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## NIGERIA, THE LITERATURE OF *RESSENTIMENT*, AND SUBALTERN CULTURE

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### **Abstract**

A Nigerian culture is gradually evolving by virtue of the forces of culture formation functioning. What is difficult to predict is the nature of the value system that this culture will generate and transmit. But there is division among Nigerian literary critics concerning the kind of culture they wish to see consolidate in Nigeria. Some think that a modern Nigeria based on the heritage of colonialism will yield an inauthentic culture or a hybrid situation, which is as undesirable, whereas an authentic culture ought to be African. Others demand of literature to ‘show the light’, by providing models of probity in political life and inclusiveness and tolerance in social culture, and further to project an ideology of commitment to integrated national development. In a market economy, however, a vast range of forces of social change interact in culture generation, and no single one of these forces can alone by itself determine the shape and tenor of values marking a culture. Both scholarly attitudes in respect to a Nigerian culture, moreover, have strong echoes of what Friedrich Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*. In this paper, we shall explore the distrust frequently encountered in literary studies towards the evolving culture in Nigeria using this analytic of *ressentiment*. Literary scholarship exercises direct and indirect influence on the evolution of culture, but it is the latter

that is of greater concern here, namely the orientation it presses upon literary creativity and the way in which it influences perception of the emerging culture in the wider world.

### **Introduction**

Human life within stable political and geographical boundaries and stable conditions over time inevitably leaves a trail, which may, and usually develops to regular patterns and shared knowledge that in turn shape and give meaning to actions going forward. That, undoubtedly, is the case with Nigeria, a country constituted by a political act of the British colonizing authority in 1914, bringing together peoples of different cultures, histories, religions, and different levels of exposure to world cultural movements. From this point then, work with a future orientation and play – competitive and diversionary, political institutions open to direct and indirect participation, along with all the other social forces and human activities interplaying – religion, trade, production and consumption of goods and services, exchanges of shared meanings and interpersonal circulation of symbol systems under basically one legal system together begin to accumulate, so to speak, a national history. Thereby, a Nigerian culture is evolving and taking shape. However, this concept, Nigerian culture, does not often appear in the

writings and research of Nigerian literary critics, even though culture is an issue of great moment in the tradition of criticism dominant in Nigeria, which is basically humanism. More commonly culture is thought of as what pertains to the individual ethnic nationalities that make up the country, or of Africa itself. We read, for instance, in the following passage extolling Chinua Achebe's achievement:

What Achebe revealed about Art, Culture and the Nation are thought-provoking. His literary works not only reveal the Igbo cosmivision to the world but also show that culture has its own flaws which Achebe did not occlude. That also endeared him to the world. We cannot underestimate the value Achebe projected of Igbo culture in particular and African culture in general. (Esther Ugwu 94)

Nigeria appears not to be in focus in Ugwu's discussion of culture here. A possible reason for this is the tendency to think of culture as a system constituted within a past domain, perhaps belonging to the time of the foundation of the group, a *'depositum'*, according to Paul Ricoeur (27), that is handed on, to which the present relates in absolute loyalty, instead of a system that forms a people who in living it and carrying it forward remake, adapt, and restructure it in line with the realities of the present. There is need not only to re-open and rethink settled attitudes towards culture in the context of modern Africa, but also to examine the impact of the conscious and mostly indeliberate pressures exerted by the scholar community on culture formation.

### **Culture Looking Back**

There are specific functions in human life that are usually associated with culture and culture production. These include education, popular festivals, mass and social media, political activities and projections of power, religious belief and practice, use of technology, fashion, film and video – treated by Walter Benjamin as the art of 'the distracted'(239) – in contrast to the old forms traditionally celebrated, namely music, painting, sculpture, and literature, both 'highbrow', as Arnold Kettle calls it (202), and 'middle-brow' which, according to him, 'not to beat about the bush - is inferior literature adapted to the special tastes and needs of the middle class and of those who consciously or not adopt the values of that class' (96). A common marking of middle-class literature is thus the attempt 'to reproduce their own attitude to life upon the stage' or in the pages of the novel (158), which becomes a standard for 'critical' judgement of the work. On both sides, where literature is concerned, it is often the 'middle-brow' variety, the one more widely consumed, that is more immediately influential, whereas the highbrow which is normally where criticism focuses tends to be more long-term and indirect in its impact, as it is the matter for criticism of which the knowledge circulates among specialists, gradually spreading and trickling down and building up the intellectual tradition.

In the case of Nigeria, of course, the commencement of the political entity has a known date; and in the logic of one like Ezidemili in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, a Nigerian culture could hardly stand since there are pre-existing ethnic ones.

For this chief priest of the Idemili deity demonstrates the superiority of Idemili to Ulu, the common deity of Umuaro clan, by referencing the fact that ‘Ulu was made by our fathers long ago. But Idemili was there at the beginning of things’ (45). Thus as has been mentioned, for many it is easier to reference the culture of an ethnic group or even – with much less clarity, African culture, than the culture of a state created under colonialism. All the same, a Nigerian culture has been evolving since colonial times. Hence some language scholars have been able to make out a Nigerian English; others discuss Nigerian politics (political culture), Nigerian attitudes to the rule of law, Nigerian video, Nigerian political economy, and Nigerian music. With regard to literature, it has been handed on for decades in Nigeria’s critical circles that African and Nigerian literatures, if attentive to social realities and indicate the direction society should go, the result should be a society that is more humane, more orderly, more equal and just, more tolerant and more germane to individual self-actualization, a society, in short, that is compliant and reflective of middle-class values. (Needless to mention that the middle class characterized by these values is of Western pedigree.) A work like Gabriel Okara’s *The Voice* has been presented as a kind of model of literature portraying the above values. The concluding remarks of Albert Ashaolu’s review of the work highlights this:

Recent events in various African societies demonstrate that there are still some ‘Izongos’ (or *Zongologos*) and ‘Abadis’ (or *Ambadis*) who will stop at nothing to muffle the voice of legitimate dissent and to stifle the

Okolos who are committed to social reform and justice. Okolo may have been drowned, and the river may be flowing ‘smoothly over (his dead body) as if nothing had happened,’ but his soul keeps marching on in Amatu. The Okolos in the Nigerian society may be hunted down as if by falconers, but, as the demonstrated optimism at the end of *The Voice* suggests, the struggle continues. (117)

But Okolo himself had asked, ‘What is he himself trying to reach?’ (*The Voice* 112) – nota negligible question. Without clarity on this point, Okolo may look like a busybody or even a trouble maker to be going about enquiring of citizens if they have got *it*. But there is reason to believe that the question is worth asking, and that it demands to be asked, even if no final answer may be forthcoming, as it is tied to what Karl Jaspers calls ‘the question of the value and meaning of existence’, whereby ‘man does not seem to become really serious until he faces it’ (333). What Okolo is raising in *The Voice* is the question of truth. His asking it, moreover, says something about his quality of soul.

Hence he has been called a philosopher in the criticism; and this comes out precisely in not being defeated by his inability to answer his own question about goals and purposes, and instead asking it of others, because he is desirous to learn. He is teachable, then – an entailment of what the Greeks called *sophrosunē* (moderation). We can thus contrast him to Chief Izongo, the absolute ruler of his community, whose traits are contrary to the movements of philosophy, as he quite fits the description of the anti-type enunciated in Nietzsche as follows:

He has lost his plasticity, [ ] is ‘hard, unknowledgeable, unteachable, devoid of gentleness, eternally suspicious, and precipitate in judgment. He seizes every possible means to maintain his opinion, for he cannot at all understand that there are bound to be other opinions’. He is not capable of conveying anything, and his incapacity is due precisely to the fact that he behaves as though univocal truth has been found and can be communicated. (Karl Jaspers 404-405, partly quoting Nietzsche)

The ambiguities and dilemmas of a work like *The Voice* may sooner reduce a reader to thoughtfulness than yield reassurance of rightness against a world of corrupt and power-hungry bourgeoisie. And it is probably by misrecognition that it is discussed as though a reproduction of middle-class values and attitudes to life. It is distinctive in a literary culture in which middle-class values comprise the norm to aspire to and the canon to measure conduct or achievement.

### Literature, Criticism, and Nigerian Culture

Given the views and attitudes to life claimed to be ‘Nigerian’, it may be taken that a full account of this culture is possible, for if there are *parts*, a *whole* may be presupposed. The tendency to ignore the existence or the possible existence of a Nigerian culture and to focus discussion on individual spiritual and material productions, seen normally in terms of shortcomings, must have a negative impact on that evolving culture. With the idea of culture continuing automatically to bring to mind the ethnic nationalities that make up Nigeria, and this

is unchallenged, and with ‘engaged’ criticism continuing to pressure creative writing to be politically committed – in one approved way only, rewarding the compliant writers by airing and discussing them and ignoring those who may be inspired by other things than politics – or even finding no way to engage these kinds of works, the possibility of what was not so long ago called *the Nigeria project* continues to be undermined – this, by the scholar and literary communities. How different the roles of these communities in the age of nationalism in Europe, which was during the first three or four decades of the nineteenth century.

That was also the age of romanticism. The concept of ‘Englishness’ goes back to this period, with mythizing of England as ‘Albion’, and a mythic *history* that swishes past the real history of Romano Britain and the migrations from Scandinavia all the way to Troy and the Trojan War, for example in William Blake’s epics and dramatic poetry. In the same spirit, William Arnold writes of Keats’s poetry:

The flowers of the Endymion are the wild rose and the pansy; its birds are the lark, the nightingale, the wren, the linnet, and the thrush. In a word, Keats in the Endymion is writing, so far as the background of his story is concerned, about what he knows and not about what he pretends to know, and he both knew and felt the beauty of the English land, and of the sky over it, and of the sea encompassing it. (xiii)

In these and similar ways English literature from the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century created the notion of Englishness and we see it in its full ideological and mythological coding in

the following speech in Tom Stoppard's radio play, *The Dog it is that Died*:

BLAIR: I'll just sit on this bench and enjoy the view. The view north from St James's Park is utterly astonishing, I always think. Domes and cupolas, strange pinnacles and spires. A distant prospect of St Petersburg, one imagines . . . Where does it all go when one is in the middle of it, standing in Trafalgar Square with Englishness on every side? Monumental Albion, giving credit where credit is due to some sketchbook of a Grand Tour, but all as English as a 49 bus.

Englishness is in the very air.

Most of the best known Nigerian literary works are the ones that insist on their pedigree in the culture of one ethnic nationality or another. In a relatively small number of cases, like Festus Iyayi's *The Contract* and Dibia Humphrey's *The End of Dark Street*, the 'affiliative network' connects to a social class, as it gives 'materiality back to [] the strands holding the text to society, author and culture' (Said 174), while that of Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, probably connect to whom-it-may-concern. Each work, of course, produces its own social environment, where the narrative eye rarely picks out anything of value or anything respectable, although there are often individuals with strong convictions, who, drawn into the crises of the narratives, react from these convictions. Frequently, it is these convictions that single them out in a world that is otherwise chaotic.

The roles being played by literary production and literary scholarship with

regard to the Nigerian culture question are assessed in this paper based on Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of *ressentiment*, which refers to an attitude of discontent towards the scheme of things that had rendered the group whose voice is heard or dissimulated in the work disadvantaged. But it is also 'a passion', as Nietzsche sometimes characterizes it (*The Will to Power* 105), inasmuch as it seeks and achieves release through some form of external action: 'a revolt'. *Ressentiment* is 'the revolt of the underprivileged' (108), but not in the sense of an organized action with a clear and achievable goal, because by definition, this impassioned underclass lacks 'the authentic way of reaction – that of deeds' (Fredric Jameson 201). It rather takes the path of 'imaginary vengeance' (201) 'toward everything held in honor' by the privileged class or group (Nietzsche 104). Such is middle-brow art affecting, for instance, an assault 'on those opposing values which the masters used to control their colonial subjects, values which constituted the very underpinning of the colonial system' (Lewis Nkosi 7).

Nkosi considers that having to use the language of the very colonists for this 'assault' is the bitterest of ironies. For the assault reinscribes the language, and thereby affirms – and perhaps even celebrates – the achievement of colonialism. Similarly, the art that reproduces the attitudes of the middle class and promotes their values obviously works on behalf of a foreign model of social organization, which it is impatient to see in full and flawless operation. Thus 'like all the rest of the modern middle-class rebels, [the impassioned underclass are] not in rebellion at all' (Kettle 98). They end up

reinforcing and furthering the values of the hated oppressor class. The disinclination by Nigerian critics to recognize the emergent culture may in fact be traced to the attitude, but in the public domain, the effect is probably the yielding of a culture of subaltern status for Nigeria. *Ressentiment* will always find that the middle class ideal is unachievable, because it inevitably compares its own social reality to another social reality which it sees as a standard in respect to which it falls short; and it will resent this.

Sometimes it is the analysis and characterizing of these failures as adduced from a literary work that pass for literary criticism of that work. For example, Onwumere and Elendu write with respect to Achebe's *A Man of the People* that:

sectional or regional politicking is often reinforced by self-centred and opulent life style prebends live. We often find political office holders display wealth with fleets of luxurious cars, sophisticated mansions and retinues of many kinds of properties. (200)

The air is of a book bounded on all sides by a social and political system called Nigeria, but the boundary is invisible, so the reading eye travelling unhindered from one to the other observes no change of terrain. The lifestyles of the 'political office holders' are the same in the book and in *terra firma*, as 'we often find [them] display wealth with fleets of luxurious cars', and so forth: we need not know whether this *often* is what we find in books generally or in both the book and outside it. One may even be used to illustrate the other, the book the socio-political system, and the socio-political system the book:

With the ideology of *who you know*, one can get what he is not, by any standard, qualified to get. This may have been responsible [for] the rise of Chief Nanga from grass to grace, from school teacher to a heavy weight politician and to ministerial position. We cannot therefore expect moral rectitude or patriotism and statesmanship from him as one cannot give what he does not have. (206-207)

This mutual illumination can give the appearance of a living dialogue between the two, although no attention is given to the possibility that from at least on point of view, Chief Nanga is in fact a victim. It is not his fault that, according to Emmanuel Obiechina, under and in the aftermath of colonization, 'old values' have quickly crumbled, and 'solid new values are not evolving as rapidly', leaving many in a confused state (34). The received western system in which Nanga finds himself functioning amateurishly is exempt from all criticism. This remarkable one-sidedness is condoned generally in the criticism, inasmuch as the alleged contestation of the values of the despised West is only *ressentiment*, with no vision of a self-assigned and workable alternative. But if the instrument of the alleged revolt is questioned and assessed, for example by reference to the concept of *ressentiment*, the same local middle class would denounce the procedure as 'western epistemology'. We note, however, that notions like *ressentiment*, 'middle-brow' and reproduction of attitudes to life were first enunciated in studying mainly English and German letters; and if they conferred disapprobation in application to a specific work, whether English or German, it

would not be wise to ignore their lessons in dealing with African literature; it would be directly in conflict with reason and also demeaning to take the view that with respect to African literature, those are marks of strength and dignity.

### Art and Ethical Guidelines

Within African criticism there is a powerful current which appears to run on the principle that literature and criticism have the decisive roles in culture formation. Leading the way in this regard is probably Obiechina himself, who understands African literature in terms of the need to create new social values to replace the old that is said to have come to grief under a culture conflict which the old traditional system that apparently had never before been tested was unprepared for. This involvement of literature and culture is understood in different ways in African literary studies. For some it means that literature should consciously and purposefully address the task of engineering a culture, in line with the vision of Negritude, which according to Wole Soyinka,

was that of restitution and re-engineering of a social psyche, the establishment of a distinct human entity and the glorification of its long-suppressed attributes. (126)

His novel, *Season of Anomy*, is presumably committed to this value of 'social engineering'. Thus it projects a well-planned and coordinated effort to infuse the locally sourced Aiyéro culture, itself a refinement of 'the wisdom of its parent body Aiyétómò' (2), in the manner of yeast (Mt 13.33) being mixed into the

social mass to supply the missing national culture.

In Obiechina, the ideal is to create something new and relevant, and use of elements of the old in this process is not precluded. Negritude, on the other hand, is a kind of discourse of recovery and purification, and the cultural values are already given. Chinua Achebe appears to express sympathy for this view where he writes:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels ... did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them. (*Morning yet on Creation Day* 45)

While it is clear in this affirmation that there is something or even much that is of value in the past which the present ought to be able to build on, and literature has a role in this, it must be said that Achebe's account of literature goes way beyond what is enunciated in the passage above which is often treated by Achebe scholars as the spring-head and ultimate destination of that writer's creative output.

For Achebe, literature is art first and foremost: art is what explains its nature, and the art character is not to be understood merely as to how a particular story or poem is written. What it is able to do is by reason of what it is in itself - art. He writes, for instance:

our world stands in just as much need of change today as it ever did in the past. Our writers responding to something in themselves and acting

also within the traditional concept of an artist's role in society – using his art to control his environment – have addressed themselves to some of these matters in their art. (*Hopes and Impediments* 58)

The environment to control includes the world of human action, by seeking to establish what the rules are, 'what is meant by virtue and vice', what are 'the attributes of a hero', and 'what constitutes a heroic act' (100). In this respect, art is functioning as the soul of a community seeking through the maze of events, natural and man-made, enlightenment and clarity. Thus:

art must interpret all human experience, for anything against which the door is barred can cause trouble. Even if harmony is not achievable in the heterogeneity of human experience, the dangers of an open rupture are greatly lessened by giving everyone his due. (*Hopes and Impediments* 44)

Even though art is something different from philosophy, it can create space for exercise of thought, but without the rigour that leads to moral certitude. Thus in artistic mimesis, the distinction 'of good and evil, or of the heroic and the cowardly' may be entirely 'fuzzy' (100). Accordingly, Obiechina had argued that 'the other intellectuals of society' had a key role in establishing ethical guidelines ('Cultural Nationalism' 34). Some of the scholars who have been projecting cultural nationalism have tended to ignore or not allow room for a potential multiple perspective.

Achebe also maintains that art has a 'practical purpose', which is 'to channel a spiritual force into an aesthetically satisfying physical form that captures the presumed attributes of that force' (43). Whereas philosophizing by art may not count for much when professional philosophy is available, this 'practical purpose' is part of 'the native soil' of art (Ernst Cassirer 98) – and not art of any specific society. Hence we read in Levi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind*: that by creating images out of what may be fearful situations, 'even if this is an illusion' art 'gratifies the intelligence and gives rise to a sense of pleasure which can already be called aesthetic' (24). In Soyinka, who is broadly in agreement, it is rather *revolutionary art* that acts in this way; and just as 'the revolutionary socio-economist will ... share the burden of containing and controlling the forces of distribution', 'art will attempt to contain and control power, metaphorically ... on behalf of the masses' ('Barthes, Leftocracy and other Mythologies' 49).

#### **Partial Statements Adding up**

However, Obiechina's idea that the old values are rapidly crumbling is something that seems wholly at odds with the ethos of a practice like Feminism, but nevertheless shares its middle-class aesthetic of direct representation – maybe over-representation, sometimes – of experience. For the state of affairs that enables Feminism to articulate itself as an opposed voice is cultural. It is a culture of male domination with respect to which the traditional culture and the colonial heritage are considered to be mutually reinforcing. Whereas at the political level the traditional system is eclipsed by the

colonial, there is rather continuity at the level of social control, with one set of males taking over and perpetuating the same oppressor-oppressed social relation in which women are at the receiving end. To this extent, the colonial heritage is part of the 'African culture', which according to Andrew Nyongesa, 'gives men authority to violate ethical standards in their treatment of women: [where] men are gods, above the law thereby given to their primordial instincts' (1). These very issues of violation and oppression are highlighted, with texts for exemplification, in accounting for the work of another critic by F.O. Orabueze:

In Iniobong I. Uko's study of the diverse cultural trends and codes that oppress women, particularly the black women, she situates the oppression of women with a comparative study of the experiences of female fictive characters in the novels of three female African writers – Nawal El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile*, Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough* and Chimamada Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. (217)

The works selected in Uko's study are sufficiently representative. In Nawal El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile*, although what Edward Said calls the 'affiliative network' of the story (174) is Islamic, traditional and inward-looking, the issue of concern is probably much less the culture itself than patriarchy which 'for El Saadawi, is an all-inclusive system that informs social, political, and religious structures' (Isam Shihada 169). For some of the writers and critics, however, there is no difference, and the antagonist is part of the general background; *is* the background

– which, associated with iconoclasm, tends to lead to over-representation of the given objectionable reality. Chimamada Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is Janus-faced – on the one hand, towards the heritage of colonization, and on the other, the traditional Igbo culture. It is generally antipathetic towards the dominant middle-class culture of the oppressors, but sympathetic to the hard-pressed traditional culture of the marginalized characters. While there is over-representation of Eugene's particular ambient within the colonial heritage, Negritude sentimentality reigns in this novel in representing the traditional Igbo culture to the extent that woman's experience in this cultural milieu is hardly visible. In Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough*, for its own part, the burden of oppression is on the culture itself impacting heavily upon the childless bride through the mother in law.

In African Feminist literature, iconoclastic over-representation of both the traditional culture and the local appropriation of the heritage that came with colonialism may recall a point of despair in *Things Fall Apart* where we read of Obierika's anguished perplexity that has brought his very power of decision-making to a standstill. But there is a crucial difference in tone. Obierika's tone is sad with the echo of a defeat which he can already see in the horizon: it is *his* culture; its defeat is *his* defeat:

[the white man] says that our customs are bad, and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. (57)

Obierika here also gives expression to the will-sapping perplexity of Umuofia which Okonkwo alone in his exile in Mbanta is kept from. But he will come to know the extent to which it had turned Umuofia to a shadow of its former self where he strikes what should have been the first blow to start a war, only to hear the men of formerly warlike Umuofia asking one another, ‘Why did he do it?’ (67).

In socially committed literature, the ‘assault’ Nkosi claims to be happening is in the mode of *passionate* representation. Thus literature of this kind leaves little room for criticism, in terms of *judgment*, whether the object is art or something else, and if art, by what criteria. The room available is for interpretation, the making one’s own, according to Paul Ricoeur, ‘what was initially “alien”’. He writes:

the aim of all hermeneutics is to struggle against cultural distance and historical alienation. Interpretation brings together, equalises, renders contemporary and similar. This goal is attained only insofar as interpretation actualises the meaning of the text for the present reader. Appropriation is the concept which is suitable for the actualisation of meaning as addressed to someone. (*Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* 147)

Interpretation is premised on the notion that a text has a meaning which is humanly relevant, and thus can be appropriated and put to use in one’s own behalf. But the *meaning* of a feminist work appears to be known beforehand: ‘a message to all women that resistance is the only option left to eradicate oppression and deconstruct the patriarchal class

structures that enslave them’ (Shihada 176). At a wider level, it is a call to ‘society to change and abolish the patriarchal class structures that keep women victims’ (176). So of high value in the feminist movement, in both art and criticism, is the evolving or acquisition of a voice and the public and insistent exercise of this voice against a patriarchy which is either in a state of dissolution or has been absorbed by a failing postcolonial social practice of which *The Contract* and works of that kind are the lament, and where a free spirit may on occasion, as in *Season of Anomy* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, take a dire situation in hand, despite that it might mean for him or her personal ruin.

### Conclusion

Of course culture will evolve based on pull and push factors within and pressures from without, and will tend to move in the direction where change is least difficult. Literature and criticism are undoubtedly among the internal forces of cultural change. In Nigeria, however, criticism demanding probity in public life sounds much like lip-service because in practice the literature it delights in is one that indulges in passionate over-representation and unfolds as an ‘assault’ against some malpractice, in general, literature of *ressentiment*. There is no real interest how the culture that is *Nigeria* is evolving nor in its specific form. Cultural awareness remains dominantly in terms of the given characterizing one or another of the ethnic nationalities that make up Nigeria. Beyond this level, criticism has supported and promoted passionate or over-representation of social reality by

creative writing whereby the evolving culture is known only in terms of what is wrong with it. This culture will be subaltern in terms of having very few or no known positive attributes compared to other cultures, and in any case only contemptible: it is, moreover, a non-culture, as it is claimed by no one, and invests no one's behaviour with worth and dignity.

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