoples, their culture and civilizations were subjects of monumental distortion, ridicule and amusement in the European intellectual community the renowned Scott Philosopher, David Hume, for example, had this to say about Africa and its people:

I am apt to suspect the negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion other than white, nor even any individual eminent in action or speculation, no ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no science.

Harry Johnston added his own bit when he argued that prior to the arrival of Europeans, “tribal Africans were barbarous people who had never advanced beyond the first step of civilization”. Similarly, Endre Sik, a Hungarian Marxist, posited that “the pre-colonial peoples of Africa led a primitive life. Some were sunk in the lowest state of barbarism, and the scientific history in Africa primarily revolves around the expansion of Europe and as to the soil Africa”. Based on his own conviction that “history only begins when men begin to write”, A. P. Newton stressed with arrogance that, “Africans have no history. How can you expect barbarians or savages to have rationality...? They are primitive: their history only began when Europeans came”.

As recently as 1963, another “eminent” English historian, Professor Hugh Trevor – Roper in responding to students’ demand for courses in African history at Oxford University, opined with great arrogance that:

Perhaps in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present, there is none: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness... and darkness is not a subject of history... we cannot therefore afford to amuse ourselves with the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe.

The same level of misconceptions and misrepresentatives featured in the history of the blacks on the American side of the Black Atlantic where the Negro, to borrow the words of William Leo Hansberry, “had the ill luck of having himself studied and interpreted to the world almost solely through the media of distant neighbours and enemies” (qtd in Uya African History 66-67). Allain Locke claimed that “slavery not only physically transplanted the Negro, it cut him off sharply from his cultural roots and by taking away his language, abruptly changing his habit, and putting him in the context of a strangely different civilization, reduced him, so to speak to a cultural zero”. Based on this wrong impression, the African –American experience was interpreted through analyses of the white experience. Mainstream scholars regarded the Negro simply as a source of labour, not as a bearer of culture and civilization. Based on this assumption, Archibald Murphy claimed that the study of the Black man in the Americas independent of the white experience was an unrewarding exercise, hence:

To visit a people who have no history is like going into a wilderness where there are no roads to direct a traveler. The people have nothing to which they can look back; the wisdom and acts of their forefathers are forgotten; the experience of one generation is lost to the succeeding one (Berry and BlassingameX).

Sociologist Franklin E. Frazier claimed in his *The Negro in the United States* (1949) that “the most conspicuous feature of the Negro in America is that his aboriginal culture was smashed, be it by design or accident” (qtd in Kardiner and Ovesey 39). Nathan Huggins argued to a distressing degree that there is no African-American culture out-side mainstream American culture. He insisted that:

What is most remarkable about much of what is called Black culture is its Americanness. There is no doubt that on some levels one can distinguish a Negro ethos, but again, I doubt whether such distinctions are sufficiently important in the lives of Blacks to warrant a separate historical study (qtd in Uya*African History*69).

The above assumptions on Africa and its Diaspora gained currency because written records were accepted as the only authentic source for historical reconstruction. White scholars, who until recently attached no value to oral history were not concerned with the study of black culture. Thus, the cultural arrogance of the Europeans which led them to equate “civilization” with “Europeanization” affected the study of African culture (Imbua *et al*64).

The decades of the 1960s and 70s will be best remembered as a major watershed in African cultural studies throughout the Black Atlantic. After considerable hesitancy and vacillation, scholars from various walks of life came to agree that there was much to study in Africa beyond what had been stridently condemned as barbaric.

Extremely important during the 1960s was the coming to maturity of a young generation of African scholars, trained in the European tradition and conscious of their responsibility as scholar-activists to their fatherland. One can mention here for examples, historians Kenneth Dike and Jacob Ajayi, novelists Cyprian Ekwensi and Chinua Achebe. These scholars were committed to rescuing the image of Africa from European distortions. The most significant theme in their works was the conflict between European and African cultures. Though conscious of the benefits of European presence in Africa, these scholars were more concerned with the cultural, social and political disruptive impact of European activities in Africa. Thus, Achebe argued that the Europeans had “driven a wedge into the things that held us together”.

One of the brightest stars of this era, Dike played an important role in rescuing African culture from the disparaging and prejudicial distortion by Western scholars. In responding to Margery Perham’s (advisor to the British Colonial Office on African territories) assertion that pre-colonial Africa was “without the wheel, the plough and the transport animal; almost without stone houses or clothes except for skins; without writing and so without history (qtd in Nwauwa180). Dike forcefully stated that:

There is no criterion by which to compare one culture in terms of progress with another because each is a product of its environment and must primarily be judged in relation to the community which it serves. There is no people without a culture and civilization of its own, without some means of controlling its environment in a manner more or less corresponding to its needs (Nwauwa174).

As correctly observed by Nwauwa, Dike’s timely and well – articulated reply to Perham’s monumental distortion and falsehood, “revealed the intellectual, the nationalist, and the Pan-

Africanist in him. He re-asserted the pride and place of African history, culture and civilization in world affairs” (174).

In various degrees, Pan-Africanist scholars of this period defended the integrity of Africa and the sophistication of her cultures. The period thus marked the beginning of the search for the meaning of African culture. With this spirit, it was unfashionable for any post-colonial African state government programme to be justified without reference to the cultural demands of the people. Freed of the constraints of colonialism, many African governments, through the establishment of archives, libraries, research centres, universities and antiquities commissions actively supported the recovery of the African past. In his very perceptive book, *Cultural Engineering and Nation Building in East Africa* (1972), written to guide these programmes of recovery African past, Ali Mazrui identified a four-fold challenge: how to indigenize the foreign elements in our culture, how to nationalize the sectional aspects of our cultural mannerisms, how to idealize the indigenous elements of our culture, and how to emphasize a common Africanity over and above national idiosyncrasies.

In response to this new challenge, African scholars devoted substantial attention to the question of continuities of African institutions and cultures despite decades of European domination. The assumption that the colonial period marked a watershed in African history was re-examined and the degree of impact of that unfortunate episode deflated. Put differently, there was an increasing insistence on seeing the African historical experience as a basic continuum with which Europeans played a significant but not an overwhelming part. There was thus an ever-increasing emphasis upon studies of the dynamics of African culture as the basis for reconciling the forces of tradition and modernity. The attempt here, in the colorful phrase of Mazrui, was to “ancientise and modernize” at the same time.

While the above developments were taking place on continental Africa, black scholars in the Americas and the Caribbean were also engaged in an intellectual battle aimed at analyzing the African dimensions of American cultures. Through their effort, the historical profession came to the realization that African history and culture were central to the understanding of significant aspects of American cultures. Promoted mostly by the African Heritage Studies Association, established in 1969 as an antidote to the racial tendencies and domination of the existing African Studies Association of the United States by white scholars, the emphasis necessarily revived the debate over the significance or otherwise of the African background to a proper understanding of the experiences of people of African descent in the Americas. Relaying on the scholarship of interested amateurs in an earlier period, scholars of the 1960s and 1970s worked for the institutionalization of the Black History Week as well as Black and African Studies Programmes in many American Universities (*UyaDiasporas and Homelands*8).

Opposed to mainstreamism, which claimed that the circumscribed world of racism, discrimination, and oppression combined to reduce the African-American to a cultural zero, Afro-centric scholars saw the Black man as a crucial protagonist of his own cultural destiny. Afro-centric scholars argued that the cultures fashioned by slaves in the New World cannot be adequately understood or interpreted without reference to their African patrimony. Black slavery in the Americas was considered to be nothing more than:

The saga of a people forcefully uprooted from their land, transported in the most inhuman condition to serve the labour needs of the New World, denied basic rights... compelled through threats and legalized violence to renounce their cultures and humanity, but yet able to survive, grow and transmit their African

cultures to their descendants as well as influence the emerging mainstream polyglot culture of the Americas (Uya43).

An increasing number of scholars believe that the cultures and institution fashioned by slaves in the New World to enable them meet the challenges of survival imposed by their most difficult environment cannot be adequately understood or interpreted without reference to the African aboriginal cultures of the slaves. Overtime, it became impossible for anybody, except the completely uninformed, to believe Frazier's claim that the aboriginal culture of African-Americans was smashed. All now agree that the cargoes of labourers also contained African culture and no people have been so completely bearers of culture as the African slave immigrants. Increasingly people have come to support Bastide's conclusion that:

The slave-ships carried not only men, women and children, but also their gods, beliefs, and traditional folklore. They maintained a stubborn resistance against their while oppressors, who were determine to tear them loose, by force if need be, from their own cultural patterns... it should come then, as no surprise that in America we find whole enclaves of African civilization surviving intact, or at least to a very substantial extent (23).

There is no doubt that by the 1970s, African cultural studies were carried out on all sides of the Atlantic World. Significantly, too, the Pan-African world was ready to converge in Nigeria in what is now known as FESTAC '77 for the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture. Indeed, the huge resources the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria committed to hosting the Festival was an eloquent testimony to the importance African governments attached to cultural studies and revival. At the end of the festival, there were celebrations in the Black Atlantic because of the great cultural achievement of the Black World. In the case of Nigeria, for instance, E. J. Alagoa avers that:

Prior to the staging of FESTAC, there was a lively press discourse on the huge sums of money estimated to be spent on structures and facilities. It was the view of many, that FESTAC would exhibit, in the main, half nude dancers, a show devoid of meaning in an age of science and technology. Once the performances took off, there was, definitely, no such complaint of the selection of events presented at the fringe FESTAC at Unilag (2-3).

Due to the importance of the global dimensions of the African experience and its crucial role for the resolution of cultural and identity crises in Africa, it was necessary that an institution be created to among other things, champion the promotion of global understanding and appreciation of Black and African Culture (Babawale 13). To this end, the Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC) was declared open on June 22, 1978, and formally established by Decree No. 69 of 1978, of the Federal Government of Nigeria to be a dynamic archive, museum, and custodian of all the library, audio-visual and other documents of FESTAC '77. CBAAC, therefore, bears trusteeship responsibilities, on behalf of the Nigerian nation, for all the 59 nations that participated in FESTAC '77 and indeed, for all Black and African world (Alagoa20).

Since its establishment, CBAAC has continued to play an audacious and crusading role through advocacy and research to draw attention to the need to revive the cultures of Africa and the Black World. It has carried out this stupendous task through numerous lectures, seminars, discussions, symposia, workshops, exhibitions, performances and demonstrations of arts, crafts, and the entire range of cultural materials available in its collections, and of new and future

products of the intellectuals, artists and writers of the Black and African world (Alagoa20). As the custodian of Africanity, CBAAC has published the results of its numerous lectures, symposia and conferences. These publications focus on important aspects of Africa and Black culture and civilization such as history, language, religion, traditional political thought and institutions, divination, literature, philosophy, oral traditions and oral history, democracy, ethics, gender, diplomacy to mention just a few. There is no gain saying that CBAAC's attempts at Black and African Cultural Revolution has been commanded by Pan-Africanists throughout the Black Atlantic. It has focused on Black and African heritage in expanding a diasporic consciousness of cultural studies.

Given that Nigeria has the mandate of the Black world to carry on the achievements of FESTAC '77, and by implication to lead the crusade for Black and African cultural renaissance, its cultural and educational policies must explicitly incorporate Pan-African concerns into the curriculum. There is no reason why Pan-African cultural studies should not occupy a central position in the curriculum of our secondary schools and institutions of higher learning. Such efforts will reduce the level of mutual ignorance regarding the nature of the historical and cultural relationships which have existed between Africans at home and in the Diaspora. Government and non-government organizations should offer scholarship awards and other incentives to students and young faculty members engaged in cultural studies. It is rather unfortunate that the allocation of resources and opportunities to institutions that custody our cultural resource shrinks each new day. There is need to support Emmanuel Ayandele's plea that "the irrational, unhealthy and culturally homicidal policy of the governments of the Federation which looks upon man as primarily an economic animal, a Naira chaser", should be reconsidered. Ayandele lamented that:

Indeed, one of the painful wonders of modern Nigeria is the incredible myopia of policy-makers who are so Naira-obsessed that, in their perverted judgement, development of Nigeria is basically a physical affair and not that of Nigerian personality per se in the context of a rationalized authentic cultural heritage of the Nigerian peoples (3).

It is really unfortunate that Nigeria which should be a principal trustee of the most durable fruits of black genius has not done enough to promote her cultural heritage. Beyond the statutory allocation of fund to the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and National Orientation, there is nothing concrete to show that the leaders are generally committed to the preservation of the nation's cultural resources. Truly, our culture needs many gadgets in its unremitting battle with globalization and it is the Black world, in this case Nigeria, who must provide them. Without deliberate effort to re-engineer our culture, development will continue to elude us. This is so because all human endeavours, whether political, economic, ideological, social and religious are located within a specific cultural milieu.

Culture represents the sinews and the most enduring features of any society. UNESCO has continued to emphasize since its 1982 World Conference on Cultural Policies in Mexico City that "culture constitute a fundamental part of the life of each individual and of each community and that consequently, development whose ultimate aim should be focused on man-must have a cultural dimension" (UNESCO3). A people that ignore the insights and values that come from humanistic studies are least likely to benefit maximally from technological age as a scientific and technological advancement never occurs in a cultural vacuum (Uya "Tourism in an age of globalization" 683).

Importantly, it must be borne in mind that African cultural studies cannot depend on books. One universally accepted characteristic of African culture is that it is more oral than written. African songs and folktales were as much for entertainment as they were for chronicling actual occurrences in the society as well as imparting a lesson to the young. For most African peoples, the spoken word was most important than the written word. Thus, since oral tradition is “an indispensable source of reconstructing the early culture and civilization of Africa” (Ajayi 24), the re-engineering of African cultural studies must involve the massive collection of songs, folktales, myths, legends, poems, rituals, liturgy, proverbs and other ethnographic data from our people. A systematic uncovering of our people’s culture will require new types of sources in which audio-visual materials, rather than books, will predominate. People should be trained on how to collect and use oral tradition for cultural studies and revival. Alagoahad earlier draw attention to the need to document oral traditions on FESTAC 77. According him:

In the case of Nigeria and Festac, 26 years after the event, what corpus of oral tradition have we built up or preserved? After 30 years, a great many members of the participant and eye-witness generation would have gone, or taken back seats in the affairs of the nation. After 26 years, it is time to take steps to collect the memories of key actors, observers, and critics of Festac round the nation, to add life to the duty bones of material evidence preserved in the CBAAC museum and library (4).

The project of reviving African cultures necessarily requires that we study African languages. One of the issues raised and addressed by several learned papers and in the popular press during FESTAC 77 was that of *national language* for each African nation (Alagoa14). The issue of national and continental languages was discussed as part of the quest for unity and national integration, in the process of nation building, the need to unite ethnic groups as well as the elite and the masses”. Dele Alonge’s assertion that “culture is the road map to any societal development... [that] there can never be any meaningful development in any society that has lost her sense of culture” emphasis the importance of culture to nation building (qtd in Babawale 5). Several years after FESTAC 77, there is not just a national language but most languages are losing speakers on daily basis. Even at home most parents do not consider it expedient to communicate with their children in their indigenous language. Even more frustrating is that many departments of languages in our tertiary institutions do not include Nigerian/African languages in their curriculum, not even that of their host communities. This is done in total disregard to the fact that the mother tongue should be “the basis of cultural education” to be utilized from the home through primary and secondary school to the university (*Cultural Policy*8). Language communicates a culture’s most important norms, values and sanctions to people. The centre for endangered languages in its universal declaration of Linguistic Rights in Barcelona asserted that:

A lost language is a lost tribe; a lost tribe is a lost civilization. A lost civilization is invaluable knowledge lost... The whole vast archives of knowledge and experience in them will be consigned to oblivion (qtd in Omagu152)

The above explains Montesquieu’s statement that “as long as a conquered people has not lost its language, it can have hope” (qtd in Diop214) as well as that of Karl Mark that “to conquer a people, you just have to block the transfer of values, morals and beliefs between generations” (qtd in Babawale 7). Ofcourse, no two people can see the concrete world we live in exactly the same way unless they share a common language.

To round-off this discourse, it is important to reiterate that since culture is “a tool kit of identities for our survival” (Kukah 11) African governments must commit resources towards cultural rejuvenation. Institutions and scholars must accept the challenge of re-engineering Pan-African cultural studies with courage, commitment and vision. This has become imperative because any development paradigm that conceives development as an autonomous process and ignores the cultural framework in Africa is bound to fail. An important task before policy makers in Nigeria is that her natural resources like museums and archives custodianship her cultural artifacts should be given deserving attention. This is the surest way of consolidating the modest achievements that CBAAC has recorded through its various programmes and activities throughout the Black World. Of course, we need hardly stress that for Nigeria to make a quantum leap in the culture sector, it must empower and strengthen CBAAC to effectively confront the challenges of Pan-African Cultural revival in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We end with the clarion call of Amadou Mahtar M’Bow:

Africa [nay the Black World], from now on, must work towards a form of modernization which is truly hers, taking her creative inspiration from the reinterpretation of the traditions of her past. She must seek renovation, freely assuming the responsibility for it and put to good use such rich cultural traditions and social and moral values as will enable her to inspire progress without self-betrayal and achieve change without self-adulteration (qtd in Oloruntimehin 22).

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