

**Agbajo owo la fii so'ya**  
**Thought on African Concept of Solidarity for Global Peace**

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**Abstract**

In the words of Henry Drake (2013), “the science of life is the Supreme science, and the art of living, the finest of the arts. The body of essential knowledge is the esoteric tradition”. By “esoteric tradition”, we might pay attention to belief systems, practices and values, which have not only stood the test of time, but also functioned effectively in bringing about desirable condition of living and existence for people who believed in, and utilized them for their own edification. Africans, especially the Yoruba have such systems, embedded in their culture with which they have been able to strike a balance between the chaotic and unfriendly world and their own need for survival and continued existence. This was achieved through the observance of the complementary nature of their world; the world of spirit and matter, represented vividly in the relationship shared with their ancestry. This paper proposes the Yoruba knowledge of solidarity as a metaphor, duly expressed in simple objects such as the two hands, legs and the intricacy of the relationship between the eyes and nose, or the mouth (tongue) and dentition, which function together as correlative materials for human satisfaction and comfort, especially in a contemporary world taken over by irrationality, imbalance and threat to peace.

Keywords: culture, society, civilization, literature, ethos of existence, Pan-Africanism

**Engaging Solidarity**

Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that our hope is for the same future. *Solidarity involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feeling, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common grounds.*

(Ahmed 2004,189) [emphasis mine].

Searching for the meaning(s) of the word “solidarity”, or its derivatives, I came across such words like ‘unity’, ‘cooperation’, and phrases such as ‘mutual affection’, ‘working together to achieve a purpose’ etc. It was while on this that I came across Sara Ahmed’s book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, which focuses on the relationship between emotions, language and bodies as unifying matrixes, and sine qua non for what Rachel (2006) described as “social relationships that determine the rhetoric of the nation”, and was quickly attracted to it. After coming across the portion that I have quoted, the reviews of the book, that I will like to share also helped to cement the “bond” that I

have somehow forged with the work, especially in its relation to what I set out to propose in my paper.

Noble (2006) believes the work shows “how the bodies materialize from emotion, particularly in the process of nation building” and in their own observation, Athenasious, Pothili and Kostas (2008) explain that Sara Ahmed’s work shows “her ability to depict the relationship between bodies, language, and emotion while also analyzing the intersections of gender, race, class, sexuality, and nation through a variety of histories”. This last statement fittingly subscribes to an African adage; “within everything is the seed of everything”.

In all of these, and in regard to the socio-political and economic reality of our world today, the question that kept coming to mind and which somehow helped to cement the “bond” I have with Sara Ahmed’s book is “how do we get ourselves out of this conundrum of violence and brutality ravaging our world?”. Emotions certainly run high all over the world today. Africa is in flames of political, economic and social tribulation; Asia and the Middle East continue to grapple with violence which seems terribly eternal, Europe struggles to manage her own economic down-turn and everywhere chaos is gradually becoming the staple of every home. The situation recalls the title of Ayi Kwei Armah’s book; *Why are we so blest?*

The new fear, and most terrifying of all, is the threat from industrialized nations, North Korea for example, bent on unleashing, or at least, trying out on the world its newly acquired deadly nuclear weapons that remind everyone of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; weak nations groaning under the yoke and burden of “satanic” debts incurred by irresponsible leadership, whose ignorance and sated passion for buffoonery is not only ridiculously alarming except for its being compounded by arrogance and penchant for deployment of its military might to quell its hapless and impoverished populace’s demand for change, often done in a fashion that appears like displaying dirty linens in the public for sale, while threats of global terrorism compound the problem. Everybody seems to wait and anticipate the eruption of this volcano of disaster. It is a question of when it will come.

Despite claims and slogan of the world being a global village, we still live our lives as individual nations, concerned more with the politics of our immediate geographical enclosure. That is understandable, except that the reality of our world continues to draw attention to the fact of our interconnectedness, our dependence on one another for support, the need for us all to forge a bond—a true bond—devoid of manipulation from behind, in secret and beaming friendly smiles in the open; the characteristic trait of global politics today that has left us all in the ditch.

You hold your head in disbelief and shocking perplexity when “international observers” made up of world leaders and personalities, who grant interviews in globally acclaimed tabloids, have ruled over powerful nations and spoken about fairness, justice, equity and above all, truth, for a truly assured development and eradication of imbalance the world over as the root causes of all national distress, go on air to proclaim an election characterized by blatant and massive malpractices to be free and fair. You wonder if such words have different meanings or the dictionaries are just fraudulent compilations of words that lost their ‘true’ meanings way back in the medieval period are still being sold to people. When national leaders go on air to announce their budget and how much was spent in the previous year’s, for the development of the same country you both are citizens, you wonder if theirs is different, or they are talking about a new country that is being built from the scratch, because these things are just not there and never intended for it to be so in the first place.

Why all the deceit? Why raise people; poor, hopeful and hungry people’s hope only to dash it without even giving them any sign of warning? Who determines how some people live their lives and what audacity arrogates such authority in the first place? What makes one a truly international

and global leader if you cannot even speak the simplest of truth as open and naked as it is seen by everyone? Where exactly is the place of honesty in all of these? Above every other reasons, one stands, peering intently at us all, even though we almost always turn our faces away because it is the clearest sign of our weakness despite our individual and collective claim to financial success, military strength, political powers, fickle and unpredictable economic stability, scientific breakthrough and technological advancement: there is a distinct disjunction in the divide; there is a yearning disconnection between our perceptions, which of course underlines the fact of our individual differences as persons and nations and, at the same time, the reason for the gaping imbalance we continue to grapple with.

That does not really constitute the problems in themselves, but for the seeming ‘determination’ to keep the divide solid rock intact through our actions and decisions. It is this point that troubles the concerned mind, which gives serious thought to why we cannot and have not, with all these associations—League Of Nations, United Nations, European Union, African Union and the several unions, which litter the world map like posters for commercial shows---been able to overcome our adversity. It is here Sara Ahmed’s statement; commitment, solidarity “even if we do not have the same feeling, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common grounds” becomes relevant.

In the face of all the threat and turbulence caused by imbalance, is it not necessary to look back, like the proverbial Akan Adinkra bird, Sankofa, and take what is good from our past provided by the benevolence of such knowledge, in order for us to move forward? By digging into the past of our race, we can exhume knowledge that not only helps us get through the vicissitude, but also gets us equipped for the future that we all so much crave for, but definitely unsure if it is going to come and, if eventually it does, how it is going to meet us, whether in peace or pieces.

### **Solidarity from cultural context**

In looking backward, our attention is turned to culture. Different definitions have been offered by scholars about what culture could possibly mean. However, here, I like to consider three, which are directly related to my purpose. Haralambos (1952) believes that “culture has two essential qualities: firstly, it is learned, secondly it is shared. Without it, there would be no human society”. For Arnold (1960), culture says “*consider these people then, their way of life, their habits, their manners, the very tones of their voices; look at them attentively: observe the literature they read, the things which make the furniture of their minds*”[emphasis mine], and, in his own words, Clifford (1976) says “without men, no culture, certainly but equally, and more significantly, without culture, no men”.

There is no society in the world without its own idea of culture, in which is subsumed their custom and tradition. However, modern man’s overdependence on science and scientific knowledge, which is good in all ramification, except that, in abandoning culture and time-hallowed tradition, society is generally unwittingly exposed to terrible situations, that now call to question the efficacy of science in solving the problem that it has created. The fixation on the false sense of security that science provides for the world as what it needs to progress and survive at the same time is captured in the expression of Bensaude-Vincent (2001,106)

There is no alternative to science. Science is unique. Thus, the world of knowledge is clearly divided into two categories: that of scientists, who hold the monopoly of true, valid statements, and that of the rest, the numerous, anonymous, and amorphous mass forming the public.

What about the danger posed by the products of science and how the world is deeply threatened by such scientific invention that no sooner does it satisfy our immediate needs than it also poses a

worrisome concern to us? People marvel at the thought behind air planes, especially the fact that it can cover such long distance within hours much faster than donkeys, horses or even motor cars. They also marvel at the telephone, which instantly connects people within seconds, or more with the internet, yet are troubled by a plane crash or more terrifyingly by the danger posed by bombs and nuclear arsenals, what the Yoruba, in their wisdom explain in a simple phrase: “*Ti’bi t’ire la da’le aye*”, that is, good and evil are inseparable companion.

But, strangely, within this “unusual” knowledge of science, is also embedded a system of culture, because, as Ajikobi (2013) argues, “it is not we who define culture; it is culture that defines us”. In the words of Carlyle (as cited in Ajikobi, 35) “*we do everything by custom, even believe by it, [as] our very axioms. Let us boast of freethinking as we may [or], such beliefs as we have never heard questioned*”[emphasis mine]. Besides, looking at it from the Pan-Africanist perception of Hountondji (1974), there is always what is called cultural mutation, the complementary relationship between cultures achieved “either by preserving these cultures from mutual contamination or by organizing a peaceful dialogue among them for their mutual enrichment”(156).

By striking such alliance, which stems from the concept of solidarity, as opposed to certain parts of the world, especially the West’s claim of authority over others, global imbalance and crises can be reduced if not eradicated totally, after all as Hountondji argues the “Europe that produced Levi-Bruhl also produced Levi-Strauss. The Europe that produced Gobineau also produced John Paul Sartre. The Europe that produced Hitler had previously produced Marx”, which confirms Europe, just like other continents not as well developed as she is, as a “criss-cross of the most diverse tendencies”. The bottom line is that solidarity consists not only in thinking that an idea or one part of the world is better and superior to the other, or one privileged individual to one not too lucky, but that human society can only thrive through mutual respect and symbiotic relationship---the real basis for solidarity.

### **Yoruba concept of Solidarity**

Africans, especially the Yoruba have over time developed certain customs and tradition, which derived from their cultural belief. These have been used to conceptualize their world, bring forth knowledge that has helped them in the intricate relationship among themselves and their environment. They believe very strongly in the adage that says “custom meets us at the cradle and leaves us only at the tomb”. Drewal, Rowland and Abiodun (1989) write that “there are several fundamental concepts that are distinctive to a Yoruba worldview. They provide a foundation for comprehending the dynamics of Yoruba art and culture through time and space”. They also observe that “these concepts are expressed in words, images and actions that are the pervasive and enduring markers of Yoruba civilization”.

This body of knowledge is embodied in Ifa, the Yoruba system of esoteric wisdom and knowledge, that in itself provides a significant ethos of solidarity---union, complementarity, unity of purpose---in the intricate relationship between two principal deities, Orisha, from their cosmology, namely, Orunmila, the god of profound wisdom and Eshu, the principle of contradiction and ambiguity that pervades existence. This relationship of “Ifa which symbolizes the revealable and Eshu/Elegba as the agent of effective action [that] reminds one of the unpredictable nature of existence” (Drewal, Rowland and Abiodun,15), certainly stands out as one of the most effective examples of solidarity that help to keep the human species going without any turbulence, at least in the Yoruba conception.

In two separate but related articles, Awo Fatunmbi explains the operation of Ifa and how it connects with the concept of solidarity

Ifa teaches that the visible universe is generated by two dynamic forces. One is the force of “contradiction”. The first initial manifestation of these forces is through “light”, and through “darkness”. In Ifa myth, expansion and light are identified with Male Spirits called Orishako. Contraction and darkness are identified with Female Spirits called Orishabo. Neither manifestation of ase is considered superior to the other and both are viewed as essential elements in the overall balance of Nature (Fatunmbi 1992,15).

In the second article, he states

The Ifa concept of Obatala embraces a wide spectrum of spiritual forces that are referred to as Orisha Funfun. The word, “Orisha Funfun” means “consciousness guided by whiteness”. Here the word whiteness is used as a symbol of spiritual elevation and purity. Spiritual elevations refer to the process of projecting consciousness into the future by transcending the limitations of the present.(Fatunmbi 1993,15)

Fatunmbi goes on to explain the attainment of spiritual consciousness through the concept and effective understanding of the intricate relationship between the two opposite poles; Black and White, because to the Yoruba, ‘blackness’ does not necessarily connote evil, but reference to deep knowledge that the white needs in order to project into consciousness.

Solidarity as an effective and necessary condition for human existence is also noticeable in the contrast and connection of everything from such concepts like hope and despair, good and evil, positive and negative, male and female etc, which all have scientific explanations. Even in human life, as Grszimek (1972,43-4) explains “in human beings, left and right-handedness is a psychological attribute which is inherited” (as cited in Ajikobi,12), as a manifestation of the natural dichotomies, present as well in mundane affairs.

Solidarity in the context of every day practice, as explained by the Yoruba, can also be observed in a number of natural occurrences like the changing seasonal cycle, the interlocking relationship between Orun (heaven) and Aye (earth) by which human life span is itself measured, or even through bodily endowments such as the mouth which houses both the tongue and dentition that function together, in solidarity, to allow for talking and eating, or even more engagingly in the relationship between the eyes and the nose in which one expresses solidarity with the other, especially in a tragic situation, whereby as the eyes shed tears, the nose also runs.

The Igbo society in Nigeria has something similar in this case, what Mimiko Bestman (2012) calls the “principle of gender complementarity”, or in another sense, the “male and female principle”. Uwazomba explains this Igbo concept of solidarity as it is represented by the spiritual metaphor embedded in the way their houses are constructed

The obi ---the male-focused ancestral home--- symbolically and metaphorically represents maleness. The obi is usually where the UMUNNA meet when issues of any sort concerning their kindred unit are to be deliberated upon. There appears to be a binary opposition between the Mkpuke (women’s quarters) and the obi but we must state that this opposition is healthy and desirous for the progress and survival of the Igbo society. This structure of relationship between the Mkpuke and the obi throws up different but needful values such as compassion, love, peace, the spirit of common motherhood in the

ideology of UMUNNE and the spirit of competitiveness, masculinism, valour, force and even violence in the ideology of UMUNNA. Each unit is not to undermine the other or usurp the power of the other [...]. In this relationship there is a symbiosis, which guarantees balance, [...] and mutual respect.

This ethos of being governs the life of the people and helps them to forge a strong communal system of interaction and living in harmony long before colonial penetration of the hinterland.

### **Literature and the Idea of Solidarity**

Literature has helped to promote the idea of solidarity among people in various ways. These stories have been carefully woven to draw attention to the conscious and unconscious ways by which human society has continued to establish communal relevance, within the scope of globalization and civilization. Whether in the form of prose, drama or poetry, literature has come across as some kind of social action, which “provides insights and strategies that empower individuals and social groups”, and at the same time help them to “construct a quality of life that is inclusive”(Berry 2000,66).

Berry’s opinion obviously connects with that of Benhabib (1992), who considers literature and popular media like films as agencies of cultural knowledge whose essential purpose is “not the legitimization of power but the enabling of empowerment”. I will like to illustrate this point with two examples drawn from two equally very popular texts, namely, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.

Published in 1958, *Things Fall Apart* occupies a distinguished place on the pedestal of African literature canon, not so much for being one of the earliest efforts by Africans in the literary world, but for vividly capturing the glory of a traditional society before contact with the West through colonialism. In the words of William (2012), the novel “depicts the Igbo society of that period and it was a well-structured society with its traditions and taboos, its strength and weaknesses”. The novel also scores a significant point for its subscription to the Pan-Africanist ideal, and as a response to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, colonial legitimacy of narration, which purports to claim that everything about the African past is nothing but bestiality, savagery and chaos.

However, our discussion is the portrayal of solidarity by the novelist through the tragedy of the protagonist, Okonkwo, who is banished from his own community, Umuofia for accidentally killing someone through a discharge from his dane-gun. This crime is considered a “female” crime. As such, instead of facing the death penalty, Okonkwo is banished for seven years along with his entire household, while both his farmland and compound are set ablaze. Under this circumstance, Okonkwo has no other choice except to retreat to his mother’s village. An elder, Uchendu, Okonkwo’s maternal uncle captures the element of solidarity in that action vividly

We all know that a man is the head of the family and his wives do his bidding. A child belongs to his father and his family and not his mother and her family. A man belongs to his fatherland and not his motherland. And yet we say Nneka---“Mother is Supreme”. Why is that? [...].It is true a child belongs to his father. But when a father beats his child, he seeks sympathy in his mother’s hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you (Achebe 1958,106-7).

The idea elaborated above also finds corroboration in the novelist, Flora Nwapa's account of the Nigerian Civil War fought between 1967--1970. She writes "without women, the Nigerian vandals would have overrun Biafra; without the women, our gallant soldiers would have died of hunger in the war front. Without the women, the Biafran Red Cross would have collapsed" (1980,13). Her account touches on one of the most harrowing periods in the history of Nigeria. But, it also helps in a number of ways; it repositions the various accounts of the national disaster, which have all paid glowing tributes to the role of men in bringing the war to an end, without acknowledging the significant role played by the solidarity of the women in bringing it about. Second, it underlines the value of casting a thoughtful gaze backward in order to be able to see the future more clearly.

Also, among the Igbo, even though valour, strength and bravery are associated with the male, on a number of crucial situations, such element and ethos of being are needed to be activated through the solidarity of the feminine strength as Achebe also draws our attention to here

Umuofia was feared by all its neighbours. It was powerful in war and in magic, and its priests and medicine-men were feared in all the surrounding country. Its most potent war-medicine was as old as the clan itself. Nobody knew how old. But on one point there was general agreement---the active principle in that medicine had been an old woman with one leg. In fact, the medicine itself was called agadi-nwayi, or old woman (Achebe 1958,10).

Forging a strong solidarity between male and female for achievement is clearly portrayed by Shakespeare in *Macbeth*. In this "interpellative dream-text" (Zabus 1), we find a very compelling literary depiction of solidarity in the relationship between Macbeth, who is returning victorious from battle fought on behalf of his country, and, Lady Macbeth whose action is stimulated by the news brought home by her husband, particularly in regard to the prophecy of the Three Weird Sisters, one of which had already been fulfilled, by the naming of Macbeth as Thane of Cawdor.

Even though most commentators have painted Lady Macbeth as evil, for her contribution to Macbeth's tragedy, but, in this paper, I will like to argue differently. Macbeth has already begun to consider the possibility of becoming the king of Scotland long before getting home to meet his wife. Shortly after the Witches departure and his friend and honest compatriot, Banquo draws his attention to the danger in taking seriously their prophecy Macbeth's response suggests a man already embroiled in the thought of the ambition

(Aside) This supernatural soliciting  
Cannot be ill, cannot be good; if ill  
Why hath it given me earnest of success  
Commencing in a truth? (I.iii 9).

His comment in another Aside, after King Duncan pronounces his first son, Malcolm, the Prince of Cumberland also highlights the urge being built deep inside of the man

(Aside)The Prince of Cumberland! that is a step  
On which I must fall down, or else o'er leap,  
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires  
Let not light see my black and deep desires,  
The eye wink at the hand: yet let that be  
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see (I.iv.7).

The fact remains that he simply does not have the “technical expertise” to carry out the act, except relying heavily on the solidarity of his wife, who knows her husband perfectly well that she begins to make adequate preparation towards aiding his ambition even before his arrival in their home.

Hie thee hither,  
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear  
And chastise with the valour of my tongue  
All that impedes thee from the golden round,  
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem  
To have thee crowned wither (I.v.28-33).

Yet do I fear thy nature;  
It is too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness  
To catch the nearest way (I.v. 16-18) .

As time draws near for the act of murder to be committed and Macbeth begins to lose the grip on himself, Lady Macbeth steps up to encourage him, by providing that essential push needed

But screw your courage to the sticking place  
And we will not fail (I.vii. 70-71).

These deeds must not be thought after these ways  
So it will make us mad (II.ii,37-8).

A little water clears us of this deed (II.ii,86).

Consider her choice of words; instead of saying “you”, she uses “we” and “us” to demonstrate the fact that they are both fully involved and take responsibility for charting the path towards their greatness and taking the Scottish crown. Bloom (1998) sees the unusual sense of solidarity that both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth share as an unusual compatibility, “persuasive and valuable personalities, profoundly in love with each other”, and in the words of Kott (1974), theirs is “a confirmation of manhood, an act of love”.

Lady Macbeth finds a convincing excuse to send the nobles home during the banquet called by Macbeth at which the ghost of Banquo comes to torment him. In the morning when Duncan’s murder is discovered, she is on hand to get public attention away from her husband by pretending to faint. But, after sending Macbeth to sleep in Act 3, scene 4, we hear nothing of her again. Within that lapse of absence strange things have taken over the course and by the time we do, Macbeth has effectively put himself into a very tight corner that he found difficult to extricate himself from.

Shakespeare appears to draw attention to the fact that Macbeth lost it the moment he cuts off that vital link, the “middle passage”, essential union between both of them, similar to the Igbo “male and female principle” which even though has already prepared the ground for his ‘greatness’, as one of the most well-crafted heroic characters in any literary work, albeit tragic heroism, yet hinges on the very important support---solidarity--- he enjoys from Lady Macbeth, which lends credence to a popular English saying: “mutual sympathy leads to mutual triumph”, or even best captured in the Yoruba saying;”Omo kekere, omo t’obi; t’otun, t’osi la fii gb’omo”, that is, no matter how small or big a baby is in size, it is with both hands we carry him/her.

When solidarity suddenly disappears, what replaces unity is chaos and violence on the strange island Golding’s boys in *Lord of the Flies*, are trapped; instead of order and survival, tears, blood and terrifying fear become the *only* language of authority which supplants coherence of ideas, and

not the conch shattered into pieces in the moment of youthful madness; even the brutality of Napoleon, which successfully buries the charisma, brotherhood and sisterhood, that Snowball weaves from the collective will of the Animals on Manor Farm in Orwell's *Animal Farm*, compares with the irrationality of Hitler in the build up to the outbreak of the Second World War. Like Sankofa, we must stretch back into the past and learn from history and culture.

Let me draw attention to Ifa again. Even though, Ifa or Orunmila its incarnate being, so to speak, is a male Orisha, recent significant research into oral traditions, which the oracular divinity also supports has shown that behind this process of divine knowledge and personality lies also the complementary contribution of another deity, Osun, a female Orisha. She also occupies a very prominent place in the Yoruba person's awareness of Selfhood and spiritual consciousness, embodied in the Ori. Behind the seeming masculine world, the female principle occupies a prominent place. This understanding shows the relevance of culture to individual and collective growth and the importance.

It also points at the need for the politically powerful, economically stable and scientifically and/or technologically advanced nations of the world to grasp the simple logic behind the fact that the simple law behind electricity that all of these 'invention' and 'advancement' that contribute to globalization rests squarely on the solidarity of the opposites; positive and negative, male and female, black and white, poor and rich etc. Imagine what it will be like if the world experiences nightfall at the same time and there is not going to be any daylight, or it rains continuously without the world ever going to experience sunshine forever, or how tragic it is going to be if we all have to eat and drink and, at the time we want to empty the bowel or bladder, we discover the systems are blocked? Have you imagined how frighteningly terrible such discovery will be?

### Conclusion

The whole world is on a rat race, by our decision to overlook the simplest of the natural laws that incidentally govern our lives and bind us together---solidarity. Yoruba proverb draws our attention to this simple fact; Agba jo owo laa fii s'oya, which, freely translated, means, "in unity lies our strength". The earlier we embrace this principle, the better for the edification of humanity.

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