

My hope for Burundi

“Every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul **an inferiority complex has been created** by the death and burial of its local cultural originality finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation”

While Frantz Fanon is specifically addressing the language issue, the inferiority complex of which he speaks manifests itself in so many ways within our societies. An example is the constant need to resemble the other by adopting their culture and way of life, to build exact replicas of societies that are considered advanced or ‘civilized’, to conform to their theories on the management of societies, among other things.

A few days ago, I stumbled upon an interview of a wise elder of ours (Burundian), Father Adrien Ntabona, on the phenomenon of acculturation that affects our postcolonial societies. In it, he emphatically denounced the participation in this phenomenon of our elites in Burundi who, in their quest for “modernity,” found nothing better than to relegate the common and sole local language of Burundians (Kirundi) to the background, especially in our education system. Father Ntabona profoundly explains that such practices can be explained by the existence of a dominant culture and a dominated culture.

By his reasoning, the consequences of our mental surrender to the existing world order became equally appalling to me. I especially find most appalling the inability of most elites to conceive Africa as an interconnected community of peoples with a common history – of oppression and struggle – where achievements and failures, benefits and burdens, are shared and felt beyond the present artificial borders.

The second is the inability of this elite to appreciate any

progress made on our continent to confront this cloning project that Father Ntabona speaks of when he denounces unmitigated acculturation. Let me illustrate by way of an anecdote.

I was speaking recently to a Burundian friend who came to visit me in Rwanda. She made this odd remark: "You speak of Rwanda with such passion. Looks like you're not one of ours anymore. Moreover, not everything is perfect in Rwanda; they also make a big deal of every little progress (barirata) and they display contempt towards us, Burundians".

Several thoughts raced through my mind at that moment.

The "them versus us" mentality

Why should celebrating progress in Rwanda, or in any other African country, be perceived as betrayal by my compatriots? Was it because I fled to Rwanda and my friend still lived in Burundi, I wondered. However, I quickly dismissed this thought because neither of us is a fervent supporter of the present government in Burundi. In fact, her assessment of it may be more critical than mine, which is far from mild. So, I had to look elsewhere. Why this hostile attitude to a fellow African country that is making positive progress whose benefits are likely to spread to its neighbors?

In most decent societies, and even in close extended families or close knit organizations, celebrating excellence is a motivational tool that inspires others to emulate it. Indeed, as I regretted having brought up the subject of Rwanda to my friend, I recalled how the intention was to inspire her so that she may carry with her back to Burundi some hope that someday things would be better despite the individual and collective despondence that most of us carry in our hearts whether we are inside or outside the country. The moment I speak of Rwanda thoughts always bring me back to Burundi. It gives me hope for my country and this hope helps me to live

another day and to be hopeful about the future. The attitude is not to despair.

Why Rwanda, though? For starters, it's where I live now. Secondly, more than two decades ago Rwanda was devastated by war and genocide against the Tutsi. Ethiopia inspires me too. In the same time span it recovered from being among the three poorest countries in the world and it was ravaged by famine. So does Angola. This is a country that had been destroyed by a quarter century of armed conflict. I see progress.

In other words, those whose countries appear caught up in perpetual cycles of violence should draw optimism from the African countries that are making progress, especially those coming out of similar strife.

Who is excused from perfection?

The other thought that kept lodged in my mind was the imperative for perfection, "But Rwanda isn't perfect!" Fanon's psychoanalysis of the colonized underscores that when the proponents of Western mimicry refer to their preferred ideal, the tendency is to minimize the problems that they observe. Whether it is the rise of racism in Europe or the treatment of Black Americans in the United States, or the glaring social inequalities arising from the models they so cherish, nothing seems to cause excessive outrage. There is no reference to such societies not being perfect and the lack of perfection is normal and to be excused because nothing is ever perfect.

Alas! The slightest transgression in the African countries of the colonized obscures any other consideration and justifies the dismissing of progress made in the material circumstances of their people as insignificant.

The same set of people who evaluate Africa and ascribe to it terminology that emphasizes its worse elements turn around and evaluate the West by focusing on its best elements, and invariably suggesting these as constituting models to inspire

the former. For Africa, they see nothing as ever good enough and a place deserving condemnation; for the West they see things that might not be perfect at the moment but that will get better soon because whatever shortcomings only make sense as an exception to the rule that must be given benefit of doubt for the moment as “work in progress.”

The paradox of the oppressed, as Fanon might have noted, is to extend the benefit of doubt and trust to a distant force and to deny the same to those in proximity. Indeed, what better way of convincing Africans that something about them is defective and that they need the help of the enlightened to right things, as my Brother Lonzen Rugira explains so well in his article “Why prejudice against Africa persists,” that tackles our collective inability, with a few exceptions on the continent, to describe our present and imagine a future without a European reference.

An occupied mind is insecure. Here I speak frankly to my Burundian compatriots. Rwandans hold no contempt towards us Burundians or towards any other Africans. Perhaps it's time for us to look closely in the mirror: the embarrassment that we have drawn from our present predicament shouldn't cloud our judgement. I bear witness to the fact that most enlightened Rwandans are aware that a peaceful and stable neighbor like Burundi is paramount for their security, wellbeing, and the sustainability of their national project.

Once we have internalized this reality, then we can project the resultant confidence to the rest of Africa and ultimately internally towards rebuilding our own country. Recognizing that Rwanda and other African countries that are performing modestly well, however “imperfect” they may be, is the only way to survive the straightjacket of the individual and collective despair that Peter Nkurunziza has placed us into.

After all, its “work in progress.”