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**Orality, Modernity and African Development:
Myth as Dialogue of Civilizations**

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Introduction

The desire to understand pressing issues such as modernity and development is not made any easier by competing and different knowledge domains, none of which offers a single and comprehensive answer to what is happening around us. Thus, this paper discusses the various ways in which orality provides an indispensable, eternally-expanding guide to reading, writing, living and creating the African world of the past, present and future. The paper argues that what has generally been dismissed as myth is a massively complex intellectual reflection and perception on civilizations in contact, conflict and conversations that is in response to modernity. Explaining the intimate correlation between orality, myth and modernity, the paper demonstrates that myths belong to traditional oral philosophy and can be harnessed as indigenous resources in dealing with development challenges facing Africa.

Although the oral tradition in Africa is always based on myth, and despite its ubiquity and role, African orality and its importance on the continent is a subject that is not yet widely known. The concept remains alien in existing studies despite it standing both as a representation of the concrete facts of the collective experience of the African people and as a reconstruction of their consciousness induced by engagements with modernity. Whereas African orality has been regarded as myth and nothing more by many scholars, its mix of multiple voices, its fusion of personal and communal historical experiences, its fragments of narrativity, its riveting imagery and layered allusiveness, all remain hallmarks of a response to modernity.

While scholars have been acutely conscious of the myth in African orality, they have too often missed its cues on the challenges of modernity. As a consequence, many scholars have treated African orality superficially and contemptuously as largely mythical and not modernist. Yet, African orality explores, recreates and seeks meanings in human experience, contemplating and celebrating its diversity, complexity and strangeness of interactions of civilizations at different times. While much of what has been said by mostly non-African scholars so far represents the notion of traditional myth, a closer reexamination of the oral tradition reveals that it is not marginal to issues defining modern society, including science and technology. However, with the turn to orality, there is a growing consciousness of cultural identity and with it myth is becoming a domain of great intellectual interest to various scholars of African studies.

The purpose of the paper, therefore, is to increase the visibility, effectiveness, sustainability and acceptability of orality as a form of indigenous knowledge by connecting it with what passes for modernity. It argues that the challenge of understanding today's fast-changing world is how to balance and connect knowledge from different perspectives through partnership, collaboration, innovation, integration and communication based on active cultivation of a dialogue between different communities.

The paper concludes that unlike in the West where written culture is a sign of modernity, the oral-tradition in Africa, as a people's wisdom and philosophy, becomes a marker for modernity, an ever-moving point marking off our own present from a long past. The paper acknowledges that there are alternative forms of knowledge and cultural transmission outside the sphere of literate modernity and that African orality is an indigenous system of knowledge that needs to be appreciated as a particular worldview and intellectual engagement and negotiation between the ancient and the modern. The great tradition of African orality represents the depth, achievement, and ambience of the people's culture and forms an important contextual basis within which to discuss, understand and deal with the challenges of development facing the continent in the twenty first century and beyond.

Africa, the Myth-Orality Nexus and the 'Other' Modernity

Despite a significant and dominant element in orality in Africa being the idea of modernity, the concept has remained largely neglected and that accounts for many of the myths characterizing it. Whereas orality engages the extremely complex concepts of dialogue of civilizations and modernity that have increasingly come to mark our world with monumental influence, this reality has been lost through superficial and contemptuous analyses, misinterpretations and distortions. Yet, emphasizing the role of myth and orality as discourses in systematic exploration of the African reality and their response to modernity can help us understand them as a projection of 'future history' of the world and the need for civilizations to dialogue.

The development of African society and its values is reflected in orality and myth. This is because there is a particular worldview associated with myth and orality on the continent. The two are important and dominant progressive and innovative media of thought and intellectual expression of topical event, ideas,

values and viewpoints. They narrate histories of transition as they are themselves histories of language, culture, society and tradition. As a living embodiment of African metaphysical principles and self-consciousness, orality and myth are guides to reading, writing, living and creating the African world.

Myth and orality are in a symbiotic relationship in Africa; with the former being ubiquitous in oral tradition, and the latter almost always based on the former. Both belong to traditional African philosophy. They are the forces, energy, and dynamism of daily lives on the continent. As a growing consciousness of cultural identity, myth and orality offer multiple perspectives on the spatial and temporal nature of life and its civilizations. They are a repository of potentially radical and subversive sentiments on encounter of civilizations. The two are emerging as domains of great intellectual interest on the continent.

Myth and orality are discourses of considerable epistemological significance with a powerful sense of reality that can transform knowledge and ways of thinking about dialogue of civilizations and other challenges of modernity facing contemporary Africa. With a long history of shaping African culture and civilization, orality and myth have been important in search for identity, community, and the meaning of life in an environment of interaction, control and change. The narratives stand both as a representation of the concrete facts of the people's collective experience and as a reconstruction of the consciousness induced by that experience of engagements with the very complex idea of modernity with multiple implications that challenged existing influence of individual leaders, groups of people, institutions and whole communities.

As an aspect of lore, orality attained its historicity as a living embodiment of African metaphysical principles and self-consciousness as a form of artistic representation at the moment it encountered the historical divide between tradition and modernity which are contesting each other. As a historical bridge across the divide between the past and the present, orality offers multiple perspectives on the spatial and temporal nature of African life and its civilizations. Thus, African orality is an enlightened 'text' invested with social and political capital which throws light to the paradigm of civilizations in dialogue. The inclusion of African orality in the civilizations in dialogue debate is at once a decentering and a critique of the hegemonic and oppressive Western systems of thinking and knowing that define the modernity paradigm and exclude Africa. Exploring the epistemology in African

orality privileges the oral philosophy that has existed on the margins of modern literate society and at the same time demonstrates how the two can blend in a creative way.

On the other hand, myth can help study the perception of people and also narrate histories of nations, analyzing their historical, cultural or social transition. Myth is itself a history of language, culture, society and tradition. Myth as oral tradition speaks the story of not only the past but also of contemporary social, cultural and linguistic structure of the African society. Within this context, African myth becomes a complex narrative with historical significance and relevance to understanding modernity. African myth has innovative ideas that connect broader cultural trends and aspects that offer new perspectives on emerging global trends and challenges. Myth is not only a source of African history of civilization but an effort at preservation and reenactment of the events that brought about encounters amongst and between Africans and 'others'.

Myth and orality in Africa shift and evolve with indigenous consciousness amidst pervasive global change. Both have important contribution to make to modern discourses and creative production. They straddle between tradition and change as modernity as they connect Africans to memory and ancestors. They are a historical bridge across and between the past and the present of Africa. They allow access to imagination and thoughts that can be articulated, expressed, and recreated through redefining tradition in new ways. Myth and orality feed the spirit of innovation by intertwining ways of thinking with ways of doing

While acknowledging and appreciating the massive canvass of philosophical and epistemological foundations of myth and orality in Africa and their unique historical value, the two have come under the sustained imperializing and subordinating power of the written word. As a consequence of the discriminatory tendencies of literate modernity, the two are placed low on the hierarchy of intellectual, cultural, and civilizational achievement.

However, modernity is not a purely western phenomenon. Even though western modernity is hegemonic and homogenizing, there is a multiplicity of modernity parallel to western modernity. Myth and orality in Africa radiate with a complexity of knowledge which opens minds to multiple readings of reality beyond the narrow dimension that has characterized them. They articulate different forms of African identity and self-consciousness, their particular unity and distinction from

the 'Other'. They have profound and far-reaching messages on clash of civilizations and dialogue of civilizations. Myth and orality are important in understanding and addressing modernity challenges facing the African continent, including universalizing culture, global civilization and the paradox of development.

Myth, Modernity and the Development Question in Africa

Today, perhaps no challenge is more complex than the development question and its effects on people and places across Africa. As the global community of scholars explores the problem and its effects, their deliberations are situated at the confluence of science, technology, management and policy. However, the problem of development as seen in the need for improved quality of life occurs at multiple spatial and temporal scales. The effects of this reality respect no boundaries of whatever kind. Likewise, we need knowledge and institutions that defy any boundary limitations. This implies that if we are to respond effectively to the challenges of development in Africa, cross-disciplinary answers to the problem must be sought beyond any one dominant and hegemonic narrative.

At the dawn of independence in the 1960s, 'development' was regarded as the most central mission of the new African states. For the last five decades, specific suggestions and detailed proposals on how to tackle the development question in Africa have since been produced in great quantity. Development programmes were formulated based on the conception that political leaders, planners, and influential pressure groups held about a desirable nation, the manner in which the citizens were to be organized and function, and how individuals and nations of Africa could be changed. An entire ideology emerged which required the subordination of virtually all interests of national concern to the imperative of development. The aim of most African governments has been to achieve improved standards of living through the eradication of ignorance, disease and poverty. The rhetoric of development itself, however, was deeply infused with the notion of nation building, a term which had become quite pivotal in the entire vocabulary of the post-colonial politics (Mazrui, 1972).

Though some of the strategies pursued by independent African governments delivered high initial levels of economic growth, none of them proved capable of leading to sustained development. The major aims of a majority of governments at independence were social justice, individual liberty, and economic independence.

The logic then was that these objectives were realizable in a strong growing economy that could guarantee a stable and peaceful society. Development planning placed almost exclusive emphasis on the role of physical capital in furthering economic progress. This marked the genesis of the materialist meaning of development that characterized much of Africa in the first decade of independence.

Pioneer Pan-Africanists like Jomo Kenyatta, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, Gamal Nasser, Nelson Mandela, Haile Selassie, Eduardo Mondlane, Sekou Toure, etc. were not only political leaders but also excelled as academic intellectuals who experimented with great original and imaginative ideas like Mwalimu Julius Nyerere's *Ujamaa* (Socialism), Kenyatta's *Harambee* (Pulling together), and Kwame Nkrumah's Consciencism. These great thinkers initiated nation-building development policies that were driven by tremendous earnestness and seriousness of purpose and desire to see Africa become self-reliant and inter-dependent on itself and thus gain dignity in the world. While not looking at only Western civilization for paradigms of change and progress, they were ideologically innovative, philosophically independent and borrowed from both indigenous culture and foreign influence. Although most of their experiments did not deliver sustainable development dividends, theirs can be said to have been heroic attempts to find their own routes towards self-reliance and socialist egalitarianism rooted in indigenous African civilization.

Although it can be argued that development planners have not been able to transform African societies from their unsatisfactory conditions due to their failure to have a clear image of the significant components or factors that make up African societal structure (African Development Bank, 1999; World Bank, 1981 & 1989), no African community can develop without paying considerable attention to crucial cultural elements including myth and orality. Looked at separately, the components may not strike one as being central to any form of development. However, the relative strength of each can only be appreciated in the influence they have on each other and their overall impact on development. There can be no doubt that African development can change for the better if these factors are harnessed as resources that closely interact. That is what informed the original African Renaissance of the 1930s that was propagated by Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, and that was later on elaborated upon and expanded by Thabo Mbeki and other African revivalists in the 1990s.

Although popular participation was desirable as early as the late 1960s, the dynamics and importance of human factors were not emphasized then. The importance of language, culture and participatory communication as building blocks of African societies was not widely acknowledged. Instead, over the years, development planners and managers of the process stressed the need for economic efficiency, national planning of programmes and the efficient organization of production, and the necessity to rely on techno-bureaucratic methods. But Africa is a continent of many civilizations, and therefore needs a diversification of its outlook to development.

During the 1970s, the development literature became generally dominated by the concept of satisfying the basic needs of poor households and providing them with opportunities for self-enhancement (Streeten 1979). Given that world-wide economic growth in the 1960s did not “trickle-down” to the majority in the Third World, mostly African nations, the need was perceived to attack the problem of poverty more directly. This emphasis led to greater global support for a rural focus in development strategy and planning. This approach did not deliver and as a consequence, the development expectations aroused by the independence euphoria in Africa had evaporated by the close of the 1970s.

In the last two decades of the last century, the global development debate was largely defined and directed by neo-liberal theories and prescriptions for reform. In Africa, in response to the economic downturn and debt crisis of the 1970s, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank pressed for structural-adjustment packages fashioned on the theory and practice of neo-liberalism. More than just being an economic theory, neo-liberalism is also a political theory. Where neo-liberals have called for economic conservatism and the preeminence of the market, they have also supported the theory of a minimal state. Indeed, central to the critique of structural adjustment in the South has been the evidence, now generally accepted, that neo-liberal packages have in fact seriously exacerbated poverty levels and distributional inequalities.

However, the practical implications of this dialogue, particularly from a policy and research perspective, are considered somewhat tenuous. Whereas critics of the neo-liberal school have highlighted real weaknesses of the dominant economic paradigm, others suggest that the strength of the critics’ perspective has been in their

theoretical and social critique of neo-liberalism, rather than in their articulation of a cogent and defensible alternative. Indeed, the predominant focus of this critical literature on the social failings of neo-liberal reform has spurred charges that it has merely challenged imperfect mainstream models from the perspective of equally unsustainable interventionist or welfarist strategies that still leave too much in the hands of the state (Green 1996). Skepticism about the contribution of the critics of neo-liberalism has also been reinforced by recent historical trends: the dramatic and recent failure of socialist economies has undermined proposed alternatives to a market-oriented approach.

The dismal economic record of structural-adjustment policies and the perception that they have had far-reaching negative social effects have fueled broad-based criticism of these policies. In the developing world, concerns about the social implications of the neo-liberal agenda have been expressed through extensive research on the practical burden that economic reforms have placed on grass-roots groups (Afshar 1992; Jolly et al. 1992; Bakker, 1994). Among the reforms witnessed across Africa were deregulation of economies, trade liberalization, export promotion, currency devaluation, strengthening of the financial sector, and public-sector reform. Thus, neo-liberalism took root in many African countries and came to inform development strategies, including social-cultural policies. Consequently, social-cultural policies have become marginalized and have therefore remained implicitly separate and subordinate to overarching economic priorities.

The dominant development model that appears to have been gradually adapted in Africa is the Western one, which is founded on materialistic ideology, secularism, consumerism, individualism and modern science and technology. This kind of development is contrary to that advocated by UNESCO (1982) which defined development as a complex, holistic and multidimensional process, which goes beyond mere economic growth and integrates all the dimensions of life and all the energies of a community, all of whose members must share in the economic and social transformation effort and in the benefits that result therefrom. It is therefore tempting to conclude that the African experience of development since independence is by and large barren and alienating.

While most of Africa is economically underdeveloped, it is culturally rich. It is this realization that compels us to rethink the tendency of limiting development to the techno-economic field alone. The socio-economic development of Africa certainly

does not follow and ought not to follow the development course of the West in all respects. Whereas most of Africa might not have what the West has, such as usable natural resources, capital accumulation, technological superiority, industrial base, the Western rationality, and so forth, the continent has what the West does not have—cultural resources. Many African communities possess unique cultural values and indigenous languages that can be harnessed and utilized in the process of mobilization and organization needed to pursue the goal of sustainable development. It is this nature of the relationship between culture and development that raises many interesting and important issues that inform our thesis.

Over the years, development approach and development policy have therefore been ill-conceived for failing to pay adequate attention to cultural identity. As a consequence, the importation of an alien model of development has led to the impoverishment of the moral and spiritual basis of African societies. Efforts to offer an alternative development model which is rooted in indigenous culture, and which could be more suited in the local situation to fulfill the aspirations of a majority of African people, have not been successful. Many obstacles have been cited for this failure. First, culture is an abstract concept, thus elusive to define, and to limit its parameters and scope. Everybody defines culture to suit themselves. It has become difficult to explain the role of culture in development. Second, in many African countries, the formulation of a cultural policy has not been easy and has raised a set of complicated problems that include content, application, cost, implementation, benefit, sustainability, and evaluation. The third issue has revolved around how much of their resources African countries can commit to cultural preservation, promotion and development.

The above scenario has not made African culture to be acknowledged and appreciated as a precondition for development. Instead culture has been viewed as being in opposition to development. However, the experience of the last 50 years shows that for development to occur, a complex set of factors needs to fall into place, and economic growth is only one of these factors. Culture is a factor whose role has either been misunderstood or not understood at all. Higher levels of economic growth do not necessarily translate into increased social well-being or the eradication of extreme poverty for hundreds of millions of people excluded from development. In short, economic growth is no longer equated with development. Instead, it has to be accepted that development has multiple dimensions (IDRC, 2004).

The key challenge is not only to understand the complex and multidirectional links among the various dimensions of development but also to identify the extent to which, and ways in which, these can be reinforced through appropriate public strategies and policies. Indeed, one of the key concerns of development theory and research has been to understand how public policies and programs can be designed to address both persistent and newly emerging development problems (IDRC, 2004:5).

With the broadening of the concept of development in the recent past, it is increasingly coming to be acknowledged that public policies in such areas as oral culture have in their own right a direct bearing on the nature, direction, and outcomes of a country's development efforts. It is this realization that has led to both governments and development agencies all over the world to recognize the need to put people at the centre of development and to give development a human face. They have begun to advocate strategies to explicitly address social-development needs. According to the new thinking, development processes are fundamentally a question of human development and thereby equally of history, culture, communication and participation. Yet, there has been relatively little research that systematically examines the roles and impacts of cultural policies in African development.

Recognition of the changing nature and importance of cultural policy is reflected in the emergence at the international level of a distinct discourse on social development. Thus, the final report of the World Conference on Social Development (United Nations 1995) emphasized the need to promote dynamic, open, free markets, while recognizing the need to intervene in markets to the extent necessary to prevent or counteract market failure, promote stability and long term investment and harmonize economic and social development. Moreover, echoing the views of a growing range of international bodies, including the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, similar prescriptions surfaced in the 1997 Human Development Report, which emphasized the importance of "pro-poor economic growth," and "people centred strategies." There is a growing consensus around the concept of people-centered development, which places culture at the center of development thinking, with emphasis on popular participation. It is argued that all

important factors of development be put on an equal footing with the macroeconomic angles which to date have been given priority.

Opposition to the priority given to economic concerns has led to a renewed emphasis on social-cultural development. The 1997 Human Development Report made clear, some very sobering realities to justify this renewed concern with social-cultural development. This has contributed to a significant shift in development thinking. Beginning in the early years of the 1990s and in large part driven by the backlash against narrowly defined economic reforms and perspectives, strong support has emerged for a more balanced approach to development, one that integrates both social-cultural and economic objectives without subordinating the one to the other.

Africa, Myth and the Dialogue of Civilizations Narrative

Mythology has had great influence on African life and way of thinking. Dealing with the lore of Africans, myths have intriguing tales and themes including dialogue of civilizations. As oral art forms, and with captivating characters and episodes, myths from all periods and from all parts of Africa are of inexhaustible fascination and interest. There is considerable similarity between themes, characters, incidents, and even details, in the mythologies of countries that are widely separated by distance. These points of likeness cannot be dismissed or disregarded. What this means is that different peoples throughout the continent were faced with similar situations, similar phenomena of nature, asked themselves similar questions, and answered them in much in similar way making clear their ideals, their mode of life, their state of civilization.

Just like there was great flowering of myths and legends in various parts of Europe and Asia, Africa too had its own story about its ancient civilizations. The complexity and nebulosity and the rhetoric and paradox of mythology in Africa is comparable to the accounts of the myths and legends of India as told in the great Mahabharat and the Ramayana. Like the mythology of China which accepted influences from neighbouring areas which fulfilled the mood or need of the people, myths in Africa were not insular to such effects. And just like the Greeks who descended from the Indo-European tribes, there are African communities who trace their origin to disparate communities who settled in different valleys, hills and along her coasts.

It is often pointed out that certain river valleys have been cradles of civilization, and the valley of the Nile illustrates clearly what this signifies. Egypt produced one of the earliest civilizations which flourished over the course of more than 3000 years, going as far back as 4000 BC. Mesopotamia, the prodigiously fertile plain which the Tigris and Euphrates rivers flow, was the heartland of several ancient civilizations – Babylonian, Assyrian, Chaldean. It was the scene of mighty struggles of mountaineers against nomads, and of king against king. Perhaps that is why the dominant tone of the Babylonian mythology is one of disillusionment. It is full of intentional ambiguities on man's position in the universe and his ultimate fate. The transitory nature of life is always felt (Robinson & Wilson, 1950).

There is renewed attention across disciplines to myth as a source of knowledge as interest grows and turns towards interpretation of human life. Scholars under the influence of interpretative traditions such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, cultural criticism, feminism and symbolic interactionism have developed what Marcus (1986: 262) calls a 'literary consciousness' that assumes standpoints and employs techniques that were once mostly associated with literary analysis and criticism. Newly preoccupied with forms of expression, literary devices, rhetorical conventions, and the reading and writing of texts of experience (including bodies, lives and literature), scholars now see the story in the study, the tale in the theory, the parable in the principle, and the drama in the life (Bordo, 1990; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Rosaldo, 1989; Ruby, 1982; Sacks, 1987; Suleiman, 1986; Turner & Bruner, 1986). The study of narratives has linked sciences with history, literature and everyday life to reflect the increasing reflexivity that characterizes contemporary inquiry and furthers the postmodern deconstruction of the already tenuous boundaries among disciplines and domains of meaning (Ruby, 1982).

A prevailing conceptualization of narrative is that it is one of the many modes of transforming knowing into telling (Misher, 1986). It is the paradigmatic mode in which experience is shared and that experience itself is storied, or it has a narrative pattern. Narratives assume many forms; they are heard, seen and read; they are told, performed, painted, sculpted and written (Sandlow, 1991:162). They are international, transhistorical and transcultural: simply there, like life itself (Roland Barthes, 1982: 252). Human beings are immersed in narrative', telling themselves stories (Polkingshorne, 1988: 160) and tirelessly listening to and recognizing in their own stories the stories of others. This re-conceptualization of human beings as

narrators and of their products as texts to be interpreted have been conditioned by empirical rather than narrative or biographical standards of truth and by a preoccupation with obtaining information at the expense of understanding expression (Sandelowski, 1991: 162).

Every age must re-criticize and reinterpret the great works of the past with a view to finding new sorts of significance, and new strands of relevance to particular cultural or intellectual contexts in order to keep them alive and ourselves alive to them. As stories told to make sense of disparate and regimented state of knowledge, myths serve to account for life, unlike in the present when meta-narratives are constructed to explain events. Myths represent the collective imagination of a people or nation, not the inventions of any one man.

Myth is more than a historical and literary narrative. A re-reading of myth in Africa reveals that there is an alternative voice on the discourse of dialogue of civilizations. It is a connected pattern of ideas and evaluations which together constitute a key component of our modern world view. Despite this other meaning, the metaphoricity of myth has contributed to subdue its real meaning that has existed for many years before the current discourse on the clash of civilizations.

Samuel Huntington's (1993 & 1996) now in vogue 'clash of civilisations' 'relies on a popularised version of the classical anthropological notion of culture (Malkki, 1992) as a complex, integrated whole' (Wimmer, 2002:19). By seeking to construct a theory of the nature of 'man and society' (Mills, 1959:23) after the end of Cold War, Huntington engaged in what Skinner (1985:3) terms as Grand Theory. It was as if the 'end of ideology' had been reached (Bell, 1960). His is a meta-narrative that refers to theories of knowledge, morality and grand story of social progress which have been central to the legitimation of modern knowledge, culture, and social institutions.

Huntington's clash of civilizations is part of the meta-narrative of inter-relations that holds that culture explains the economic success and failure of whole nations (see Fukuyama, 1995; Wicker, 1995). Implicit in this grand narrative is the traditional idea of cultural homogeneity and superiority which were limited to the colonial encounter, and 'helped legitimize colonial subjugation and exploitation' (Asad, 1979; Gendreau, 1979). The studies did not take into account the dynamic character of every cultural order (Moore, 1987) even outside situations of colonialism (Wimmer, 1995). However, contemporary studies show that cultural givens can be

perceived as just one of several possibilities for thinking, feeling and doing things (Schofthaler & Goldschmidt, 1984).

Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' has been treated as a great truth paradigm. The wealth and variety of discussions about the clash and the need for civilizations to dialogue demonstrate that there are many other voices discussing how power, abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted in the modern world. However, the inadequacy ascribed to minority texts, voices and authors reveals the limiting ideological horizons of the dominant, ethnocentric perspective.

Lyotard alludes to the fact that such social knowledge may become instruments of social control as they abandon absolute standards, universal categories, and pragmatic social inquiry, and not aware of social differences, ambiguity, and conflict. In his thesis of the decline of the meta-narrative, Lyotard voices a major theme of the postmodern turn: the decentering of the subject and the social world. Meta-narratives presuppose an ahistorical standpoint from which to understand the human mind, knowledge, society, and history. The shift from meta-narratives to local narratives and from general theories to pragmatic strategies suggests that in place of assuming a universal mind or a rational knowing subject, we imagine multiple minds, subjects, and knowledges reflecting different social locations and histories. There is no centre (Seidman, 1994: 4). Foucault speaks of dominant and subjugated knowledges, multiple subjects or producers of knowledges, and the interconnection of knowledges to various axes of domination and resistance.

Wimmer (2002:24) identifies four principal theoretical and methodological problems confronting the classical notion of culture. First, it does not give an answer to the problem of intra-cultural variation; Second, it cannot help to understand the relation between power and meaning; Third, its concept of human action is largely inadequate; Lastly, it does not offer an adequate tool to analyse processes of cultural and social change. Consequently, a move away from this classical notion and the development of alternative conceptual tools in many critical social sciences is leading to a renaissance that instead focuses on individual and sub-cultural variability, to process and the strategic adaptability of cultural practice (Brosfsky, 1994; Kaschuba, 1995, Wicker, 1996; Wimmer, 1996). on cultural differences between 'us' and 'them', the singularity and immediate understandability of every person should be

emphasized considering that notions of cultural differences can be overcome and the gulf separating 'them' from 'us' is bridged.

The idea that cultures are clearly discernible, bounded and integrated wholes becomes exclusionist and potentially dangerous for all those considered to belong to another culture (Wimmer, 2002; Lepenies, 1996; Geertz, 1993; Gamst & Helmers, 1981; Hofstede, 1991; Elkana and Mendelsohn, 1981). Notions of multiplicity, hybridity, creolisation and multivocality have replaced the idea of cultural homogeneity and integration (cf, Vertovec & Rogers, 1998). Wimmer (2002: 26) explains culture as an open and unstable process of the negotiation of meaning. In the emerging thinking, discourse has replaced culture as the master term with such post-structuralists like Foucault trying to understand how in a certain setting, multiple discourses criss-cross each other, overlap, develop into bundles of meaning, dissolve again and disappear. As the social world is synonymous with the coming and going of discourse (Foucault, 1978: 211), notions of economic relations, of social structure, of hierarchies of power are reduced to discourses on economic, social and political relations.

Talking of traditions and communities which produce multiple vocabularies of self and world and therefore the pragmatic nature of knowledge, Rorty (1979 & 1982) vouches for the decentering of culture and society so as to give voice and resurrect discredited folk knowledge. This new cultural politics of difference by marginalized and disempowered groups (West, 1990) challenges hegemonic Eurocentric culture and politics and asserts the value of individuality, otherness, heterogeneity, locality, and pluralism. It is a counter-culture against the perpetuation of colonialism, inequality and oppression in the name of modernity -- reason and social progress.

Myth in Africa epitomizes this exclusion of minority discourse from the dominant dialogue of civilizations paradigm. Nevertheless, myth gives an account as seen from the margins of the clash of civilizations and the need for various civilizations to engage in dialogue. Situated in relation to contemporary discourses of 'clash of civilizations' and the need for 'dialogue of civilizations', myth and orality in Africa provide a space in which questions about the nature of identity are most provocatively articulated. A critical-discursive articulation of alternative meanings in the texts can be reread transformatively as indications and figurations of values

radically opposed by the dominant culture. Derrida (1978) challenges the logocentrism of the West and urges a pragmatic approach to social issues.

A theory of minority discourse is necessary for this reinterpretation. The minority status of myth and orality is not a question of essence, but a question of what Mohamed & Llyod (1990:9) call position, and a product of the 'ontological Other' (Wynter, *ibid* 432). Beyond this boundary, the two forms of knowledge should be looked at as a form of counter-memory, an attempt to offer space for the emergence of subjugated knowledge and for the organization of resistance and therefore are essential to the critical articulation of minority discourse.

Our understanding of a text arises out of our position in a historical tradition (Gadamer, 1975a: xxi). According to (Gadamer, 1985:24), hermeneutic theory has paid too much attention to the detached way in which we tend to interpret texts, and not enough to the more practical concerns where the outcome is not just a better understanding of a text but its actual incorporation into our own lives. This process of coming-to-understand is not a matter of unprejudiced appropriation of an object such as a text, but a fusion of one's own horizon of meanings and expectations with that of the text, the other person, the alien culture (*ibid*, 31).

Before alien civilizations came to Africa, there were indigenous civilizations on the continent. Africans have existed on the continent since antiquity with a lot of trade, marital, and other forms of interactions between different communities. Despite vague lines separating them, African peoples historically formed a socio-economic and cultural unit, welded together by a cultural identity with one another, a consciousness of a common history and common interests. These ways of living can only be understood and appreciated by identifying different communities and varying periods of their existence and interactions.

For instance, according to the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, written around A.D. 110, the East Coast of Africa was inhabited from a very early period by black people. From around A.D. 150 the various Bantu groups and families began to invade the East African Coast, from both the south and the west. They established themselves along the rivers and in other cultivable places (Ylvisaker, 1979). The centuries from 1000 BC to AD 400 constitute a Classical Age in which were laid the cultural and economic foundations on which the societies of Greater Eastern Africa were to build their institutions and livelihood for the following fifteen hundred years. It was an era of transformative consequence which brought into being new forms of belief, culture,

and technology. The African Classical Age was marked by the full establishment of iron technology, the emergence of important new agricultural processes and technologies, and the spread of new religious and social ideals. In Greater Eastern Africa, the new cultural and economic dispensation was spread out toward the Indian Ocean seaboard from the interior. There were innovations and inventions, themselves forms of modernity.

The developments of the Classical Age of Greater Eastern Africa reveal the peoples of those regions as vibrant participants in the trends of world history, even as they marched to the drummers of their own particular historical pasts. They engaged in the creation of more complex and more adaptive forms of agriculture. The Classical Age was a time of immense reshaping of belief, custom, and livelihood. A myriad of complex histories of interethnic interaction and economic and social change lie behind the social formations and economies that had come into being by the fourth century. The age lies at a key juncture of the defining and integrating themes of continental history. It was one of several regional stages of world history with three great, long-term historical themes integrating Greater Eastern Africa into world history: increasing establishment of more fully agricultural ways of life in regions that before then had successfully maintained either low-complexity food-producing livelihoods or less labour-demanding gathering-and-hunting economies; the spread of iron technology; and, Commercial revolution (Ehret,1998.1).

European expeditions in Africa marked the beginning of imperialism and colonialism where once independent and vibrant Kingdoms began to decline. With their modern weapons, and guided by their greed and plundering intensions, the Europeans succeeded in not only ruining the formerly thriving African civilizations, but also in placing the continent on the road to social, economic and political ruins. The predominance of western civilization that is still witnessed today is not because of its superiority, but rather it is due to all kinds of factors involved, some linked to ability, others to circumstance or chance.

There are political, moral and intellectual implications of all forms of encounters with otherness (Williams, 1989; Noiriél, 1991; Brubaker, 1992; Calhoun, 1997; and Mann, 1999). Western modernity has constantly meant the abandoning of part of one self. Though it has sometimes been embraced with enthusiasm, it has never been adopted without certain bitterness, without a feeling of humiliation and defection; without a profound identity crisis (Maalouf, 1996:58-60). When European

civilization took the lead, African civilizations began to decline and became marginalized.

Through myth, Africans were not just reflecting on modernity, but they were actively involved in making it through actions and words. Various myths that are found across the continent should not mystify instead of clarifying people's experience of civilizations in contact and conflict. The discourse on the clash of civilizations shows that Africa has largely been excluded or ignored. Indeed, the regions that Samuel Huntington focused on did not include Africa. Indigenous communities in Africa had different unique and perhaps unexpected experiences with what Huntington termed as 'clash of civilizations'. Indigenous communities on the continent embraced dialogue of civilizations long before the concept had been propounded by Samuel Huntington and his disciples.

Our Orality, Our Heritage: Rereading Myth as Text

In order to demonstrate its considerable relevance and establish myth as a bridge linking antiquity and modernity, a fresh reading and re-writing of this orality becomes imperative. Read as a ritual of ideological recognition (Loius Althusser: 1973), orality is the thread that ties myth, modernity and civilization in African philosophy. Both myth and orality can be looked at as 'collective memory' of the African people. The importance of memory is borne by what Bartlett (1995) calls an effort after meaning, grounded in traces from the past, but an effort that actively shapes them in the present (Schacter, 1996). Myth and orality can be described as a process of unfolding and revelation, with much that still remains hidden and that can only be unravelled and understood with continued reading guided by clarification and explanation.

While a number of quite different strategies could be adopted to convey reading and understanding of a text (Valery, 1990), I have attempted to reread and interpret myth and orality as transient and historical discourses that are part of African history and philosophy. Although analysing myth as oral history poses many challenges, as an official document and repository of community knowledge, it is worthwhile because it yields precious experiences and insights into how Africans interpreted and understood the world around them. By engaging a variety of discourses, I have attempted to reread the texts with a view to unveiling, legitimizing

and validating meaning that defies structures of power and domination that have hitherto characterised their scholarship.

Myth and orality are not each set up externally to each other, but are in an intricate and connected relationship, and this internal relationship is what constitutes the definition of the two as ideological forms of African philosophy. Thus, my analysis is not simply a historical approach to the texts, but as the revolutionary understanding of the two forms of knowledge. This approach adopts an integrative ancient, contemporary and future history challenging ideological assumptions by arguing that myth and orality in Africa do not just passively reflect experience.

Adopting a socio-cultural analytical framework (Wertsch, 1991, 1998 & 2002; Vygotsky, 1978 & 1987; Luria, 1928 & 1979; Bakhtin, 1981 & 1986; Cole 1996; Asmolov, 1998) that claims that human action is inherently connected to the cultural, historical and institutional contexts in which it occurs (Wertsch, 2002: 18), my discussion understands myth in Africa as a mediated action in collective memory. Myth is a fusion of both memory and history that continues to reinvent African community traditions, linking the history of its ancestors to the undifferentiated time of heroes and origins. Myth is a cultural tool that afforded Africans to tell the stock of stories that existed in their socio-cultural contexts. Orality, in its dialectical variations, is the meditational means through which myth was created, held and transmitted.

Myth is a meta-metaphor with various levels and units having basic and contextual meanings which are extended and gradually developed and used to think and talk about experience. Metaphor is an important aspect of discourse in allowing users to reframe their perceptions, or see the world anew (Barrett and Cooperrider, 1990:222), by offering new ways of looking at existing situations (Crider & Cirillo, 1991), while simultaneously acting as a bridge from a familiar to a new state (Pondy, 1983). Metaphors can help to concretize vague and abstract ideas, can holistically convey a large amount of information, and can foster new ways of looking at things (Sackmann, 1989). Metaphors can be used to persuade, reason, evaluate, explain, theorize, and offer new conceptualizations of reality (Semino, 2008:22-32). This linguistic phenomenon of thinking about something in terms of something else not only contributes to rhetorical goals, but is a technique predicated on omission and incompleteness meant to produce responses that mirror a more general human response to existential condition of humankind (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980b; Lakoff & Turner, 1989; Lakoff, 1993).

Gordon (2008) identifies Africana philosophy as a species of Africana thought which involves theoretical questions raised by critical engagements with ideas in African cultures. In his view, before the invention of 'Africa', there existed in that modern space ancient civilizations which would be alien to the modern conceptualization of the continent. Ancient and traditional African intellectual activities existed long before Greek philosophy. Africans were critical thinkers in their use of indigenous knowledge. Myth in Africa should be acknowledged as a reflection about the interactions, reactions and actions of different communities on the continent. By interacting with other civilizations, Africans must have encountered what Gordon (2008:14) calls 'modern concerns such as race, racism, and colonialism seriously, exploring problems of identity and social transformation, of the self and the social world, of consciousness and inter-subjectivity, of the body and communicability, of ethics and politics, of freedom and bondage'.

Disguised within the tales of immortals, monsters, heroes and elements of nature consciousness that dominate mythology lies a deep and accurate assessment of the human psychology. Myth is important as it is filled with philosophic meaning and explanation of human life and of the human soul. Unfortunately, the true nature of myth has become obscured by the diverse interpretations it has been given over the centuries, with much of what was originally advanced scientific and psychological thinking degenerating into suspect magical practices. Myth carries a subconscious message that makes it arouse interest and respect in so many great minds over the centuries. In order to understand myth, it is necessary to look at the historical and cultural background (Hope, 1989).

Myth in Africa is exceedingly rich, complex, suggestive and often paradoxical in its formulations as it explores relationships between civilizations. It is a work of painstaking intellectualism and masterly ingenuity that reflects deeper workings of the African mind, insight and prophetic perception for dialogue of civilizations. It may sound ironical, ambiguous and paradoxical for myth to talk about a contemporary issue like clash of civilizations and the need for dialogue of civilizations. However, to grasp that other deeper meaning, attention has to be paid to details of articulation in an effort to arrive at the fullest possible understanding of myth. This approach reveals that although concerns with clash of civilizations and

the need for dialogue are more pronounced in contemporary society and culture, they are not a preserve of this era.

Myth in Africa is a great tale of the interaction of different human civilizations that demands a particular sort of reading that is intense and analytic, and which is informed by a wide knowledge of the history of African society. The primary ideological message of myth lies not in its explicit content, but in the attitude toward reception it demands. It is this 'attitude towards information' which forms the basis for a response to other information, not necessarily literary, in the text. Thus, inter-texts (Hutcheon,1988) and pre-texts (Howthorn, 2007) are important in reading and looking for the metaphorical meaning that is not immediately apparent in myth by filling in gaps left without comprehensive facts so as to make the misty meaning visible.

By Way of Conclusion: Beyond Simple Mythology in Africa

This paper has attempted to critically examine the tangled and often contradictory relationship between three notoriously complex ideological forms of myth, modernity and orality, and how the three impact on development in Africa. It has been argued that myth and orality in Africa are cultural spaces full of recollections and memories that the community occupies. They are an embodiment of the community's lived experiences and therefore their ideological worldview. They express many types of relations the African community had and serve as testimony through which the community reaffirms the values and traditions of the natural space that it occupies. These indigenous knowledge systems have been at the centre of the lives and livelihoods of Africans.

It has been established that myth and orality are saturated with meaning and laden with history. They interrogate and comment on the important theme of African responses to modernity, viewed in broad philosophical and social terms. However, despite being host to important human civilizations, Africa has been neglected in standard studies of world civilizations for decades. Instead, the trend in most historiography only signifies Africa in terms of a mythical past. But through an analysis of the continent's orality, it can be demonstrated that Africans did not exist on the margins of history of civilizations. Myth belongs to traditional intellectualism in Africa whose conceptualization of modernity deserves more engaging interrogation than mere casual mention.

The paper has demonstrated that there is no one accepted form of modernity; there are alternatives to the narrative and its chronology. African encounter and the challenge of modernity is not the same as the Western one. Myth and orality are a testimony of the existence and emergence of layers of modern ideas and intellectual discourses among the African people. Their interactions and influences are part of the global narrative necessary to explicate the discourse on modernity. Africa did not just 'become' in a mystifying vacuum; it evolved through a complex socio-cultural, economic and political context that deserves analytical understanding. Cultures interacted and even conflicted, but that was nothing near the apocalyptic clash proportions of Huntington and Lewis.

Conventional and extremely dogmatic narratives of modernity that differentiate the universe between 'West' and 'rest' or 'modernity' and 'tradition/myth' or 'Us' versus 'Them' set the stage for clashes of civilizations which are proliferating in the contest between champions of 'authenticity' and defenders of 'universalism' (Mirsepassi, 2000:11) with the former as resisters of domination and the latter as promoters of prosperity. If modernity is to be taken to be the search for meaning, then the world as a text has no one mode of reading, understanding and explaining.

At a time of unprecedented turmoil in world history, the myth about 'us' versus 'them' has to be debunked. It is perhaps time for the turn for a 'significant other', an-other, in our relationships. The current tensions understood as imminent clash of civilizations are rooted in the historical trajectory of how modernity came into being, its causes and courses, its purpose, its ways and its ends. The clash of civilizations is much as a result of failures of modernity than its consequence. There is need for an authenticity discourse that represents a cultural attempt to reconfigure modernity and make it more inclusive and diverse, and less homogenizing and totalizing (Mirsepassi, 2000:97). This discourse needs to be built around the critique of the Western conception of modernity and its discontents. The dominant narrative of modernity needs to be re-theorized in light of increased awareness of the 'Other' (Said, 1994). There should be no undesirable 'other'.

In the contemporary world, other civilizations are very apparent and significant. The plurality of their voices and visions is what is required of the dialogue of civilizations. Instead of universalist, intellectually naïve and simplistic worldview, hybrid versions of modernity should inform the dialogue. By opening

up to new possibilities, modernity will be welcoming diversity, tolerance, inclusivity and openness to a dialogue of ideas. Modernity must open its spirit to a limitless diversity of voices, and make this the focus of its self-understanding (Mirsepassi, 2000:35). It is this willingness to listen that will lead into dialogue, otherwise it will continue clashing with other civilizations. Just like Hegelian idealistic paradigm, Western narrative of modernity is not a harmless intellectual idea; it is this kind of discourse that threatens the 'Other' into reactions and actions that are so often seen as anti-Western. Modernization should not be universalization and homogenization. There is no one kind of modernity in the world and no single narrow path leads to it.

The complex dialectics of modernity need to be understood beyond the narrow Eurocentric focus and imperial narrative. Homogenizing society and dehistoricizing African cultures and civilizations is not the way to go. A dialogue of civilizations should be an attempt to accommodate other modernities within a sense of authentic identities, cultures and historical experiences. Although the possibility of a reflexive and reconfigured modernity may be hard to absorb, it calls for an attitude of pragmatic adaptation rather than one of rigid adherence to immutable doctrine. For modernity to survive, it must recognize its own inner capacity for flexibility and creativity, and transcend the totalizing narrative in whose grip it has been enchained in theory if not always in practice. The existing narrative of modernity is a European invention rooted in Western culture, and is intellectually too rigid and historically too hostile to non-Western cultures and histories which have been looked down upon (Mirsepassi, 2000).

Modernity should not be limited to the West and the contemporary alone. It is to be found in all places and at different times. It is a spatial and temporal socio-historical and literary narrative. It helps us engage in a dialogue with history. It can be treated as the site of the struggle of something new in the past and the present. The assertion that the West is shifting to a postmodern terrain need not presuppose the end of modernity. Modernity is not abruptly coming to an end. In most parts of the globe, modernization remains the chief social goal. Modernity has not exhausted itself; it may be in crisis but it continues to shape the contours of our lives (Seidman, 1994:1-2).

There is no denying that modernity is the defining factor in shaping issues and conditions in the world since antiquity. While clash of civilizations is familiar to most Western intellectuals, dialogue of civilizations has always been the norm in

many unfamiliar communities in Africa. Any attempt to link myth to modernity may seem, at first blush, a perverse enterprise. After all, definitions of modernity tend to cast it as nearly the antithesis of modernism.

While acceptance of the challenge to development in Africa is increasing, there remains lack of clarity over how exactly the problem should be addressed. What is not in doubt is the fact that understanding and tackling the development question requires insights from various natural and social scientific disciplines drawing on diverse data sources and how both can synergize each other. It is because of this fact that this paper argues for a more inclusive approach that acknowledges the value of diverse perspectives in effectively responding to the challenge. The paper shows that myth in Africa contains a complex idea of dialogue of civilizations, although this meaning and significance is not in any sense obvious. While modern readers have been acutely conscious of the myth in Africa, they have too often missed its cues on the dialogue of civilizations. Yet, myth as orality explores, recreates and seeks meanings in human experience, contemplating and celebrating its diversity, complexity and strangeness of interaction.

Recent years have witnessed a remarkable renaissance in the study of orality in Africa in general and African myth in particular. While this rejuvenation of interest is welcome, this paper has vouched for the imperative need to engage and reread these forms of knowledge which have until now been marginalized in modernist studies. Myth and orality should not be treated simply as provincial footnotes to African literature.

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