

BOOK REVIEWS

The Mind of Africa by W. E. Abraham, Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2019, iii-214 pp. including index. GHS 35 (paperback), ISBN: 978-9988-550-58-5.

The title of the book, *The Mind of Africa*, may seem to suggest that there is a definite and distinct mentality, a mind-set, of Africans; it might even suggest that the author offers a telescopic vision into the African consciousness, a lens through which African thought processes can be observed. Well, fortunately, not so! Writing from outside Africa but with a sensibility and an in-depth knowledge of Africa, William Abraham explores the common and fundamental cultural underpinnings of African societies as the furnace to forge out the African personality – the African personality that is the harmonious complex of the moral, social, political, religious, and aesthetic elements of Africa. His motivation is to examine the prospects and potentialities of Africa vis-à-vis Africa's problems and challenges in a bid to fashioning out a solution. The ultimate arena to shape the African personality – in its fully developed form – is African unity, pan-Africanism. The furnace is the African culture, fuelled by its rationalist humanism, egalitarian and communalistic principles. But more crucially, in extending the imagery, the smith or metal worker is *the African*. *The Mind of Africa* is, therefore, a critical reflection on, and a passionate appeal to consider the integrative traditional African cultural values that has withstood the onslaught of colonialism and the loss of independence, as instruments for both national and continental development and unity.

Two central themes are prominent in the book: one, that Africa is capable of shaping her own destiny and solving her own problems; in other words, the African has the ability to manage his/ her own resources for development. Secondly, Africa's development ultimately resides in an urgent pursuit of African unity, pan-Africanism. The two themes are underpinned by two philosophical conceptions – the essentialist view of man, and Rational humanism. While essentialism recognizes a constant and irreducible element in being human, rational humanism identifies this element as rationality or reasoning. Possession of reason is fundamental to the nature of humanity, and it is this view of the essence of humans that inspires the position that *the African* has the capacity to, not only manage *her* own affairs, but articulate solutions to the problems of the world. These two themes and their philosophical grounding are given expression in an integrative account of culture; the pursuit of self-rule, national development, African socialism, and African unity, should be authenticated in the African traditional culture and experience.

The account of culture Abraham articulates, and the focus on the African culture he recommends for national and regional integration, is admirable. Culture provides the basis for the understanding of Africa's history and evaluation of the experience of colonialism and the loss of independence; it is the instrument for crystalizing the gains of independence and for battling neo-colonialism to attain national unity. Yet, culture is not merely traditional but contemporary; it is not constricting but free; it is not just transient and changing but a control of change; the focus on culture is not backward-looking but futuristic. As Abraham rightly points out: "Our interest in our own cultures is not historical or archaeological, but directed towards the future. It helps importantly in solving the question not what Africans were like, but how we can make the best of our present human resources, which are largely traditional" (p. 36). This interest in our cultures should motivate Africans "to pose problems, to formulate ideals and national objectives meaningfully with an eye to the cultures of Africa which have in fact continued to be in force" (p. 31).

Abraham, thus, provides a cultural model for the pursuit and attainment of African unity. Pan-Africanism is grounded in, and argued for, by the common cultural values that are pervasive in all the cultures of Africa. The pursuit of African unity should not be premised on economic and political lines but by an appreciation of the cultural links that bind the states of Africa. The disparities in the economies and political situations of African countries is a reason for, rather than an obstacle to, pursuing African unity on cultural lines. The sense of fraternity engendered in the unity of African cultures, the egalitarian and humanist principles underlying traditional African cultures, make it possible for the pursuit of African unity. The seemingly unsurmountable challenges and problems facing Africa today, in contradistinction to the undeveloped vast resources, skill and capital Africa possesses make it urgent for the pursuit of African unity.

Abraham, like Nkrumah in his *Consciencism*, recognizes that traditional African cultures exist side by side with Western and Islamic cultural influences. Where Nkrumah thought that the continued existence of these three strands of cultures will plunge the African into a state of schizophrenia, Abraham thinks that it will be "supine madness simply to ape the West or the East, indeed any point of the compass" (p. 28). Nkrumah's cure for the schizophrenia is to achieve a harmony by collapsing or accommodating the other two strands to be in tune with traditional Africa, and this raises a question of what sense of 'harmony' it is if one accommodates the other two strands into the one. This solution implies that there is a pristine and pure form of traditional African cultures. Abraham's view, however, is that traditional African cultures contain digested and undigested Western and Islamic elements and that any synthesis

should take into account these elements. For him, cultural progress implies selection and rejection and these processes should be done subject to African cultural values.

I find a highly persuasive, albeit undeveloped idea in the book, which is that institutions are idiomatic. An idiomatic expression defies the logic of translation from one language into another; indeed the idiomaticity dissipates and their meanings are literalised when translated from one language into another. For instance, 'to kick the bucket' into Akan loses its idiomatic meaning 'to die', and similarly for, 'ka nkyini gu' from Akan to English, although both expressions articulate the concept of death. The point is that same ideals can be served by differing institutions and different institutions can be devised to articulate the same ideals in different circumstances. There is no need, for instance, for the West to foist their style of liberal democracy on Africa, for Africa and its traditional institutions were already democratic.

Abraham asserted that "the tendency in Africa today is undoubtedly towards one-party states"(p. 149). Well, 57 years after the publication of the statement, it is obvious that it was wrong prophecy. But one could balk at his view that "well-organized parties, in the plural, are not essential to democracy" (p. 148). And his reasoning is that "if plurality is essential then strong opposition too is essential" (p. 148). One can accept that a plurality of parties is not conducive for the attainment of independence without accepting that post-independence the norm should be the singularity of parties. Nonetheless, the plausibility of Abraham's view lies in his emphasis on traditional African cultural practices: in traditional African societies, governance was democratic although there were no political parties.

The importance and relevance of the book to contemporary debates and discourses on Ghana and Africa as a whole cannot be overemphasised. Abraham's view that the security of our democracy depends on an impartial judiciary, efficient civil service, constitutional government, well-organized parties, pressure groups, and a free press, still rings true. His view on education, for example, is very pertinent to current discussions on educational policies in Africa. In his 2019 State of the Nation Address, Ghana's president announced a new curriculum for primary schools beginning in September 2019 that is focussed on mathematics and science; he also announced the establishment of 10 science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) centres for introduction of STEM into basic education, and the appointment of a Presidential Advisory Council on Science, Technology and Innovation (PACSTI) to advise the president on science and technology for the nation. It appears that our politicians equate national development and individual success with the progress and development of science and technology. Now, this is what Abraham has to say: "At any time there will be some needs of

the nation which are urgent...But the educational structure of a nation should not be rigidly geared in an *ad hoc* and opportunistic way to problems of the day alone...The educational structure of a nation should be primed to make remedial provisions for changing and even unforeseen needs...If African governments were themselves prepared to pay money for research into art, religion, and thought, a true and integrated picture of the African personality could easily soon emerge”(pp. 197-198).

Although William Abraham is a philosopher, and *The Mind of Africa* is replete with philosophical arguments, it will be wrong to situate and confine the book solely to philosophy. Its analysis of culture and exposition of the cultural traditions of Akan is of interest to the ethnographer and the anthropologist while the systematic interpretation of the numerous Akan proverbs should pique the linguist and the literary critic’s interest. The book’s critical inquiry into the social and political institutions of traditional Africa should captivate the minds of sociologists and political scientists as its presentation and interpretation of the independence struggles in Africa should interest the historian. All in all, this is a systematic and carefully articulated work by one mind for all disciplines.

To the non-African, a journey through *The Mind of Africa* offers one a breathtaking view of the cultural traditions, practices, and conceptions of African societies. Interlacing his exposition with proverbs and sayings, Abraham offers unique perspectives and interpretations of the Akan culture and conceptual scheme – Akan cultural values, social and political institutions, metaphysical conceptions of man and society – as paradigmatic of the culture and conceptual schemes of African societies. But crucially, Abraham reveals, examines, and rejects, a plethora of unfounded notions about Africans and their cultures – some of these erroneous ideas are often repackaged and recited even in present times. In reading the book, one will come to understand and appreciate the theoretical underpinnings and the practical significance of the African experience

The Mind of Africa is a challenge to all African minds to direct their thoughts to the urgent need for African unity, and to work towards achieving that unity on the basis of our shared African cultural values. It is said that it took the United States of America 170 years to achieve unity; I hope that the United States of Africa will not take that long.

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