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Spiritual Journey and Primordial Self: Requisite Actions for Individual and National Identity in Christopher Okigbo's Poetry

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Abstract

European nations colonized most of the African societies and as a result had political and economic power and control over these nations. With the western domination, the colonists ruled the African nations and every other person was to obey their command. The colonizers introduced hegemonic educational system to Africans in which they were taught the European ethos without their studying African culture. Due to this hegemony, the European colonial masters imposed their culture on Africans and it succeeded in reshaping the cultural and political lives of Africans. Many Africans abandoned African customs and beliefs when they gained western education. Therefore due to this hegemony Africans lost their authentic/real selves and became adulterated. Their main concern becomes to create and recreate themselves through going back to their culture and origin. Through poststructuralist analysis of 'Heavensgate' and 'Path Thunder' in *Labyrinths* (1971), this paper explores how Christopher Okigbo, an African poet, embarked on a spiritual journey in quest of his primordial self and became an asserted poet. The paper aims at imploring Africans all over the world to follow the footprints of Okigbo in identifying their true selves for them to have meaningful lives.

Key words: Western dominion, hegemony, cultural life, self-assertion, authentic and primordial self-identity

Introduction

The key tactic of colonization is usually that the colonialists portray the colonized culture as negative and irrelevant. Urama in her 'Self and identity in African and Caribbean Literatures' (2016, p. 1) stresses that the colonialist objective in Africa was primarily to have the indigenous people believe that there were little or no positive aspects within the indigenous culture. She further points out that the colonists succeeded in entrenching within the colonized that the indigenous people had no alternative but to assimilate and conform to the colonial paradigm. The cultural life of the indigenous society was therefore destroyed and African interests were made subordinate to the European interests. This made

many Africans to abandon their customs and beliefs when they gained western education and this destruction led to inferiority complex and identity crisis among other negative effects. The acculturation due to lack of self knowledge turned most of the black Africans into white look-alike. They thought that turning into 'white men' would make them be taken as real human beings by the whites yet Africans were not accepted to have equal rights with the Europeans. Africans were caught up between the historical concept of their traditional culture and their present reality and they began to rethink whether to continue living fragmented lives or search for their cultural identity.

This notion of the whites on the black Africans started during the transatlantic slave trade. In order to justify slavery and keep the blacks in perpetual bondage, the whites told the slaves that they were cursed because of the colour of their skin and they were created to serve the whites. The blacks were discriminated against and subjected to racist attitudes. The whites did everything possible to make the blacks seem inferior. The blacks were oppressed and tortured to make them really believe their inferiority. The blacks fought for their liberation and frustrated the desires of the whites to perpetually keep them in slavery. The 'frustrated desires' of the whites poured their aggression on the slaves to thwart their plans too. The response to the frustration was also to fight back. Most aggressive behavioural traits were destructive and momentary. Some of the blacks were lynched and imprisoned while suffered depression because they lived in fear. Nwoga in support of this posits in his *Literature and Modern West African Culture* (1978, p. 54) that "the African personality had long been depressed before even the arrival of colonialists on the continent". He opines that colonization adds much to the brutalization of the indigenous population as it is western conquest and domination. Slavery and colonization are destructive to the black people's sense of personal worth and dignity and Nwoga, in addition to this stresses that 'both are anchored in violence and have been made possible by the use of some kind of force and coercion against the blacks' (Nwoga, 1978, p. 55).

This acculturation and assimilation gave way to the loss of not only the individual but also the native self and the need for Africans to go back to their real selves therefore arose. Christopher Okigbo, an African poet, embarked on a spiritual journey in quest of his primordial self because of his abandonment of his native culture to go to Europe to study the white man's culture. The European culture made him feel alienated from his culture and he embarked on this spiritual journey to be initiated into the worship of *Idoto*, the goddess of his ancestors. Okigbo, in returning to his cultural roots after many years of alienation in the form of study and immersion in foreign cultures asserts his true self by identifying with his roots.

This study is done using post-structuralist approach to textual analysis. Post-structuralism is a variation of structuralism, often seen as a critique emphasizing

plurality of meaning and instability of concepts that structuralism used to define society, language etc. Gilles Deleuze (2004, p. 171) sees post-structuralism as an intellectual movement developed in Europe from the early mid twentieth century which argues that human culture may be understood by means of structure (modeled on language) that differs from concrete reality and from abstract ideas. In the post-structuralist approach to textual analysis, the reader replaces the author as the primary subject of inquiry. This displacement has its greatest effect on the text itself and is often referred to as 'destabilizing' or 'decentering' of the author. Barry (2002) points out that Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida are the two figures most closely associated with the emergence of post-structuralism by their critiquing of structuralism and shifting from it to post-structuralism. Roland Barthes, originally a confirmed structuralist, published his essay, 'The Death of the Author' in 1968, in which he argued that every literary text has multiple meanings, and the author is not the prime source of the work's semantic content. In Barthes essay 'The Death of The Author' (1968, p. 66), Barthes announces the death of the author which is a rhetorical way of asserting the independence of the literary text and its immunity to the possibility of being unified or limited by any notion of what the author might have intended or crafted into the work. Barry argues that Barthes did not only use this crucial essay as a 'hinge' round which he turns from structuralism to post-structuralism but that Barthes says in the essay that the corollary of the death of the author is the birth of the reader. There is therefore, a shift of attention from the text seen as something produced by the author to the text seen as produced by the reader.

Derrida posits that there is no longer any authoritative centre for validation of interpretations of texts and in his *Of Grammatology*, he involves the highly detailed 'deconstructive' reading of literary texts. He argues that there is nothing outside the text because critical reading must produce the text and the reading has to be deconstructive rather than constructive. This 'deconstructive reading' of literary texts makes previously regarded unified artistic artifacts to be fragmented, self-divided and centreless, Post-structuralism as a critical method, therefore, is engaged in the task of 'deconstructing' the text. Deconstructing, according to Eagleton (1983, p. 147), is 'reading the text against itself' with the purpose of 'knowing the text as it cannot know itself'.

Barry (2002, p. 71) points out that destructive reading uncovers the unconscious rather than the conscious dimension of the text. The post-structuralist examines other sources of meaning (e.g. readers' cultural norms, other literature etc.) which are therefore never authoritative and promise no consistency. A reader's culture and society share at least an equal part of interpretation of a text to the cultural and social circumstances of the author. In this study, African cultures are represented in their literary works and the Africans knowledge of their culture enhances their self-assertion.

The post-structuralist assumes that an author's intended meaning has no single purpose, meaning or existence and it is necessary to utilize a variety of perspectives to create a multi-faceted interpretation of a text. In accordance with post-structuralism, a lot of elements are used in the interpretations of the primordial self in Okigbo's poems in this study to decipher meanings of the literary texts. These elements include diction and syntax imagery, language of the texts, the sound effects of the words, the figurative language in form of symbols, metaphor and the structure of the formal pattern of the organization of the selected poems. Creative writers often hint indirectly more than their words directly hint because of the connotation or figurative meanings of words in the texts. These elements of literature used by Okigbo and other African authors help in re-interpreting the meaning of the whole texts discussed in this paper because of the ambiguity of language. In this study, we break the poems, compare them with other texts in terms of the language used in the texts because the selected poems are grounded in concrete and specific details that stimulate our senses. Through this stimulation of the readers' senses we see the African world. These specific details called images trigger memories and stimulate feelings that command response. They reveal meanings of the texts. Metaphors and symbols that represent something beyond their literal meaning also help in the interpretation of the selected texts.

Examining the selected poems from Okigbo's only volume of poems *Labyrinths* (1971) used in this study in order to identify unconscious manifestations in the poet persona, would reveal newer meanings of the text. Colonialism, racism and sexism distort personality and make one a victim of psychological problems. These problems make one not to be in control of one's actions; they also make one unconsciously engage in actions that are disadvantageous to one's pleasant existence. The unconscious actions of the whites that led to identity crisis of the Africans and the strategies employed by these blacks in regaining their identity are analyzed in the selected poems studied in this research. Historical, socio-political, cultural and environmental factors influence identity crisis in Africans. These factors help in analyzing the selected poems as the languages of the poems explode into 'multiplicities of meaning'. Therefore, critical analyses of the selected poems used in this study are based on some of the postulations of post-structural theorists.

African writers and self assertion

The black Africans begin to question their reality and the indigenous African's questions became 'Who am I?' What does it mean to be oneself? Against the total obliteration of the indigenous self, Africans fight back in different forms to regain their true self. Africans assert their individual and native self through literatures of the people. Self and Identity therefore becomes one of the major themes of African literature. African indigenous literature had to battle with such issues as:

They know that the possible way for Africans to assert their native self is to fight for their political freedom. Africans covet western education which they see as 'the white man's secret magic and power but want their own (Africans) way of life. Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his novel, *The River Between* (1965, p. 79), presents this theme of western education as a critical factor in the political liberation of Africa. To him, the real heroes of this period are black men who know how to use the white man's magic against the white man himself; "... symbols of people's thirst for the white man's secret magic and power. Few wanted to live the white man's way, but all wanted this thing, the magic". Africans formed Nationalist Movement. The nationalist movement and ideological groups enhanced the development of the black people's self and identity through their call for the blacks to respect their past in order to have a new dynamic black future.

Most of the Nationalists and the elites in pursuit of western education travelled to Europe to study. Africans who studied in Europe in 1950's were discriminated against in Europe because of the colour of their skin. They saw the need for Africans to get their political freedom and they started fighting for their independence. The black Africans in diaspora through interactions with fellow blacks from continental Africa discovered that they have the same ancestry and are created by God for a royal purpose. Though their colour of skin is different from that of the whites, it does not make them inferior to the whites. They therefore expressed the pride in being black and promoted their Africanness. Creative writers used their literary works for cultural literacy by incorporating African cultures into their literary texts to create awareness in Africans the need to go back to their culture.

One of the main concerns of the many African writers is the rehabilitation of the African culture. This concern arose as a reaction or response to the negative, distorted image of Africa and her people presented in literary works and travel reports of European writers and explorers. Such writers' works as Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939), Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and reporters' works like George Alfred Henty's *By Sheer Pluck: a Tale of The Ashanti War* (1883) and others create widely-believed images of Africa and her people as wild, untamed, totally ignorant and savage. Such widely accepted notions encourage European abuse of and contempt for Africa and Africans. African writers try to instruct the people through their literary works on how they should defeat the confusion the imposed colonial culture created on them. Achebe in support of this feels that the novelist in particular is regarded as a teacher whose primary task is to reeducate his society to an acceptance of itself (Achebe, 1975, p. 42-45). This is the concept of post-colonial identity which aims at identifying the native self. It is also the preservation of the native self against the attempts by foreigners to depict self (Africans) as barbaric and savages.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's also presents characters that obtained the white man's education and still held on to their tribal customs belief and ritual in his literary works to highlight the importance of African culture to the discovery of their true identity. He presents this theme of the importance of African culture and tradition so that African writers would explore this new awareness of impacting new image of blacks' sensibilities and produce works African people can relate to and be encouraged to assert themselves. These Africans that are exposed to western education without abandoning African culture and tradition know that Africans have their own noble ways of governing themselves which the colonial masters neglect.

The Quest for the Primordial Self in African Literature

The quest for the primordial self in African literature is simply the call for Africans to go back to their roots through their literary works. Edward F. Edinger in his *Ego and Archetype* (1972, p. 107) stresses that "one of the symptoms of alienation in modern age is the widespread of meaninglessness". Those who are aware of this problem of meaninglessness of life are obliged to make their own individual search for a meaningful life'. This search for meaningful life is the reason for voyage of self-discovery or the quest for the primordial self. As the individual takes this voyage of self discovery or the primordial quest, the person makes use of metaphors through which initiation and rebirth of the true self are ratified. Many black literary writers have written on this quest for the primordial self. They use traditional images and metaphors that depict their native identity. It is their rebirth or identifying their true self that gives meaning to the life of these individuals seeking their primordial self. In support of this, Ikenna Dieke's *The Primordial Image* (1993, p. 126) stresses that "having suffered seemingly incalculable loss as a result of cultural derailment or divided consciousness or both, brought about by either Western imperialism or American slavery or perhaps, by postcolonial/post slavery social evil, these writers view the medium of symbolic quest as a primary vehicle of the imagination in which to embark upon the crucial search for meaning or native identity".

Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, Kofi George Awoonor and other African writers present the quest for true native identity in their works.

Okigbo's *Labyrinths* and His Quest for the Primordial self

Okigbo in his only volume of poems *Labyrinths* (1971) explores the search for true self. The first movement of the part - 'Heavensgate' celebrates Okigbo's attempts to resolve the antagonistic foreign and traditional cultures which he has acquired. Through his efforts of resolving the two cultures, he achieves personal understanding and self-discovery. He embarks on a spiritual journey in quest of his primordial self. Dieke in his *Allegory and Meaning* (2010) asserts that in

Labyrinths Okigbo explores the subliminal interior of his being, searching for the eternal unconscious images with which to assuage his violently sundered feelings as he gropes his way through the darkened labyrinth of modern Nigeria caught in the suffocating cobweb of cultural dialectics. Okigbo presenting his search of his primordial self in his poems depicts that he is aware of his personal unconscious, which is a reflection of his personal experiences. The very idea of the collective unconscious, when applied to art and literature according to Dieke (1993, p. 3) points up the relationship between literature and subliminal vestiges of the psyche. Okigbo abandons the worship of his ancestors because of his involvement in Christian religion and western education. He is aware that he is alienated from the deep significance of his being. He then finds himself yearning for the totality of his being. He recognizes the vital deposit of ancestral life, and how the ancestors tend to shelter and inspire one in his growth and professional development. Dieke (1993, p. 5) opines that “in art and literature, the collective unconsciousness is expressed in the form of images ... represented in prefigurative and symbolic forms ever-repeated ageless motives in myths”. Okigbo therefore, has to go in search of drives and subliminal vestiges which are products of the unconscious that tends toward the archetypes of myth of his meaningful life. He is initiated into the worship of his ancestors and his alienation is healed. He becomes asserted and gains his voice.

Okigbo’s ‘Heavensgate’ opens with the compelling lines: “Before you, mother Idoto, naked I stand” which shows a river goddess of a village stream in Ojoto, Okigbo’s birth-place. His maternal grand father was the priest of this goddess, Idoto. He sees himself a priest of Idoko because he wants to assume the responsibility of his maternal grand father he claims he is his reincarnate. He describes the essence and environment of Idoto as a water goddess, ‘watery presence’; while the expression ‘prodigal’ refers to the story of the prodigal son in the Bible (Luke 15: 11-32). Okigbo in returning to his cultural roots after many years of alienation in the form of study and immersion in foreign cultures likens himself to the prodigal son who in his extremity remembers the steadfastness, comfort and love of his father’s house and returns to beg forgiveness for his misdemeanour, confident that he would be forgiven. He has realized his folly in abandoning his ancestral goddess because of the white man’s religion.

*BEFORE YOU, mother Idoto,
naked I stand;
before your watery Presence,
a prodigal*

(lines 1-4)

He is leaning on the oilbean tree and the ‘oilbean’ is the emblem and representation of the goddess. He declares that he is lost in the legend of the goddess - ‘lost in your legend’ and it shows the poet’s ignorance of the legend of

the goddess of his creation and rebirth. This may be because of his abandonment of his native culture to go to Europe to study the white man's culture. He leans on the oilbean tree feeling dejected because of his fragmented life caused by his ignorance of his legend (ancestry). Therefore, he humbles himself before this goddess to ask for forgiveness – 'under your power wait I/on barefoot' The context of the quest is religion and this quest is conducted through the exploration of the Christian religion (representing foreign culture) and traditional images bathed in all-suffering and powerful nature (which provides both solace and continuity). Dieke (2010, p. 47), in support of this, opines that Okigbo knows he has wronged his goddess of creation, rebirth and fertility by pandering to foreign gods who have distracted him from the world of his revered goddess and her life-enhancing ritual. He further stresses that Okigbo knows full well that the apparent cause of his tribulation is his estrangement from the goddess, his true muse, and his loss of the original and essential language, the aboriginal voice of his poetry.

The poet shows the confidence and expectation of good which he is certain will accompany the goddess's utterance to him. 'Heavensgate' here is a reference taken from Shakespeare's Sonnet 29 wherein the thought of the poet's love for his friend enlivens him and lifts his spirits from his dejected, forlorn and hopeless state so that he 'sings hymn at Heaven's gate This shows that Okigbo picks European, classical and African heritages for myths and symbols to reveal his confusion, anguish and quest.

*watchman for the watchword
at Heavensgate;*

*out of the depths my cry;
give ears and harken...*

(lines 9-12)

The poet's quest is shown as a spiritual one; he must forge a personal path through the claimant forces on him. The quest is also for the growth of the poet in his poetry, with his own style and strong voice, becoming his own myth-maker, through which he can comment on his society and his people in the clear voice of vision and prophecy. Dieke (2010) asserts that Okigbo is anxious to grow and mature as a poet with a strong voice and distinctive art through which he can speak to his people in the voice of prophecy. This shows that self and identity are the vehicle for successful professions. Many black people (Africans) who are doing well in their profession abandon their jobs and travel to Europe just because they accept the white man's notion that Africa is subordinate to Europe. Some of these blacks are languishing in prisons in European countries just because they lack self-esteem on themselves as Africans. Okigbo here solicits for his fellow Africans to search for their primordial selves and be free from all perspectives that put Africa and Africans as inferior to the whites.

'DARK WATERS' emphasized in upper case in the poem can refer the reader to the darkness and chaos that existed at the very beginning of creation in the Bible, Genesis 1:1 or Milton's account of *Paradise Lost*. The poet's vision is not clear and he is struggling but there are signs that enlightenment and purification will come, 'foreshadows the rain that is dreamed of'. In his struggle which is his alienation, he hopes to find solution in embracing the worship of his ancestors and that is what he expressed as "foreshadows the rain that is dreamed of". This expression is to portray that there is assurance that identification with one's root heals one's fragmented life. He deploys the juxtaposition of two opposing forces or ideas to show the conflict between the two cultures he is trying to resolve. These are the images of a 'rainbow' and that of 'a boa bent to kill' showing death/life, hope/mystery or beauty/death. Then the scene shifts to an orange grove where the poet pictures himself as a solitary bird 'wagtail' which has a difficult story to tell 'tangled-wood-tale'. The poet has to lament his abandonment of his tradition 'to mourn a mother on a spray'. The image of the bird can therefore be seen as the young poet who is struggling to acquire his own style and achieve his own distinctive voice for poetry.

DARK WATERS of the beginning.

*Rays, violet and short, piercing the gloom,
foreshadows the rain that is dreamed of.*

*Rainbow on far tide, arched like boa bent to kill,
foreshadows the rain that is dreamed of.* (lines 13-17)

He points out that the rain and the sun are in combat in the poem. 'Rain and the sun in a single combat' suggests the conflicts between the traditional and the foreign cultures, while the image of 'a young bird standing on one leg' is taken from an Igbo folktale and expression of doubt or uncertainty. According to the Igbo sayings on the young bird that came newly to a place, it will only stand with one leg until it masters the custom of the land. This can be the attitude of the poet at his initial stage of writing poems. But his hope is that when he masters the custom and tradition of his ancestors, he will reach the zenith of his profession.

*Rain and sun in single combat;
on one leg standing,
in silence at the passage,
the young bird at the passage* (lines 24-27)

The poet also makes use of image of 'crossroads' to show that crossroads are important and symbolic in traditional ritual practice because it is a point where several roads intersect. Sacrifices are done there because traditionally it is believed that that is where the spirits meet but the poet juxtaposes this meeting place of the spirits with the Christian Church 'behind the bell tower'. He continues with the juxtaposition of traditional and Christian imagery. Okigbo pictures his mother (Anna) here holding the knob of the Church door and appeals to her to listen to him from the crossroads. The door shuts in and out and he sees the 'loft pipe organs' and leather-bound hymn books. He also portrays two landscapes - the traditional landscape represented by 'cornfields', 'wind', and Christian Church represented by 'the leather-bound hymn books' and 'pipe organs'. The pages of the leather-bound hymn bleached with stains of orange leaves' can depict the traditional religion and Christianity which have been in contact for a long time.

SILENT FACES at crossroads:

festivity in black ...

(lines 28-29)

where all roads meet:

festivity in black ...

(lines 34-35)

Okigbo uses the figure of a 'woman' - the goddess Idoto as his intercessionary symbol of his enlightenment and purification. This is the vegetal symbolism used in his quest of the primordial self and vegetal symbolism is seen as he prostrates before Idoto to pray. The images of Okigbo's primordial mothers according to Dieke (2010) are constellated in four symbols: the vegetal, the labyrinthine, the canaline and the astrological. With the symbol of the moon, sun and the stars he uses in poems in his *Labyrinths*, the poet's primordial mother (goddess Idoto) assumes her rightful place as the celestial goddess and the bright moon, the shining sun together with the light of the stars illuminates the poet's life as he is purified with the cleansing water of the goddess of the river Idoto. The new self, the primordial self Okigbo has been searching for becomes a reality when light illuminates his life. This light is a symbol of enlightenment and transcendence. It is what the poet has been seeking in his quest for his true self. This light shining on his soul as he passes through the passageway gives him voice as a poet. This light illuminating his soul frees him from the pains and sufferings of his alienated self.

O Anna at the knobs of the panel oblong,

Hear us at crossroads at the great hinges

(lines 46-47)

In his *Labyrinths*, 'Elegy for Alto', the final poem in 'Path of Thunder', is today widely read as the poet's "last testament" embodying a prophecy of his own death

as a sacrificial lamb for human freedom: Okigbo, an accomplished soldier, is killed in action during a major push by Nigerian troops against Nsukka during the Nigeria-Biafra civil war. Nsukka is the university town where Okigbo found his voice as a poet and vowed to defend with his life. The death he prophesies about on the last two lines of the poem finally comes but he dies a fulfilled man because he died a primordial man.

*Earth, unbind me; let me be the prodigal; let this be
the ram's ultimate prayer to the tether...*

*AN OLD STAR departs, leaves us here on the shore
Gazing heavenward for a new star approaching;
The new star appears, foreshadows its going
Before a going and coming that goes on forever*

(Path of Thunder, lines 36-41)

The poet's formal confused life dies and he is reborn. His new/true self predicts the departure that will last for ever. Therefore the remarkable and fascinating point about this poem is the true self. 'An old star' represents old Okigbo. He has departed and the coming of a new star is anticipated. 'The new star' represents the new Okigbo. This new Okigbo according to E.N. Obiechina is another poet that will stand firm and talk about assertion of one's self by going back to his ancestors/roots. Obiechina in his 'Literature: Traditional and Modern' (1978) argues that the legacy of Christopher Okigbo continues to make its impact and to be perceived as a major creative force. He further stresses that the self of Okigbo, who lost his life in the Nigeria civil war (defending Nsukka zone), as a poet is shown here as his professional colleagues cry and look on to God to give them another poet as a source of consolation. These his colleagues are his fellow creative writers who know the importance of identity. They are asking God to give them another poet who will fight for the preservation of African identity. The new Okigbo is represented by the new approaching star. The new star appears and foretells that the going of the new star that will be forever. Here Okigbo is seen as a prophet prophesying of his death. But the solace of his colleagues and other Africans is that Okigbo has achieved his own voice after the discovery of his true self and his poems are now original and fresh. His joy is that he has identified his primordial self, and his departure from the earth will only mean going back to be with his ancestors, his root. But he died when his colleagues need him more. They need an assertive poet that has a voice. They are at the same time talking to themselves, creative writers, to follow the footprints of Okigbo. It is clear from Okigbo's poems that identifying one's primordial self or true self not only heals one's fragmented life but also foster creativity. The blacks all over the world should

also follow the footprints of Okigbo in identifying their true self for them to have meaningful lives.

Conclusion

A major conclusion drawn from the analysis of Okigbo's spiritual journey and his quest for the primordial self is that fragmentation and alienation of Africans caused by their being subjected to racist attitudes motivate literary creativity. The literary works help in revealing that European culture is not superior to African culture. The black people, even in facing an oppressive system of deep-rooted norms and practices, beliefs in African inferiority and subordination, strived and asserted themselves. The fragmented and alienated Africans worked out strategies for survival and recognition through self-assertion. Another conclusion drawn from this study is that individual and native self-assertion, through decolonization of the African mind, rehabilitation of culture, cultural literacy, participating in ancestral worships are indispensable elements for the healing of the fragmented and alienated lives of the blacks due to the destruction of their cultural life.

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