

Huntington and the Denial of African Civilization

This article constitutes a small contribution to the century-old debate on Africa, its history, its legacy, its contribution and its place as part of the world. Africa has already been denied the possession of its own history, but now the existence of civilization on the African continent is questioned in the highly polemic thesis of 'the clash of civilizations' prophesied by Professor Samuel Huntington¹.

'The Clash of Civilizations':

A new, western version of Marxism?

The expression 'clash of civilizations' was first used in 1990 by Bernard Lewis (American academic, close to American neo-conservatives). In 1991, Barry Buzan reused the expression to illustrate a 'societal cold war' between the West and Islam, having Europe as its stage. Finally, the expression was accepted and made popular in the media by Samuel Huntington (1993, 1996). Contrary to the opinion of the majority of thinkers from the post-Cold War period, according to which the main ideological division between nations would be henceforth based on questions relative to human rights, liberal democracy and the free market of the capitalist economy, Huntington believed the end of the ideologies would be substituted by a new division characterised by civilizational and cultural conflict. His thesis has as its premise a future characterised by conflicts with religious and cultural bases, as the last confrontation among people. Paradoxically, Huntington adopted within his paradigm of civilizational conflict a framework of analysis inspired by Marxist dialectic, when placing the conflict between civilizations as a driving force of history, just as Karl Marx had chosen the class struggle as a driving force of history. Why does Professor Huntington consider as necessary and inevitable a conflict of cultural and religious differences? Why does it exclude the potential of dialogue and complementarity between civilizations for the good of humanity instead of considering diversity as a source of permanent tensions and conflicts? The definition, the nomenclature and even the

number of civilizations is quite ambiguous in Huntington's thinking, with the notion of civilization comprising different realities and spaces such as state and social groups (ethnic and religious minorities), large religions (civilizations all having, as their origin, a large religion which constitutes its moral and political foundation), geographic proximity and linguistic similarities. Huntington's world is thus divided into eight large civilizations:

- Western civilization, founded on the basis of Catholic and Protestant Christianity;
- Orthodox civilization, founded on the basis of Orthodox Christianity;
- Latin American civilization, founded on the basis of Catholicism and in the corporatist Latin American political structures inherited from the colonisation;
- Islamic civilization, founded on the basis of Islam;
- Hindu civilization, founded on the basis of the Hinduist religion;
- Chinese civilization;
- Japanese civilization;
- African civilization (sub-Saharan Africa, excluding North Africa or the Horn of Africa), founded on a set of animist practices in which the existence of a dominant religion is not recognized.

Huntington's world is considered by many critics as simplistic, arbitrary and based on a self-fulfilling prophecy. Chinese civilization is seen as a larger threat to the West once Chinese culture collides with the American interests regarding the non existence of a regional power in Southeast Asia. Islamic civilization is considered as a potential Chinese ally, for both are driven by revisionist aspirations and share common conflicts with other civilizations, particularly Western civilization. The common interests identified between these two great civilizations, namely the proliferation of arms, human rights and democracy, are aspects that enter into contradiction with Western interests and values. Professor Samuel Huntington's thesis, far from meeting with unanimous agreement, has come under severe criticism of its different paradigms, implications, methodologies and even its basic concepts. Our interest in this article is to analyse the doubt that hovers

over the existence (or the lack) of an African civilization. However, before doing this it is important that we understand what we are talking about when we speak of 'civilization.'

Civilization: A notion

of variable geometry

The definition of what constitutes a civilization, particularly the distinction between civilization and culture, has been an intellectual and academic debate ruled by substantial ambiguities and deep controversies. Based on the text of Jean Cazeneuve,² we can distinguish three definitions of the term civilization: First of all, in the current language, the term civilization is associated with a judgment of values, positively or favourably qualified as to the societies for which we utilise the term. This fact supposes that, inversely, there exist peoples or societies which are uncivilized or savage. Secondly, civilization is an aspect of social life the manifestations of which are concretised in the institutions or productions designated as 'works of the civilizations.' Thirdly, civilization is considered a product of a high degree of evolution.

History and the etymology of the word 'civilization' show that the word was used to designate peoples with a higher degree of development in relation to others. This fact led Jean Cazeneuve to confirm that the term was used in an imperialistic or colonialist context to designate Western European culture as being superior to others in an absolute form. The evolutionist hypothesis used in Spencer's perspective allows us to consider that a society is civilized when it reaches a certain degree of complexity, of heterogeneity between its parts, and of differentiation between its organs based upon their functions. Conventionally, the features of civilization are: urbanisation (which results and is a symbol of civilization); technology; writing, art, science, political, judicial and religious organisation.

The idea and image of Africa

Africa has always been represented in a certain form in the European imagination.

In the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century, when the modern teachings of history were introduced into Western universities, the general European perception was that Africa, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, did not possess a history. Its societies were seen as primitive and lacking in a collective historical conscience. Such racial perception was the fundamental ideological pillar in the era of European imperialism, and it was used to justify the partitioning of the continent in the nineteenth century. The Portuguese voyages of discovery served not only to deepen European knowledge of Africa but also to initiate the process that would transform the thinking of Europeans in regard to Africans. The context for this transformation was the transatlantic slave trade. It is emphasised that slavery was an essential element in the classical era of the Mediterranean world, having continued under various forms in medieval Europe. In an equal fashion, however, the practice of slavery was largely practised in the Muslim world – including North Africa – and also in sub-Saharan Africa. But it was the transatlantic slave trade (which, between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries involved the forced migration of approximately 12 million Africans to the Americas) which sustained an explicit relationship in the minds of Europeans between racial inferiority, slavery and Africa.

Africa: identity and civilization

Culturally speaking, understanding 'culture' as the sum of ideas, beliefs, values and shared representations by members of a specific community,⁵ Africans are the custodians of their own extremely rich and authentic culture, which is predominant in our current times in the field artistic expression: music, dance, fine arts, architecture, fashion, body decoration, etc. Within these forms of art it is most certainly music which has been historically more dynamic at the global and continental levels. The fusion in the Americas of African rhythm and European songs has transformed popular music, giving birth to jazz, samba, rock, soul, reggae, rap, etc.

Despite the sculptures of Western Africa having arrived in Europe early in the year 1470, it was only with the colonial conquest that 'African art' became popular in the West. Renowned art pieces or sculptures from various peoples and African cultures became invaluable acquisitions to the most prestigious museums, galleries and private Western collections. It is significant to note that the influence of art from Western and Central Africa is furthermore reflected in the art of Pablo Picasso and other vanguard artists based in Paris. Africa is, in the spiritual sense, the continent characterised by confessional pluralism, from a system of traditional beliefs to the religions of monotheist revelation, Christianity and Islam. As such traditional religions, these two great religions – called world religions – assumed various forms, one of which constituted a distinct African contribution to the history of these beliefs. Among the examples of various African innovations in these great religions we can mention, in Islam, the Murid brotherhood in Senegal, and, in Christianity, the Churches of Aladura in the southwest of Nigeria, already rooted in the cities of Europe and North America. But the major spiritual 'exportation' from the African continent consists of the West African gods Vodun and Orisha, which, in Brasil and the Caribbean islands, are the base of rituals in *voodoo*, *santería*, *candomblé* and other hybrid religions. In the area of political organisation, Africans have in the past experienced various forms of government ranging from the most absolute type of monarchy to the forms of diametrically opposed organisation; societies whose absence of identifiable aristocracies or of clear hierarchal authority induced certain anthropologists in the past to consider them as 'acephalous' societies. Confronted with societies in which the rulers were not identifiable, external observers rapidly concluded that they were in the presence of a primitive anarchy instead of a political order. This opinion was reviewed with time when it came to be understood that these 'acephalous societies' were submitted to authority (represented by their 'segments': families, clans, age groups and religious cults), had their laws and

were far from being anarchies. Each African religion attested to a linguistic, cultural and political diversity as the fruit of a millennial process of human movements, of conquests and subjection, of cultural exchanges, of long-distance commerce, of the dissemination of religious beliefs and of colonialism. Great empires and kingdoms from African antiquity developed important and renowned civilizations, among which Egypt stands out (Egypt inspired a great debate regarding its *negricity*, Egyptocentrism). The Kush, having as successive capitals Kerma, Napata and Meroe, situated on the third cataract of the Nile, was an important centre for gold and trade between sub-Saharan Africa and Egypt. Aksum, in the north of Ethiopia, was an important trade centre between Oriental Africa, India and the Mediterranean. On the Sudanese savannah and in Sahel, ranging from the coast of Senegal to Kordofan, we can find Ghana, the land of gold, the first great kingdom of Sahel, having as its capital Koumbi Saleh; Mali, the second great kingdom of Sahel, with the intellectual centres of Timbuktu and Djenné; Songhai, having as its capital Gao; and Nok and Kanem-Bornou. In the central and south part of the continent, important kingdoms and civilizations flourished, including Luba, Lunda, Kuba, Kongo, Buganda, Bunyoro, Ankole, Rwanda, Burundi and Mutapa (this last one between the Zambeze and the Limpopo). Today the absence of ruins in tropical Africa is notable – despite the region having known, in the past, important urban centres. This absence is most likely due to the use of extremely biodegradable materials, erosion from the desert winds, the intense rain and the destructive activities of termites. These factors ensured that no trace would be left, with the exception of 'Great Zimbabwe' and the cities of stone on the Swahili Coast.

What can we conclude?

If we don't allow ourselves to be limited by the ethnocentric temptation and by the simplistic definitions of professor Huntington, which identified religion as a determinant factor of civilization but completely ignored the other variables, we

can more easily respond to the doubt raised by the paradigm of a 'clash of civilizations' regarding the existence (or the lack) of an African civilization. Complexity is recognized as a common element of the notion of civilization. This complexity is based on axiological, morphologic and intellectual criteria, such as urbanisation, arts, techniques, norms, values, forms of production and the transmission of knowledge, and political and religious organisations. In fact, all these factors are present in an authentic and specific form in Africa, just as they are on the other continents. A parallel with European civilization will permit us to better decide what we consider as constituting the characteristic features and common denominator of Black African civilization. The civilizational construction of Europe, founded on the Judaic-Christian legacy, is, in human terms, the product of the cross-pollination of various peoples (some arising from Asia), of migrations and emigrations, being characterised by a linguistic diversity with origins both in Greek and in Latin and having, as an alphabet, the Greek, Latin and Cyrillic. Among their essential values are the democratic ideal, the principle of representation and of social contract, the principle of the separation of powers, individual freedom and private ownership of property. Equally, with the exception of Islamic North Africa, an integral part of *Dar-al-Islam*, sub-Saharan Africa or black Africa, whose population was designated by Arab merchants as *bilâd as-sûdân* (land of the Black), represents a civilizational reality that has animism as its matrix, characterised from the human perspective by multiple contacts and cross-pollinations of peoples – of migrations and emigrations – and inheriting oral tradition as a form of acquisition and transmission of knowledge, a specific artistic expression (music, dance, sculptures) and a form of expression by images and rhythm. Among their fundamental values are the capital importance of parentage, the cult of ancestry, solidarity, harmony and social relations, as well as the principle of unanimity, among others. Africa is much more than a discordant mixture or a juxtaposition of different tribal

groups, cultures and religions without any interrelationships. As with any other space, sub-Saharan Africa is an entity with its own identity, but it is one driven by internal differences in human and cultural terms. As is obvious, the distinction between civilizations implies the definition of their profiles in space and time. For example, in current times must we speak of an Western civilization, a European civilization, an Anglo-Saxon civilization, a Latin civilization, a French civilization or a German civilization? The important thing for any objective, responsible study of these questions is to avoid ethnocentrism and prejudices that formerly served to legitimise colonial conquests, and to insist on the interconnectedness, which allows us to better learn the movements of populations, commercial relations and cultural currents. Two precautions must be imposed when studying these questions: first, when we insist on the autonomy of African history and civilization, we run the risk of reinforcing the old idea of particularity and isolation of Africa. Secondly, when we insist on the interconnectedness with the world, we must be cautious in our approach so as not to dilute the essence of its civilization in a unilinear process dominated by the West. The contribution of African civilization to the history of humanity must be recognized in its just value, as a contribution specific among others, neither superior nor inferior. ■

¹ «The Clash of Civilizations?», *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, n° 3, 1993, pp. 22-49; *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 1996.

² Jean Cazeneuve, «Civilization», in *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, p. 944.

³ John Parker & Richard Rathbone, *African History, a Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2007.

⁴ Maurice Houis et Emilio Bonvini, «Afrique Noire. Langues», in *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, vol.1, pp. 486-491.

⁵ John Parker, op. cit.

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