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THE FLORAL GAP:
WHERE ARE THE FLOWERS IN AFRICAN CULTURE?

by

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Modes of communication between cultures differ not only in terms of verbal language but also symbolically. The use of flowers is one mode of communication in civilizations which range from Japan to Iran, from the gardens of the Palace of Versailles in France to Hindu weddings in Jairpur. Western civilization as a whole uses flowers for occasions which also range from bereavement to Valentine Day. Flowers in the West articulate grief at a funeral and celebrate romance in courtship.

But how universal is the use of flowers as a mode of expression? Do Africans use flowers as language to any significant degree? Or is there a floral gap in African culture? Let us look at this issue more closely.

The Floral Gap: Aesthetics of the Environment

The Green movements of recent decades have partly been inspired by the aesthetics for conservation. The concept of "endangered species" has been a deference for biodiversity, rooted in the belief that a world with fewer species of animals and a smaller range of plants would be a less beautiful world.

On this issue of natural beauty one question which has arisen is whether the love of flowers is culturally relative. Jack Goody, the distinguished Cambridge anthropologist, has strongly argued that although Africa is rich in plants, African culture is not fascinated by flowers.

> …the peoples of Africa did not grow
> domestic flowers, nor yet did they make
> use of wild ones to any significant
> extent in worship, in gift giving or in
> the decoration of the body… But what is perhaps
> more surprising is that flowers,
> neither domesticated nor wild, play
> so little part in the domain of
> design or the creative arts.[1]

Jack Goody goes on to observe that African sculpture provides no striking floral designs. And even in African poetry, songs and proverbs, flowers are relatively absent unless there is a prior stimulus of Islam or some other external aesthetic.

George Bernard Shaw was once visited by a flower-loving aristocratic fan. The lady visitor observed that there were no flowers inside Shaw's home. "Mr. Shaw, I am surprised to see no flowers in your beautiful home. Don't you love flowers, Mr. Shaw?"

Bernard Shaw responded: "Indeed I do love flowers, dear lady. I also love children. But I do not go around chopping off their heads for display in my living room!" Shaw was asserting that a genuine love of flowers required our leaving them to prosper as plants in the soil. There is a sense in which African attitudes to flowers is organic in the same sense.

Yet this does not explain the more limited use of the imagery of flowers in either African plastic art or African verbal arts. Where are the African poetic equivalents of William Wordsworth and his fascination with daffodils, or his sense of wonder about a violet? :

A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye!
Fair as a star when only one
Is shining in the sky

Shakespeare urges us not to attempt to beautify what is already naturally beautiful–least of all a flower near perfection:

To gild refined gold, to paint the lily,
To throw a perfume on the violet
To smooth the ice, or add another hue
Unto the rainbow…
Is wasteful and ridiculous excess.[2]

An English pastor in the eighteenth century was challenged to prove the existence of God. He responded, "Behold the rose, the lily, the violet! Behold the peacock!" He invoked natural beauty as proof of the existence of God.

In African poetry and song is there an equivalent use of flowers as metaphors "to point a moral or adorn a tale"?

If it is true that African culture underutilizes flowers for either art or ritual, what are the underlying social and aesthetic reasons? One possible explanation would take us back to Bertrand Russell's assertion that "civilization was born out of the pursuit of luxury." It is possible to see civilization as a relentless quest for beauty. It is a sense of "civilization" which produced the Taj Mahal, the sunken churches of Lalibela, the Palace of Versailles, and the spectacular temples of Abu Simbel at Aswan built by Ramses II. Such splendor illustrates what Bertrand Russell regarded as "the pursuit of luxury".

Before European colonization were the cultures of equatorial Africa inadequately motivated to pursue luxury? Was that why there were so few indigenous palaces and monuments outside the Nile Valley? Was the psychology of not constructing beautiful structures related to the psychology of inadequate attention to flowers?

Another possible explanation for the "deflowering of African cultures" is that so many flowers on the equator were potential fruit in the process of formation. A planted seed begins to germinate into a plant; the plant produces a bud; the bud blossoms into a flower, and the flower culminates into a fruit. Africa celebrates the end product [the fruit] rather than the intermediate stage (the flower). Africa may be poor in names for flowers. In most indigenous cultures there is no tropical equivalent of such range of

names as, the lily, the violet, the tulip, the orchid, the daffodil. But African languages are fully competitive in names of fruit:

> *--chungwa, chenzi, embe, bungo, kitoria, nazi, kanju, ndizi, kunazi, fenesi, buyu and many others.*

More recent African loan words for fruit (usually borrowed from Arabic) include *nanasi* (pineapple) and *tufaha* (apple).

In the history of Islam the garden and ecological beauty were initially assigned to paradise in the Hereafter where rivers, lakes, flowers and beautiful women awaited the faithful. However, in the history of Islam on Planet Earth the heritage of flowers initially came more from Persia than from the Arabian Peninsula. The heritage then spread to North Africa. What came to be regarded as distinctively Islamic gardens developed in Tunisia in the ninth century of the Christian era. Jack Goody refers to the evidence of a Flemish traveler in about the year 1470, who seemed to have counted four thousand individually owned, irrigated gardens around the city of Tunis – "full of fruit and with flowers perfuming the air."[3]

A cost-benefit analysis needs to be done as to whether Islam's encouragement of gardens and discouragement of organic representation is compatible with the ecological pillar of the Global Ethic. Similarly is Africa's coolness towards flowers and Africa's warmth towards fruit ecologically friendly? Such aspects of Islamic and African cultures need to be studied and evaluated from the perspective of the Fifth Pillar of Wisdom (Ecological).

African cultures which have been stimulated by other civilizations into floral appreciation may build upon what they have borrowed from others. Swahili culture in

East Africa was initially a creative synthesis of elements from African civilization and from Islam. Swahili use of jasmine on wedding nights has been intended as an aphrodisiac for the successful consummating of marriage. Rose petals may also be spread on the bridal bed on the wedding night. But the Swahili words for jasmine and the rose are clearly borrowed from Arabic – *yasmini* and *waridi*. In Coast Swahili the name for a flower which is in perfume only at night carries the direct Arabic name *rahatu el-layl*, bliss of the night. In the English language a version of the same flower is called Queen of the Night.

After Swahili culture was initiated into floral appreciation, it developed its own words for other flowers in the wider Swahili environment. The new floral names in the aesthetically enriched Swahili culture have included the following:

> *Mlangi-langi, kiluwa, asmini-boko, mhanuni, mkadi, msama-piti and rehani*

The vocabulary of most other African languages have a **floral deficit** – a shortage of names for specific flowers.

There are two kinds of appreciation of flowers – aesthetic and instrumental. Aesthetic floral appreciation is purely artistic, enjoying the flowers either for their visual beauty or for their scent and smell. Instrumental floral appreciation values flowers for such purposes as healing and herbal medicine.

On the aesthetic side, Africans are more likely to enjoy flowers for their smell than for their appearance. But even more widespread in Africa is instrumental floral appreciation. Aspects of herbal medicine in Africa include the healing properties of some flowers. For example a flower called mranaha is widely used in East Africa by those

who suffer from asthma. Mranaha may be smoked like a cigarette or smoked in a pipe, or served on hot charcoal as incense.

Some African languages have poetic descriptions of particular flowers rather than specific names for each. In the English language such as descriptive name for a flower, is best illustrated by ***sunflower***, "a flower which imitates the sun in appearance".

If African cultures are to be floralized in the future, poets and songwriters will have to bear the initial burden. Literature and music may have to respond more evocatively to the imagery of Africa's own floral heritage.

ENDNOTES

[1] Details to follow

[2] King John, Act IV Scene I

[3] Jack Goody, The Culture of Flowers Ibid, p. 105