

Cultural Dislocation and Urban Anarchy in Africa : Towards a Future of a Humanized City

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The dehumanization of the cities in today's Africa is examined from a value and cultural perspective. Many problems of urban anarchy are the result of the displacement of the traditional value systems and cultural dislocation. The African, as it were, faces a cultural dilemma. Desperately searching for a new paradigm for social action in a world characterized by "confused moral values", the African is confronted with a moral code which affirms the hegemony of the individual at the exlpense of communal solidarity. This paper concludes that until this problem of transvaluation coursed by the cultural dislocation of Africa and the African is adequately tackled, the quest for a peaceful and humane urban Africa will remain an agenda for some distant future.

Keyword:cultural dislocation, urban anarchy, humanized urban Africa

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Introduction

The deepening crisis that has led to the displacement of social order, group solidarity and above all, the dehumanization of the cities in today's Africa is here examined from a perspective which is different from what has almost become orthodox in the discourse of urbanization in Africa. Specifically, the central claim of this paper is that the urban anarchy which in contemporary Africa, manifests in armed banditry, rape, arson, forgery, street violence, hired assassination, and so on, is the result of the displacement of the traditional value systems of the Africans. In other words, it is rooted in cultural dislocation brought about by the chequered history of the African people; a history that led to cultural discontinuity, an almost complete annihilation of the existing traditional value system and the imposition of a completely different value system on the people. The African today is, as a result, caught between a past s/he cannot recall and a present s/he is not equipped to understand. The African, as it were, faces a cultural dilemma. Desperately searching for a new paradigm for social action in a world characterized by "confused moral values", the African is confronted with a moral code which affirms the hegemony of the individual at the expense of communal solidarity.

This development, has robbed the urban centres in Africa of its hitherto promising and **humane** nature as the melting pot of shared interests and values. The city in Africa has since remained a marketplace of possessive individuals who are driven by the self-serving instinct to cheat their fellows. Thus having discarded, the African traditional value of being one's neighbour's keeper for one that celebrates the autonomy of the individual at the price of collective goal, the prevalent philosophy in contemporary urban Africa can be summed up thus: **Everyone for herself, God for us all**. It is this tension, between personal interest and the public good which this paper sees to be at the root of the anarchy that has become part of the defining characteristics of the life in urban centres in Africa. This paper therefore conclude that until this problem of **transvaluation** coursed by the cultural dislocation of Africa and the African is adequately tackled, the quest for a peaceful and humane urban Africa will remain an agenda for some distant future.

Why a Philosophical Analysis

The discourse on urbanization in Africa, as elsewhere, has for a long time been dominated by experts who have, understandably addressed the problem with their own disciplinary biases, and of course limitations (see for instance, Duru, 1974, Rakodi, 1990, Albert, 1994, Adisa, 1994, Osaghae, 1994,

Mabogunje, 1992). Most of these authors have concerned themselves with the aspect of this hydra-headed problem that impinges on their professional competence. But to properly understand the problem of urban anarchy in Africa, requires an integrative or holistic analysis of the issues at stake. By integrative analysis, I mean an approach which will bring together all the contending variables in the apparently crowded universe of problems in the African city. Here, I want to agree with Andrienne Koch (1960:65) that the philosopher is about the only professional best suited for this job. The simple reason here being that:

The total aspect of the crisis emphasizes the necessity for the integrative attitude essential for the philosophic enterprise. This attitude is probably present in philosophy than in any other professional activity. For normal professional specialist guard against any intrusions by others and hesitates to make any excursion himself into other areas... But where we must deal with a set of major problems of human existence today, we simply cannot avoid a responsible and disciplined consideration of materials belonging to different fields. And it is apparent that almost no professional groups, as a group outside the philosophers in the classic tradition have made it their business to cultivate the integrative attitude.

Put differently, philosophy, unlike other disciplines, seeks to “explain the surrounding world as a whole”, interrogating, as it were, “its nature and condition” and the philosopher, having been trained to “teach man to overcome the one sidedness and limitation of ordinary human understanding and to see the relationship between ail- relations” (Horkheimer, 1972:271) cannot justifiably relinquish that role to any other person. If, in Africa therefore, it has become imperative “redefine what is significant, fight against prejudice and intolerance, and generously design a better world that will once again have the city .. a centre for peace, freedom, justice and solidarity” (Wilhem, 1996:13), the philosopher must as a matter of professional responsibility, join the debate. The ultimate goal of this paper, in the light of the above, is to suggest “new ideas and new modes of thought that will resolve the present conflicts and tensions” .(Anyanwu, 1985:271) in the urbanized Africa.

The Making of a Marketplace

Many attempts have been made to answer the question :Why has anarchy

displaced social order in the urban space of Africa? (see for instance, Duru, 1974; Sparks, 1991; Adisa, 1994; Holomisa, 1996 etc.). However, one answer which has become popular is that which attributes urban violence to modernity. The African city is here said to be inflicted by the diseases that go with modernity. The life of a modern "city is very complicated", it has been argued. By this it is meant, among other things that by "their very nature, cities provide an enabling environment for violence" (Osaghae, 1994).

I see the above view as being problematic in many respects. It has the underlying assumption that violence is an inevitable feature of a city. It is perhaps pertinent to state that the prevalent anarchy in African cities was virtually non-existent in the traditional (i.e. pre-colonial) urban centres of Africa at least not in their present criminal manifestations. Yet, it cannot be said that there were no such cities like Benin, Ibadan, Kano, Oyo, to mention only four of the big old cities in Nigeria, in the pre-colonial Africa. These cities I must state were in their pre-colonial days even larger than some of our cities today. Yet there were no such crimes as we have in even the smaller cities today as in those big cities of the pre-colonial era. One conclusion that issues from this is that the problem of urban anarchy is not necessarily the direct consequence of the size of these cities, either spatially or demographically, as some would want us believe. On the other hand, it is the result of the continent's colonial history and the consequent changes introduced by Western cultures. By implication, a proper understanding of the problem, requires a critical analysis of the interplay of traditional African world view which was the underlining philosophy of social relation in the past and those imposed by the colonialists as it manifests in the cities of contemporary Africa.

Peter Ekeh (1980:11), has rightly characterized colonization as experienced by Africans as an event of epochal dimension, comparable to the Industrial Revolution in England as well as the French Revolution. As Ekeh puts it:

In addition to the disparate activities of the colonizers and the colonized, and in addition to the ... colonial situation, colonialism may be considered as a social movement of epochal dimensions whose enduring significance beyond the life-span of the colonial situation lies in the social formations, developed from the volcano-sized social changes provoked into existence by the confrontations, contradictions and incompatibilities in the colonial situation

One of the transformations brought about by colonialism was an individualistic rather than the hitherto communalistic attitude of life of the Africans. In other words, with colonialism:

New ideas concerning individual accountability and individual reward, the spread of sense of individual vision and the ascendancy of self - interest in contrast with community interest on a basis of action, the growing sense of private power arising from self - action rather than clan direction, all of these atomizing factors, acting in concert, have loosened the internal bonds and efficacy of lineage - based clans (Abraham; 1992:27).

To put the matter another way, colonialism led to the displacement of a world view that enhanced communal cohesion, familial solidarity and good interpersonal relationship with one that celebrates the “autonomy of individual”. This has a lot of implications for the life in the urban Africa. First; though the individual gains his autonomy and freedom, so to speak, in the atomized city, but because “community” in the strict sense of the word has disintegrated, s/he loses, “the spontaneous self-expression, the morale, and sense of participation that comes with living in an integrated society” (Wirth, 1938:54). For the African, and here is the second consequence of the cultural dislocation in African as it manifests in the cities, “the moral and social order which formerly encased the pre-colonial indigenous institutions is burst by the social forces of colonialism and they seek new anchors in the changed milieu of colonialism”. (Ekeh, 1980: 11).

Here, we have to stress the point that the “kinship role in the Nigerian setting” for instance, a condition which obtained in most of the pre-colonial black African communities, “was particularly noteworthy. Groups were organized into “compounds for political, social, economic and administrative purposes” (Aderinto, 1994:234). This had a lot of implications for social cohesion in the pre-colonial African urban centres. Because the traditional African society was group-oriented or communo-centric in character, it prevented “aggrieved or injured persons from engaging in the kind of anti-social behaviour” (ibid.) that is prevalent today in Africa. Coser’s (1976) explanation here is very instructive: “People who are well integrated into a group are cushioned to a significant extent from the impact of frustrations that afflict the human lot; hence they are less likely to resort to extreme behavioural attitudes”. Conversely, as an autonomous being in the urban space of Africa, the individual becomes almost completely amoral and egoistic and so has the tendency to take to crime and other antisocial behaviours. This is more so because here,

.....the main external checks upon men’s conduct, the opinion of his neighbours, which has a powerful influence in the country or small towns, tends to disappear. (Here) one has no neighbours. No man knows the doings of his close friends; few

men care what the secret of their friends may be. Thus, with his moral sensibilities blunted, the young man is left free to follow his own inclinations (Boyer, 1978:206).

How this leads to urban anarchy in contemporary Africa is easily discernible. In his paper, aptly titled "Can Third World Cities Be Managed?", Carole Rakodi (1990) has a graphic presentation of these realities: "Large proportions of city populations" the argument goes, "are unable to obtain access to wage employment, land for housing, piped water supply, an adequate sanitation system, and social facilities such as educational or health services". Invariably, the urban poor are "driven to squat on land which does not belong to them, to erect unauthorized, poor quality housing, or to live in over-crowded and unsanitary inner-city slums and tenements, and to rely on low-income, untidy, and sometimes illegal economic activities to support themselves" (Ibid.: 111). This is at variance with the expectations of many able-bodied men and women tramped to the city in the desperate search for the so called golden fleece, which has however remained elusive.

The point needs however to be made that poverty itself is not usually the main reason for people becoming criminals. Instead, criminal disposition, usually, though not necessarily always, results from the individual's perception or interpretation of social realities. It is, in other words, the result of an attempt by the deprived to adjust themselves to a perceived injustice whether by individual members of the society or the social system as a whole. Specifically speaking, "violence emerges in a setting of extreme economic and social inequities.....and growing disparities between rich and poor....."members of the city which could not be adequately justified (Pinheiro1993:33). In other words, unjustifiable inequality or better still, unwarranted dis-equilibrium among city dwellers tend to "destroy the community, thus making almost anyone fair game to exploit for personal ends, whether that person is a member of one's own class or of some other" (Michaiowski, 1993).

I also find very interesting the linkage which the Editor of Daily Nation of Kenya tried to establish between the incidence of urban violence in Nairobi, the Kenyan capital and the ever widening gap between the city's "halves" and the "have nots", on one hand and the misplaced value of the city dwellers, on the other. After cataloguing the various criminal activities that now prevail in the Nairobi city which the paper attributes to the fact, among other things, that the average man-in-the-street, has been given the erroneous impression that "crime pays" the paper asks rather rhetorically: "How can society demand honesty from its members when many of its leaders are so conspicuously lacking in that virtue? Who can be surprised if the average man decides that, tired

of trudging painfully along the straight and narrow path, he too jumps on the gravy train ridden by his superior?”.

The point here is not that inequality necessarily breeds violence. But rather that the resort to violence depends largely on whether or not “the unequal distribution of rights and privileges is considered illegitimate” or otherwise, by subordinate groups or private individuals (Coser, 1967: 67). The contention of this paper as have said earlier is that this perceived difference, the lack of legitimating paradigm to justify the perceived and sometimes real inequality is one of the major sources of antisocial behaviours in the urban cities of Africa. And it is within this context, among others, that I believe the problem should tackled.

Towards a Humanized Urban Africa

In addressing this problem, certain factors have to be kept in view. First, it must be acknowledged that “social alienation has become a fact of life for a significant proportion of the urban population who, with the relative absence of traditional stabilizing influence, could easily resort to violence” (Isamah, 1994:288). This point has also made it imperative for us to take more seriously the views expressed by Friedman (1973) to the effect that it is not in anybody’s interest if the society is totally atomized as it now is the case in most African cities. For as he argues:

If we throw away public interest into the rubbish heap of out-worn notions and ideas; with whose interest shall we be left? Only the self-antagonistically held together by an interest in private gain. And if we throw away the common good, what is left? No good at all. We end up facing one another; each locked up in the narcissistic contemplation of an empty self, driven aimlessly across the globe by an insatiable urge to fill the void.....we end up being gripped by a general sense of dissolution (Friedman, 1973).

What follows from this is that an integrative policy of urbanization that would restore the **community** in place of **individuality** has become imperative in Africa. In other words, our town planning policy must be geared towards consciously seeking to restore the “loss of small community inhibition” which has led to the enthronement of urban anonymity and the erosion of traditional mores ail of which have contributed to the dehumanization of life in the urban centres of Africa.

Second, it should also be noted that majority of those who engage in crimi-

nal activities in our cities are youths. These are people who, apparently are not sure of what the future holds for them in a present that seems not to have taken them into consideration in the scheme of things. It thus follow that their anxieties must inform our town planning policies; their fears of the future must be allayed while their present hardship must be mediated. This cannot be aking lightly the way many African states have done for the mere fact that, "when people are uncertain about the future their just response is to retreat, and through an instinct of self-preservation, to become intolerant and selfish" (Wilhem, 1996:12). This is even an attitudinal disposition of virtually anyone that leaves in a society where things are in short supply. People ordinarily tend to "defend what they have today (when) they do not know what they will have tomorrow" (Ibid.). What this means basically is that there must be adequate planning for a functional education of the youth. But beyond that, there must be opportunity for them to have a gainful employment. After ail, the time-honoured saying that an idle mind is a workshop for the devil remains potent till date.

It can then be seen from the foregoing that humanizing the cities in Africa today does not mean returning them to the ways they were in the pre-colonial days. This, I believe is not feasible. Rather, I strongly believe that our solution must acknowledge and make allowance for the obvious fact that "the rape of Africa has taken place (that) slavery, colonialism, the invasion of technology, western educational patterns, western religions and political systems have shaped our historical situation" (Ruch, 1974:13-14); and therefore, whether we like it or not, there are certain aspects of our lives that could not be reversed. For instance, urban centres in Africa are relatively larger than they were in the past. The population is equally more plural in terms of religious affiliations, culture, professional groupings and so on. Yet, nothing in all this says our cities could no longer enjoy the tranquility with which they were noted in the past. What could it therefore mean to **humanize** the city in Africa in the present circumstance?

As a first step, it would mean to **democratize** it, in the broad sense of the term. By this, it is meant that a conscious effort should be made "to facilitate the access of all to the goods and services produced by society, creating conditions that give priority to those who have less. Usually the children, women and the most vulnerable groups in society such as the elderly and the disabled" (Fiores, 1996:19). This is because, even when this category of city dwellers may not be directly involved in urban crimes, they are in one way or the other influences on criminals.

In view of the foregoing therefore, I see the greatest challenge of city planning today as residing in the ability to strike "a balance between meeting people's

basic needs and preparing for the city's future". This means, as Lerner (1996: 17) puts it balancing "what is vital with what is important".

The greatest source of violence in our cities today is fear: Fear of the future, fear of being marginalized, fear of remaining completely marginalized, fear of being displaced from a privileged position, in short, fear of the known and the unknown. In essence therefore, what the city dweller needs today is the restoration of hope first; in himself or herself, in the other person (s) in the neighbourhood, and perhaps more importantly, in the looming future. Since one of the main sources of this fear is plurality and the individualization of city life and the fact that interpersonal relations are no longer mediated by shared values and by implication, and so the consequent breakdown in the traditional uniformity of perception and purpose; the new philosophy of city planning in Africa should emphasize "the spiritual sense convergence toward.....unity on the basis of the sacredness of each human person and respect for the plurality of culture" and cultural expressions (Whyte, 1954: 24).

The point must therefore be made that the human realities in Africa of "the 20th Century demand the relaxation of tension through the cultural integration of human sensibilities" (Anyanwu, 1985: 275). This being the case, our city planners must harness the cultural plurality in the urban centres to essentially making the people participate in the way the planning is done. To take them for granted, to plan the city in spite of the city dwellers as it is the case in most African cities today is to live perpetually with the problem of people's resistance to recalcitrant experience-the source of anarchy in the urbanized Africa of today.

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