

In Praise of Alienation twelve

Abiola Irele

The starting point of any consideration of our perception of Europe and the civilization we associate with that continent is the observed fact that it is marked by a profound ambivalence. This is a quality of emotional response that we share with other peoples who have experienced European conquest; in other words, it is a function of our historical experience. As we keep being reminded by our writers and our historians, notably by Chinweizu in his book, *The West and the Rest of Us*,¹ the circumstances of African encounter with Europe were especially brutal. The British Empire was not acquired in a fit of absent-mindedness, nor lost in a similar attitude of nonchalance; much less the French. Modern imperialism was an act of calculated aggression; as far as we in this part of the world are concerned, Obara Ikime has documented for us, in his book *The Fall of Nigeria*,² the violent process by which the British colonizer, and especially Lord Lugard (of venerated memory at Chatham House) subjugated the peoples and societies of the territory that now make up our modern State. More generally still, in our historical relationship with Europe, the master-slave relationship was exemplified in a very real sense, with not merely a meta-

1. Chinweizu, *The West and the Rest of Us* (London and Lagos: Nok Publishers, 1978).

2. Obara Ikime, *The Fall of Nigeria* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1977).

phorical but a literal significance. We played Caliban to the White man's Prospero, Man Friday to his Robinson Crusoe, as part of a historical drama of slavery, colonialism, and racism.

The consequences of this experience have been unsettling for us in all kinds of ways. The incursion of Europe disrupted traditional societies all over Africa, and in some cases this disruption was so severe as to have turned the drama of colonialism into pure tragedy. Such was the case especially in Central Africa, where the French and the Belgians, particularly those who worked for King Leopold in his Congo Free State—a name that reflects his bizarre sense of irony—wrought such devastation as to have turned the stomach of decent humanity everywhere. These facts require to be recalled, for our resentments carried over from a phase of history from which most of us have only just emerged, and into which a substantial section of the race is still locked in Southern Africa even now, these resentments remain with us extremely vivid.

At the same time, we are conscious of the irreversible nature of the transformations the impact of Europe has effected in our midst and which are so extensive as to define the really significant frame of reference of our contemporary existence. The traditional precolonial culture and way of life continue to exist as a reality among us, but they constitute an order of existence that is engaged in a forced march, in a direction dictated by the requirements of a modern scientific and technological civilization. It also happens to be the case that Western civilization, at least in its contemporary manifestations and circumstance, provides the paradigm of modernity to which we aspire. Hence our mixed feelings, the troubled sense of acceptance and rejection, of a subjective disposition that is undermined by the objective facts of our life. There is something of a paradox here, for the intensity of the ambivalence we demonstrate in our response to Europe and Western civilization is in fact a measure of our emotional tribute; it is expressive, in a profound way, of the cultural hold Europe has secured upon us—of the alienation it has imposed upon us as a historical fate.

The association in our minds of Western civilization with the historical fact of colonial domination and the real discomforts of social and cultural change give to this alienation a wholly negative significance in our eyes. All our modern expression in literature and ideology has developed from a primary concern with the pathology of alienation as inscribed in our experience as a colonized people. It isn't so much the fact that our modern literature has explored the theme

of culture conflict that strikes one now as that it has determined a fixation upon this pathology of alienation, and thus conditioned our emotional and intellectual reflexes to the whole subject of our relationship to Europe and Western civilization.

The classic representation of the pathology of alienation is that offered by Cheik Hamidou Kane's novel *L'aventure ambiguë* (Ambiguous adventure). The title of the novel is more than eloquent. The hero, Samba Diallo, is the archetype of the divided consciousness, of the African who suffers in his mind the effects of cultural dispossession. His agony is that of his dual nature, marked by a cleavage rather than an integration of its two frames of reference. As he says in the novel, and I quote:

I am not a distinct country of the Diallobe facing a distinct occident, and appreciating with a cool head what I must take from it and what I must leave with it by way of a counterbalance. I have become the two. There is not a clear mind deciding between two factors of a choice. There is a strange nature, in distress over not being two.

The very expansion of his vision upon the world becomes for him his dilemma, his existential plight. He is no longer able to relate to the world because that world is no longer coherent, no longer offers him a stable and compact order of values. His suicide at the end of the novel is thus a logical outcome of his spiritual tragedy. But it is significant that Cheik Hamidou Kane contrives an ending in which Samba Diallo's struggle with the concrete world of experience finds a resolution—he is finally integrated into the cosmos, that is, nothingness. For presented in the way in which the novelist has presented the drama of alienation, the choice is, indeed, between being and nothingness in the very perspective of Jean-Paul Sartre's brand of existentialism: between an affirmative being in the world, which confronts all its problems in order to wrest a meaning out of its contingencies, and a withdrawal into meaningless void.

The theme of alienation as an existential predicament runs through all our literature inspired by the colonial experience, in one form or the other. The self-dramatization of Senghor's poetry lends it a pathos and a grandeur with which we are also able to identify, because we accept it as not merely an individual poetic experience but as a transposition into the language of image and symbol of a felt personal experience, which is also representative—as an authentic statement of a general condition. But the writer who seems, in fact, to have engaged our responses most forcefully upon the problem of alienation

is Chinua Achebe, especially in his masterpiece, *Arrow of God*, whose impact derives from the writer's profound sense of tragic irony. His quite unsentimental approach to a common theme lends it an uncommon significance and gives it a universal application. For Achebe, history in its broad movement is simply not of man's making; the most we can do is accommodate ourselves to its turns and changes and strive to keep up, as best we can, with its caprices; the image of the mask dancing which requires that we change our positions so as to capture its progress seems to me to summarize his vision. However, Achebe's vision does not deny human freedom, it only acknowledges that this freedom is limited, but that within the narrow confines of its possibilities is infinitely precious. From Joseph Conrad, whom he was later to turn against, largely I believe out of a misunderstanding, Achebe learnt the lessons of a humane pessimism.³

When we consider our modern literature in its development, in its themes and preoccupations, and in its orientation, the striking fact is that it offers an image of our experience as one not only of cultural and spiritual disorientation but of moral decline, a situation that is presented as the aftermath of our contact with the West. Implicit in this image is an idea of the past and of our traditional culture as a universe of pure coherence. In Camara Laye's *L'enfant noir* and *Le regard du roi—The African Child* and *Radiance of the King* in the English translations—it is this idea that explicitly commands the narrative structure, point of view, symbolism and the whole tone of both the autobiography and the fiction. In greater or lesser measure, our writers are constantly tempted by, and yielding to, this romanticism; it is not even altogether absent from Achebe's novels, despite his incomparable sense of sobriety. What runs through all this literature is the feeling that it is within our traditional culture that we are happiest, most at ease with ourselves, that there is the truest coincidence between us and the world: in other words, that our identity is located.

The whole movement of modern African thought has been to define this identity. The intellectual reaction to our humiliation under

3. This underlying quality of Achebe's vision is well in evidence in his latest novel, *Anhills of the Savannah*, and his second collection of essays, *Hopes and Impediments*, both published by Heinemann, in London, in 1987. Achebe's reaction against Conrad is contained in the essay "An Image of Africa," included in the latter volume. (1-13).

the colonial system and to our devaluation by its justifying ideology has consisted in affirming our difference from the white man, the European. This conscious effort of differentiation has produced the well-known ideologies of "African personality" and *négritude*. In Senghor's formulation of the latter, the idea of African identity takes the form of an irreducible essence of the race whose objective correlative is the traditional culture and world concept. This essence is held to confer an inestimable value upon our past and to justify our claim to a separate existence. The whole movement of mind in Black cultural nationalism, from Blyden to Senghor, leads to a mystique of traditional forms of life, whether or not allowance is made for their interaction with European forms of cultural expression. And it is a mystique that continues to exercise a special force upon our minds and sensibility.

I have lived for a good part of my professional life with these ideas, and in presenting them on both sides of the language wall that divides the intellectual world in Africa I have shown considerable sympathy for them. In reality, what I have tried to do, in what I considered to be my privileged position, was to bring together the two streams of our intellectual history so that we begin to see it as a whole. You cannot do that kind of work without striking a relation of sympathy with the ideas of such powerful minds as Blyden and Senghor. Besides, the concept of African personality and its more elaborate variant of *négritude* represented a genuine attempt to think through the tensions of an especially difficult historical experience to some form of balance. There is no question, therefore, that they were both necessary and valuable. Blyden and Senghor thus deserve an eminent place in the intellectual history of Africa, as indeed of the Black race as a whole.

That said, it is impossible today not to recognize that the concepts they have provided us with have some serious shortcomings, and the feelings they have diffused make for some serious confusions. It is not only in the particulars of their formulation that they can be faulted but in their fundamental presuppositions, and ultimately in the general propositions they hold out for African development.

It is not possible for me here to undertake a detailed critique of the various theories of Africanism that have been propounded, in the case of Senghor's *négritude*, it is not even necessary for me to do so. The objections to *négritude* have been advanced by several writers: in the Francophone world, by Franklin, Cheikh Anta Diop, Adotevi, Fanon, and more recently as a part of the debate on African philosophy, by

Marcien Towa and Paulin Hountondji.⁴ I have given an account of the views of these critics of négritude in several articles.⁵ On the Anglophone side, we are familiar with the attacks of Mphahlele in *The African Image*⁶ and of Soyinka in *Myth, Literature and the African World*.⁷ You will also find a penetrating critical assessment of négritude in Kwasi Wiredu's *Philosophy and an African Culture*.⁸ It is not always that I find I can accept the terms of the critique of négritude presented by these gentlemen, and I am especially aware that in the Anglophone world the views of Senghor have been simplified and perhaps misunderstood; there is a complexity to his formulations which is often missed. Nonetheless, these are important objections which have kept alive a necessary debate among us concerning our entire structure of life and experience, and our destiny in the modern world.

It is precisely in this spirit that I want to add my voice to this debate, and to develop the critique of cultural nationalism in relation to the specific problem of our present alienation. And the first point concerns its refusal of history. I am not sure myself that this is a correct evaluation of Blyden and Senghor's position, both of whom seem to me to have a keen sense of historicity, but what is being attacked in cultural nationalism as a general phenomenon is clear enough to me. It is the failure to recognize the radical discontinuity between the precolonial past and the present direction of African life. The point is that what we perceive as alienation is in fact a much more serious affair than we recognize; we have all of us, whether edu-

4. The relevant works are the following: Albert Franklin, "La négritude: Réalité ou mystification," *Présence Africaine* 14 (1952) (Paris); Chelch Anta Diop, *Nations nègres et culture*, Editions Africaines (Paris: Présence Africaine [1955] 1977) (the critique of négritude is contained in the introductory chapter); Stanislas Adotevi, *Négritude et négrologues* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1972); Franz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: Maspéro, 1975) (in particular chaps. 3 and 4 entitled, respectively, "Méaaventures de la conscience nationale" and "Sur la culture nationale"); Marcien Towa, *Essai sur la problématique philosophique dans l'Afrique actuelle* (Yaoundé, 1971); Paulin Hountondji, *Sur 'la philosophie africaine'* (Paris: Maspéro, 1977).

5. See in particular the essay "What Is Négritude?" in my *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (London, 1981; reprinted Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1990).

6. Ezekiel Mphahlele, *The African Image* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962).

7. Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

8. Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

cated in the ways of Europe or not, become strangers in our own world. It is an illusion to imagine that the problem of alienation concerns only intellectuals and the Westernized elite; it is, in fact, a global phenomenon, affecting every single individual—in varying degrees it is true, depending upon the particular circumstance of each, but every individual nonetheless. The truth of our situation is that the modern institutions we now operate, the material furniture of our modern universe, the ideas that are making their inexorable way among us, are creating a new context of life and meanings to which every single individual has perforce to relate in one form or the other. More important still, to the same degree that any individual retains his attachment to the traditional culture, to that same degree does he sense the threat to his way of life, the increasing marginalization of the traditional culture. The point is not that the culture does not have a reality for him, it does, but that precisely is the problem; he knows that it is a precarious reality, that the axis of the world in which he is living is shifting from its grounding in the institutions and values of the traditional culture toward a new point of orientation determined by the impact of an alien culture, specifically Western civilization.

The refusal of history in cultural nationalism proceeds from blindness to what Professor Peter Ekeh has described as the epochal character of colonialism in his inaugural lecture delivered from this same forum two years ago.⁹ The colonial experience was not an interlude in our history, a storm that broke upon us, causing damage here and there but leaving us the possibility, after its passing, to pick up the pieces. It marked a sea change of the historical process in Africa; it effected a qualitative reordering of life. It has rendered the traditional way of life no longer a viable option for our continued existence and apprehension of the world.¹⁰

This raises a fundamental issue in any evaluation of the phenomenon of cultural nationalism: the view it promotes that culture is an

9. Peter Ekeh, "Colonialism and Social Structure" (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1980).

10. An awareness of the profound impact of colonialism on our societies and cultures does not preclude a proper estimation of the large measure of initiative which, as J. F. Ade Ajayi has insisted, still remained with us as Africans in the making of our history during the colonial period. See his two essays, "The Continuity of African Institutions under Colonialism," in *Emerging Themes of African History*, ed. T. O. Ranger (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1968), 189–200, and "Colonialism: An Episode in African History," in *Colonialism in Africa, 1870–1960*, ed. L. H. Gann and Peter Duignan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 497–509.

intrinsic value, bound to the natural environment of a people or race and, therefore, determining a natural correspondence between a way of life and a collective identity. This is, of course, the organic view of culture, which found its most powerful expression in Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and informs the writings of all cultural nationalists of every hue and color, of every age and continent. In Germany, through the influence of Herder, it promoted the notion of *Volksgeist*, and inspired a heady and cloudy romantic nationalism that found magnificent expression in the music of Wagner but also led to the Aryan myth, the consequences of which the world still has to live with even today. I have cited this example simply to point out that cultural nationalism is, to use a cliché, a double-edged sword, to stress one's distinctiveness is to set oneself apart, and this is an attitude that contains equal possibilities both for cooperation and for conflict. It is also a relevant example, for Senghor's *négritude* drew much of its substance (and overtly so) from the movement of cultural nationalism in France itself, represented by Gobineau and Barrès. The link between this movement and the Fascism of Action Française is well known. I don't want to give the impression that Senghor's *négritude* was an ideology of aggression; in fact, one of the main objections leveled against it by its radical critics is that it was, in fact, a form of collaboration and accommodation with colonialism.¹¹ I only want to emphasize the point that the ideas of cultural nationalism have shown a tendency in the past of changing their joyful character, and becoming manifestations of a collective neurosis especially under conditions of stress. European history from the beginning of the nineteenth century up to the Second World War can be regarded, in part, as an illustration of this observation.

The organic conception of culture derives from an excessive valuation of tradition. Its romantic vision of the past confers an ontological status upon the notion of identity and constitutes the abstraction of national culture into its transcendental category. But the movement of thought which culminates at this lofty point proceeds, in fact, from a fallacy—what I'd like to call precisely the "organic fallacy," which derives in turn from a confusion of metaphor with fact. In that metaphor, the dominant imagery is vegetal. The life of societies is likened

11. Indeed, this has been the principal argument against Senghor's formulation of *négritude*, an argument advanced notably by Irving Leonard Markovitz in his *Léopold Sédar Senghor and the Politics of Négritude* (New York: Atheneum, 1969); and by Stanislas Adotevi in his *Négritude et négrologues*.

to that of a tree, growing slowly and imperceptibly, and sending down firm and strong roots, producing with time the ripe fruits of a settled way of life. But for all its suggestion of growth and vitality, the organic conception of culture is a static conception of the life of societies. It is not surprising that social theories based on it have a powerful element of reaction built into them, as Karl Mannheim has demonstrated in his well-known essay, "Conservative Thought."¹²

I say confusion of metaphor with fact, for when the matter is considered it becomes evident that it is in the very nature of tradition to be vulnerable, to be under constant barrage from the forces of change. If we conceive of tradition as a specific configuration of social relations, of techniques and modes of production, of collective representations and so forth, in short, as the totality of culture as it is actually lived, then it is easy to understand that a modification in any one department will affect the totality. The dynamism of social life puts a constant pressure upon tradition in this sense, shapes and reshapes it over time, until it is no longer recognizable as a specific relation to specific parts within a total structure but simply as an idea. The idea may retain a meaningful correspondence to a present reality and thus serve an integrative function. I take this to be the essential meaning of what Rev. Dr. Munoz has alluded to as the "rationality of tradition" in his essay of that title.¹³ But sometimes, as in a time of social revolution, or of rapid social change—in states of pronounced transition—the functional correspondence between the idea of tradition and the actual forces and processes of collective life disappears, and in its place you have a marked cleavage, a pronounced asymmetry. In such cases, the idea of tradition actually becomes dysfunctional, quixotic, in the exact historical sense of the term as derived from the celebrated novel by the Spanish writer, Cervantes. The value of tradition as an idea is thus largely functional and not axiomatic; it is measured by its appositeness to the reality of a living culture and need not have the moral connotations that we often ascribe to it.

To return to the subject of our historical alienation in the light of these observations: the striking thing about our present situation is the discrepancy between the idea of tradition still current among us and the emerging structure of reality in which the fortunes of our

12. Karl Mannheim, "Conservative Thought," in *Essays on Sociology and Social Psychology*, ed. Paul Kecskemeti (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953).

13. Louis Munoz, "The Rationality of Tradition," *Archiv für Rechts- und Sozial Philosophie* 67, no. 2 (Frankfurt, 1980): 197–216.

cultural and moral values are now engaged. The discontinuities between the various departments and levels of our social experience thus make for all kinds of contradictions in the objective spheres of life and for curious distortions of the personality as reflected in observed behavior.

Let us take, for example, the area of political institutions. Nigeria is a democratic republic with a written constitution, a legal document which is the source of legitimacy in the modern political system we operate. Yet the territory covered by this document contains a large number of kingdoms, principalities, city-states, or what have you, whose authority derives from the traditional political culture and who have no status whatsoever, formal or informal, in our constitution. All the same, our traditional rulers are encouraged to consider themselves in some special but obscure way to be entitled to the allegiance of people belonging to their area of traditional authority. The potential for conflict of this untidy situation has been demonstrated by events which have had tragic consequences in the recent past.¹⁴

Let me take another example closely related to the one I've just cited and which is topical. The controversy that now surrounds the Land Use Decree centers on the traditional system of land tenure. The argument that has been advanced for the repeal of the decree is that land was vested in the past in the traditional ruler who held it in trust for the rest of the community. What is being urged by those who use this argument is that we should return to tradition which the Land Decree is supposed to offend. The possibility that the very logic of this argument can be turned against them doesn't appear to have occurred to any of those who employ it. For if the point they are making is that land was socialized in the traditional system, then all the Land Use Decree has done is to extend this principle to the modern system by vesting this important economic asset in the authority which now transcends the traditional within the framework of a plural society. The State governor has manifestly replaced the Oba, the Obi, the Emir, it is he who is responsible for the economic and social welfare of those who have elected him into office. The provisions of the Land Use Decree may well be open to objections but not on the

14. The reference is to the riots that broke out in Kano, in Northern Nigeria, with serious loss of life reported, following an attempt by the elected governor of Kano to circumscribe the powers of the emir of Kano, one of the people killed was, in fact, the political secretary of the governor.

grounds of a reverence for tradition as narrowly defined by those who are agitating against it.¹⁵

The argument from tradition simply fails to take account of the transformations in our whole political and social order, transformations that reach right down to the intimate aspects of life. This can be illustrated from another example—that of polygamy. The common argument for its perpetuation is that it is not only justified by the African way of life but even dictated by it. This may still be true for the man in the village, but for the civil servant in Ibadan, not only is there no compulsion upon him to marry several wives, the very conditions of his life recommend the discipline of monogamy. The socioeconomic context in which polygamy can function with a minimum of convenience simply does not exist in the urban centers. What is more, anyone familiar with our folktales must know the tensions that polygamy is capable of setting up even within the traditional culture.

This example is not trivial. It illustrates the way in which the notion of tradition can be manipulated for motives that have nothing to do with a genuine respect for the African way of life. This kind of manipulation has attained a remarkable level of cynicism in the politics of some African states—popular attention is diverted to the wearing of leopard skins over the safari suit, the wholesale adoption of indigenous names, the animation of traditional dancing, while the serious business of holding onto power and amassing fabulous wealth goes on elsewhere. In such a situation an attitude of robust skepticism—even more intense in quality than what the late Professor Dudley recommended to us from this same forum a few years ago—seems to me perfectly in order.¹⁶

One important point emerges from all this: when the notion of tradition is not being invoked to confuse deliberately, it obeys a selective principle. Those who make the appeal to tradition are perfectly willing to enjoy the satisfactions of modern civilization, sometimes even to appeal to tradition is made to insure their unhindered access to its material benefits. This throws a sharp light upon the superficial understanding of tradition and culture that is being fostered among

15. The controversy aroused in Nigeria by the Land Use Decree has subsided somewhat since the reintroduction of military rule in 1984 and the limitations imposed on political discussion as a result.

16. Billy Dudley, "Scepticism as Virtue," Inaugural Lecture, University of Ibadan, 1975.

us by the organization of festivals and the like which do nothing, in their banality, other than rob our indigenous artistic cultures of their poetry and dignity.

The converse of this state of confusion is the spurious Westernization of the national bourgeoisie. Frantz Fanon's celebrated denunciation of this social category in Africa has not lost its relevance in the twenty and more years since it was proffered. The incapacity of the national bourgeoisie to grasp the implications of the process of transition in which we are involved is betrayed by the shallow spirit of materialism that is abroad among us today. We have joined the movement of the "international bazaar," to use an expression by V. S. Naipaul in his book *Among the Believers*, or what Ayi Kwei Arman (in his novel *Fragments*) has represented as a new version of the cargo cult. In Nigeria today, the magical element of this cult is supplied by our much vaunted oil wealth. From it has flowed all the "goodies"—the cars, the furniture, the stereo sets, the champagne, the jewelry, and all the other tinsels of an industrial civilization in which we have no creative part. The depths of the consumer mentality now abroad among us are touched when an adult Nigerian male, affluent, with wife or wives and several children, can find no better use for his Japanese-made video set than to watch blue films, sometimes in the presence of his children. This example suggests a deplorable twist to the prevailing ethos, but it is perfectly in character with the state of moral indolence it has induced in the general society. The idea that there should be a relation between effort and reward has become openly laughable: instant gratification has become the norm.

The moral indolence is well matched by a remarkable intellectual indolence. Outside of a few circles of writers and intellectuals, generally of a radical persuasion—pools of light in a vast area of conceptual darkness—there is no sustained thought in this country, no coherent intellectual, cultural, or moral connection with any scheme of ideas or values, traditional African or Western. The Israelites in exile singing of their unhappy lot likened the sky above them to a sheet of bronze spread over their heads. Matthew Arnold, in his *Culture and Anarchy*, made use of this biblical image to characterize the intellectual climate of Victorian England. Here, I am afraid the intellectual sky above us is made of grosser material: it is not even bronze, but *wooden*.

The situation I have just evoked corresponds to the pathetic aspect of our global alienation. It demonstrates the way in which we are wedged uncomfortably between the values of our traditional culture

and those of the West. The process of change we are going through has created a dualism of life which we experience at the moment less as a mode of challenging complexity than as one of confused disorientation. The ideas of cultural nationalism cannot help us out of this agonizing situation, cannot help us to resolve the problems posed by our alienation. On the contrary, they unfit us mentally for the urgent tasks we have to undertake—which we *are* undertaking but in a muddled frame of mind—in order to create a new and viable society. It is of no practical significance now to us to be told that our forebears constructed the Pyramids if today we cannot build and maintain by ourselves the roads and bridges we require to facilitate communication between ourselves, if we still have to depend on the alien to provide for us the necessities of modern civilization, if we cannot bring the required level of efficiency and imagination to the management of our environment. Admittedly, the earlier emphasis of cultural nationalism was beneficial: it had an inspirational purpose which had a point in the colonial period. And if Cheikh Anta Diop to whom I have just alluded is to be understood aright, his appeal to a past of African achievement was not meant as an encouragement to cultural snuggles but to greater effort. Unfortunately, that point is lost sight of in the postures we now adopt. It was thus that the pieties of cultural nationalism led to the scandal of our being caught dancing at Algiers in 1969 on the day the Americans landed a man on the moon for the first time.

We may have no business now sending a man to the moon, but we have to cope with the demands of the modern world. We cannot meet the challenges of the scientific and industrial civilization of today by draping ourselves with our particularisms. The resources in ideas, techniques, and in certain respects values offered by our traditional cultures are simply not adequate for our contemporary needs and interests. This is a truism I'd not have ventured to utter if time and again one didn't come up against the simplifications of the cultural nationalists, an example of which I came across the other day. At the end of his textbook entitled *The Social Anthropology of Africa* published by Heinemann, Angulu Onwuejeogwu has placed an epilogue entitled "The Faceless versus the Face." In it, he tells the story of two groups of children, one from the modern urban elite, the other belonging to the rural community. He makes an observation I'd like to quote:

The children of the new elite did not know that the teapots and teacups which they were using were made of clay,

while all the local children knew this. Indeed, some of them helped their parents to make clay pots and cups and fire them. The children at home could name all the trees around, and talked about the palm trees, banana and yam, while the children of the new elite knew nothing about them. They ate them and that was all. The children from the urban area talked about aeroplanes, television, hotels, birthday parties, fine dresses and shoes. Those at home talked about masquerades, wrestling on the sand, making traps and fishing.

Now, the thrust of our anthropologist's story is in fact tendentious and amounts to a prodigious begging of the question: he proves only what he wants to prove, which is that the traditional culture produces children better adapted for life. But it depends what life: in the village or in the city, in the traditional culture or in the modern culture. Our anthropologist leaves out many issues relevant to his demonstration. If the children of the elite in this story did not know that the teacups they drank from were made from clay, there is obviously something wrong with their education. But the solution is not to send them to the village to learn this—they may, of course, need to go to the village for other reasons—but to reform the educational system so that they can learn this elementary fact at school along with the facts about airplanes and television. As for the rural children, those activities which presumably gave vitality to them must be seen in a context of life in which their chances of survival at birth were very small. *To have vitality, you need to be alive in the first place.* The overriding consideration in any case is that the urban children are, in fact, more prepared for a modern technological civilization, more attuned to the future we envisage for ourselves, whatever the new problems that future will bring—a future indeed in which social anthropology will have become an anachronism in Africa.

My contention is that we need to advance beyond the kind of romantic stuff being peddled by our anthropologist. We need to abandon the self-consciousness that goes with cultural nationalism, to move beyond its positions to entirely new ground. We need a new determination, a new spirit of adventure fired by a modern imagination: a new state of mind that will enable us to come to terms with our state of alienation and to transform it from a passive condition we confusedly endure into an active collective existential project. We need to take charge of our objective alienation by assuming it as an *intention* so as to endow it with a positive significance.

It is pertinent at this point to remind ourselves that the concept of alienation, in its rigorous philosophical form (as opposed to the loose sociological application of the term with which we are more familiar) contains this positive significance. In its formulation by Hegel, from whom the concept has come down to us via Feuerbach and Marx, alienation designates the state of consciousness produced in the dialectic of mind and matter. The adventure of mind in the realm and universe of nature is for Hegel the very definition of history. From the point of view of human existence, what we commonly term "culture" is the result of man's transformation of nature, a result which stands apart from his consciousness but from which these transformations originally flowed. In other words, it is through the active confrontation of matter by mind that culture and thought are produced and that history itself is made possible; it sets in motion the historical process, within which mind undergoes refinement and progresses toward the ultimate perfection of the "Absolute Idea." Culture and thought are thus the objectified forms of mind within the historical process, of primal mind alienated in nature. The state of alienation is thus a condition for the fulfillment of mind, perhaps even for its self-recognition. Like the Judeo-Christian God in the Book of Genesis, the primal mind is not only moved to creation but also to the contemplation of its own work.

I have attempted this summary of Hegel's phenomenology in which the concept of alienation features because it is central to my argument. From Hegel's abstruse dialectics, we can retain the notion of alienation as the principle of all becoming or, more simply, as the moving power of the historical process. In cultural terms, it implies a willed movement out of the self and a purposive quest for new horizons of life and of experience.

In the historical context of present African development, we may now ask, Alienation for what, and in what direction? I will answer that question unequivocally: as a matter of practical necessity, we have no choice but in the direction of Western culture and civilization. If the answer is unequivocal, it is not meant to be taken unilaterally, for I am aware that my answer needs to be hedged round with all sorts of qualifications, some of which, I hope, will become apparent in my conclusion. But for the moment, let me consider one aspect of Western civilization on which there is hardly any dissent as to its importance for us, namely, science and technology. The general consensus is summed up in the expression "transfer of technology" which denotes a current obsession.

But there is a naive assumption underlying the use of this expression, that we can domesticate science and technology by a quick arrangement of rapid industrialization: we buy and install machines, train the manpower, and all will be well. I am even leaving out of account here the problems of capital and finance which come into the question and are far from negligible.

I am afraid this will not do, for there is more to science and technology than machines and their manipulation—there is the scientific spirit itself, which governs the whole functioning of the scientific and technological civilization we now wish to appropriate. It so happens that what we now recognize as the scientific spirit is the product of a whole movement of ideas by which what we now refer to as the West sought to understand man and the universe: the ground for modern science was a matter of historical fact prepared by the development of Western philosophy.

The outstanding good fortune of Western civilization was to have cultivated the deductive method which was elaborated in the philosophy of ancient Greece, and to have made it the foundation for its entire approach to the world. For all the distinction that is commonly made today between philosophy and science, modern science not only owes its existence to the fortuitous development of the deductive method, it is made possible by the application of this method to the universe of phenomena and experience. It is not only in mathematics that this observation holds true, but in all the natural sciences. The very definition of a science is that it is systematic, even systemic, that it displays order in its procedures and in its results. It is not only observation and description that make a science, but the organization of empirical data into an intelligible order. The inductive method is incompletely prosecuted without the final intervention of the deductive; the latter thus subsumes the former. The significance of this for contemporary scientific method, with its emphasis on structure and its recourse to model building, has been stressed by Popper and Kuhn. But it was recognized in the work that served as a manifesto for modern science in its infancy—Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum*, which was conceived, as its title indicates, as a restatement of Aristotle's *Organon*. It is no accident that the great biologist Linnaeus based his taxonomy on the order of concepts of formal logic.

This example will also serve to illustrate the misfortune of African civilization, the inability of our traditional world concept to break

free from the prison of the mythopoetic imagination. In Yoruba *ijala* poetry, for example, there is a wealth of information about the fauna and flora of our natural environment which is truly astonishing, but all this information is fitted into an exclusively poetic mode. I understand, too, that the operation of the Ifa corpus depends upon a sophisticated calculus, but nowhere in the culture is this calculus made explicit. This second example points to the real distinction between our traditional worldview and that of Western thought. It is not, as some anthropologists have maintained—and they are well represented in the collection of readings edited by Bryan Wilson under the title *Rationality*¹⁷—it is not a question of the absence of a rational mode of thought in the one, and its presence in the other, but rather that of its theoretical formulation. It is not rationality as such that distinguished Western civilization but its logic of rationality.

Thus, while we have been content to celebrate the universe, Western man has been engaged in analyzing it as well. This approach bred a tough-mindedness that became a moral value in Europe, and is well expressed in the motto that Leonardo da Vinci adopted for all his activities as both artist and scientist: "ostinato rigore," which can be translated as "stubborn application." That motto was to turn out to be emblematic not only for the internal effort of development in Europe but also for the Europeans' dealings with the rest of the world. From the Renaissance onward, as Europe became increasingly conscious of its power, its civilization assumed an aggressive posture. We are only too familiar with the rest of the story—the political, economic, and human consequences of the European colonial adventure. But there is an aspect that is not sufficiently attended to and which the Italian scholar, Carlo Cipolla, has illuminated with a wealth of fine detail in his book *European Culture and Overseas Expansion*.¹⁸ He points out that the decisive factor in the world supremacy of Europe was the stubborn application of intelligence and skill to the improvement of firearms, ocean-going vessels, and, above all, precision instruments; to the perfection of all these technical resources which finally gave the advantage to the Europeans in their onslaught upon other races, other peoples and nations, other civilizations. The terrible truth of our colonial experience, therefore, is that we were

17. Bryan Wilson, *Rationality* (Evanston, Ill.: Harper and Row, 1970).

18. Carlo Cipolla, *European Culture and Overseas Expansion* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books). See also J. H. Pary, *The Establishment of the European Hegemony: 1415–1715* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

victims of the European's developed sense of method. We were overwhelmed, in fact, by the objective force of the deductive people.

Now, there is a Yoruba saying which sums up admirably the moral of the story: *Adaniṣoro k'oni logbon*, which can be translated into English as "One who causes you injury also teaches you wisdom." The immediate lesson of our recent past of colonial domination can be extended to our contemporary situation. We are still in a position of weakness with regard to the West. If the term "neocolonialism" sometimes has a hysterical ring, it is not meaningless, for it refers to a concrete reality of contemporary international life. I hardly need to stress the point in the present situation of Nigeria today, in which every aspect of our lives is affected by our pathetic dependence upon the West. In a situation where all the ideas and resources we require for a modern economy—for the conditions of daily existence—are still controlled from the West, all loose talk about "transfer of technology" will be of no avail. We cannot do without a thorough-going revolution of the mind.

It is certainly not simplistic to affirm that this revolution can be brought about by an assiduous cultivation and internalization of those values enshrined in the scientific method—organization, discipline, order, and, not least, imagination. Imagination, because the scientific culture involves projection, calls upon qualities of mental resourcefulness which translate, in social terms, into a vision of the future.

The scientific revolution in Europe did not take place in a void but in a dynamic context of political, social and cultural development, and, especially in the eighteenth century, of intense intellectual debate which Paul Hazard has described as "crisis of consciousness."¹⁹ An intellectual like Voltaire was a passionate man: he could feel the changes taking place in his universe on his very pulse. Voltaire typifies the strengths and limitations of his age, the unbounded faith in the power of reason closed to him important avenues of the imagination and of human experience,²⁰ at the same time, the clarity of his moral perceptions gave meaning to his cosmopolitanism. He had a broad vision of humanity such that he was able to place the European world in the right perspective and to understand that its civilization did not have a monopoly of human achievement. Indeed, his attitude to the medieval past was much like that of the Frasers, the Tylors and

19. Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne* (Paris: Boivin et Cie, 1934).

20. Hence what amounts to the dismissal of Voltaire's work by Eric Auerbach in his celebrated work *Mimesis*, tr. W. R. Task (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).

the Levy-Bruhls of a later century with regard to non-Western cultures.

You may begin to wonder what all this has to do with us. I will answer directly by saying "everything", by drawing your attention to the Nigerian constitution which came into effect in October 1979. Without the intellectual ferment of eighteenth-century Europe, without the ideas of men like Locke, Montesquieu, Voltaire, and even Kant (in his moral philosophy summed up by the phrase "man as an end in himself"), we would have had a different constitution, perhaps even no constitution at all. At any rate, these ideas are embodied in the legal document which regulates the corporate life of all of us today. Take, for example, the notion of the independence of the judiciary. That notion has come down to us via America, from the principle of the separation of powers enunciated by Montesquieu in his *L'Esprit des Lois*. Notions such as these have become commonplace today, but they were forged in the heat of political and ideological battles fought in Europe. We have entered into the intellectual inheritance of eighteenth-century Europe as regards our political culture simply because its ideas have now become the property of all mankind.

We could do, then, with a broader vision of our humanity than cultural nationalism in its present emphasis proposes to us. If we can accept that the scientific and technological civilization which has come down to us, historically, from Europe can improve the quality of our lives, if we can accept that our modern institutions should be based on political and social ideas articulated elsewhere, there is no reason why we should exclude from our acceptance other valuable areas of experience simply because of their association with Europe. There is no earthly reason why a professor at Ibadan who has mastered the mathematics of, let us say, Gauss, and enjoys the comfort of a Mercedes-Benz saloon, cannot extend the range of his satisfactions to include a Bach fugue. Between all those, there is a historical and cultural, if not a structural, connection, which can be embraced by a single sensibility. In my view, our not altogether hypothetical professor could do with a little more alienation.

Let me refer to another of our proverbs which says that one should not point the left index at one's father's house. Nothing I have said goes against the spirit of that proverb. I have not come to bury our traditional culture under a foolish scorn inspired by an alienated consciousness. Neither have I come to sing the praises of Western civilization, much less to justify its historical aggression upon us and to

endorse its ideology of the civilizing mission. As Aimé Césaire has said, "From colonization to civilization, the distance is infinite."²¹ Nothing I have said is meant to confirm the White man in his racial and cultural arrogance. The scientific and technological supremacy of Europe was a historical phenomenon that was both particular and contingent, marked by all the vicissitudes of human experience. European civilization did not spring forth fully formed from the brain of a providential God but was shaped over time, often under dramatic circumstances that could well have deflected its course in a direction other than the one it was eventually to pursue.

There are, indeed, interesting parallels between this development and our historical experience and present situation. Like us, the early Europeans were conquered—in their case by the Romans. They were colonized, exploited, and even enslaved. They were later Christianized, I should know something about this, for my Irish teachers did not tire of reminding me that it was St. Gregory, the patron saint of the school I attended in Lagos, who sent the first Christian missionaries to England. These early Europeans were dispossessed culturally, and with time whole populations even lost their indigenous languages—you can't be alienated further than that—so that they began to speak pidgin forms of Latin which have evolved into the Romance language of today. In the all-important area of literacy, they learnt everything from the Romans as, indeed, in other areas such as civil works and architecture. When the fact is remembered that the Romans considered these people savages and barbarians, the later pretensions of European ethnocentrism and racism appear in all their hollowness: as the products of a monumental amnesia.

Some eminent European scholars and philosophers seem to have been acutely affected by this malady. For example, Max Weber, in the introduction to the final edition of his classic work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, practically makes the staggering claim that all worthwhile human achievement has been the work of Europeans. The philosopher Martin Heidegger has also affirmed with a dogmatism that goes against all the principles of his discipline that philosophy is, by its very essence, a European phenomenon.²² But we must be clear what we mean by the word "European" in this context,

21. Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1955), 10.

22. See Heidegger's *What is Philosophy?* trans. Jean Wilde and William Kluback (New York, 1958); Paul de Man offers a critique and refutation of Heidegger's affirmation in his *Blindness and Insight*, 2d ed. (London: Methuen, 1983).

and whether the ancient Greeks can be considered European in the modern sense of the word. For it seems likely, from what comes through of Plato's personality in *The Republic*, that he would have recoiled from the suggestion that he should live among the ancestors of Weber and Heidegger with the classical Greek equivalent of Frazer's celebrated remark, "God Forbid!"

Joseph Conrad by the way, seems to have been affected much less than the Europeans of his time, despite appearances to the contrary. In *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, there is an evocation of the Thames estuary as it would have appeared to the Romans, this evocation placed in symbolic parallel to that of the Congo river later in the work. This double evocation of two ages of imperialism, far removed in time and place, in Conrad's short novel, makes the point I'm trying to put across here—that of the strange forgetfulness of the European racists and of the historical and moral horror it has engendered both for us and the European colonizer.

The fact remains that the civilization we now associate with Europe was originally a derivation, and as it developed it continued to assimilate elements from other world civilizations. It is surely one of the greatest ironies of history that gunpowder, which later gave Europe such immense power, was originally a Chinese invention.

The contribution of Africa itself to Western civilization is far from negligible. It is now generally accepted that ancient Egypt exercised considerable influence upon the early civilization of Greece. Moreover, African philosophers have made individual contributions to the conceptual elaboration of Western civilization all through the centuries—St. Augustine of Hippo being the most eminent. In our own century, our traditional art and music have provoked a remarkable revolution in Western aesthetics, the effects of which have been more far-reaching than is generally realized. The visual landscape of Europe is still being transformed by the influence of modern art on architecture and technical design, an influence that goes right back to the impact of African sculpture on artists like Modigliani, Braque, Picasso, and Ferdinand Léger. Indeed, modern technology seems to have found in African art its most adequate mode of presentation: the very organization of volume, shapes, and lines in the manufactured objects we all handle everyday has benefited immensely from the absorption of the formal principles of African art into European aesthetics. You only have to compare nineteenth-century designs to those of the twentieth century to realize the simplifying effect of the application of these principles, and the gain in functionality it has effected. (How

strange, then, that your ordinary Westernized African cannot suffer the presence of an African mask in his sitting room, side by side with his videorecorder! We must not forget, too, that African labor and resources went into the building of the material prosperity of the West. In many ways, therefore, we have a claim upon Western civilization, as well as a considerable stake in it, as the instrument for the necessary transformation of our world. It is in our interest to make good that claim, to adopt strategies that will make our stake in that civilization pay handsome dividends. We cannot do this if we continue to be burdened by the complexes implanted in us under colonialism, and which are only intensified by cultural nationalism. If the Japanese had been deterred by the insults constantly hurled at them by the Europeans during the last century, they would not have been where they are today: as we all know, the yellow peril has become with time the yellow paradigm.

Let me conclude these reflections by going back to the essential point of my argument, which has led me to a positive evaluation of the concept of alienation. I have tried to argue with specific reference to our situation that the phenomenon of alienation in its positive aspect is the generating principle of culture, the condition of human development. There is no society, no civilization that has not experienced alienation in one form and to some degree of the other. Our present experience of alienation stems directly from our historical encounter with Europe, and from our continuing relationship with a civilization that, in its present form, was forged in that continent, and which, therefore, holds out a special interest for us. We cannot ignore the fact that the transforming values of contact with this civilization have produced the present context of our collective life, if we are to get a mental handle upon the process of transition in which we are involved. The very tensions and conditions of stress of this process would have been beneficial if they helped to concentrate our minds both wonderfully and intensely upon the nature of our alienation.

The necessary effort of understanding our alienation and coming to terms with it justifies all forms of scholarship devoted to European culture and Western civilization, considered as a totality. Indeed, we have been so involved in this civilization that to consider it as something apart from us is to set it up as an abstraction. Our ancestors may not have been the Gauls, the Saxons, the Visigoths, or what have you, but that is not because we are not descended racially from them but because we know practically nothing about what they did or

thought, and it doesn't really matter for us. On the other hand, the Hellenic and Roman civilizations have a direct significance for us, as much as for any European. Indeed, in one particular respect, classical Greek civilization has a more immediate interest for us. Its philosophers were confronted with the same dualism of modes of thought in a context of social change and even of political instability that we are now confronted with, and by grappling at the level of ideas with the real problems of existence which this situation posed for their age, with the difficulties of creating a viable society such as we now experience, they made the conceptual breakthrough responsible in large part for the scientific and technological civilization which defines the modern world.

This reference points to the final significance of my argument arising from my particular involvement with the discipline of modern language studies—the conviction of the universality of human experience on which it is based. To study another language is to assume that you will get to understand it, and in the perspective of modern language studies that the culture it reflects can speak to your mind and imagination in ways which may be different from those of your original culture but which can still be meaningful to you. In fact, all human history confirms this assumption: language and culture know no boundary, at least not significantly, and the reality of the contemporary world, the “global village” in the expression sent into circulation by Marshall McLuhan and now become current, has tended to reinforce our awareness of a common humanity.

Thus, it is significant that in the Humanities today the dominant trend of scholarship has been inspired by a new universalism, a direct result of contemporary historical experience. The Linguistics of Chomsky, the Structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, and the Semiology of Barthes have no other final objective than to demonstrate the proposition that different languages and different cultures are varied forms of realizations, varied modes of transformation, of a universal grammar and of a universal structure of experience. The philosophical anthropology that informs contemporary scholarship in the Humanities envisages the essential unity of the human mind, no longer in terms of its rational function but from the point of view of its faculty of symbolization.

The notion of the universality of human experience does not, however, imply uniformity—quite the contrary—but it does mean that cultures maintain their dynamism only through their degree of ten-

sion between the particular and the universal. Alienation, in this view, cannot mean total loss; the fulfillment it promises resides precisely in the degree of integration it helps us to achieve. In its creative potential, alienation signifies the sensitive tension between the immediate closeness of the self and the reflected distance of the other.

V. Y. MUDIMBE is the Ruth F. DeVarney
Professor of Romance Studies and professor
of comparative literature at Duke University.

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To the memory of Alioune Diop and Jacques Howlett

Integer vitae scelensque purus
non eget Mauris iaculis neque arcu
nec venenatis gravida sagittis,
Fusce, pharetra,
sive per Syrtis itere aestuosas
sive facturus per inhospitale
Caucasum vel quae loca fabulosus
lambit Hydaspes.

Q. Horatius Flaccus, *Carminum*,
liber 1.22.1-8

Nous nous sommes, je crois, dépêchés de
juger les nations qui vivent encore sous la
main de la nature, dans la crainte qu'elles
ne nous jugeassent. La Révolution est l'ap-
pel bien marqué contre ce jugement in-
nique, et nous nous efforçons de devenir
sauvages pour cesser de l'être...

Lavallée cité par M. Ozouf, p. 216,
in A. Brenguière, M. Ozouf, and M. N.
Bourguet, "Naissance d'une ethnographie
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