Toyin Falola


In The Humanities in Africa, Toyin Falola sets a broad agenda for the humanities in the African continent. The author makes references to and, at times, provides detailed synopsis of the works of such notable African and black leaders, activists, writers and thinkers as W.E. Du Bois, Kwame Nkrumah, J.E. Casely Hayford, Kenneth Kaunda, Julius Nyerere, and Steve Biko, among several others. While each of these early Africanists presented unique perspectives on the African condition and the place of the black race in the global system, all acknowledged the precarious situation of the black race in a world that has subjected blacks to the worst form of oppression from the period of Atlantic slave trade to the era of colonial exploitation and up to the present day.

In the 328-page book, we learn that the early African thinkers and leaders, while focusing on different strategies to liberate the black race, were unanimous in their assessment that “all blacks experienced a common history of suffering and struggles; their destiny is the same, and for them to overcome and solve all their problems, they must unite, and history and culture would form the basis of that unity” (p. 18). The author emphasized how “blackness” and the black race have been defined in very negative forms and “labels” by the same forces that were behind slavery and imperialism, leaving the black race to the unproductive task of constantly “explaining” or “defending” its place in the universe.

Having set a framework based on the foundations defined by early African thinkers, the book engages with the place of Africa in the contemporary global political economy – specifically, Africa’s place within the context of globalization and its accompanying injunction of free trade. The neoliberal ideas associated with globalization, such as the belief that markets will solve all of society’s problems, the need to privatize public enterprises and calls for limited government, are seen as forces of imperialism that would strengthen the hegemony of the West and exacerbate Africa’s already weak position in the global system. The book calls on the humanities in Africa to critically evaluate the past in order to understand the present and to work out appropriate strategies for Africa’s liberation as the only credible mission for the future. The author argues that globalization and free trade, although presented as a global agenda, represents nothing other than the national aspirations of a few countries. Therefore, some of the “tasks of the humanities in Africa is to understand the agenda of globalization, the problems represented by the forces and pressures of globalization . . . ” (p. 59). Irrespective of how it is presented to Africa, globalization
will not produce equal benefits to the rich and poor countries at the same time. The author makes the argument that given unequal starting points and widely different economic conditions between the industrialized nations and African countries, globalization and free trade would strengthen the economies of the West and further impoverish African countries that are encouraged to de-emphasize the “nation” and to see the world as one “global village”.

The well-written book contains a number of revised typical lectures and presentations delivered by the author at various universities across Nigeria. The lectures and presentations have a central theme that revolves around education and national development. The author calls on the universities to rise to the challenge of charting a new course of action that would produce real development and consequently liberate the black race from the shackles of oppression and deceit by the global North. The lectures chronicle, among others, the negative impacts of colonialism in Africa, especially its role in creating and sustaining “divisions” in the form of ethnicity, and its role in bequeathing weak state structures that continue to be a burden rather than facilitator of development. The universities must interrogate what the forces of imperialism have promoted as conventional wisdom or the “norm”, as these supposed norms are not value-neutral. What has been promoted as “mainstream”, “norm” or “conventional wisdom” are ideas, aspirations and conditions of one or a few nations promoted as universal truths; but these universalized norms have in-built values that reinforce the subjugation of the cultures and experiences regarded derisively as “others”. Liberation of the African continent and the black race in general must involve a heavy dose of questioning what has been promoted as the orthodoxy, and infusing the lived experiences, systems and cultures of the black race into the universal knowledge systems, not as “others”, but as part of the mainstream.

After a lucid analysis of how Africans and the black race in general have been defined in the most negative ways by the forces of oppression and imperialism, the author sets an ambitious agenda for the Humanities in Africa, urging the Humanities to bring to the fore how the Western hegemonic forces have continuously exploited Africa, especially as demonstrated through the triple evils of trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and neocolonialism, as well as the current but equally debilitating forces of globalization. The author concludes with a chapter devoted to the concept of “pluriversalism”, which denotes an academic orientation that places Africa at the centre, with a “clearly-defined agenda to attain an intellectual autonomy in the service of economic and political liberation” (p. 265).

According to Professor Falola, pluriversalism must attain an academic autonomy that sets it apart from the universalism already stretched out to