

**THE BLACK SUBJECT AND POSTMODERNISM –
RESPONSE TO M. SHAWN COPELAND¹**

Elochukwu E. Uzukwu c.s.sp.
Milltown Institute, Dublin

Shawn gives a fascinating presentation of the “Black Subject” in the postmodern era. This paper that I read over and over again convinces me of the need for Africans in the home continent to engage in dialogue with African Americans, to share experiences and adopt strategies for survival in the postmodern world. Shawn lucidly presents the challenge of the racialization of identity (black identity) precipitated by modernity (Enlightenment logic). Racialization dominates the American view of humans in the world. Shawn has a good grasp of the subject matter. She makes you stop, affirm, reflect, challenge and agree or disagree.

I may not do justice to the paper in a few minutes response, but I draw attention to three issues I find interesting for the ongoing dialogue in Africana theologies: [1] the close link between diasporic theologies and the African resources – precisely diverse West African resources; [2] the dimensions of creativity that Jazz provides to enable one situate Black Subjectivity, and also to open optimistic window for reinvention – the post-postmodern; and [3] the challenge of creating a new pattern of human living – an Africana project of creativity and reinvention.

Diasporic theologies and the African resources:

There is a connection naturally between Africans living in the homeland and the African diaspora. As Shawn says “Diasporic theologies excavate, critique, and deploy fragmentary, but persistent West African intellectual, rhetorical, and aesthetic forms, values, questions, and concerns even as they improvise critically on

¹ First presented at Black Catholic Theology Group Seminar “*The Black Subject in the Post Modern World: Africana Theologies in Dialogue*”, as part of the 2006 Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSAs) Convention, June 8 - 11, 2006 at the San Antonio Hyatt Regency, San Antonio, TX, USA.

these as well as on Western European and American traits, which, after all, are but human traits.”

One aesthetic and intellectual value/trait that we share in our conversations is relationality – the principle that for reality to be real it must be related. West Africans capture it in a way that disturbs those groomed within the Enlightenment logic. They insist on the fundamental duality (or multiplicity) of all things. In Igbo *ife kwulu ife akwudebe ya* – “Whenever Something stands, Something Else will stand beside it.” Chinua Achebe expands this in one of his essays: “Whenever Something stands, Something Else will stand beside it. Nothing is absolute. *I am the truth, the way and the life* would be called blasphemous or simply absurd for is it not well known that a man may worship Ogwugwu to perfection and yet be killed by Udo.”²

This appears to me a creative response to modernity – a postmodern principle that casts suspicion on all grand narratives. Again I refer to Achebe. As an artist in search of identity both for himself and his people in a world profoundly destabilised since the experience of slavery and colonialism, Achebe updates Igbo wisdom tradition to respond to the modern/postmodern challenge. His resort to the Igbo wisdom tradition becomes enabler of creating “a space of imagining a different universe, of organising ourselves in a world which holds many perils for black people”³. For, “We are in a period so different from anything else that has happened that everything that is presented to us has to be looked at twice”⁴. The perception of reality as multiple enables one always to search for a “second point of view” or to practice “looking at everything twice”. Shawn shows that this hermeneutic of creative suspicion,

² Chinua Achebe, *Morning yet on Creation Day: Essays, Studies in African Literature* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1975)., p. 94; See also Simon Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe - Language & Ideology in Fiction, Studies in African Literature Series* (Oxford; Portsmouth, N.H.; Nairobi: James Currey; Heinemann; EAEP, 1991)., pp. 20-21.

³ See the study of this aspect of Achebe in Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe - Language & Ideology in Fiction.*, 3-4.

⁴ Achebe in Interview with Bill Moyers, cited by Ibid., p. 1.

especially of postmodern strategies that continue to exclude or make invisible voices of the marginalised, is a liberating methodology to reinvent black subjectivity. It is illustrated in the cognitional irony contained in Jazz.

What did I do to be so black and blue?

The inspiration comes from Jazz (“jazz at the highest level of cognitional irony”); with it Shawn analyses the African American experience of “invisibility”. It reveals the creative areas of our own identity. Shawn, as academic, is also an artist that evokes other artists. I read the abridged edition of *Invisible Man* of Ralph Ellison in High School; Shawn has made it touch the guts; I never saw it in that light.

Africans on the continent can share with African Americans similar struggles with “invisibility” that more or less transformed into African Initiatives in Christianity. The emergence of the “galaxy” of African prophets and founders, to use Kä Mana’s expression, is a response to Western Christianity that transmitted Western modernity. They are prophets overwhelmed with the *dominating vision of the fulfilment of the biblical promises on African lands*. William Wade Harris (from Liberia), Simon Kimbangu (from Democratic Republic of the Congo), Samuel Oschoffa (from Benin Republic), Simao Gonçalves Toko (from Angola), are only a few of these colourful founder; “the galaxy of prophets and founders of churches”.⁵ Ethiopianism in Africa rejected racism and the marginalization (invisibility) in worship and administration of the African experience, needs and demands; it also included dimensions of pan-Africanism. ‘Zionist’ Church founders received the Holy Spirit to preach fearlessly in the face of racism and tyranny; to bear witness even unto death, etc. The revivalism of Simon Kimbangu in the Congo was against colonial and missionary project.⁶

⁵ See Kä Mana, *La Nouvelle Évangélisation En Afrique, Chrétiens En Liberté* (Paris; Yaoundé: Karthala ; Clé, 2000)., p. 122ff.

⁶ Important literature in this area includes Bengt Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, 2d ed. (London, New York,: Published for the International

African philosophers and theologians acknowledge that these founders of Churches creatively combined critical approach to their religious cultures (the struggle against fetishism, witchcraft and sorcery) and reception of Western modernity through missionary Christianity, colonialism, and globalisation. Some argue that in so far as African modernity subjected the grand narratives of Western modernity to local criticism and scrutiny, it is indeed a combination of the modern and postmodern in the African experience.⁷

Creating a new pattern of Humane living – a Challenge:

Absent from Shawn's presentation but presupposed in Jazz that Shawn used to illustrate her thesis of black subjectivity, is "humour". However, humour is not totally absent in the presentation; for, I find Shawn's imagining an airport experience as black woman full of irony and humour. African slaves, as revealed by slave literature especially the Brer Rabbit stories, created territories of laughter in the midst of their suffering.⁸ It was a "necessary psychological distance from the mental stress caused by oppression". Earl draws the conclusion, "Slaves' ability to create their own laughter-evoking resources gave them the last word, so to speak, in the master and slave relationship model."⁹

African Institute by the Oxford University Press, 1961), David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa; an Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (Nairobi, Oxford University Press, 1968), John S. Pobee and Gabriel Ositelu II, *African Initiatives in Christianity: The Growth, Gifts and Diversities of Indigenous African Churches - a Challenge to the Ecumenical Movement*. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), M Sinda, *Le Messianisme Congolais Et Ses Incidences Politiques. Kimbanguisme, Matsouanisme, Autres Mouvements* (Paris: Payot, 1972). Also ML Daneel, "Aic Designs for a Relevant African Theology of Missions," *Missionalia* 28, no. 2 & 3 (2000).

⁷ See Abel Kouvouama, *Modernité Africaine - Les Figures Du Politique Et Du Religieux* (Paris: Paari, 2001), see also Mabilia Justin-Robert Kenzo, "Thinking Otherwise About Africa: Postcolonialism, Postmodernism, and the Future of African Theology," *Exchange* 31, no. 4 (2002).

⁸ Riggins R. Earl provides many texts of laughter among the slaves in the Brer Rabbit stories – see *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs*, chapter 6, especially pp. 155-158.

⁹ *Ibid*, 155.

In imagining a post-postmodern world that we live in West Africa today, different but not totally unrelated to the African American experience, I ponder on humanistic properties that keep all of us, especially the youth, alive. The basis of creativity and reinvention is humour. Humour is based on an *optimistic anthropology that contains the potentials for reinventing a 'better world'*. The search for a better world is inspired by optimism. Africans survive today because of their sense of humour (“*joie de vivre*”) – an incorrigible faith in life even in the face of unbearable natural disasters, violent conflicts and wars, the tragedies of Rwanda, Congo, Sierra-Leone, Somalia, Sudan, and the list continues. In the African context social analysis tends towards afro-pessimism. However, note is being taken today of the optimistic ethos that keeps Africans alive in spite of evils that bestride the continent¹⁰. Bibaki Nzuzi identified humour as first of four elements structural to African culture (i.e. *joie de vivre* or optimistic view of life or humour, solidarity-hospitality, palaver-dialogue, and a religious view of the world.) For Cheikh Anta Diop gaiety, optimism, social sense, etc., are dimensions of the African psychic identity; they encourage optimistic communitarian ethos (in contradistinction from individualistic social structures that communicate insecurity and pessimism). There is nothing absolute about these psychic reactions or cultural traits; they are in permanent flux.¹¹ They may change; and they are changing following the radical transformations of the continent. Optimism as well as lucidity needs to accompany narratives of our past failures or weaknesses, narratives of the ordeals powerless Africans are

¹⁰ See for example, Samuel Kobia, *Le Courage De L'espérance - Les Racines D'une Vision Nouvelle Pour L'église Et Sa Vocation En Afrique* (Paris & Genève: Cerf & Conseil Oecuménique des Églises, 2006)., Kä Mana, *Christians and Churches of Africa: Salvation in Christ and Building a New African Society, Theology in Africa Series* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004).

¹¹ Bibaki Nzuzi, *Culture Noire-Africaine Et Réflexes Inculturateurs* (Kinshaha-Limete: Boabab, 1999). Cheikh Anta Diop, *Civilization or Barbarism : An Authentic Anthropology*, ed. Harold J. Salemson and Marjolijn De Jager, trans. Yaa-Lengi Meema Ngemi, 1st -- ed. (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991). pp. 218-219.

passing through today.

Diasporic and continental African renewal and renovation are therefore based on the inspirational heart of the cultural matrix, re-imagined, reimagined, and reconstructed. Shawn's presentation gives us a taste of how to go about this.

References:

- Achebe, Chinua. *Morning yet on Creation Day: Essays, Studies in African Literature*. London: Heinemann Educational, 1975.
- Barrett, David B. *Schism and Renewal in Africa; an Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements*. Nairobi,: Oxford University Press, 1968.
- Daneel, ML. "Aic Designs for a Relevant African Theology of Missions." *Missionalia* 28, no. 2 & 3 (2000): 2-46.
- Diop, Cheikh Anta. *Civilization or Barbarism : An Authentic Anthropology*. Translated by Yaa-Lengi Meema Ngemi. Edited by Harold J. Salemson and Marjolijn De Jager. 1st -- ed. Brooklyn, N.Y.: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991.
- Gikandi, Simon. *Reading Chinua Achebe - Language & Ideology in Fiction, Studies in African Literature Series*. Oxford; Portsmouth, N.H.; Nairobi: James Currey; Heinemann; EAEP, 1991.
- Kenzo, Mabilia Justin-Robert. "Thinking Otherwise About Africa: Postcolonialism, Postmodernism, and the Future of African Theology." *Exchange* 31, no. 4 (2002): 323-41.
- Kobia, Samuel. *Le Courage De L'espérance - Les Racines D'une Vision Nouvelle Pour L'église Et Sa Vocation En Afrique*. Paris & Genève: Cerf & Conseil Oecuménique des Églises, 2006.
- Kouvouama, Abel. *Modernité Africaine - Les Figures Du Politique Et Du Religieux*. Paris: Paari, 2001.
- Mana, Kä. *Christians and Churches of Africa: Salvation in Christ and Building a New African Society, Theology in Africa Series*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004.
- . *La Nouvelle Évangélisation En Afrique, Chrétiens En Liberté*. Paris; Yaoundé: Karthala ; Clé, 2000.
- Nzuzi, Bibaki. *Culture Noire-Africaine Et Réflexes Inculturateurs*. Kinshaha-Limete: Boabab, 1999.
- Pobee, John S., and Gabriel Ositelu II. *African Initiatives in Christianity: The Growth, Gifts and Diversities of Indigenous African Churches - a Challenge to the Ecumenical Movement*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998.
- Sinda, M. *Le Messianisme Congolais Et Ses Incidences Politiques. Kimbanguisme, Matsouanisme, Autres Mouvements*. Paris: Payot, 1972.
- Sundkler, Bengt. *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*. 2d ed. London, New York,: Published for the International African Institute by the Oxford University Press, 1961.