

GLOBALISATION: A NOTE OF THE MYTHS OF OUR TIME

Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (PhD)

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On Myth

The myth of globalisation, like any other myth, is a collection of stories or ideas we use to understand and interpret our life worlds. Myths speak of social preferences, their deformation and endless re-formation. Myths are not necessarily true or untrue, rather they suit their purpose as tools within a specific hermeneutic trajectory. They provide their adepts with explanatory resources to make sense of their existence and moral universe and to fulfil their desires. One of the biggest myths about myths is that they refer to an immemorial past and have little role in shaping the "enlightened present". In fact, in the contemporary world, myths occupy a space between fiction and fact, culture and politics. For instance, myths provide the means to persuade others that ones story or a particular worldview should take precedence over all the rest (i.e. news agenda-setting such as the power of the Jewish Lobby in North America to determine how the Israeli-Palestine issue is represented and discussed.). Myths express the relations of power woven within the fabric of the human world, as well as the tears that occur within this fabric. Through myths, mundane and ordinary life is transformed into the sacred, as the sacred is transformed into the banal. Of course, in politics, myth is not referred to as such, it is re-named as "spin". In North America and the UK, the media-driven nature of politics is such that so-called "spin-doctors" such as the British Labour PR man, Alistair

Campbell are amongst the most powerful figures in political life, creating new myths on a daily basis to further the interests of those they represent.

Myths are therefore as much about the present as they are about the past. Through repeated re-telling, the imagination of each storyteller or spin-doctor adds its own distinctive inflection, each tale becoming a history of its perpetual formation and deformation as each teller impregnates the story with their own interpretation. The centrality of language in myths and its mis/use often leads to a plurality of myths, which embraces time and context. In this way, myths get divided from themselves, and structures of contestation arise. We begin to see that what was once perceived as the truth is ideologically motivated, and belongs to a specific culture and mode of perception. Just as, over 50 years ago, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1944) exposed the myth of the absence of myth that lies at the heart of modernity in their classic book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, so too, a mythic approach to globalisation will allow us space to breathe against the insistence of its claims to truth, and to stand still amidst all the spin. Here I will only focus on three aspects of the many myths of globalisation.

Three Myths of Globalisation

A) The Myth of Rupture

Although its definition and periodisation have taken many forms, for postmodernists and globalists alike, one theme that recurs over and over again is the declaration of a radical break or rupture between modernity and postmodernity. The irony here of course is that modernity also saw itself as a radical break – the processes of industrialisation and the machine age supplanting and transforming all previous modes of production. In this sense, postmodernity should be viewed as the bastard spawn of modernity –

a disruptive child that disowns its parents in the act of repeating their actions. The “shock of the new” – the aesthetics of the tabula rasa, the sanitised white wall of the art gallery, the metaphysical denial of history, the fetishisation of technology – all these supposedly postmodern themes actually emerged within modernism. We have simply forgotten our history, which is of course what good postmodernists *should* do. In contrast, for theorists like Anthony Giddens (1990), Roland Robertson (1992) and others, globalisation does not mark a radical break from modernity, rather, it is directly connected to the very project of modernity - industrialisation, expansionism and material accumulation – creating what Giddens has termed “high modernity”. High modernity is characterised by intensified modes of communication, travel, material accumulation and the exchange of information, goods and capital. People in diverse location are connected and made more familiar to each other through the powerful forces of globalised brands, images, styles and signs.

The question the myth of the break raises, whether in modernist or postmodernist terms, is whether discontinuity *ever* took precedence over continuity. To those who proclaim the event of the postmodern rupture, we must ask: whose rupture? How a society identifies and expresses itself across time involves both continuity *and* discontinuity. It is hard to imagine a world in which both these factors are not always in play. Even in the face of the strongest discontinuities (the Middle Passage, the industrialisation, the digital (“evolution”), is it not our experience that remembrance, whether conscious or part of a collective unconscious, remains and allows for survival and the creation of new cultural artefacts? In this light, we need to ask why some theorists feel the need to stress breaks and fissures over continuities, and assess the dangers that lurk within this move.

I suggest that a masculine death-drive haunts and motivates postmodern and globalisation theory – a denial of the past, of the maternal and the semiotic, in favour of stamping a new symbolic (and patriarchal) code onto the world. Here, postmodern and globalisation theory are part of a wider current in Western philosophy that privilege death over birth, a kind of self-willed orphanage. Examples abound in European philosophy of this kind of mechanism: Martin Heidegger’s declaration of “being towards death”, Roland Barthes’ “death of the author”, Sigmund Freud’s privileging of thanatos (death-drive) over the pleasure principle and his account of Oedipal patricide. According to Barbara Adams, the privilege accorded to death in Western philosophical history is part of ‘the encoded fear of non-existence, of nothingness after the end, and the desire for mastery and control over the inevitable’ (Barbara Adams 2002: 14). Feminist philosophers from Luce Irigaray (1974) to Christine Battersby (1998) have attempted to shift the focus away from the discourse of death to that of birth. For these feminists, to theorise existence and human civilisation in terms of birth is to draw attention to our vulnerabilities and interconnectedness to other human beings, to the non-human and the invisible world of our existence – the past that haunts every space. Thinking from the standpoint of birth privileges the important work involved in the re/production and continuity of human life, culture and civilisation – the connections with the past rather than the disconnections. To speak about natality is to be reminded that we come from somewhere, that a history and collective memory surrounds and engulfs us, whether we embrace this or not. Following Battersby, to speak of natality is not to argue that all women ‘either can or ‘should’ give birth’ (1998:7). Rather, focusing on birth allows us to rethink our identity and culture as that which is linked to a past without being imprisoned by it, becoming the overture for freedom, justice and new modes of being and relating in the world. In contrast, any

discourse that relies on a total break with the past in order to assert or project itself onto the world stage is not only solipsistic but is doomed to fail. Such a discourse cannot accept or deal with impermanence, uncertainty, chaotic flows and lack of mastery. Rather than envisaging continuity through the mystery of birth and reproduction, it seeks to dominate, create a fissure between the self and the other. In this way, theorists of the postmodern break and the new globalised world can avoid to deny their connection to the body of the Other, the reserve armies whose sweat and blood are used to create the illusion that we have moved entirely away from the age of industrial production to one characterised by an information-driven service-led culture which has no place for the dirty world of manufacturing. Of course, as we are too aware, these reserve armies are not only all the excluded and under-represented females of the world, they are also nations and cultures. Within the Western imaginary, most non-Western cultures and nations are either feminised or considered feminine and childlike; shrouded in a sub-conscious colonial imaginary that refuses to budge. Africa remains the “dark continent”, apparently temporally and geographically non-aligned to modernity, let alone postmodernity.

A final aspect of the myth of the rupture is that it allows theorists to satisfy the vanity that appears to delude many – that the present is superior to and somehow more special than the past. We should be suspicious of any claims that our “postmodern” period is a unique configuration with a more developed moral consciousness. The biggest danger here is that we are fooled into thinking that the crimes of the past are over – that, for instance, “post-colonialism” implies that colonialism is over, that slavery is over, or that genocide is over, that exploitation of the workers is over, that racism, sexism and heterosexism are over. To assume a hiatus with the past is to

return to the horrors and violence of history as if they are locked away in a glass case in a museum, without any awareness of their resonance, repetition and difference within and from the present. We should not be fooled into thinking that the “wretched of the earth” are now at rest, six feet under. The contemporary equivalent of the factory workers living in the urban slums of the Dickensian age are the wage slaves who work in call centres scattered on the outskirts of major Western cities, under constant surveillance and temporary contracts. Just as the nineteenth century was built upon the flows of forced labour, minerals, cotton and colonial expansion, the twenty-first century is increasingly being built on the criminal trafficking in humans to work in cocoa plantations in Africa, or as sex workers or in non-unionised activities such as construction and agriculture in the West, feeding the greed of Western and third world elite consumers.

B) The Myth of Technological Transformation

Technology is regarded as key engine of contemporary globalisation, accelerating the speed and quality of exchange, interaction, mobility and connection. Technology also fosters the ability of nations to attack and destroy each other at the push of a button. Champions of globalisation insist that global markets are driven by an international, knowledge based, post-industrial service economy (Bell 1973, Castells 1996-1997). They try to persuade us that technology will radically change the way we produce and how we relate across borders and ultimately, make the world a better place: with instant communication across spaces, times and cultures, facilitating participatory democracy; producing economic and political transparencies through networked communication systems and the creation of sophisticated bio-technologies that will feed and cure the world of its ailments. Cyber-gurus say we live increasingly in an informatically dense and networked society whose winners are the semiotic workers who are able to

decode the information flows to the masses and turn them into capital. With the internet, we are told that for the first time the flat, one-dimensional text can be turned into multiple and hyper text which can be read and decoded on multiple levels. However, any student of history will tell us, hyper-textuality is hardly new. The Jewish Midrash, the rabbinical interpretation and re-interpretation of the Old Testament writings, is just one of the more famous examples of hypertextuality. The Yoruba Odu Ifa is another.

Technologies of information, communication and warfare are therefore not new. They have 'been an instrument of human power and control – religious as well as economic and political' (Davis 1998:81) for millennia. Each epoch produces different platforms and different technologies of communication, information, transportation, weaponry, and prosthetic. The advent of each new technology is invested with a unique aura that proclaims their radical break from the past, rather than their differential continuity. Technology is seen as the driving force of history and the cause of cultural and historical changes and events. For example, the invention of the printing press is presented as the cause of the Reformation because it brought the Bible into wider circulation; the arrival of the contraceptive pill allegedly contributed to the sexual revolution of the sixties; the invention of navigational equipment in the 15th Century enabled early Europeans to cross the Atlantic and opened up the entire world to colonial enterprise and brutality (Marx and Smith 1994). Attributing major social changes to technological innovations has the effect of reducing what is in fact a confluence of complex factors to a singular causality. Of course, the correlation between innovations in technology and socio-cultural changes are undeniable and therefore cannot be discounted. However, we must also understand that technology is not just about gadgetry or a prosthetic

extension of the human body, it also speaks to the perceptual and cognitive landscape of each epoch. For Martin Heidegger, the word “technology” derive from the Greek root of the word *techne*, which itself refers to “a way of seeing”. That is, more than Bakelite phones or silicon chips, technology alters the way we perceive our world and therefore also changes the language and metaphors we use to articulate perception and human experience. For example, the theoretical metaphors popular in the present - “viral”, “memes” and “rhizome” etc. – all express the interconnected modes of perception that issue out of digital technology.

When new technologies emerge and embed themselves within society, they typically follow three stages of development. First, there are the early adopters or the technological pioneers who prophesy that a new future is upon us, taking on the guise of what the historian Leo Marx has called the “technological sublime”. According to Marx, the ‘awesome and frightening grandeur that the Romantic poets associated with nature became attached to new technologies’ (ibid: 59). Western science fiction, from *Star Trek* to *Minority Report* repeats the idea that in the near future, we will all be wearing completely different clothing and live in a world absolutely ordered, regulated and transformed by technology. Second, the technology is adopted by the masses, creating an environment of experimentation, confusion and excitement. Finally, the technology becomes banal, an unnoticed part of everyday life and loses its messianic edge. At this stage, technological engineers and venture capitalists begin working to try and generate a new technology that will replace the previous one and the circle of technological sublimity continues.

In *Techgnosis*, Erik Davis points out that these stages are not new. He reminds us that prior to the mobile phone and the internet, myths quickly

formed around the invention of naval technologies, the printing press, the railroad and the telegraph – new religions, ideas of the imminent future and so on. It is often the case that when we are in the midst of a technological boom there is a tendency to exaggerate its importance, to imbue it with a kind of mysticism and think that that moment is unique and remarkable. The tendency to see each new technological moment as uniquely portentous is part of a Euro-American conceptualisation of human identity as autonomous, self-made, self-contained and unconnected to the organic, to other worlds, other times and other places. In its specifically American expression, the myth of the technological sublime links with the myth of the pioneering spirit, conquering outer space and everything in its way. Again, like the myth of the rupture, this myth of the transformative power of technology cannot accept that each new innovation is part of a wider cultural and historical context of repetition and difference.

Exposing this mythic dimension of technology is not to deny that new technologies do have some transformative power. We have seen how anti-capitalists movements such as People's Global Action have used the internet to relay their messages, how mobile phones and "phone trees" are used on street demonstrations, how diasporic communities exchange information and ideas back and forth to their countries of origin, the opportunities opened up for small business and individual entrepreneurs etc. We have also seen how ICTs have contributed to the democratisation, production and dissemination of information, ideas, values and opportunities. As Walter Wriston points out, 'the information age is rapidly giving power to the people in parts of the world and in a way that only a few years ago seemed impossible' (1992: 170-1). The point under critique here is the idea that technology is *inherently* transformative and will be of equal benefit to all agents and change the quality of our lives. Evidence from Euro-American

society suggests exactly the contrary. Just as building new roads tends to lead to new traffic jams, so too as computers and information networks have increased in power, the pressure and stress of the workplace has increased. Many people working in offices in the West spend most of their working day trying and failing to reduce the size of their email inbox whilst the real work mounts up. The pressure to multitask in order to handle all the data flows increases. Far from being intrinsically transformative, advancement in ICTs is increasingly used to legitimate and reinforce market capitalism and new variants of wage slavery. Multinational corporations can organise and co-ordinate their activities around the globe more effectively and efficiently from an headquarters in one (generally a western) location. Capital can be moved with the click of the mouse, as knowledge and information become part of the corporation's general capital assets. Critics of globalisation have suggested that far from being liberating, advancement in ICTs have reaffirmed and consolidated existing international division of labour. This has resulted in the shift of many manufacturing unit to countries in the South, while Northern countries consume, accumulate more wealth and distance themselves from the murky world of production.

From the use of IBM's data processing machine by Germany's third Reich to gather, identify and later slaughter millions of Jews, homosexuals, Gypsies and others deemed undesirable, to the 2002 Homeland Security Bill which empowered American police to tap into citizens' emails and force Internet Providers to furnish government with details about their customers including emails without warrant (Schwendinger & Schwendinger 2003), ICTs have always been used as tools of surveillance, repression and control. Some theorists have also began to argue that new technologies often become instruments of alienation - where we become alienated from our own bodies, other people, nature, tradition and lived communities

(Borgmann 1999, Virilio 1998) as we are increasingly more interested in what is happening on the world wide web than we are interested in interacting with our neighbours. Throughout history new technologies have been liberating and transformative, as much as they have been used as instrument of oppression, domination and propaganda. Instead of believing the hype and spin that technology is inherently liberating or repressive, it is important for us to explore and understand its real effects on daily lived experience and modes of relating across generation, geography and gender.

C) The Myth of the erosion of local culture

One of the most popular myths of globalisation is the idea that Euro-American cultural imperialism is increasingly homogenising the experience of the rest of the world and reducing complex cultural experiences into a singular unified process. Theodore Levitt has written that ‘everywhere, everything gets more and more like everything else as the world’s preference structure is relentlessly homogenised’ (1983: 93). Others, such as Tomlison (1995) have argued that globalisation has brought about more synchronicity, homogenisation and unification in how we experience our life-world. This has come about through the universalisation and spread of a specific local cultural framework beyond its border of origin. We can see this in the spread of Western European industrial capitalism, nationalism, bucreatisation, the Gregorian calendar and so on. Today, the universalisation of one local experience is being transmitted and orchestrated through powerful transnational conglomerates: CNN, BBC, MTV, Hollywood film industry etc. Although these corporations appear to have no loyalty to any particular country and are therefore value neutral, in fact their service offering reflects the cultural norms of their founding country of origin. For example, the BBC World Service or CNN news reflects events from a British or American lens; MTV exports youthful,

whimsical, irreverent, American cultural values to the rest of the world (Tehrani & Tehrani 1997). It is the global predominance of these local cultures on the world stage that has led people to speak about the “McDonaldisation effect”. This means that an American consumer can travel wherever she wants and not feel too far from home. She can eat burger and drink coke-cola and remain semi-immersed within the same branded environment (Amex, Nike, Tommy Hilfiger, iMacs, Mickey Mouse etc.). The cacophonous melody of a third world city is replaced with the formulaic anthem of Madonna, Michael Jackson, Puff Daddy and Eminem. Whilst homogenisation is undoubtedly taking place and is a marked feature of globalisation, it would be inaccurate to reduce contemporary cultural experience to pure assimilation, a sort of hypodermic needle that merely injects its fluid onto a passive patient. In fact, the adoption of cultural artefacts is far more complex, involving a complex appropriation, deconstruction and reconstruction of the array of goods, signs and images circumventing the globe. The notion of a homogenising, unreflective global culture is in fact a fiction, an abstracted concept that is essentially created and driven by the profit-seeking mass media. A global culture doesn’t exist outside of the national and local cultures that gives rise to it and is the source of its meaning and affectation. The local is however more ontologically real than the global, a concrete phenomenon that ties incarnated communities to a long tradition of cultural memories, symbols, events, mythologies and ways of seeing in the world. What has come to constitute global culture is in fact a thousand syntheses of different forms of locality. However, some cultural groupings, for example the Americans, the English, the French, tries to project and impose their own particular local experience onto the world stage and make it a universal, trans-cultural, de-territorialized and disembedded phenomenon.

The idea of global culture should therefore be understood as a set of culturally specific signifiers that abstract themselves from their concrete origin as they set off on their journey of cultural imperialism and parasitic capitalism. For example, in the middle of nowhere, in rural Africa, we find American brands – Coca-Cola, Nike, Adidas, Tommy, Disney etc. This “global brands” are in reality a microcosm of American culture set adrift from its origins. Many cultures and society within and outside America engages and continues to appropriate for their own use this specifically American cultural taste and experience. Yet, despite the ubiquity of American artefacts, rarely does America engage or receive its outsiders, even within America itself. The discourse of the “melting pot” ended decades ago. In fact it is yet another myth. Given their unmatched access to information, most Americans remain unaware of what lies beyond the boundaries of North America or indeed within the richly layered difference of American society. It is within the context of American insularity about how they are perceived around the globe that American citizens could have been so shocked and outraged by the horrors of September 11th, whilst the rest of the world understood the motivations behind such atrocities, even as they sympathised with the victims. Saturated with and deluded by their sense of global superiority (the home of the “World Series” in baseball, when only a few countries in the world actually play baseball professionally), Westerners, Americans in particular have little understanding of how supremely local their branded world is nor pay attention to the localities of the world and how they resist and creatively re-imagine their cultural exports.

From the viewpoint of the local, we need therefore to understand in much more detail local desires and local frames of reference. These often involve completely different patterns of interpretation and understanding to the

abstract signifiers of cultural imperialism and invasion. Whilst Karl Marx was right to say that capitalism makes a fetish of the commodity, we need to also recognise that there are *different* forms of fetish in different locations. It is precisely this power of the local to rework and make complex global phenomenon that we need to examine. We need to look, for example, not at the importation of American Hip-Hop onto local cultures, but at how Hip-Hop has been appropriated (in South Africa and West Africa for example). We need to look at how imported cultural signifiers get refigured as they enter different systems of fetishisation.¹ Jonathan Friedman's (1994) important account of the "La Sape" – the cult of haute couture – among poor young men in the Congo and Zaire is an example of how a specific local fetishism gets woven into another local fetish system to produce an altogether different system. Through an investment in the world of European high fashion, the Sapeurs do not uncritically absorb European fashion; their participation in this fashion system is used to accumulate spiritual and social power (life-force) which feeds into their own existing cultural framework. The relationship between the local and global cannot therefore easily be reduced to homogenisation and passivity. Rather, it is one of reciprocity, appropriation, misappropriation, creating a positive (and sometimes) negative feed-back loop of cultural vibrancy and regeneration.

What gets lost in the globalisation/homogenisation thesis is therefore something quite simple: the power of place. Places are not simply physical locations, they are gatherings of collective embodied lived experience that give meaning to and shape our linguistic, moral, perceptual and affective universe. Global flows and relations *do* have the ability to alter these

¹ Here, we again challenge the thesis of the "postmodern break" – we might well be reminded in our studies of global hip-hop how jazz found different forms across the world in the mid-twentieth century (for example, the jazz of South Africa and the influences of jazz in West Africa).

configurations through the instrumentalisation of parasitic market forces. However, every place on the map is already reconfiguring global configurations for its own purpose. The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins has argued that most of us use foreign objects and ideas to enable us to become ourselves, they are a reminder of who we are, where we are coming from, and where we want to go and are going. People appropriate other local discourses such as American McWorlds – iMacs, Sneakers, Coke Cola - for their own ends, to make it meaningful to their own situation. On the Japanese island of South Ryukyu Coke-Cola bottles are used in religious ceremonies as fertility symbols to represent the torso of a pregnant woman that in former times was depicted in clay. In Cuba, Adidas stickers sit comfortably with the Yoruba shango axe on motorcycle taxis; some Russians believe that Coke-Cola is a tonic against the wrinkles of age. Similarly, Western fashion stylists appropriate non-western clothing in order to create an expensive, luxurious, ethnic chic. People therefore not only appropriate global cultural flows, often these appropriations are the impetus for the assertion, promotion and support of their own local cultures. For example, although some Africans are able to consume an American perspective on the world through MTV or CNN, their local cultures are intuitively moving towards an unconscious but collective Africanism. For instance, the homegrown video industry in Nigeria is big business; the interest in the Cameroonian music form Makossa among Nigerian youths shows the continuity of cultural exchange; hip South African music of Kwaito which blends English, Zulu, Seotho and Iscamtho slangs with South African “bubble gum” disco, Hip-Hop, Ragga and a heavy dose house music. Of course, there is a sometimes subtle and sometimes not so subtle Western² influence in all of this in terms of the goods that is exchanged, the

² While invoking the notion of western, we need to be careful that we don't homogenise the west itself. The west is an amalgamation of different cultures with a history of intermixture and exchange.

music that is produced, the content, form and so on. However, in line with Sahlins' point, people become more aware of who they are through their encounters with other cultures. They understand that although they are part of a wider network of cultures, their place in the world is also a site of difference.

When we start looking at everyday lived experience and practices, we see how people appropriate and rework different local and foreign cultures for their own ends. For example, through the study of lived practices and the active taking-up of cultural goods, we can engage in meaningful discussion about how Africans resist the forces of domination and attempt to deal with the seduction of death and hopelessness that wrecks havoc on their lives. Focusing on the dynamic interaction between the local and the global moves us away from thinking that there is an authentic, timeless and pristine African culture or tradition that is waiting to be discovered or recovered. Importantly, we can move away from assuming that there is an overarching, all-powerful, all-important external culture imposing its will on its elsewhere. Instead, we realise that the terrain of the local in Africa is already absorbed into a localised global system of signs and significations that transcends any particular group. Africans already consume Euro-American and other cultural signifiers (glass beads, Bollywood films, BMW, Dutch Wax, Swiss lace etc.). In turn, once Africanised, various cultural signifiers find themselves spun out onto the global system of signs, to be re-appropriated elsewhere. A recent advertising campaign by the Italian fashion-house Diesel is typical in this respect: using images of westernised African style from the 1960s to sell its latest line of clothes. Similarly, Europe already consumes goods and signs produced elsewhere: English or Yorkshire tea when they are not produced in England, Seville oranges as a staple of the English New Year etc. Far from suggesting uniformity and

imperialism, the translation of local goods into another context indicates that the world is intricately woven into the fabric of a wider network of cultural exchanges that predates the contemporary period.

In a world where the forces of heterogenisation are equal and opposing to the forces of homogenisation, there is no “world picture” which can summarise the state of world culture. There is no grand narrative available (homogenisation or heterogenisation, localisation or globalisation etc). It is our responsibility, as critical thinkers, to follow this “end of big theory” to its logical conclusion and be aware of the possibility that each location we study is unique and in the process of refiguring its relation to what lies beyond it.

Local Myths: Ojuelegba

One such unique location is Ojuelegba in Lagos. An examination of what takes place everyday at Ojuelegba, followed by a brief exploration of Eshu Elegba – the messenger god – will allow us to understand at a much richer level the existential realities of African culture and how they relate to globalisation.

Ojuelegba is one of the busiest intersections in Lagos. People gather in dense crowds, as cars and buses packed with people clog the roads with fumes and noise. Hawkers of all ages sell (in)pure water or nuts or a thousand other things as Fuji music pulses out its rhythmic intensity, people go about their business, on their way to church or the mosque to their place of work or to the market. Ojuelegba is 360 degrees of chaos: sometimes it seems all the languages of West Africa criss-cross each other in this place in constant exchange. Exchanges take place fast and furious on the material

level too: naira are converted to dollars, pounds and francs and back again. People wear “traditional” clothes (made in Africa, Holland and designed by Dutch designers), or they wear Nike, Adidas (real or fake) or they wear the latest adornment styles from Brooklyn, London or Ovation magazine, all inflected with urban sophistication and narration. Here, like elsewhere in Nigeria, spirituality is part of the commodity, each item laden with fetish-value to be hawked and exchanged.

It is through a microcosmic analysis of the interactions and exchanges that take place every minute in places such as Ojuelegba that we can begin to understand the real textures of globalisation and their relation to African localities. At Ojuelegba we see forces of flow – information, goods, religious ideas, people, signs and capital - being appropriated and expropriated. Above all, we see complex movement and production – the production of creative survival strategies across time and space. We do *not* see homogenisation, neither do we see pure heterogeneity; rather, we see criss-crossing patterns of each. We do not see pure appropriation, but neither do we see pure expropriation; rather, we see an ambiguous fluxual movement between the two extremes. We cannot look at the activities that take places at Ojuelegba and create one overarching story (or myth) that captures the whole. What we see is people embracing complexity, chaotic disturbance, ambiguity, betrayal and loyalty, and making sense of it.

Ojuelegba takes its name from one of the most important orishas (gods) in the Yoruba pantheons, Esu Elegbara or Elegba (the indomitable one). Ojuelegba was where the original consecrated site for the shrine of Eshu, the supreme deity of the Awori people, the original settlers of Lagos Island. Esu Elegba is the orisha of the crossroads, of liminality and mediation. Similar to Hermes, the Greek god of interpretation, Esu is the linguist, who

translates and transmits divine messages between and among mortals and the celestial beings. He is the god of contradiction and ambiguity, constantly inviting and forcing us to reflect on our lives and not to get too blinded by habit. He loathes complacency. Any sign of complacency is awoken with chaos and confusion. For this reason, he is sometimes referred to as the trickster god. This is not because he is spiteful or the devil, as the Christian translation of his character would have us believe. Rather, he wants us to always be alert, vigilant and questioning. It is no surprise then that one of the most intense and diverse parts of Lagos lends its name to the spirit of this interstitial figure.

Eshu, both as myth and as urban incarnation, is a vital example of how African cultures adapt to and engage with the globalising forces of our times. As a mythic structure and pattern, an appreciation of the mercurial spirit of Eshu enables Africans to engage with contradictory complexity, with semiotic juxtapositions that make no sense (from London to Lagos, McDonalds to Mr Biggs, dollar to naira) without losing rationality. Eshu offers safe passage through the storms of the interstitial. A god that sits *between* rationalities – Eshu haunts the crossroads of rationalities: the rationality of the spirit world and the rationalities that form and unform in the material world. Eshu is one mythic pattern to whom we ought to turn, when the non-linear complexity of the globe threatens to engulf us with its contradictory flows.

Myth, in the guise of the myth of Eshu and other resources of the spirit, allows Africans to re-imagine their daily life. Myths are the building blocks of creative rationality (as the myth of science is the building block of scientific rationality in the West). Globalisation, as an ambiguous and

complex mix of homogenising and heterogenising forces, requires that we learn to deal more effectively with complex systems. We find, in figures such as Eshu, that there are mythic structures already in place which enable Africans to make sense of their world, and to create and divert existing stories to embrace what is around the corner.

Here, we need to challenge what we may call the “African shame syndrome”, as if talking about myth occupies the same level as grass skirts. All philosophy and thought is grounded in myth and is at base a form of ethno-philosophy (in the West as much as in Africa), just as all science is grounded in one contingent form of rationality (amongst many others). As I have argued, all human expression and intellectual structures begin with myths – foundational narratives that structure everything that follows. On a cultural level, myths allow us to explain how culture is both about stasis and flows, developed out of dialogic exchange, chaotic interactions and uncertainty. In this way, we can construct a theory of culture that mirrors the antiphonal form structuring many African musical traditions. An antiphonal understanding of culture means that one culture calls and presents its ideas and another responds, by inflecting the beat with its own flavour, reworking it and returning it back. So the circle continues. We might call this the culture of the return beat, born of the chaotic noise of Eshu. Culture, thought in musical or mythic terms, enables us to see how every culture (local or global) is a gift bequeathed by the ancestral body for us to reshape and refigure in order to speak about the beauties and horrors of our time (Ben Okri). Rather than culture or globalisation characterised in terms of rupture or disjuncture, we should therefore use mythologies as a way of reading and re-reading our contemporary situation. To elite groups, such as academics or policy-makers, myth can be easily denigrated as primitive, to be left behind in favour of “rigorous scientific method.”

Instead of adhering to the desire for a pure social science, I suggest we need to examine myths and their relation to the imaginative practices of daily life in critical terms. It is then that we are able to leave our ivory towers and immerse ourselves within the contradictory textures of existential reality.

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