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As Africa marks African Liberation Day today, an interesting debate has quietly emerged from the Sahel. On May 15, Burkina Faso celebrated its annual Traditions Day, honouring African customs, ancestral institutions, and traditional spirituality.

Reactions across social media ranged from admiration to ridicule. Some saw cultural pride. Others saw dangerous superstition.

Yet perhaps the more important question is this: was political liberation enough without civilisational confidence?

When the Organisation of African Unity was formed in 1963, Africa's primary struggle was political. The continent sought flags, borders, governments, and sovereignty after centuries of colonial rule. Liberation movements focused on reclaiming territory and State power during the height of the Cold War.

But political liberation did not necessarily resolve Africa's relationship with its own civilisation.

Over time, many African societies became politically independent while remaining psychologically uncertain about their own symbols, traditions, and systems of knowledge. African languages became "vernaculars". African spirituality became "witchcraft." African governance systems became "tribalism." Meanwhile, similar structures elsewhere retained dignity under different names.

This is why the contrast between Benin's Vodun Festival and Burkina Faso's Traditions Day is revealing. Benin's Vodun celebrations are largely tolerated globally because they are presented as culture, heritage, dance, spirituality, and tourism. Interesting, colourful, and even exotic.

Burkina Faso's observance appears different because it is emerging within a wider conver-

Unfinished business of African liberation

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Political



sation about sovereignty, identity, traditional authority, and African self-definition. Suddenly, what seemed acceptable as harmless folklore begins to feel politically unsettling when it approaches questions of legitimacy and power.

Perhaps that is the unfinished business of African liberation.

For centuries, colonial systems did not merely conquer African territory. They also delegitimised African cosmologies, spiritual systems, and indigenous authority. Yet human civilisation itself has always depended on symbols.

European monarchies still preserve crowns, ancestral palaces, sacred rituals, and ceremonial authority. Religious institutions across the world rely on rings, sacred garments, rel-

ics, and spiritual hierarchy. Modern republics themselves depend heavily on flags, constitutions, ceremonies, and symbolic performance.

Human societies have never stopped believing in symbols.

The real issue, therefore, is not symbolism itself but whose symbols are recognised as civilisation and whose are dismissed as superstition.

This does not mean Africa should romanticise everything simply because it is indigenous. Every civilisation must interrogate harmful practices and adapt to changing realities. But there is also danger in assuming that African traditions alone must constantly justify their legitimacy before they deserve respect.

Perhaps Africa's postcolonial journey has moved through three stages: political liberation, cultural recognition, and now a deeper civilisational reconsideration.

And that may be where May 15 and May 25 finally meet. One commemorates the liberation of African territory. The other quietly asks whether Africa is prepared to liberate its imagination.

Gertrude Kamya Othieno
Political Sociologist
Alumna of London School of Economics
(LSE) gokbooks@gmail.com