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Speech by Wole Soyinka "The AVOIDABLE TRAP of CULTURAL RELATIVISM"
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It is easy enough to recognize what is meant by the expression 'cultural diversity'. That phrasing opens up culture, acknowledges the richness of man's creative existence and palpable manifestations of his inner sensibilities, his aesthetic impulses and sometimes even his spiritual intuitions. It conjures up a panoply of creativity, limitless, an expansion of the human horizon in ways that amplify even the most mundane aspects of the various activities involved in the reproducing of human existence. So far, so good. Unfortunately, another expression has crept into global usage, one that has done its best to substitute for an uncomplicated, thought multi-textured activity of human existence. That phrase of usurpation parades itself as –cultural relativism. And in what context does this substitute intrude itself? Naturally, in the much abused domain of Human Rights. So what exactly is Cultural Relativism?

A trap of course, a cunning device meant to lure the unwary into the counterfeit face of mutual tolerance of, and respect between cultures, that is, breed an attitude that legitimizes any form of conduct, as long as it can be attributed to cultural usage. It is a cynical design disguised as a mechanism for the promotion of the virtues of Diversity, deployed mostly by men in a position of power and their apologists. We encountered it, for instance, among the justifications for the creation of Bantustans in the apartheid era of South Africa.

Humanity is of course diverse. So, logically, are the products of his hand and mind, and sensibilities – culture above all else. Is it however possible to conceive of the relativity of one member of the human species to another? That would be to endorse the Nazi doctrine of racial selectivity and thus, of disposable humanity. The innate properties of each human unit, what collectively defines us as social beings in contrast to the rest of the animal world, cannot be relative – not if we accept that all sentient beings, despite their diversity, meet at a common destination known as humanity, and that all its members are indeed born with such innate properties. What circumstances of birth, upbringing, opportunities and environment make of each is a different matter, but cannot be considered fundamental to the worth and validity of each individual, and thus to his or her entitlements from, and responsibility to the rest of society, in the pursuit of self-development and social relationships. The issue comes down, as always, to a contest between power and freedom, or human volition, and the desire of the former to encroach upon, and dominate the latter. Thus is laid that red herring, cultural relativism, evoked to make a hierarchical distinction between spaces of power and spaces of freedom. Part of our social responsibility is to come to the defence of the latter. Freedom, above all else, is guaranteed by a plurality of choices.

The trap of cultural relativism is well baited. On the surface, it parades itself as an

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expression of solidarity among cultures, an affirmation of the right to differing expressions of cultural production, social mores and values. It is hinged on the quite unassailable need for recognition of differences in historical formations, traditions and even strategies of development, the reality of which no one would reasonably argue against. Human society is shaped as much by climatic conditions – whose diversity also cannot be denied - as by history – including the origins of such societies, and the experience of external encounters. Cultural relativism claims to imbue us with a respect for these differences. In practice however – to cite extreme instances right away – it asks us to accept such barbarisms as 'honour killing' as justified by tradition, or dictatorship, even of the most brutal kind, as sanctified by a people's antecedent or ongoing experience, largely under duress, conveniently labeled political culture. It endorses the rights to discriminate between sexes, between races, and to accept the stratification of citizens on grounds of religious beliefs, colour of skin or gender.

Freedom, to which I have already briefly referred, is bound up in dignity. When you want to dehumanize an individual, you first rob your target of his or her dignity. In seeking to define dignity itself, all we need do is look for certain attributes, the lack of which – in contrast to the animal world is easily recognized as a denial of dignity. One immediate component of dignity quickly suggests itself, perhaps because it is so constantly contested. Indeed, its negative face is upheld as a necessity of governance, that component being -volition. The right to choose, the right to social and political choices. The most current, materially and humanly wasteful pursuit of this denial is what we are witnessing in Zimbabwe today, or was endured in Nigeria this past year. It is this denial that provokes perennial contestations. It unleashed a brutal detonation in Kenya only last year, continues to unravel the nation of Zimbabwe, and most recently brutalised the Plateau State – again in Nigeria - where nearly five hundred people perished within a matter of twenty-four hours. These are consequences of that denial of the fundamental right of volition –the right to choose. Volition is integral to the social dignity of man, and its denial often attains these abysmal depths where, in a vicious cycle, humanity reverts to worse than animal conduct in the struggle to retrieve its stolen dignity.

In addition to volition, there are also those other active rights that are couched in negative terms, the "Don'ts" - – the right not to be subjected to cruel and degrading treatments such as torture, the right not to be discriminated against for whatever reasons - race, religion , ideology or politics, physical attributes or circumstances of birth. We can debate ad infinitum the extent and limitations of these rights, being duty bound, realistically, to take into our recognition such parameters as where the rights of the individual conflict with those of the larger entity – the community, society or nation, or indeed conflict with the rights of other individuals. But such indeed, constitutes the logical basis of these fundamental human rights – the negotiation of social arrangements that serve to arbitrate between those individual rights on the one hand, and the rights of the rest on the other.

Like natural justice, those rights are innate and, at some point in the development of society, become recognized and codified as such –and this includes pre-literate communities. Oral traditions have served as a vehicle for the transmission of these rights, both directly, or as narratives whose deductions are affirmations of the fundamental rights of the individual within the community. All these references

serve to remind us that culture itself is not static, that it transforms itself with increased mastery of the material of environment. This is what makes culture a constantly engrossing feature of the human adventure, enjoins us reach out for guiding concepts such as cultural connectivity, rather than cultural relativism which only promotes a hermetic, separatist tendency. Culture in the horse-and-carriage, camel and caravan, or timber raft and sailing boat era is not exactly the same as the culture in an era of space travel.

We have to address those societies and states which either fail to recognize this, or elect to evoke entitlement to cultural relativism in order to undermine or dismiss the universalist entitlement of human rights. I take it that it is the frustrating awareness of such conduct that makes it necessary for gatherings such as this, time after time, to remind such time-trapped, pristine pools of atavism that resistance to such anti-human notions is a human constant – if not now, then tomorrow. These rights are not conceded by other mortals, but lie at the very basis of the separation of the human species from its brutish, predatory cousins that inhabit the primordial jungles of the world. It lies behind the declaration of the Chief Scribe of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, of his expectations of a twenty-first century world. I quote:

"I believe that the twenty-first century will be defined by the commitment it devotes to the dignity and sanctity of every human life"

Kofi Annan, like his predecessors, dealt with governments. He was only too keenly aware of members of that governing club, who, among other ploys, constantly invoke responsibility for the collective security of all, in unusual times, in order to nibble away, at first imperceptibly, then ravenously, at structures of rights that have long been established, even in their founding constitutions. When, as operates today in the United States, you pass a Patriot Act that includes the right to intrude, unnecessarily into the private lives of citizens, to detain without due recourse to the law courts, you are not many light years behind those who legislate torture, ransom taking etc. all in the name of national security.

It all boils down to this: a reluctance, or outright refusal, to create an environment for the diversity of views in society, and on any subject under the sun. Thus has arisen the specious doctrine of cultural relativism in response to the outer world — *our culture does not permit the exercise of dissent, or plurality of views*. End of discourse. Cultural relativism has been at the base of the conduct of those societies that openly adopt and implement policies of discrimination as a fundamental condition of state, manifested in the state's regarding of, and conduct towards sectors of its own community. Our culture, they tell the world, is different, and our traditions remain sacrosanct. Examine such traditions carefully, and you discover that all it means is that one sector of society is privileged, in both trivial and profound ways, at the expense of another, a state policy that appropriates an infallible status onto itself.

In the more authoritarian instances, this 'immunity clause' is said to derive from the very scriptures that preach human equality in the sight of God – not for nothing is

it said that the devil is adept at quoting the scriptures in his own cause. George Orwell captured this egregious ploy in that memorable formulation of his *Animal Farm* placed in the mouth of the four-legged ideologue, in defence of the contradictions between precept and practice: *all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.*

Let history be our teacher. The legacies of humanity's mottled past still inform and indeed dominate the present with murderous zeal. The refusal of divergence in human thought lay at the brutal career of the Holy Roman Empire with its diabolical agency of the Inquisition, also of its rival Muslim world, not forgetting the secular complement of both - the atheistic empire of communism. This refusal continues to take its toll till today, especially within the Muslim world where irreconcilable disputes over dogma exact a dearer price, internally, than even against declared infidels and other nominated enemies of God. Forgotten, or more likely simply ignored, is the calm wisdom of the Muslim sage from Mali, Tierno Bokar, known as the Sage of Bandiagara, who preached that Truth is threefold: there is my truth, there is your truth, and there is The Truth. There is of course also the possibility of a fourth, which is that there is No truth, an anarchic condition that leaves the world floundering in a moral void, where even Human Rights become a casualty, yet may be considered preferable to the conduct of the fanatical, absolutist truth enforcers of our times. Despite such mutations, nonetheless, the quest for an Ultimate, Inviolable truth, undertaken peacefully, tolerantly and with the consciousness of human fallibility guarantees, at the very least, an enrichment of the world intellectually, creatively, culturally, and materially. The alternative route is responsible for what we witness today - mind-closure, material and human destructiveness, the impoverishment of discourse, and a retreat from true enlightenment. That right to seek enlightenment is the foundation of every universal human right.