

African Spiritual Renewal: Cultural and Environmental Dimensions

Joseph Nga

Thank you so much for coming to share our reflections on African culture and spiritual renewal. I am so delighted, and grateful to visit your beautiful country, “The Land of the Rising Sun.” I have been fascinated by the cultural beauty and wonderful hospitality of Japanese people. Japan has such a rich and colorful culture that few nations can match. I am so proud to bring you loving greetings from my family and friends in Africa and America. I am immensely grateful to ABS-Japan for the privilege to share a couple of thoughts with the great people of Japan. It is such a wonderful honor for me to participate in this vibrant and dynamic conference. We shall explore the transformative effects of Baha’i teachings on African tradition and culture. We shall also examine how Baha’i natural metaphors speak directly to African culture and revive the African impulse to care for Mother Earth! We shall punctuate our discussion with relevant cross-cultural comparisons between Africa and Japan.

African culture is so diverse, complex, and still in a constant state of flux. Japanese culture appears to be more homogeneous and can perfectly blend the ancient and the ultra modern. My parents raised me in a God-centered universe where symbols of nature such as trees, birds, flowers, mountains, and rivers have a great cultural significance and carry deep spiritual meaning. Mt. Fuji in Japan is also sacred to many Japanese, and has inspired poets and artists for centuries. Japanese people have a great love and strong sense of connection to nature, just as much as we do in Africa. In Africa, we believe that the human spirit finds its best expression when it is in harmony with nature and Mother Earth. Land and nature are abundant in African, and can provide ample space for spiritual renewal. Perhaps limited land and vegetation here inspired Japanese people to develop many forms of art such as the ancient *Bonsai* art which involves growing miniature trees in shallow pots to bring the spirit and peace of nature indoors. Since many Japanese may not afford private gardens and extensive landscapes, stunted *Bonsai* trees can provide green spiritual luxury for hundred of years. Both Africans and Japanese believe that it is very important for people and nature to coexist!

Perhaps, we should first define the concept of metaphor, since we shall be referring to a variety of Baha’i natural metaphors. Let me propose a simple and creative exercise that may help us to understand the concept of metaphor. Look at this good-looking honeydew melon. Let’s draw imaginary eyes on it! Maybe a smiling mouth. Let’s add a nose that may not be so disappointing! Now, let’s hold it over my face. A metaphor can be defined, or explained, graphically by intersection between a face and a honeydew melon. We can say “somebody’s face and a honeydew resemble each other.” That is to say: “the face looks like a honeydew melon.” When we say the face looks like a honeydew melon, there is an intersection somewhere! In discovering that a face looks like a honeydew melon, we begin to see the face in a new way.

Dear friends, we don’t want to belabor the point. We are simply trying to define a metaphor, in a way that is not so terribly abstract. There are other excellent ways of defining a metaphor in addition to “implied comparison.” In fact, a metaphor helps us to look for the common in the uncommon! A metaphor could be a transition, a crossing over, or, an intersection, whereby “something looks like something else.” Have you ever wondered why Abdu’l-Baha, referred to the revelation of Baha’u’llah as the “*divine springtime*” through which the earth becomes “*verdant and blooming*”?⁽¹⁾ The time when all created things are regenerated and, renewed? Have you ever reflected, why Abdu’l-Baha, compared the power of love, and “unity in diversity” with:

- The waves of one sea!
- The stars of one heaven!
- The leaves of one tree!
- The fruits of one tree!
- And the flowers of one garden?⁽²⁾

All of the above metaphors illustrate certain spiritual principles and realities. Natural metaphors evoke natural feelings in us. I found Baha'i natural metaphors quite fascinating and beautiful. I found them very inspiring, compelling, and spiritually rejuvenating.

After this sweeping overview of metaphors, let us quickly shift gears to the primary business of the day: "The impact of Baha'i natural metaphors on African cultural and spiritual renewal." Perhaps, I should first tell you how Baha'i natural metaphors shaped my spiritual outlook and informed my cultural perception of nature. I found some Baha'i natural metaphors, and utterances which were specifically addressed to people of African descent by the Central Figures of the Baha'i faith, very striking and fascinating. It all began in Africa. I discovered the Baha'i Faith when I was able to read a good book and make my own independent judgment. No kidding!

I was raised on the open farm fields in the tropical rainforests of Cameroon, in West Africa. I was privileged to have toiled on the farms, collected medicinal plants, and hunted in African jungles with my peasant parents before breaking through challenging economic and cultural barriers in Africa to become a first generation college student. We cultivated and survived on our farmland on nearly a daily basis. It is probably not by accident that I became a forester and conservation biologist. My connection to the land has been a tactile connection, a cultural connection, or perhaps an identity connection. Let me share a few words about my peasant parents to put things into proper perspective. Despite the hardship and backbreaking life on African farms, my illiterate parents were able to sacrifice all they had so that I could have the benefit of education. My parents never lived a life for themselves; they only lived a life for their children! My mother still cultivates various crops and also picks lots of wild vegetables and aromatic spices from the woods to feed her children. My mother was probably denied the benefit of education and the promise of equality because of her gender and planet of birth. In African popular thought and custom, the woman is still female first, and human being second. Despite her challenging cultural circumstances, my mother has always been the bedrock of our family. She works harder and longer than everyone else in our family. She is often the last to go to bed, but always the first to wake up! My mother is just an ordinary African woman who knows how to survive in extraordinary times.

My father is a traditional herbalist, who understands his cultural and natural environment in very sophisticated ways, and knows how to manipulate medicinal plants and community resources to help our community to survive disease, stress and anxiety. The African concept of health and healing is holistic – emphasizing the integration of body, mind, and spirit into the cultural environment. My father believes he can cure a variety of diseases, such as malaria, epilepsy, depression, and other skin diseases, except wrinkles! He identifies three critical factors that determine our health and aging process in the community: First, what we eat is very important because our food is our natural medicine – eating the wrong food can compromise our health. Second, what we drink may determine how long we survive and thrive. Third, how much peace and love we share in our family and with the community is a sign of a good health. My father never allows anyone go to bed without the best sleeping pill in the world "Peace of Mind". Baha'is call this Prayer.

About 80% of Africans still rely on natural herbal medicine for their primary healthcare because of the scarcity of modern medical facilities. Herbal medicine also speaks directly to African culture. The herbalist in Africa is part doctor, pharmacist, psychologist, community

counselor, and spiritual leader who can blend ancient wisdom, mysticism, tribal politics, and medicinal plants to provide community healthcare. The community in Africa is generally not understood as a collection of human heads in numerical terms alone, but as a pool of life; a pool of emotions and responsibilities; and a pool of love, health, and happiness.

I was equally pleased to learn that Japan has some of the most modern hospitals in the world, and most of the latest medicines, but many Japanese think herbal medicine is more natural and body-friendly. Japanese people sometimes use traditional herbal medicine that is very effective for some medical problems and sometimes use modern medicine that is more effective for other medical problems.

After this rough cross-cultural comparison between Africa and Japan, you may also be interested to know that my father is a great nature conservationist without academic education. Nature degradation is very tangible to him. My father cannot understand why medicinal plants that we collected from the woods a few years ago are fast disappearing. We now have to go beyond the village periphery to collect medicinal plants. My father believes our land has fallen into a certain global peril. He thinks pollution from upland settlements has blocked the respiratory passages of our land because the earth below his feet is now breathing with a certain force.

After this brief family background, let me tell you how my traditional circumstances shaped my spiritual outlook and informed my cultural perception of the world. I have often been fascinated and intrigued by religious questions and issues of human justice. I often worried about the future, and wanted to know the meaning of my own life. I wanted to know why we labored so hard, but could hardly make ends meet. Remember that for generations, our colonizers in Africa have often conceived, deceived, and demonized Africans as lazy, stupid, and backward! I painfully remember working so hard with my parents, on our coffee farm, sometimes earning less than a dollar, for a week of backbreaking labor, when a cup of coffee from our farm was worth more than a dollar in the West! We labored while others stole the benefits of our labor. There were times I wondered if there was any human justice in the world. If there was no distributive justice, where was retributive justice? Despite my great motivation and drive to give the best that was in me, my life was not quite fulfilling. While I was being tormented by these perplexing human questions, Baha'is saw nothing mysterious or perplexing. Baha'is simply believed that these perplexing human questions were answered when Baha'u'llah came to the world, and will be fulfilled when the world comes to Baha'u'llah. Period! Baha'is even believed that pain and suffering were simply part of the spiritual process that helped us to grow in spirit and refinement. These ideas first sounded to me like very complex and confusing propositions. That pain and suffering have a cleansing and refining effect? I seriously thought that Baha'is must have been going nuts! However, I was quite thrilled, and humbled, to discover that Baha'u'llah founded the Baha'i Faith in 1863 to establish love, justice, peace, and unity among the people of the world. The most important thing that touched and moved my heart was the fact that, for centuries, almost everything, in African culture has been dismissed as primitive and barbaric, yet Baha'u'llah and the Central Figures of the Baha'i Faith saw depth and spiritual beauty in African humanity. They acknowledged, and ennobled, the richness of African cultural identity, and spiritual reality. The Central Figures of the Baha'i Faith all provided a public voice, and spiritual recognition to a group of people who have been despised, abused, or simply ignored for generations. Suddenly, the Baha'i Faith gave me, and other under-privileged and disadvantaged people of the world, a new sense of social inclusion and self-worth; a new sense of social responsibility.

We believe Baha'u'llah, the Founder of the Baha'i Faith, brought the most powerful, and the most important idea of the 21st century called the "Oneness of Humanity" and "Unity in Diversity." I was always humbled and thrilled to discover that Baha'u'llah likened black people to the "Black pupil of the eye through which the light of the spirit shineth forth." ⁽²⁾ Abdu'l-Baha

made several trips from the Holy Land to Africa, and saw a great spiritual destiny in Africa. The Master repeatedly blessed the people of Africa. He loved them “So Dearly” and considered them “Pure-Hearted and Spiritually Receptive” (3) He ardently prayed for their illumination. Abdu’l-Baha watched over the people of Africa with “Particular Love, Tenderness, and Understanding”. The Master cherished the “Brightest Hopes” for the future of Africa. Shoghi Effendi crossed the continent of Africa twice. He was struck by the love of African people, and was charmed by the beauty of African photogenic landscapes.

According to Shoghi Effendi, Africa is truly awakening and has a great message and a great contribution to make to the advancement of world civilization. Shoghi Effendi has even intimated that there will be a general shift in the balance of power from the old colonial regimes to their former subjects. Black people will have an upsurge that is both spiritual and social. The spiritual upsurge will rapidly bring them great gifts because this is an act of God, and it is so intended. Socially, the world’s forces will be alarmed and frightened to see that black people are really rising to the top.

These remarkable pronouncements from the Central figures of the Bahai Faith have been very touching, and moving to the people of Africa! I fell in love with the Baha’i Faith. I loved the Faith. I was eager to learn more about the Faith. I was enthusiastic and willing to serve and teach the Baha’i Faith. In fact, to teach the Baha’i Faith is to touch lives forever! The Baha’i Faith can inspire us to do the unthinkable!

In Africa, we often join a new religion to get something out of it. This is not a secret—after all, some churches in Africa entice us with all sorts of unbecoming incentives, as they plot to steal our poor souls! Unfortunately, when you become a Baha’i, you instead believe you have something to offer and something to share. Wait a minute; what did the early followers of Jesus expect to get out of Christianity? Perhaps a cross? What did the Dawn-Breakers or the early believers expect to get out of the Bahai Faith? Martyrdom—a martyr’s death! And what are we now expecting to get in Yokohama? Perhaps, sushi and coffee!!

It is quite amazing to see how the Bahai Faith uses the language of love that defies traditional barriers of time and space. The Bahai Faith appeals to different people in different cultures in a variety of interesting ways. I was equally intrigued to discover how Abdu’l-Baha attached great importance to the great people of Japan. The Master described Japanese people as “Lovers of Truth”. Lovers of Truth! The Master admonished Japanese people to “Make Peace” with the people of the world.

According to Abdu’l-Baha, “Japan has made wonderful progress in material civilization, but she will become perfect when she will make spiritual developments and the power of the kingdom becomes manifest in her.” (4) Abdu’l-Baha prophesied the spiritual future of Japan. He said, “*Japan will turn ablaze.*” Japan will turn ablaze! I believe the future of Japan is Bright, and Radiant! The future of Japan is bright and radiant!

Let us quickly shift gears back to Baha’i natural metaphors as we conclude our reflections. One of the things that struck me the most, about the Baha’i faith, is the value given to the kind of beauty that enhances nature, and touches upon the human spirit. The Baha’i Gardens at the Baha’i World Centre in Haifa strike me because of their Simplicity, Order, Harmony, and Beauty. The Baha’i Faith expresses esthetics in its main principles through a variety of natural metaphors. I am always enchanted by the beauty and spiritual power of Baha’i natural metaphors. Remember I told you my father planted lots of palm trees in Africa. I was quite intrigued when I read in Baha’i Writings for the first time that: “An unlit candle, however great in diameter and tall, is not better than a barren palm tree or pile of dead wood.” (5) This metaphor literally transported my mind because my father will simply set a barren palm tree on fire for stealing our precious farmland for nothing! This metaphor spoke directly to my cultural imagination because I could clearly see a burning fire on my father’s farm.

Since I am also the son of a farmer, I thought I knew what it takes to nurture a plant to grow

and bear fruit! But Baha'u'llah uses other natural metaphors that give deeper meaning and different layers of spiritual sophistication to my farming experience. Let me share a few more quotes:

O my Brother, sow the seeds of my Divine Wisdom, in the Pure soil of thy Heart, and water them with the water of Certitude that the Hyacinths of my knowledge and wisdom may spring up, Fresh and Green in the Sacred city of thy Heart.⁽⁶⁾

Again Baha'u'llah writes:

Oh my servants, ye are the Trees of my garden, ye must bring forth Goodly and Wondrous fruits, that ye yourself, and others may profit there from.⁽⁷⁾

Trees that yield no fruit, have been, and will ever be for the fire.⁽⁸⁾

All of the above metaphorical quotes could be analyzed in a variety of ways to identify our purpose in life, and to recognize the importance of deepening our knowledge in the Faith of God. Baha'i natural metaphors appeal to different people in different cultures in a variety of interesting ways. In Africa, I first learnt that Baha'is are:

- Followers of light
- The waves of one sea
- The stars of one heaven
- The leaves of one tree
- The fruits of one tree
- The flowers of one garden
- Baha'i children are like Tender Plants in God's Garden of Love.
- Baha'i men and women are equal like the Wings of One bird.

In the eyes of my mind, these simple and powerful metaphors were simply turning strangers into friends. I began to understand why Baha'is are followers of light. I began to see light in a new light. I saw light in the sense of Knowledge and Wisdom. Light in the sense of Love and Unity. Light in the sense of Justice and Empowerment. Light in the sense of Guidance and Protection from the darkness of self. And light in the sense of a Brighter and Brighter future.

I believe Baha'u'llah came to teach us how to express our spiritual nature in the material world without compromising the biological basis of our existence. Above all, Baha'u'llah came to teach us the "Oneness of Humanity" and "Unity in Diversity". I also believe Baha'u'llah came so that women like my mother will no longer be denied the benefit of education and the security of equality because of their gender and planet of birth. I believe Baha'u'llah came so that people like me will no longer be judged by the color of their skin, but be appreciated by the content of their character and the quality of their service. I believe we are gathered in Yokohama because we are good people with a noble mission. We still want to make the world a better place! We want to bring friendly understanding between and among people from different traditional cultures around the world.

Not long ago nations passed their lives in mutual ignorance, and in fact, even feared and hated each other. Our generation is now redefining our civilization, and helping clean the mess from our shameful past. The compression of time and space by science and religion now makes it easier for all the children and people of the world to interact and enrich each other. In fact, the traditional face of Japan is changing rapidly. Many Japanese students now study English, and travel to other countries, you know, to see the world, and to make the world a better place. We in

Africa, also making progress and have a great message and a positive contribution to make to the advancement of world civilization. We need the Baha'i Faith very much in Africa. We have suffered a great deal of oppression and human injustice! We want to catch up with the rest of the world. We want to make a positive contribution to the advancement of world civilization. Our hope for a better future, just as much as the hope of Japan, and the hope of the entire world, lies, in the propagation of the Revelation of Baha'u'llah!!

1. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. pp. 150-153
2. *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas*. pp. 247-248
3. *Abdu'l-Baha in London*. pp. 53-127.
4. *Messages to the Baha'i World: 1950-1957*. pp. 135-140
5. *Japan Will Turn Ablaze*. pp. 27-28
6. *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. pp. 21-40
7. *The Hidden Words of Baha'u'llah*. pp 50
8. *The Hidden Words of Baha'u'llah*. pp 50-51