

**Visceral Development: Toward A Genealogy of Habit, Gender and
Transformation**

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The assumption that the prosperity, growth, stability, equity and freedom experienced in the industrialised West can be replicated unproblematically in African societies is now regarded as untenable and paternalistic. Far from alleviating suffering and social inequalities in Africa, Western developmentalism has exacerbated living conditions and overturned ancient life-worlds. Economic and gender inequalities have not decreased but continue to widen; the gulf between the rich and the poor has become ever more entrenched; the abuse and destruction of the environment continues unabated; political censorship continues to be the norm in many African countries; local knowledge and age-old traditions are not a matter of pride but of shame. Many development efforts in Africa have largely taken place in the absence of any sustained or critical understanding of the intricate relationship between local culture and proposed intervention strategies. Instead, people's lived experiences are compartmentalised in terms of 'economy', 'health', 'education', 'leisure' etc. (Wendy Harcourt 1997) and measured in monetary terms or by their proximity to western social structures and technologies.

And yet. Cultural context has a profound influence on development because it is an integral part of who we are, shaping our decisions, behaviour and responses to the world. Until recently however, there was no place for “culture” within development discourse. Culture was

largely introduced to explain when things had not gone according to plan. For example, African culture and traditions have been seen as the problem, instead of pointing to the promotion of inappropriate external values and ways of being. African cultural practices are indicted as distorting and arresting the plans that will enable Africans to benefit from the material comforts and social equity that is enjoyed by people in the West. And most vociferously, African culture has been accused of oppressing women through a variety of traditional practices. Even writers such as Gita Sen and Caren Grown (1987), who are normally critical of the economicism of development, tend to hone in on culture as the problem, suggesting that African culture places restrictions on women's activity and holds them back (Sen & Grown 1987). Culture is for many development theorists, simply that which gets in the way of development. Insofar as African culture is seen as the obstacle to development, the economic ideology underpinning developmentalism remains unchallenged and, by implication, Western social development is assumed to have occurred outside of any relationship to culture and tradition. In this paper, I shall contest this assumption and propose instead that *culture is the form of rationality in all societies*. Modernity itself is a cultural form based on a Western disembodied scientific rationality and religious monotheism.

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At the close of the last century, development theory began to move away from the paradigm of gender and development towards a new paradigm which invited us to examine the nexus of culture, gender and development as a possible way forward for a more fruitful engagement with development. While I support this approach, this paper will

caution that the three concepts should not be treated as *external* or separate entities to be subsequently combined via a combination of analysis and synthesis. Rather, I take culture, gender and development to be aspects of the same phenomenon. My claim is that it is only when we can accept that all three are facets that inhere within the same moment of response from an internal perspective that we will see genuine transformational development. We will see that what is most important is to provide an historical, or rather, a *genealogical* frame around this moment of response, in order to unlock the present moment towards a more liberatory future.

Let us begin by picturing a woman carrying a baby on her back, bending down at dawn to sweep her compound in Niamey. Upon finishing the task, she starts preparing breakfast using the water she fetched with other women from a well just outside the village. Here, we have a moment of culture, a moment of gender and a moment of development combined. Our task will be to show how this is the case and I will do so by discussing each term separately for heuristic purposes.

From the perspective of culture, the woman's movements and actions embody the social environment and historical moment in which she finds herself. With each action she repeats and re-establishes the practice that has been installed in her from a very early age through mimesis; different techniques of the body involved in a series of social relations that establishes her as a female subject in her culture. Culture does not and should never refer in the first instance to patterns of

ritual, song, adornment or any other explicitly *visual* mode of reference. These visual phenomena are merely the after-effects of a culture whose material and somatic references originate from a pre-visual, pre-cognitive realm. The sweep of her arm and the way she ties the baby on her back, are themselves forms of cultural reference; a tacit and originary response to the world that pre-dates her own performance. Her arm moves as other arms move to perform the same task, in the same community. She bends to sweep the floor as others do around her and before and after her. In performing these acts, the woman draws upon a collective form of gesture, a bodily arc of understanding that forms and informs her engagement with her socio-historical world. We understand much more deeply the patterns that resonate within a culture when we begin to address these forms of mimetic repetition, of the cultural sedimentation that is imbued within every movement. Her arm, as she sweeps, describes a corporeal curve that originates in a collective experience and a collective history, much more than it originates in any form of individuation. Every re-enactment expresses and reproduces a socio-cultural system that is at once ancient and contemporary. As the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty would say, her action is a communication with the world that is more ancient than thought. Yet, through her action and with the materials available within her culture, she can develop a renewed relationship to her habitual response so that each act is constantly made anew. Culture therefore refers to the conditions that precede the moment of response and provide it with meaning, reference *and* the possibility for transformation.

For those of us interested in exploring gender and development from a cultural perspective it is necessary to understand a “thick” description of the conditions that elicit certain patterns of response to any developmental event. We need to get inside the minds and hearts of African people and perform a surgical operation to reveal what is inside. It is unfortunate that part of the colonial legacy has entailed that we do not feel the need to gain insight into the emotional landscape of African people when we begin to strategise or implement our development interventions.

Culture is the name given to the set of conditions that enable what happens to happen. It is the silent, deliberative system that is working through the Niamey woman’s practice. Culture does not always wear fancy dress; it is more closely observed in the action of sweeping the floor, cooking, fetching and using implements available to perform those actions. Culture is the thread that weaves and constructs every society into a common fabric of meaning, experience, practice and relatedness. All these are generated through forms of habits and artefacts¹, which connects people to their ancestral traditions - moral values, philosophy, spiritual, material, technological and intellectual systems - through embodied, tacit understanding. More than just a set of habits of being, culture is also a 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1976). It is at the centre of our experience, shaping our behaviour and responses to events, helping us to define who we are, what we will become and how we relate to other humans, non-human animals and the environment. Merleau-Ponty once described culture as the

¹ Here, artefact refers as much to object of representation as it does to words, signs, tools and implements.

'congealed face of existence', bringing together our lived experiences, our personal and collective identities, histories and responses to internal and external contradictions and establishing criteria for our judgements of taste (Bourdieu 1986). These responses and structures of feeling bind people in an intricate web of social relations that is constituted by power, domination, resistances and divisions such as age, gender, location, class, religion and sexuality.

However, we must be careful not to think of culture always in the past tense. Although culture refers to the way things are done, it is also a framework of how things could be done (differently), a blueprint for new creative possibilities. To understand this transformative conception of culture, we need to examine the relationship between habit and creativity in the transmission and transformation of cultural sediments. We can understand habit in two contrasting ways: as an operational requirement and as a form of inertia. Habit as operational requirement simply refers to the fact that structures and processes of habit are required in order for us to function. In order to sweep the floor and back a child or balance a bucket of water on the head, the woman's muscles must be coordinated in a schematic corporeal response. Any operation, be it physical, emotional, mental or spiritual requires a horizontal structure of habit in order to proceed. Habit is another way of understanding the temporal background that enables any activity, creating a pattern language that joins the before to the now to the future through an arc of common understanding that is pre-cognitive (it is well known that it is much easier to walk than it is to describe how the body walks). Habit is simply what keeps chaotic

patterns at bay. Habit therefore has an ontological structure: it is the horizon for functional being and doing-in-the-world. It is therefore value-neutral, unobjectionable and incontestable. More than being simply part of our world, habit in this conception is a constitutive part of what it is to *have* a world. It is there in the reflexes that enables our woman in Niamey to wake up everyday and sweep, cook breakfast and fetch water with other woman as an unconscious expression of how her body has interpreted her society.

Against this value-neutral, incontestable conception, another way of understanding habit is as the source of inertia that resides within any action. Here, habit is the force of repetition that blinds the body to the new. Habit acts as a filter to any untoward or unrecognised perception; it operates to enforce the normative status quo, both at an individual and collective level. It is what prevents us from taking advantage of adaptive impulses. This same force of habit is what stifles change within a community. If the woman continues to bend down to sweep the floor with a baby on her back using the same tools that are already available to her, she repeats the same established social performances without reconfiguring the performance. Habit, in this conception, has many synonyms: tradition, history, heritage, inertia. It is to tradition that individuals often appeal when they wish to enforce a reactionary status quo: “this is the way things are done here,” “where do you see a woman break kola-nut”, “women cook and men eat the food”, “women don’t eat chicken” and so on. The implication of this is that things should *not* be allowed to change or be altered and that change could only damage the value structures of the present. In

contrast to the first interpretation, habit here is heavily value-laden in favour of a reactive agenda that favours stasis over rupture, conservation over transformation.

It is this second conception of habit that therefore needs to be addressed in order to begin to understand how change and development can engage with entrenched tradition. No matter how recent a tradition, we need to remember that it has been devised within a human community at a specific historical moment. This ‘invention of tradition’ is a pattern both of developing and developed societies, whereby a normative structure of habitual inertia infiltrates society as a reactive control mechanism. The question all of us interested in transformative praxis need to ask is how this system of habit-responses can be challenged in favour of a disruptive creative intervention. How do we stop the woman sweeping in the compound in Niamey from continuing in her exhausting daily doing-being? How do we ensure that her action not only repeats ancient habitual patterns but also ruptures it? How do we intervene to create change for women *and* men in African societies so that each can flourish and live without humiliation or oppression?

To begin, we must challenge the deference to the language and framework of externality that has become a recurring feature in Africa. What is required is not yet another external intervention: “best practice in Uganda suggests the following” or “a report from such-and-such UN body recommends thus and so.” This is not to deny the importance of external contributions. However, external influences can only be *part*

of the picture that will enable change to happen. After all, 'African societies have become skilled at synthesising relevant epistemologies from divergent traditions' (Hecht & Simone 1994:11). Instead, as African feminists, we must begin the kind of work that began in the Western feminist movement many decades ago: we must begin to look *within*. We must begin to uncover the plurality of habituated practices, identities, epistemologies, modes of being and traditions that will enable us to understand and respond to our current collective and individual experience. Turning within is not about jealously protecting an untainted, fixed culture from outsiders. Rather, it is about uncovering and describing the variegated cultural horizon and daily sedimented practices of diverse African communities in order to offer appropriate replies to the issues that face us, as we perceive and live with and through them. Outside stories and representations can help, but ultimately, the deepest change mechanisms work when change is felt as a dynamic that affects the visceral structure of response prior to any externally imposed forms of cognitive difference. We need to remind ourselves that many of the new economic and scientifically sophisticated and successful countries such as Japan and other East Asian economies have done so through an internal dialogue. Confucian ethics has been used to explain the success of industrial and economic progress in East Asian economies. Equally, Max Weber made a powerful argument for the role the Protestant ethics played in the development of capitalist industrial economy in Europe. It is indeed through culture that the progress of these countries have been understood and explained.

Similarly, the mechanism for development, the impetus to transform our habit must first begin from within the terms of African culture. According to the Beninoise philosopher Paulin Hountondji, an unfortunate fact of history is that colonialism ‘arrested African cultures by reducing their internal pluralism, diminishing the discords and weakening the tensions from which they derive their vitality [...]’ (Hountondji 1976:166). He suggests that to reverse this process, ‘African culture must return to itself, to its internal pluralism and to its essential openness’ (ibid). Such a return is neither about Westernization or acculturation, but about a ‘creative freedom [which enriches] the African tradition itself as an open system of options’ (ibid). I propose that the same creative disruption of self-replicating forms of habit or internally induced normative repression and violation of women and otherness (expropriation, mutilation, violence, disempowerment etc.) requires that we uncover an internally generated change mechanism.

Let us return to habit in order to understand its creative dimension. Habit may repeat and re-establish norms with each bodily involvement, but nothing here is fixed. According to Merleau-Ponty, habits do not imply passivity, rather they ‘[...] have something of the moment of existence’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962:84) which transforms them into something new. In other words, no matter how entrenched our collective habits are, there is always the *possibility* of a rupture, the potential to establish new ways of being, and of differentiating oneself from the community. For example, if the woman decides that the continuous bending when sweeping puts a strain on her back and to

reduce this she ties a long stick to the broom so that she can still perform the same task, she is involved in reconfiguring, re-engineering her habitual relationship to the task ahead of her. The woman in Niamey inflects her practice with the conscious reality of her momentary existence, thereby transmitting and simultaneously transforming the implement with a simple form of technological prosthetic. Her ability to reproduce and yet transform her cultural implement is based on her ability to listen actively to her own bodily requirements and the exigencies of her lived situation and respond to it accordingly. The moment the woman, or indeed a culture, is able to listen in and interact with itself is also the opening towards interaction with 'an-other' and the establishment of renewed cultural agency. This is the birth of transformative development: the moment when habit not only reproduces social norms and expectations, but also transforms them, creating a new body of knowledge and a new form of cultural meaning and adaptation. Habit then is as much about repetition and difference, continuity and creativity as it is about inertia and tradition.

In this transformative guise, our Niamey woman presents herself as an active participant in the unfolding drama of her life and her society rather than a disinterested passive conduit for tradition. She therefore contributes in microcosm to her society's development, survival and continuity, pushing in however small a way to the parameters of female capacity in her society. At this juncture, we should glance to chaos and complexity theory to understand that the equivalent of the flap of a butterfly's wings can lead to dramatic social change.

Development then is not (or should not) in the first instance be conceived of as an externally generated activity; rather it is the *activity* or practice of agents within a culture involving them in meaningful dialogue with the reality of their situation. Once we recognise that an internal dialogue is the starting point for transformative development we can begin to enrich this internal process with free dialogue and accommodation from the outside. Development interventions should begin with an engagement with internal narratives and ways of being, prior to any strategy is imposed from without.

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I have spent some time focusing on the reproduction and transformation of culture through habitual patterns and how development must always begin from within. I have tried to show that development and change must be viscerally motivated, situated within the historical and lived reality of every society. I now want to focus on how culture can be a force for repression, and domination by resuming the conversation about habit and practice.

We have already noted that habit or the 'habitus' is a pre-reflexive mastery of practice, a set of internalised norms, values and rules informing and constituting each of our actions. As the snapshot of our Niamey woman shows, each action is situated within and acquires meaning in a cultural and historical context which is composed of social relations of power and domination. In this instance, the domination originates in normatively framed assumptions about what

it means to be a woman or man in society, producing individuals with different styles, roles, abilities, tastes and modes of habituating and being in their culture. The social relations that produce these patterns of habit are always relations of power, or as Pierre Bourdieu names it, 'symbolic violence'. According to Bourdieu, symbolic violence refers to the internalisation of social rules and imposition which we come to experience as legitimate, the way things are and should be. Legitimacy masks the power relations which enables the successful imposition of cultural rules and therefore ensures their systematic reproduction. For Bourdieu, the legitimacy of symbolic violence is based on *misrecognition* and this involves 'the process whereby power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder'(Bourdieu and Passeron 1997:xiii). These relations of power are inscribed and expressed in our personal practices, in the way we move, our gestures, manners and responses to the world, even as we are unconscious of their workings. Culture is always already imbricated within power relations, structures and processes, often at the most subtle levels of being so that genders roles is experienced as natural. This brief account of tacit imposition and acceptance cultural sediments goes a long way in explaining why and how women or other dominated groups collude in their own oppression and stifle their own development. For Bourdieu in order not to reproduce our habitual patterning, we need to 'organize a *symbolic struggle* capable of *questioning* practically every tacit presupposition of the phallonnarcissistic vision of the world' (quoted in Moi 1999:280). Effort towards development must therefore begin the process of unmasking those taken for granted practice and norms and expose embeddedness within fields of power.

So, how do we look within to challenge conservative and repressive forms of habit and the symbolic violence that ensues? How do we

ensure that we do not become complicit in the continuation of pernicious practices within our own historical moment? How do we ensure that our practice transmits and transforms our knowledge and habits of being in a way that nourishes and advances our society? How do we obtain an *adaptive* approach to habit? How do we ensure that our being is *not* ‘totally imprinted by history’ or our cultural patterning?

There are many strands to answering this nexus of questions, each of which leads to separate forms of research and endeavour. There is not space or time here to follow any of these strands in much detail; all I can do is provide pointers and pathways, and hope that the challenge is taken up in a thousand ways. In a nutshell, what is required is a form of critical history and adaptive practice that is attentive to internal differentiation and disruption; a history that embraces the horrors and the beauties of African cultures in order to produce alternative processes of engagement and being; an account which looks at both culture and counter-culture, normativity and its disruption, as a necessary requirement for our growth. This history does not claim to seek what factually occurred, rather it is concerned with providing a “history of the present” and the subterranean events that created it. It is about the way history affects and shapes bodies in the present and vice-versa. Michel Foucault’s genealogical method provides one pathway we can follow. He identifies a reactive form of somatic normativism when he writes:

The body is moulded by a great many distinct regimes; it is broken down by the rhythms of work, rest and holidays; it is poisoned by food or values, through eating habits or moral laws; it constructs resistances(19:87).

In contrast to the multifarious regimes of habit that stifle innovation, Foucault's method of genealogy is grounded in the search for models which disrupts established habitual patterns and histories of internal differentiation:

If genealogy in its own right gives rise to questions concerning our native land, native language, or the laws that govern us, its intention is to reveal the heterogenous systems which, masked by the self, inhibit the formation of any form of identity(ibid:95).

Genealogy as a project is not therefore the concern of family trees and establishing structures of sameness, kinship and lineage (as with the demotic meaning given to the term) rather, it is a quest for difference amongst our ancestors and our ancestry. This difference may take many forms and be the opening towards a myriad of other stories. I shall mention just two forms of opening to a genealogy of African gender relations, as a way towards the evolution of an empowered and transformative developmental alternative: mythic genealogy and normative structures and events.

Mythic Genealogy

Myth refers to a collection stories or ideas we use to understand and interpret our social and historical situations. Myths speak of social preferences and inscriptions of power, their deformation and endless reformation. Myths are neither true nor untrue; rather they suit their purpose as tools within a specific hermeneutic trajectory. They provide us with explanatory resources to make sense of our existence and moral universe and to fulfil our desires. One of the biggest myths about myth itself is that it refers to an immemorial past and has little role in shaping the “enlightened present”. In fact, myth speaks to the present as much as the past. Each African culture is peppered with a thousands mythic stories waiting to nourish our contemporary experience. Instead of trying to forestall repressive cultural practices that are inimical to our growth and well-being, our mission should be to go in search of unruly myths and archetypes that disrupt the repressive normative ideal. Every culture has myths or archetypes that are insurgent figures; yins and yangs that express the culture in all its variegated richness. When young women are told that they must stay with an abusive husband because it is not part of ‘our tradition’ to divorce, we must have at our disposal stories about our female ancestors who went against the grain and had several partners until they finally settled with the one that was respectful and would nourish their growth. We need to tell our male children stories about different ways of being a man in each African location. We need to be able to tell them stories about Shango, the Yoruba orisha who embodies the ultimate tyrannical masculinity, yet he adorns himself in female clothes, plaits his hair as typical among Yoruba woman *and* acquires his gentle feminine power from his Nupe mother and his lover *Oya*.

Through our mythical figures, we need to explore what they can teach us about those things we grapple with in our own time; what they have to say about our social and psychic lives. We need to look at mythic stories in order to uncover what they have to say about gender relations and experiences of desire, love, marriage, autonomy, betrayal and violence, with a view to using them to challenge, contradict and rework our existing notions of gendered subjectivities. At a time when 'a profusion of new cultures, religions, and world views are continuously reweaving Africa's social fabrics' (Hecht & Simone 1994: 12), we urgently need to construct our own stories to counteract external practices that fail to contribute towards our growth.

Myths are tools to change the present. Through repeated re-telling, the imagination of each storyteller produces a distinctive inflection, each tale becoming a history of its perpetual formation and deformation as the narrator impregnates the story with their own interpretation. The centrality of language in myths and their continued mis/use often leads to a proliferation of myths, flourishing across 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 always ideologically motivated, located within 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 at the heart of modernity in their classic book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, so too, a mythic approach to transformative gender development will show that the culture of myth is an integral part of our lives.

Normative Structures

Here, we must look for social or juridical frameworks that differ from those that have rigidified the present moment and codified it with a specific form of oppression. Essentially a sociological framework, a genealogy of normative structures looks for other patterns of social value which represent alternative ways of being in the world to those of the present. It is by excavating these hidden stories that we allow ourselves to realise that we have always been so much more than the narrowly reductive frame of reference we cast upon our present moment.

An example here would be to look at contemporary naming patterns amongst the Yoruba and contrast this with Yoruba tradition. It is now common for Yoruba women to take on their husband's surname upon marriage. To the majority of women, this practice appears both natural and a bastion of Yoruba tradition. Many Yoruba women exhibit a mixture of surprise and disbelief when they learn that in fact the traditional Yoruba convention was that women maintained their own family name after marriage. It was only through the advent of Christianity, and more specifically the virulent form of evangelical Christianity that has mushroomed in Nigeria in the past twenty years, that the Western-imported convention of becoming the husband's 'chattel' has emerged and become normative.

What we see in this example is a form of symbolic violation, whereby ancestral norms have been supplanted by imported convention. In the case of the Yoruba, where huge significance is invested in names and the manner in which they articulate the conditions of birth or anticipate future development, this evisceration of tradition is particularly harsh. Christianised Yoruba women who adopt this practice alienate themselves from their own culture and history, tipping the gender balance in favour of the husband in the process.

Conclusion

These two pathways of excavating myths which point the way towards alternative futures, and of exploring norms and ways of being that have been occluded from historical view are amongst many others that we need desperately to begin to research. Without this work (which will never be exhausted), we cannot begin to create a change agenda that will ensure meaningful development. As any well-paid change management consultant knows, the most long-lasting forms of change are those that are precipitated from within. Any change that is imposed by fiat from outside will ultimately be resisted, as it does not conform to the pattern language of habit that inheres on the ground. For example, only when contemporary Yoruba women are confronted with the historical fact that historically they did not cede their family name to their husband, will they begin to appreciate what has been effaced with the current convention. More than just losing a name, they lose a whole way of being in the world; they are losing power and

the possibility of certain forms of empowerment; they efface patterns of gender relations that were built up across centuries of enculturation.

What is required therefore is a programme of genealogy that raids the textual and oral archives of our different African histories in order to demonstrate plural forms of existence. By opening up a disruptive collective historical imaginary, we can unlock ourselves from the repressive power regimes of the present, in favour of a liberatory future. Change for the future only begins when we change the way we are able to look into the viscera of our past. We must begin to disinvent the reified traditions that bind us into mutually destructive gender relations. Habit must be rebalanced in relationship to innovation and creativity by searching into the past for alternative ways of being and doing. It is only then that the inertias of habit can be restored to a value-neutral operative framework that balances inertia with adaptivity. It is only then that the woman who is still sweeping in that Niamey yard can stop, look up, and see a new dawn approaching.

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