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### **Writing and Righting the African Renaissance**

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A recurring project in modern Africa is the vision of an African Renaissance. Its lure has captured the imagination of many musicians from Bob Marley to Youssou Ndour, as well as intellectuals from Cheikh Anta Diop of Senegal to President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa. Most African leaders of the post-colonial era have championed some utopian version of the renaissance project. However, a common end result of these projects has been their failure to deliver, and their inability to materialize. Although each case does bear unique features relative to its shortcoming, one can examine general patterns among the failed promises, and through this examination, uncover a roadmap for the possibilities of realizing such a renaissance.

### **The Scramble for African Renaissance**

Politically, the fathers of the independence movements of the 1960s envisioned some sense of renaissance. Rhetorically, a renaissance would entail a return to a lost glory, lived or imaged, but in these African cases, they were neither. Like many renaissance logos in former colonized societies, they were mostly resonant of the European Renaissance than genuinely strategizing for an African one. In the 1970s, these projects mostly adopted political development and state-building theories; in the 1980s, they surrendered to the realities of the economic crisis of what is known as the “lost decade” that enabled the assault of IMF and World Bank policies of privatization on Africa’s public sector. In the 1990s, renaissance projects embraced imposed policies of globalized neo-liberalism, as one might glean in Fantu Cheru’s *African Renaissance: Roadmaps to the Challenge of Globalization*, which formulates the renaissance as a mere question of economic development, dismissing the dimensions of culture (Cheru). In the 2000s, the African renaissance project was captured by the energy and promises of the newly-liberated Republic of South Africa. Pan-Africanist leaders such as President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal, the born-again pan-Africanist Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, and President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa spearheaded the African project of awakening. Like Mbeki, President Wade was a fervent supporter of the African Renaissance. His legacy vis-a-vis the project is the African Renaissance Monument in Dakar; the 160-foot statue has become one of the Senegalese capital’s most popular sites. Gaddafi is credited with transforming the Organization of African Unity (OAU) into the new bloc of the African Union in 2002. Due to the intellectual or financial rigor of these leaders, the concept of the African Renaissance took new forms, meaning and relevance within the public discourse.

A survey of the literature on the African Renaissance reveals an abundance of titles that frame the topic from different angles. However, the keywords are development, pan-Africanism, South Africa, union, globalization etc. To sum up the themes, I created a word cloud from the 30 titles that appear in a title search on the topic.



### **Writing the African Renaissance in three books of great significance:**

A key point to be made here is clear: If the African Renaissance is to be successful, then African cultural expressions from the arts, music and other forms of creative expressions must be prioritized. Unfortunately, since Diop's pioneering work, the current Renaissance framework has been lacking in originality and creativity, reduced to merely echoing industrial neo-liberal developmental theories that often overlook the relevance of African culture in any economic developmental framework. If Diop was the intellectual father of African Renaissance in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, then Mbeki was the central figure in the popularization and conceptualization of the term in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And if European imperialism in Africa is recognized as the catalyst that triggered the call for an African Renaissance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, then China's impact in Africa in the present century must also be examined. The following review will address these significant factors.

### **Diop and the framing of the Renaissance discourse**

Diop was and still remains the most vigorous African intellectual to articulate what a renaissance means and entails. His book *Towards the African Renaissance: Essays in African Culture and Development, 1946-1960* consists of several essays about African culture and development written between 1946-1960. The value of the book is in its pioneering exploration of the possibilities of an African Renaissance by charting pathways toward what could be examined and investigated in service of a renaissance. In his view, developing reference points in African tradition should not be based on some abstract historical truth, but on deep scholarship and a foundational knowledge of Africa. As he argues in the final chapter, "intellectuals should study the past not for their pleasure but to learn useful lessons" (p.137).

From a conceptual perspective, Diop observes that:

The African reality reveals that there is on the one hand, a part of tradition that has remained intact and continues to survive despite modern influence, and on the other hand, a tradition that has been altered by contamination from Europe. Is it possible in the two cases to talk of a renaissance? Certainly not in the first case. As for the second, let us examine the situation closely in order to see if one can legitimately use [the] term renaissance for it. This second case is often merely a form of literary imitation, often bordering on lyricism. (p. 33)

To address these questions, Diop mobilizes linguistics, political, economic and cultural consciousness for the project of the Renaissance. For Diop, "culture does not consist of literary expression only; it is also made up of plastic expression" (p.40). In this respect, he asks what do we find in Africa? That, for Diop, is the beginning of the journey of producing answers that are useful for a renaissance project. This journey brings him to a key chapter in the book "Alarm in the Tropics." It is a critical discussion and assessment of how Africa should carefully deal with three outside worlds—the colonialists, the Arab world, and America.

### **Mbeki's legacy on the Renaissance discourse**

The second book in this range of significance is *African Renaissance* edited by Malegapuru William Mkgoba with Thabo Mbeki's contribution in the prologue. The value of the book rests in the fact that it embodies the era of President Mbeki and his vision of the African Renaissance. The book is the organic outcome of the 1998 African Renaissance Conference in Johannesburg, South

Africa that was attended by more than 470 participants from different corners of the continent and beyond (Makgoba i). As noted in the book's introduction, the main objectives of the gathering was to "define who we are and where we are going in the global community, and to formulate practical strategies and solutions for future action that would benefit the African masses" (p. i). In his address to the gathering, Deputy President Mbeki notes that, "As every revolution requires revolutionaries, so must the African Renaissance have its militants and activists who will define the morrow that belongs to them in a way which will help to restore to us our dignity" (p. xxi). Within its pages, the volume offers rich and diverse perspectives on the African Renaissance expanding from the local to the global. These insightful readings of the discourse relating to the African Renaissance are framed in six parts: the context, moral renewal and African values, culture and education, political and economic transformation, science and technology, and media and telecommunications. The strength of the volume is not in its persuasive powers, but in its comprehensive and methodological awareness of the current issues of economic development and political stability in the continent. Obviously, the diversity of challenges facing the continent play out noticeably in these essays. The book's frame of reference is clear: the roadmap for the African Renaissance is found in successful economic development. Cultural issues are moved to the peripheries of education.

### **China's impact on the Renaissance discourse**

The third book in matters of significance and relevance is *China's impact on the African Renaissance: the Baobab Grows* by Kobus Jonker and Bryan Robinson (2018). As the Renaissance becomes synonymous with economic development in the academic discourse, no discussion about the subject can be meaningful and comprehensive without looking at the elephant in the room: China, the leading investor and trading partner in Africa. From the onset, the book accepts the interchangeability of the concept of the Renaissance and economic development, claiming that it is about "what China's trade with, and investment in, African countries means for the socio-economic well-being of the continent." The authors make it clear that the purpose of the book is "to evaluate the impact of China on Africa by evaluating case studies in African countries in terms of the influence on their specific growth and development phases and in terms of 'the African Tree of Organic Growth' presented in Chapter 2." (Jonker and Robinson 1). They cite Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's announcement that China expects to conduct \$400 billion in trade with Africa by 2020 by raising its direct investment in the continent to \$100 billion.

In its ten chapters the book presents the issues as follows: 1. China in Africa: New Colonists or Facilitators of Development and Growth; 2. Renewal of Africa: The African Tree of Organic Growth Paradigm; 3. Economic Growth and Diversification Fueling Development in Africa; 4. Infrastructure: The Most Important Enabler of Organic Growth in Africa; 5. The Role of Effective Governments and Institutions; 6. A Skilled and Educated Workforce for Africa; 7. Developing a Sustainable Africa through Green Growth; 8. Improving the Human Well-Being of All Africans; 9. Integrated Organic Growth: The Cases of Cameroon and Mauritius; and 10. The Impact of China on the African Renaissance. The first chapter does not meet the book's objectives in an adequate manner; it avoids any critical examination China's role in Africa. A key problem in this book is the absence of any examination of the potential cultural impact of China-led renaissance in Africa. Although the concept is noble and novel, and Africans should explore a fruitful and mutually beneficial relationship with China, such a proposal should be problematized. Culture is a fundamental value in the social capital of Africans, so discussing it relative to Chinese economic influence is necessary. Finally, a rhetorical question for this relationship is how do Chinese politics

of autocracy and illiberalism reinforce the values of democracy and freedom that are necessary for the vitality of African culture? This could have been a focal point for this significant volume.

Much like the dominant approaches to the Renaissance project between 1970 and 2000, this book also echoes the notion of economic development as Renaissance and vice versa. This oversimplification of the issue calls into attention the dire need for a strategic approach to righting the Renaissance project. As argued by many scholars, the concept of the African Renaissance emerged as a critical tool in response to colonialism, the oppression of Africans of the Diaspora and neo-colonialism. In this approach, the Renaissance project encompasses the intellectual movements of the black Atlantic from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the current pan-Africanist movements. In their insightful work, *Problematizing the African Renaissance*, Eddy Maloka and Elizabeth le Roux capture this trend of thought (Maloka and le Roux). Contributors question Mbeki's 'reductive' usage of the African Renaissance as an option and not a survival imperative; they also engage with the ethical ramifications of globalization and its offspring, neo-liberalism. In the era of utilizing best practices to enhance social capital, Africans should learn from its predecessor across the Atlantic, the Harlem Renaissance movement in New York.

### **The Harlem Renaissance: A Lesson for the African Renaissance**

In the words of Carolyn Kyler, the Harlem Renaissance movement introduced "a generation of artists who sought to re-imagine the 'New Negro' as a powerful, creative, and inspiring figure for a new age. Emphasizing youth, new beginnings, and a bright future, this reimagining offered a complex, multifaceted figure who was both political and artistic, calm and revolutionary, an intellectual and a fighter" (Kyler). The Harlem Renaissance succeeded in breaking through the curtain of Jim Crow, exposing the brutality of the Ku Klux Klan, and surviving the Great Depression, before delivering the era of the Civil Rights Movement. What Alain Locke terms 'the New Negro' was a set of revisions in culture, identity and politics that cherished independence, originality and creativity (Locke). It produced great works of art, novels, and a socio-political revival. In the latter category, one can include the Black Hebrew Israelites, Noble Drew Ali's The Moorish Science Temple of America, Wallace D. Fard Muhammad's Nation of Islam, and in the political sense, the Universal Negro Improvement Association of Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois's NAACP, and the National Urban League. What all these phenomena have in common is originality of thought and method with a globalized vision for the African American condition.

Music and poetry were central to this movement, from Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" to Billie Holiday's rendering of Abel Meeropol's "Strange Fruit" there was an artistic fusion of talents to expose the inhumanity and hypocrisy of Uncle Sam's self-professed democracy. The "Sorrow Songs" of the peculiar institution were recaptured in new forms, genres and socio-political themes. There was also the originality of Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and their likes, who attracted mainstream Americans, in addition to world composers, novelists and musicians to come to them and use their work. In any renaissance originality matters. In *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) considers music "The path the slave took to 'citizenship,'" writing, "I make my analogy through the slave citizen's music -- through the music that is most closely associated with him: blues, and a later, but parallel development, jazz" (Jones) Jones/Baraka is talking not only about how the music elevated the African American and the cause of freedom, but also shaped American culture and destiny. Furthermore, in *The African American Roots of Modernism*, James Smethurst argues that the intellectual and artistic responses of African

American writers during the Harlem Renaissance articulated notions of American modernity (Smethurst).

As I have discussed previously, Hip Hop has inherited the creativity and vitality of the Harlem Renaissance, and is also providing the African American community a ladder of mobility politically and financially, providing new avenues for the accumulation of much-needed political capital within the African American community. (Lo) The African Renaissance movement should learn from this black Atlantic experience. However, African culture should be the central element in any renaissance movement in Africa.

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