New Perspectives on the Clash of Cultures in Africa: Lessons from the Cameroonian Experience

Thirty years have elapsed since the majority of Sub-Saharan African nations achieved their political independence from European colonizers, but the European cultural influence still dominates many aspects of life in the former African colonies. Instead of diminishing, these alien cultures have, in some cases, continued to wax stronger and stronger in spite of the popularly envisaged African drive for authentic cultural integration throughout the continent. Hence, one still sees in Africa today some form of clash of cultures similar to that which accompanied the European colonization of Africa in the late nineteenth-century. The only major difference between the clashes of the colonial days and those of today is that whereas many members of the African elite fought against the imposition of European ways in the colonial days, the fight today is fostered mainly by Westernized Africans who, even though they might not necessarily be against traditional African cultures, are generally in favor of promoting the cultures of those Western countries that gave them some form of education. In other words, the clash of cultures in modern Africa is not just one between African and foreign ways, but mainly among various imported traditions which are competing among themselves all over the continent.

Although parts of the African elite have bitterly denounced aspects of foreign cultures in their midst, it must be noted that foreign and African cultures do not necessarily always clash – it is realized that there

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is nothing wrong with borrowing from some aspects of other people’s cultures as long as these are deemed beneficial to the society adopting them. But some African leaders today have become enslaved to certain foreign ways and try to rule in a manner deemed appropriate by a people whose culture these leaders admire. As a result, many foreign cultural traits in Africa still operate basically as they did in the colonial days, that is, by being imposed from the top rather than allowing the population to decide for itself.

Judging from the current wave of unrest and political agitations in Africa, one would agree with scholars like Dube and Adedeji that by the year 1990 the African dreamed world had been shattered as its hard-won independence failed to usher the promised era of plenty and prosperity. Ultimately, with a trail of unrealized utopias behind, the promises of self-contained development lost their appeal as the modernizing elite, in many instances, hopelessly watched its planning and development strategies falter and fail. This certainly caused anguish to the African peoples whose hopes and rising expectations were turned into a nightmare of mounting frustration.

Many scholarly works on this subject explain the changes taking place in Africa today mainly from politico-economic perspectives, but, given the complex and multi-dimensional nature of this crisis, it is difficult for such an approach to answer all the questions on the subject. Therefore, some form of interdisciplinary approach to the study of these changes would offer better material for analyzing the current African problems. This explains my desire to broaden the concept of change in Africa and include the clash of cultures on the continent as a whole, while using the Cameroon Republic as case study.

Since the coming of Europeans, clashes have occurred not only between African and Western cultures but, more importantly, among various competing Western cultures operating in the continent and, to some extent, among the various indigenous cultures, each determined to gain prominence and respectability over the others. Nowhere else in the continent are conditions for such a clash more visible as they are in