



## SOCIAL WORK IN AFRICA: EXPLORING CULTURALLY RELEVANT EDUCATION AND PRACTICE IN GHANA

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## II. Cultural Identity

Disunity and noncooperation have been characteristics of black society. And this fact, more than anything else, helps in understanding not only why the Blacks eventually lost their battles with the whites, but also why even today they are still unable to deal with the white world. This situation of antagonism, self-hatred and attending disunity in the race is a matter of grave concern (Williams, 1987).<sup>1</sup>



### A. African culture and identity

In William's book (1987) on the destruction of black civilization, he links disunity of the race as a result of a loss of cultural identity in a world where the dominant culture has not been African. This identity crisis has historical roots reinforced through colonization and exploitation. The consequences are a continent of people still trying to find their way in a global world dominated by western influences. From early on, the continent has been an unknown entity with western writers and scholars

ignoring it, fearing it, intrigued by it, devaluing it, and speaking about it as the “heart of darkness” (Conrad, 1995). G.W.F. Hegel (1956) simplified African culture when he wrote:

Africa is no historical part of the world; it has no movements or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it – that is in its northern part – belong to the Asiatic or European World.... [W]hat we properly understand by Africa, is the unhistorical, undeveloped spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature and which had to be present here only as on the threshold of the World’s History. (p. 99)

Willinsky (1998) comments on Hegel’s attitude towards Africa: “The radical historical consequence of this Hegelian progression of consciousness is a world divided among people who live inside and outside history.... Hegel constructed his philosophy of history on this principle of inequitable participation in History, which is not a given of human experience; it is a privileged mode of being in the world” (p. 119). As Kuykendall (1993) states: “Hegel’s Philosophy of History is a philosophical treatise that disrespects Africa’s contribution to civilization.... [T]raditional African culture is very complex, and Hegel’s use of facts is not only questionable but shallow as well” (p. 580). A more accurate view of Africa is that it is one of the most vibrant continents with its history dating back to Nowe and Egypt (Williams, 1987). Despite what was believed and taught in the past through history lessons that were mainly Eurocentric, Africa had a complex and organized culture. It was a continent with many different micro-nations “brought together in a single entity, or macro-nation, by the colonial powers” (Maathai, 2009, p. 184). In her own personal journey of discovering her African identity and culture, Maathai (2009) learned that, unlike what she was taught in her African classroom, “much of what occurred in Africa before colonialism was good” (p. 161). She goes on to say the “people carried their cultural practices, stories and sense of the world around them in their oral traditions, which were rich and meaningful. They lived in harmony with the other species and the natural environment, and they protected that world” (pp. 161–62). Knowing

ones culture and being proud of that culture is essential to a positive cultural identity.

### *1. Understanding culture*

UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies (1982) defines culture as:

... the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social groups. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of human beings, value systems, traditions and beliefs.... [I]t is through culture that man expresses himself, becomes aware of himself, recognizes his incompleteness, questions his own achievements, seeks un-  
tiringly for new meanings and creates works through which he transcends his limitations. (p. 1)

McKenzie & Morrisette (2003) define culture as “ways of life, shared behaviour, social institutions, systems of norms, beliefs, values and world views that allow people to locate themselves within the universe and that give meaning to their personal and collective experience” (p. 259). Some people describe it simply as a people’s way of life, a collective way of thinking, feeling, and believing. It binds people together through a shared belief, customs, and values. Others see it as traditional customs and taboos, knowledge, morals and religion, etc. Professor Awedoba, a professor at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, stated that culture can also be the “customary usages, which have been institutionalized and acceptable to the majority of people, perhaps not everyone, but the majority of people.”

Culture is about the past, present, and future (Mammo, 1999). It is not about absolute uniformity. It doesn’t mean that all people of an ethnic group will behave exactly the same. It is learned and does not come to people automatically.

Culture is dialogue, the exchange of ideas and experiences and the appreciation of other values and traditions; it withers and dies in isolation.... [T]he universal cannot be postulated in the abstract by any single culture; it emerges from the experience of all the world's peoples as each affirms its own identity. Cultural identity and cultural diversity are inseparable. (UNESCO, 1982, p. 2)

Within any cultural group there are intercultural variations in the details of a particular cultural activity depending on gender, occupation, location, and groupings. In other words, the transmission, from one generation to another, of a cultural activity does not necessarily mean that it will be transmitted in the same way. Once transmitted, the cultural activity can change as groups copy, reject, or use it accordingly. In particular this is true with indigenous knowledge and practice. "Practices are handed over and through such that a process each generation adds some new and meaningful knowledge to the previous store and this new addition demonstrates the adaptability or modernity of tradition" (Mammo, 1999, p. 181). Culture shapes and is shaped by history. Culture can influence our perception of the world around us. Culture is also intangible and often can't be pinpointed in tangible terms. Maathai (2009) describes culture as something that

... gives a people self-identity and character. It allows them to be in harmony with their physical and spiritual environment, to form the basis for their sense of self-fulfillment and personal peace. It enhances their ability to guide themselves, make their own decisions, and protect their interests. It is their reference point to the past and their antennae to the future. Conversely, without culture, a community loses self-awareness and guidance, and grows weak and vulnerable. It disintegrates from within as it suffers a lack of identity, dignity, self-respect, and a sense of destiny. (pp. 160–61)

Culture and identity are intricately linked to each other.

## *2. Understanding Identity*

Identity is the means by which a person, group, nation, or continent defines themselves in terms of their individuality and difference to others. It is the way that a person, group, nation, and continent sees themselves in relation to those around them and what makes them unique from others. An African sense of identity is holistic and encompasses not only one's body, soul/mind, and inner head but the whole cosmos (Adeofe, 2004; Venter, 2004). A sense of identity is often developed through the communities in which people are raised. Graham (1999) identifies four different principles and values that underpin African-centred worldview and identity:

**Interconnectedness of all things.** All of the elements of the universe are interconnected from the atom to the human. There is no separation between the material and the spiritual worlds. "To become aware of the cultural self is an important process that connects a person spiritually to others within a culture" (p. 259).

**The spiritual nature of human beings.** This requires a shift in thinking "towards valuing human beings above the social and economic status which has been assigned to them. Personhood comes through your relationship with community" (p. 259).

**Collective/individual identity.** The collective nature of identity is intertwined with others. "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" is an African proverb that speaks to this belief. The collective nature of identity entails a collective responsibility for what happens to other people.

**Oneness of mind, body, and spirit.** The mind, body, and spirit have equal value and are interrelated. "The African-centred worldview includes the concept of balance. The task of all living things is to maintain balance in the face of adverse external forces. When this inner peace is

compromised, the psychological, social and physical well-being of a person is threatened” (p. 263).

Venter (2004) enforces the idea that community is fundamental to African identity. “Community and belonging to a community is part of the essence of traditional African life” (p. 151). “In the African view, it is the community which defines the person as a person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory” (p. 154) (Menkiti, 1979, as cited in Venter, 2004).

All of these beliefs and values were undermined by the colonizers. Once the colonizers came, the African way of life was deemed ‘backward,’ ‘satanic,’ and ‘primitive,’ and with this labelling the identity of Africans was destroyed. Not only were practices considered ‘uncivilized’ but the names of people were changed from African names to western names, thus imposing a foreign identity onto Africans. Maathai (2009) explains that this loss of identity has been the reason why many African leaders have failed to put their nation’s interest first. “Both African leaders and ordinary citizens, facilitated the exploitation of their countries and peoples. Without culture, they’d lost their knowledge of who they were and what their destiny should be” (pp. 166–67). A positive identity is important for the growth of any individual, group, community, nation, or continent. Part of regaining a positive identity after generations of negativity is to rediscover ones personal heritage, recognize that what was taught was inaccurate, and reclaim the positive aspects of culture. This will open the door for positive identity.

### *3. Understanding cultural identity*

Cultural identity, according to UNESCO (1982) has many facets but includes:

... a unique and irreplaceable body of values since each people’s traditions and forms of expression are its most effective means of demonstrating its presence in the world.... [T]he assertion of cultural identity therefore contributes to the liberation of

peoples. Conversely, any form of domination constitutes a denial or an impairment of that identity. (p. 1)

To locate one's culture within the universe is crucial to the way in which a culture progresses in this world. If a culture is identified as a positive contributor to the world by the dominant group, then progress within that dominant world will take place. If it is seen as a negative contributor or a burden to the world or gets in the way of modern progress, then it is seen as primitive and in need of modernizing or being eliminated. With that in mind, it is concerning that Africa, with its many problems, is consistently branded as the 'hopeless continent' (Heron, 2007; Ray, 2008). The western world portrays Africa as no more than "a tragic continent whose only hope lies in the pockets of Western consumers" (Ray, 2008, p. 18). It seems as though the "only thing going for Africa is the West" (p. 18), and this is suspiciously like a repackaging of colonization. Heron (2007) explains further.

The 'Third World' or 'developing countries' are presented... as places of 'suffering, starvation and bloodshed' via persistent magazine and newspaper articles, television programs and news clips, as well as direct-mail and TV fundraising drives by many development organizations ... these images have the effect of (re-)establishing the idea that the South in general and Africa in particular are in need of Northern...interventions. (pp. 2-3)

Africa, considered by the United Nations as part of the worldwide indigenous community, is "all too often ... defined by the social and health problems they experience. This deficit orientation and perspective by the majority culture becomes pervasive and generalized into negative stereotyping of indigenous peoples or other minority groups and their cultures" (Bradshaw & Graham, 2007, p. 101).

This perception of Africa is truly simplistic and one-sided as many positive developments are happening in Africa today. The task of Africans is in changing the perception of their cultures from a perceived idea that its cultures are negative and western-dependent, to a positive contributor to the world. In changing the perception of a continent, western



development organizations will have to change their own perceptions of Africa as a continent to 'help.' In other words, re-establishing a positive attitude towards Africa, by Africans and westerners, requires a change of self-perception, a country's perception of itself with other African countries and how each continent perceives itself in the world. Baylis (2003) speaks to her own identity as an African with white skin. "Racial identity is a fairly stable aspect of an individual's personality, it is a developmental process influenced by environmental and personal factors. My own view is that lived experience inexorably shapes racial identity. Who I am is both a function of how I live in the world and how I engage with others" (p. 143). She goes on to say that "the development of personal identity and the maintenance of personal integrity are dependent upon interpersonal relations with others" (p. 144). Ross (2008) agrees. "Culture goes to the very heart of how people define themselves and is intrinsic in the construction of human identity" (p. 384). Baylis (2003) suggests that "we are both who we say we are (based on our own interpretation and reconstruction of personal stories) and who others will let us be (as mediated through historical, social, cultural, political, religious and other contexts)" (p. 149).

There are many reasons why the cultural identity of Africans is being defined by the western dominant sector of the world. Maathai (2009) challenges Africans to re-educate themselves to a more accurate understanding of African history, to reconnect with this past in order to develop politically, spiritually, economically, and socially. Williams (1987), disturbed by the fact that his own education of world history in the United States portrayed Africa as having a primitive and negative history, also wanted to set the record straight concerning Africa's positive history and why it became such a negative African history. In doing so, the highs and lows of African history will be presented, according to Williams (1987), and how this has affected the continent and its identity in the world.

## B. How Africa's history has influenced African cultural identity

Williams (1987), in trying to understand how a great people could be destroyed through the ages, identifies the different periods of black

civilization and the high points of achievement to the points of destruction. The first period was before written history and centred on Lower Egypt (then Northeastern Ethiopia or Chem). The second period was from the conquest of Lower Egypt in 3100 B.C. to the end of the Sixth Dynasty, 2181 B.C. This era was the “Golden Age in the history of the Blacks, the age in which they reached the pinnacle of a glory so dazzling in achievements” (p. 39). The third period was from “2181 B.C. with tragic periods of internal turmoil and white invasion. The fourth period from 1786–1233 B.C., the great Eighteenth, 1567–1320 to the Age of Ramses to 1330–730” (p. 40). The fifth period was the last of the black pharaohs, 703 B.C. to the fifth century A.D. The sixth period was the “re-emergence of the successor black states in the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. to their final destruction by the Arabs in the thirteenth century” (p. 40). The seventh period was a period of wandering and migration, “a race that tried to outdistance famine, disease, slavery and death” (p. 40). The eighth period was the “re-emergence of African kingdoms and empires, by regions between the tenth and nineteenth centuries.... [H] owever the ultimate fall of the black states, first under Islamic and then under European Christian blows, closed this period with the triumph of colonialism” (p. 41). Meredith (2005) creates a picture of this last colonial carving up of Africa by stating that

when marking out the boundaries of their [Europe’s] new territories, European negotiators frequently resorted to drawing straight lines on the map, taking little or no account of the myriad of traditional monarchies, chiefdoms and other African societies that existed on the ground.... In all, the new boundaries cut through some 190 culture groups ... by the time the Scramble for Africa was over, some 10,000 African polities had been amalgamated into forty European colonies and protectorates. (pp. 1–2)

The final period is the Black Revolution “that ended the political colonialism with the rise of politically independent states” (p. 41). And yet most history books, even those in Africa, do not tell the African story (Foucault, 1980; Williams, 1987; Willinsky, 1998). It is subjugated knowledge that

Foucault (1980) describes as “historical contents that have been buried and disguised in a functionalist coherence or formal systemization” (p. 81). It is also “a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” (pp. 81–82). This type of knowledge is buried because it concerns itself with “a historical knowledge of struggles” (p. 83). Willinsky (1998) speaks to this burying of unpopular knowledge: “Our history lessons have plotted the progress of freedom and nationhood as a Western rite of passage; modernity has been set against the primitive and despotic ways of the rest of the world. The West has defined a single path to modernity, civilization, and the idea of a fully developed nation” (p. 121). So much of African history, written by Europeans, does not give a balanced understanding of African history. Yet, this exclusion of the positive aspects of black civilization has had a marked influence on the psyche of African people disregarded by the world as unimportant.

These various episodes of history where Africa has been conquered by other forces, including the slave trade, have caused the destruction of the African people and culture. The more recent colonization of Africa by Europe led to a mass slaughter of millions of Africans in places like the Congo (Hochschild, 1998). Freire (2007) defines the process of dehumanization as “an historical distortion of the vocation of being human that leads to despair” (p. 44). A culture of silence permeates the colonized. He identifies four mechanisms of control that form a culture of silence: (a) conquest, (b) divide and rule, (c) manipulation, and (d) cultural invasion. Conquest refers to the conquering of a culture through any means using relations of subordination and domination. The aim of the conquest is to leave the people conquered dispossessed of their word, culture, and expressiveness through myths and oral action (Freire, 2007; Morrow & Torres, 2001). In order to keep the oppressed suppressed, a divide and rule mechanism keeps the oppressed from uniting and maintains the power of the oppressor. Unity is a threat to the oppressor, and in order to keep the oppressed from uniting, the oppressor localizes problems and prevents the identification of the wider problems of social structures. Bribes, promotions, threats, penalties, and benefits are used to manipulate the oppressed into staying suppressed. This strategy is often hidden behind the social

structures supporting the oppressive society (Freire, 2007). Manipulation, through non-dialogical agreements, tries to manipulate the oppressed to conform to the oppressor's objectives. It teaches people not to think critically but to accept their oppression. Finally, cultural invasion "penetrates the cultural contexts of groups, imposing a view of the world that deprives subordinate groups of any sense of their 'alternative' possibilities" (Morrow & Torres, 2001, p. 103). This invasion is an act of violence; it moulds and shapes the oppressed into conforming to the oppressor's objectives. The oppressed have to be convinced of their inferiority and the oppressors' superiority. Many Africans became colonized not just intellectually, but psychologically and socially. Ndura (2006) describes this further.

Africans experience the kind of cultural confusion ... have lost a sense of their cultural identity and as a result become alienated from their own cultural groups.... As victims of the self-fulfilling prophecy that is propagated through Western-bound educational philosophies and practices, they associate whatever is good and desirable with the West and denigrate the products, values, and traditions of their African motherland and culture. They become psychological captives who buy into the stereotypes of Africans as inferior and unsophisticated and Westerners as superior and civilized. (pp. 93-94)

The colonizers did their part portraying the continent as in need of Europe's civilizing and Christianizing. Not only did they redefine territories convenient to them but they also defined particular ethnic groups within a country by what is known as racial identity. "The arbitrary division of Africa's ethnic groups by colonialism arrested the process of nation formation in Africa for centuries" (Mammo, 1999, p. 72). Race doctrine came to fruition in the writings of Comte Arthur de Gobineau (Mamdani, 2001; Willinsky, 1998). The idea became an increasing fascination to Europeans. "Race became the marker dividing humanity into a few superhuman and the rest less than human, the former civilized, the latter putty for a civilizational project" (Mamdani, 2001, p. 77). This interest in race continued into the scientific world, after the Emancipation

Act of 1833, “shedding what had earlier appeared to be a humanistic and egalitarian disposition, in favour of dissecting human racial differences” (Willinsky, 1998, p. 162). As race ideology developed, it was clear that Africans were considered the uncivilized or less than human race.

However, a problem arose. As Europeans explored Africa, they could not comprehend that Egyptian civilization could have been developed by the negroid. To justify this impossible reality and to face the fact that “they were confronted with, and had to explain, growing evidence of organized life on the continent before the encounter with Europe” (p. 79), they established a theory concerning a certain type of African that was Caucasian inside and black on the outside. Thus the Hamitic Hypothesis was developed. This Hamitic Hypothesis traces its origins to the Biblical story of Noah, in which the descendents of Ham were cursed by being black (Mamdani, 2001). However, the hypothesis was reinvented in order to explain why negroids could not have been part of the Egyptian civilization. Thus, the Hamites became something other than negroid. A second reinvention of this hypothesis further justified, through Biblical interpretation, how Egyptians were not cursed after all. What is important here is to understand that certain African groups, those in North Africa, were deemed Caucasian on the inside and black on the outside and therefore could have created the great civilization of Egypt. This further confirmed the idea that negroid people were not intelligent or civilized.

An example of how devastating a hypothesis like this can be is in the case of Rwanda. The Tutsi’s came from the North and were considered ‘more superior’ than other ethnic groups in the area of Rwanda. This hypothesis fuelled the Belgian authorities to institutionalize racial ideology. “Race policy became such a preoccupation with the colonial power that from 1925 on, annual colonial administration reports included an extensive description of the ‘races’ in a chapter called ‘race policy’” (p. 88). Race policies, taken from race ideology, included practical implementation through five particular areas: 1) race education (gave Tutsi’s a superior education); 2) state administration (weaken the role of chiefs and the *mwami*, make administration less accountable to the community and racialize the local authority); 3) taxation (heavy taxation to non-Tutsis); 4) religion (converting to Christianity by taking away the power of the *mwami*, thus perpetuating the colonial agenda); and 5) classification

(classifying people into Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa through means of head size, information from the church and ownership of cows). Throughout the Belgians' control in the area of Rwanda, they established Tutsis as the privileged group. This racial classification has had enormous ramifications for that part of Africa, culminating in the Rwanda genocide. "It could be argued that the lack of clarified ethnic identity is one of the primary causes of the continuing conflicts between the Tutsis and Hutus in Burundi and Rwanda, and to a great extent in the Democratic Republic of Congo" (Ndura, 2006, p. 97).

Adding to the cultural dislocation caused by colonialism was the impact of modernization. Parton & O'Byrne (2000) define modernity as "a cluster of social, economic and political systems which emerged in the West with the Enlightenment in the late eighteenth century" (p. 19) that relied on science to give answers of truth. Western concepts of modernity were seen to be: "the understanding of history as having a definite and progressive direction; the attempt to develop universal categories of experience; the idea that reason can provide a basis for all activities; and that the nation state could coordinate and advance such developments for the whole society" (p. 19). In reality modernization was a way to civilize the world into a western way of living in the world. For Africa this included becoming independent and entering into the world economic order. It has been suggested that modernization was an extension of colonization and this modernity has not been beneficial to Africa and pushed aside African traditions and cultural heritage (Mammo, 1999). Sachs (2005) sums up the exploitation of Africa after colonization: "As soon as the colonial period ended, Africa became a pawn in the cold war: Western cold warriors, and the operatives in the CIA and counterpart agencies in Europe, opposed African leaders who preached nationalism, sought aid from the Soviet Union, or demanded better terms on Western investments in African mineral and energy deposits" (p. 189). This modernization trend tended to devalue traditional knowledge and practice, deeming it to be 'primitive.'

From modernization the world has entered a period of globalization. Many see globalization as a continuation of colonialism and modernization. Through the neo-liberal policies of present-day globalization, Africa continues to be exploited and this in turn affects the identity of Africa.

Exploitation is strong, deep, and seductive. It takes on many shapes and sizes but the exploitation of Africa continues and will get worse as global natural resources become increasingly scarce. For example, recently, Simon Mann and his mercenaries were sent to prison for organizing an “invasion of Equatorial Guinea to overthrow its government and replace it with one which would share the country’s oil resources among a group of European businessmen who financed the coup” (Duodu, 2008, p. 10). Another example was the veto by Russia and China of the UN Security Council resolution supporting sanctions against Zimbabwe, tying this veto to the effect it would have on Chinese and Russian weapons exporters (Elliott, 2008b). More recently, world tobacco companies are taking advantage of child labour, against ILO regulations, in Malawi (Palitza, 2011). It takes time and resources to stop these types of exploitations that hinder the growth of Africa. It also takes a rethinking by African leaders of who they are and what their destiny should be. Instead of exploiting their countries, they should be protecting them and keeping Africa’s best interests in the forefront (Maathai, 2009). Speaking about globalization, Robertson (2003) gives a warning: “Actions that seek to marginalize human agency and creativity, and undermine democratic gains, will also deny humans the mass global dynamism they now need to address problems that exist in global proportions” (p. 6). In short, colonialism, modernization, and globalization have not benefited Africa like they have other parts of the world.

### C. African cultural identity today

Understanding one’s own cultural identity through knowing and understanding history is crucial to understanding the place Africa has in the world today. Culture, like an onion, has many layers, and confirms the complexity of culture. Within African countries, one finds cultural differences, but underlying these differences are certain core principles. “Some parallels and commonalities are cultural and epistemic.... Others are a consequence of the homogenizing effects of imperialism” (Heron, 2007, p. 15). The research group looked at the different layers of colonization, westernization, traditions, history, ethnic diversity, gender, age, sex, etc., in order to understand the core culture. What was found in this process

was that Ghana's culture is a dynamic mixture of African tradition, western technology, traditional and western beliefs, and different religious influences. It is a society that embraces many cultures and traditions. The group identified four Ghanaian cultural traits, each of which is found in other cultures: 1) a consensus society; 2) saving face; 3) externalization of feelings and emotions, and 4) hospitality. As generations have gone by and Ghanaian culture has evolved, these distinctions have been blurred, and it is difficult to identify entirely indigenous cultural components. As Ross (2008) states: "In view of the coexistence of cultures in pluralistic societies such as South Africa, there is likely to be a degree of cultural assimilation or melding of cultures to enable them to survive" (p. 384).

It is here where it would be helpful to comment on the dynamic of culture itself. It is easy to look back at the past and idealize African culture and to assume that it has not changed in the past five hundred years. But we know that it has been affected by colonization and westernization. It is also easy to assume that the traditional cultures before colonialism were perfect, equitable, and democratic. This is not altogether true either. In light of human rights, traditional culture can be destructive to certain people, including women and children. Mammo (1999) argues that many peoples in Africa relied on traditional knowledge and practice to survive during colonialism. There are many traditional practices that were the forerunners for modern technology and these should be acknowledged. Culture is not static. It is dynamic and a crisis often produces change. Along with the change in culture comes the re-identification of identity. New ideas come in, people begin to reconsider their traditional ways of doing things, and people borrow ideas from each other. "Cultural identity is a treasure that vitalizes mankind's possibilities of self-fulfilment by moving every people and every group to seek to nurture in its past, to welcome contributions from outside that are compatible with its own characteristics and so to continue the process of its own creation" (UNESCO, 1982, p. 1). Laws also change cultural practices. In fact the Ghanaian constitution speaks to the prohibition of customary practices that are injurious to the physical and mental health of a person (Government of Ghana, 1992). When culture changes or expands, it requires people to be involved in agreeing to that change, participating in developing alternatives to those changes or the law will be ineffective.



One afternoon I was swimming in a pool near Accra. Inlaid in one of the walls of the pool, underneath the diving board, were two pictures; one of the first president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, and the other of Queen Elizabeth II, positioned side by side. This is what cultural identity entails. A working out of one's own identity that is strong and true and using that strength to live in the different worlds that are demanded of people in countries like Ghana to survive in the global world. Ghanaians are taking the best of the many different identities and using them in parallel with each other. Two examples of these parallel systems can be seen in law and religion. The first concerns the British legal system and a traditional chieftaincy system. In Ghana, the chiefs and queen mothers have legal responsibility as does the Government of Ghana. Each has a role to play in working out legalities appropriate to the issue at hand, whether this is carried out in a traditional manner or in the courts. Both systems work in the same country, side by side, but not always agreeing. A second example concerns religion. I was riding a minibus in Accra and there was a preacher on the radio talking about Christianity and traditional religion. He was accusing Ghanaians of being hypocritical because they worshipped a Christian god (portrayed by wearing western suits) and yet they wore their traditional beads next to their skin, and on special occasions their traditional cloth. The preacher claimed that this was un-Christian and one can't worship both religions; it was either one or the other. People on the bus laughed when they heard this, but these are the pressures in a society trying to live in many different worlds.

This concept of living in many different worlds is described by Sultany et al., (2008) as two forces pulling in opposite directions. It is a "the push towards greater modernization and westernization and the pull of traditional values" (p. 398). An example of the push-pull effect is exiled Rwandans, returning to Rwanda and entering into a culture that has changed since they left. Returnees to Rwanda say that "they felt they belonged neither to the host country nor to Rwanda: That they seemed to occupy an in-between space ... getting a job and Rwandan national identity was not easy" (Kabeera & Sewpaul, 2008, p. 328). Many African societies have tried to balance these worlds by compromising so that both can exist together, as in the case of Ghana, or have refused to do this balancing act, as in the case of Zimbabwe. Is this blurring of cultures a form

of colonization, where eventually the dominant western culture will prevail and a traditional culture will be lost? Or can different cultures work side by side? Does the blurring of cultures strengthen or weaken cultural identity? Does it make a difference if one is accepted as an equal in the world or as primitive, or “less than the other”? Does cultural blurring allow for the fact that culture is dynamic and ever-changing? Maathai (2009) asks these questions as well:

African communities have been attempting to reconcile their traditional way of life with the foreign cultures that condemned their own and encouraged them to abandon it. What are people to do when everything they believe in – and everything that makes them who they are – has been called “Satanic” or “primitive” or “witchcraft” or “sorcery”? What do they turn to? What wisdom do they call upon? What can be done to resist? And when, as is usually the case, this heritage is solely oral, how can they rediscover and reclaim its positive aspects? (p. 173)

Indigenous peoples around the world have experienced oppression, assimilation, and attempts to destroy their societies. And yet some indigenous cultures, like the Maori of New Zealand, the Sammi of the Arctic, and the First Nations, Metis, and Inuit of Canada, are re-emerging as strong cultures. This re-emergence is due in part to a resurgence of lost history, retelling of history and identifying, acknowledging, and being proud of their culture along with modernity. This process of cultural re-emergence also benefits from the acknowledgment of past wrongs and reparations of those wrongs. “The postcolonial struggle is not merely about political or economic independence; it is about having these other voices and world views heard and validated, and about questioning the comfortable consensus on which the privileged colonial world is based” (Ife, 2007, p. 13).

I see Africans and African nations working to regain their identity in the world. However, there are perceptions that need to be changed. A process of decolonization is necessary to change this identity crisis.

There have been many suggestions as to how peoples and countries should continue the process of decolonization. Laenui (2000) speaks of

five stages to this process. These stages are not linear but are circular, happening over and over again. The stages are as follows: 1) rediscovery and recovery (This phase of rediscovering one's history and recovering one's culture, language, identity is fundamental to the movement of decolonization); 2) mourning (when a people or country feels victimized and a time of mourning occurs and can include putting up statues, creating museums, or creating public memorial services); 3) dreaming (a time where people can explore their own cultures, experience their own aspirations for their future, and consider their own structures of government and social order to encompass and express their hopes); 4) commitment (moving forward together as a people or country); and 5) action (take action that is proactive and based on the consensus of the people). Weenie (2000) speaks to the notion of resistance in the decolonizing process. It starts with "unlearning what we have been taught about ourselves and learning to value ourselves" (p. 65). She goes on to say that resistance involves "the study of the constructed images of East and West and the essentialist notion of self" (p. 69). Decolonization allows for the re-emergence of culture and tradition, strengthening its importance in the modern world as well as balancing this tradition with modern culture. It is also appropriate when looking at ways to decolonize social work education in Africa.

## D. Cultural identity and social work

The above discussion of cultural identity is important in the context of social work in Africa. As Gray (2005) explains: "Given that culture is central to indigenising, universalising and imperialising processes, we need to examine the definition of culture we are using in the context of these paradoxical processes.... Our understanding of culture affects the way in which we view universalising trends within social work" (p. 234). Smith (2008) further explains this link. "Internalized oppression and the power of hegemonic paradigms and language continue to influence the preparation of social workers" (p. 375). There are three main areas of social work that are influenced by cultural identity: 1) professional identity; 2) professional training; and 3) professional practice.

## 1. Professional identity

If the people of Africa are going through an identity crisis, then this is reflected in the organizations and institutions of society. As Mafile'O (2004) states in her research concerning Tongan social work, "social work theory and practice is socially constructed and culture is a key factor in that construction" (p. 254). Knowing one's own culture and identifying strongly with that culture will strengthen appropriate social work practice. If one is confused, uncertain, and torn between a western culture and traditional culture, chances are the resulting social work practice will reflect that confusion and ultimately end up reflecting the dominant beliefs. Interestingly, one of the main themes emerging from my PhD research was that social work is on the periphery in Ghana. Concerned about the reputation of social work, one research group member asked the following questions: "Why is social work on the periphery and how do we change the stereotypes of social workers and broaden the scope especially in regards to our role as social workers"?

Insights into these questions came out in various ways. During the research process, one of the pioneers of social work in Ghana, Dr. Blavo, felt that social work has not been accepted in Africa at all, and there is a continual struggle to keep its professional identity alive. The apathy and lack of involvement seen in professional association meetings, practitioners refusing to admit to being a social worker in public, being shy about the profession, and the lack of advocating for the profession are all reasons why social work is still on the periphery in Ghana. He continues: "I am telling you in Ghana, the enemies of social work are the social workers themselves." "Self-reflection and action must occur about how social work practice is shaped by society's assumptions and power dynamics" (Smith, 2008, p. 376). Gavin and Seabury (1997, as cited in Smith, 2008) state that "we must each delve into our own positionality and explore how we have been conditioned by the master discourses of our culture and reject that which is founded on oppression and stereotypes" (p. 376). If this critical reflection is not encouraged at the education level, then social work practice will continue to be ineffective to meet the needs of the community and society. "One must not cease to ask questions, or breed complacency along well-worn paths, or worse still to rest one's levels [*sic*]

... there is good reason to make continual revisions and adaptations, to keep abreast of new trends and possibilities” (ASWEA, 1977, p. 74).

During the ASWEA conferences, particularly in the 1970s, there was a concerted effort to encourage professional associations to be involved in African unity (ASWEA, 1977, pp. 34–36). Mmatli (2008) explains: “Social workers have been systematically excluded from the broader social policy formulation responsibilities. Instead, they are confined to the administration and supervision of ill-defined and inadequately funded welfare programs, community development projects and self-help activities.... [I]nstead professional groups, politicians, economists and bureaucrats, predominantly define the social work agenda” (p. 299). Ife (2007) considers this part of our role. In many situations,

... social workers have not been high-profile, and have been seen by others as marginal ... this is nothing new ... it is social work’s lot to be always struggling for recognition, and that is only to be expected; after all social work represents the views of the vulnerable, of the marginalized, of those whose voices are not readily heard, and so social work will always be unfashionable and will threaten the agendas of the powerful. (pp. 1–2)

Although Ife’s words ring true, there are other forces at work that support the fact that social work continues to be on the periphery. One group member asks the question: “Why is it that often social workers are the ones that people turn to as a last resort and when they arrive they are feeling hopeless and worthless”? There are many factors to consider in answering these questions. My own feeling is that this is an example of modernization, in which a western model was encouraged to grow and develop in places where that model may not have been appropriate. Instead of questioning the value of the western model of social work, the curricula remained western with social workers having to try to adapt this model to a traditional culture. As Dr. Shawky explained:

Social welfare programmes designed to solve urban problems of highly industrialized countries were transplanted into

African societies without serious examination of local priority needs and local approaches to problems and with little attempt towards their adaptation. As a result, the dynamic role of the social work method was overlooked. African social workers were led to believe that there is a certain set of legitimate and unchangeable fields where the social work methods can be utilized. This orthodox attitude towards social work, and social welfare in turn, reflected on social work education. Trained social workers in Africa keep on using the term social welfare referring to individualized attention to persons under strain of stress or in need for special care. They forget that there are millions of Africans living in rural and peri-urban areas. They keep on emphasizing remedial services, forgetting that Africa needs more of the preventive and developmental. (ASWEA, 1974, p. 53)

Like forcing a square peg into a round hole, the western social work model keeps being forced into a culture to make it fit. If we stop and ask the question ‘why are we forcing the square peg in the round hole,’ a different critical perception would emerge.

## *2. Professional training*

“Critical consciousness,” likened by Freire (1997) to ‘decolonizing of minds’ is imperative for social work training. At the start of my PhD research, genuine questions were asked about the social work curriculum in Ghana. It came out that changing curriculum to be more culturally appropriate was not something that either the department as a whole or the faculty or students had contemplated. However, a group of faculty and community people interested in social work training (representatives from government and non-government organizations) and others met two years before my research project and had already made some changes to the curriculum. What was still missing was a critique of the curricula in light of colonization, modernization, and globalization. A group member explains:

We have been raised in a society that does not allow one to challenge the status quo. We are discouraged from critically looking at an existing system, whether it is an institution or training. That is why this kind of project had to come from an outsider. We are too frightened to criticize a system or challenge a teacher at University.

One of the first statements and questions asked by a research group member was that she could understand why a place like South Africa, due to apartheid, needed a whole change in curriculum but what were the reasons why others changed their curriculum? Was the curriculum adapted or did they start from the beginning again? As the research progressed a question emerged: “Is there a body of knowledge and material that could be drawn from that was particularly pre-colonial, and that could provide the basis for this change of curriculum?” What these questions revealed to me was the lack of communication between African states concerning social work curriculum. The work completed in the 1970s and 1980s with the Association for Social Work Education in Africa (ASWEA) also asked these and other important questions and had debates concerning the curriculum but the work and ideas seem to have been forgotten. For the research group, there was also a lack of awareness of the many influences that affected the social work curricula in Ghana. However as conscientization took hold of the group, one group member stated that we have to ask the questions: 1) “who has taught us”; 2) “what have we been taught”; 3) “how this has affected our way of thinking”; and 4) “how is this curriculum been influenced by outside or inside influences”? Once these were answered then the group needed to ask: 1) “where do we start from in order to make social work training more African”; and 2) “how do we do this?” Another group member asked the question: “If colonialism had not taken place in our system, could we have strengthened our traditional institutions, taking into consideration advancement in technology, increased migration and economic independence”? Some of these answers will be explored in chapter VI.

Is it possible to develop curricula that are culturally relevant for a country in which there are many different ethnic groups? Where do modernity and tradition meet? Are there commonalities that can form

the basis for universal curricula but have the flexibility for adapting to the different cultures in which people are working? Social work international bodies have worked on universal guidelines for curricula worldwide (IFSW, 2004). Within these guidelines is there flexibility to be culturally specific (Williams & Sewpaul, 2004)? Or, as Gray & Coates (2008) suggest, standardizing social work curricula may not be that helpful to the majority of social workers in the world. “We argue that the evidence would point strongly to the majority of social workers being locally-based workers trying to do their best with limited resources to respond to their local contexts advocating wherever possible, with local, municipal or national context for policy change. The global stage stands at odds with local practice” (p. 24). At my own university, the University of Calgary, there has been an attempt to merge different worlds together. Social work training developed specifically for rural and Aboriginal communities has been adapted to the needs of people working in those communities (Bodor, Zuk, Feehan, Badry, Kreitzer, & Zapf, 2009). The basics of social work education and practice are taught, as well as pertinent issues relating to rural practice and the colonization of Aboriginal peoples. This adaptation appears not to be occurring in Ghana specifically, or in Africa generally. One research group member expressed frustration of things not changing. “How come we are still the same? ... it looks like we haven’t moved forward ... it is still the same ... it means we actually need to plan how we are going to tackle the new problems that have arrived like AIDs and even with childcare.” It feels like African social work has been in a time warp.

### *3. Professional practice*

It is not surprising, with a social worker’s own confusion of identity and the profession’s feeling of being on the periphery, that social work practice will reflect that confusion as well. Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, there was confusion as to the role of social workers in relation to national planning, i.e., a social developmental role or a social welfare role (ASWEA, 1976; ASWEA, 1977; ASWEA, 1982). This cultural identity crisis seen in social work in Africa affects the way social workers are able to respond to the confusion of individuals, groups, and communities concerning cultural change in society. Ideally, social workers are change



agents and pioneers of change, and their practice should be culturally appropriate to the culture in which they are working. "Social workers should specifically play an important role in identifying problems related to development, setting up priorities, defining the different approaches to be used and involving themselves in overcoming these problems" (ASWEA, Doc. 6, 1974, p. 13). The research group talked about both of these issues in relation to social work practice in Ghana.

**Understanding transitional change.** For people of any culture, cultural change is frightening, and people are not always able to make a transition from one cultural practice to another. According to Bridges (1991), transition is "the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external, transition is internal" (p. 3). He goes on to say that "unless transition occurs, change will not work ... transition starts with an ending ... it begins with letting go of something" (pp. 3-4). He offers three stages of transition that are useful here. The first is letting go of the old ways. The second is being in a neutral zone in which a person is in "no-man's-land between the old reality and the new. It is a time when the old way is gone and the new doesn't feel comfortable yet" (p. 5). The third stage is getting past the neutral zone when change happens and there is a new beginning, belief, or practice. In order to help others with this change, social workers need to have worked through this transition in their own lives. Conscientization needs to begin at an individual level and move on to social work practice. Through reflective critical education, this is possible.

In relation to their critique of social work curricula, it was necessary for the research group to see that there are other ways of training social workers than in the present western curricula currently used in Ghana. In order to be critical thinkers, they had to be open to other ways of training that may be more culturally appropriate to their setting. As this awareness grew, one group member summarized: "Just because things are different, doesn't necessarily mean that they are wrong ... we should be ready to adapt new ideas and new ways of looking at things."

The rural community in Ghana has seen changes in recent times due to the migration of youth to the cities, the loss of traditional family and community supports, a growing dependency upon outside help, and the continuation of poverty. Is it the job of the social workers to revive this

lost cultural activity or to negotiate a balance between western influences and traditional culture? Should they walk alongside their clients as they work through the transition of cultural changes? Here are a few examples that I have seen that show the complexity of cultural change:

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is one part of a traditional puberty right or a ceremony of initiation. This right gives respect and honour to the girls in their society. Now deemed as unhealthy and inappropriate, many African countries have banned this part of the ceremony. But it is difficult to change behavioural practices in which there is an important historical ritual that seems to need to be preserved. The puberty right ritual itself is important to keep, and therefore a healthy, safe alternative to FGM that will satisfy the culture and keep the ritual seems appropriate. However, achieving this change entails education, dialogue, and the community coming together to find an alternative that works for everyone.

Two other examples are the *trokosi* system in Ghana and the witches villages. Both are practices that affect women particularly in a negative way. *Trokosi* is when daughters are given over to priests and priestesses in order to appease the ancestors for a crime which the family did against the deities. Usually this includes sexual favours, and they are treated like slaves. Once the daughter has left the system, it is very unlikely for her to obtain a husband in mainstream society. If an alternative to whom or what is sacrificed could be agreed upon, then practice could be changed. To change the *trokosi* system, the deeper issues of the rights of women and freedom over their own bodies as well as religious beliefs also need to be discussed.

The issue of witches is also important. If bad things happen in a village, there is usually a witch hunt to find out who has brought this bad omen to the village. It is usually a woman and once she has been found, she is sent to a witch's village (Palmer, 2010). If she returns to the home village, after rehabilitation, the village tends not to accept her back. This is a gender issue and one of human rights. Education, dialogue, and discussion around the reasons why bad things happen as well as gender issues, with a discussion of alternatives, might shift this cultural practice. In all of these examples, social workers could play an important mediation role.

#### *4. Culturally relevant social work practice*

As situations change, it is an opportunity for social workers to identify these changes, whether it is the home, family lineage, or authority figures in society, and to offer alternatives to this shifting sand. This is where it is crucial for social workers to have a skill in culturally relevant social work theories and methodologies. Without an Africa-specific curriculum, these cultural issues cannot be addressed in an appropriate way. Urban Chicago case studies from western textbooks given to Schools of Social Work in Africa cannot address these issues, and it is imperative that culturally relevant articles, case studies, and textbooks be available for students. Part of social work involves helping people resolve cultural issues that involve a different value set. Culture does change slowly over time. It could be a change in the economy, political situation, social impact, or a particular leader introducing something that affects culture that may result in a cultural practice becoming obsolete. People may want to alter or eliminate a practice for various reasons, and it is possible to introduce alternatives to these cultural practices, only with the right set of knowledge and skills. An assumption can't be made that the practice is bad just because some people don't like it. Others may like it. Many of these cultural practices are about cleansing, starting a new life, starting afresh.

The more important point is that if people want to abandon an idea, they can either be persuaded to try something different or be forced into an alternative. Abolishing a cultural practice via the law can be effective or ineffective, depending on how it is completed. Passing a law doesn't change cultural behaviours if the people are not behind the law. They will continue with the cultural practice. However, if the people are taught about the practice, its history, positives and negatives, and are persuaded through dialogue that something needs to change, then chances are the cultural behaviour will change. If people don't understand why the law has changed, they will continue the cultural practice in question. If people are brought together, educated about the issue, and asked to come up with an alternative or better practice, they might shift in what they are doing. The transition period is important and time-consuming in order for people to accept change in a positive way. This is not always easy but social workers have the skills and knowledge to do this type of intervention.

Social workers are often faced with centuries of history, entrenched ways of doing things, and dealing with people's perceptions and beliefs. That is why it is very important to understand tradition, culture, and people's ways of interpreting that tradition. Knowing a culture also gives an opportunity to question that cultural practice, particularly if it is not acceptable but meets a need. A social worker needs to know this difference.

Community development has an important contribution in bringing about change and growth. First, it awakens people and initiates them into conditions and methods of achieving progress. While doing so it avoids the breakdown of basic and traditional values... [C]ommunity development provides a mutual link of co-operation and understanding between the government and the people and thus reduces social conflict and tension. (ASWEA, Doc. 6, 1974, p. 29)

People are living in an increasingly pluralistic, modern society. They are trying to hang on to tradition while tradition is changing and moving in directions people may not wish to go. People are juggling many different worlds and are challenged by the differences and conflicts, and often it is difficult to keep a balance within these different worlds. A point of reference is sometimes difficult to find and life may seem chaotic. However, the job of a social worker is to be a point of reference and with the help of traditional leaders and the community a way forward can be found.

One group member asks: "How do we decide what culture we keep and what culture we take away? And who decides?" Another group member asks: "So where do we start? We have our traditional system and we have our formal western system. How are we going to integrate these things ... to make social work more practical...? How are we going to use the positive side, use the positive things from our traditional system and blend it so that we make social work more suitable to the condition in which we find ourselves? How do we practice culturally appropriate social work in a world where many different cultures are influencing life at a rural and urban level?" The answers to these questions will influence how social work is taught in Africa.

## E. Conclusion of chapter

National and international forces have been at work, for many centuries, in destabilizing the African continent, most recently through colonization, modernization, and globalization. These forces have played a role in exploiting Africa and keeping it on the periphery of the global community. The way in which Africa views itself in the world, the way countries view themselves within the continent, and the way African people view themselves as individuals in the world all need to be acknowledged and addressed at the individual, national, and international levels. The continent continues to change. Culture is changing and social workers have the opportunity to be on the cutting edge of new and appropriate responses to people who are vulnerable in society as well as in the development of their country. And yet, social work in Africa reflects this identity crisis and has much work to do in creating a positive professional identity whereby it is recognized as an important service to the people of Africa. “To become a modern society, we must fully understand our conditions. As social workers we are the people that could act as trustees because only when we have the background, that is the background of our culture and people that we are dealing with, then we will be able to apply remedial, corrective or preventive measures, which are necessary for society to strive” (Drake & Omari, 1962, p. 1). Written in 1962 at the Seminar of Social Work in West Africa conference, these words, from the pro-vice chancellor, still ring true today. “Through education individuals can reaffirm their cultural identity as well as their rights and responsibilities as citizens of nations and a world that celebrates and values ethnic and cultural diversity” (Ndura, 2006, p. 99).

This reaffirmation has to take place at the individual psychological and emotional level, at the community level, at the national level, and at the international level. A shift in thinking has to take place. Culturally relevant curriculum has the potential of creating this shift and developing a positive identity in African social work. For change to take place, a decolonizing process that includes a critical reflection and evaluation of a student’s own understanding of the historical influences that affect social work education and practice, working through their own cultural identity issues, re-learning their own African history, and critically evaluating

their curriculum has to take place in the classroom. It also has to happen at the association level. As can be seen, this work was started with the seminars of the ASWEA and GASOW. Unfortunately, this growth seemed to stop and progress has been slow in creating a revolutionary social work profession specific to the African context. ASWEA recommended a radical transformation of curriculum in the 1970s and this has yet to take place. However, positive signs are appearing in various parts of Africa, including South Africa where the social development model is being practised, and the curriculum is changing to meet the needs of the national social policy agenda (Patel, 2005). The 2008 IASSW conference in Durban has also helped social work to be seen as an important profession in the transition of that country.

What is the role of social work in African society? How is it viewed by society? Why is it still on the periphery? How do we change unhelpful stereotypes of social workers and broaden people's views of the role of the social worker in society? How do we educate social workers to be highly skilled to deal with cultural issues? How do we educate people to appreciate the work social workers are doing? How do we maintain the good reputation social work education has with many organizations that now ask for that qualification for employment? How do we change old institutions and make them more relevant to society? These are the questions African social workers need to ask about their own profession in their own country. On a continent where people are struggling to find a strong cultural identity, the profession must change its training and practice to be more culturally relevant, meeting the new and challenging needs of its own people.

Bob Marley says it quite well in his "Redemption Song."

Old pirates, yes, they rob I; Sold I to the merchant ships,  
Minutes after they took I from the bottomless pit. But my hand  
was made strong by the hand of the Almighty. We forward  
in this generation triumphantly. Won't you help to sing these  
songs of freedom? – Cause all I ever have; Redemption song;  
redemption songs.

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery; None but  
ourselves can free our minds. Have no fear for atomic energy,

Cause none of them can stop the time. How long shall they  
kill our prophets, while we stand aside and look? Ooh! Some  
say it's just part of it: We've got to fulfill de book. Won't you  
help to sing these songs of freedom; Cause all I ever have,  
Redemption song; These songs of freedom, songs of freedom.

Maathai (2009) challenges Africans to reconnect with their cultural history. "I call for Africans to rediscover and embrace their linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity, not only so their nation-states can move forward politically and economically, but so that they may heal a psyche wounded by denial of who they really are" (p. 6). The question is then asked: Why does Africa continue to embrace this western social work training and practice and is it relevant for today? Another mental slavery that affects social work training and practice in Africa is the undying belief that what is western is civilized and the best and that traditional knowledge and practice is primitive and bad. This is the topic of the next chapter.