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AFRICAN CULTURES AND THOUGHT SYSTEMS IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

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Abstract
In the age of enlightenment, there was the erroneous claim by certain Western philosophers that there is only one philosophy which implies only one civilization and valid cultural values coming from the Euro-West. This claim denigrates and relegates the place of Africans, Asians and other colonized people to the cadre of nonhumans or animals who act from the place of irascible concupiscence as against a proper rational standpoint. It is against this background that this paper aims to demonstrate that Africans are not only humans but have rich philosophies and culture. Hence, there is need for an investigation of African worldviews and thought systems with the aim of finding the implications and relevance therein to apply them to the globalized modern world. Employing the philosophical method of analysis, the paper argues that Africans are not only humans but have rich philosophy and cultural values that are relevant to this globalized world. In fact, their worldviews and thought systems are replete with the values of unity, solidarity, interconnectedness and holistic harmony that are founded on rich philosophical systems.

Keywords: Interculturality, Philosophy, African Thought Systems, Globalization.

Introduction

We live in a multicultural and pluralized society made possible by globalization. Globalization is a growth in social, cultural, economic and political spheres of the society that is facilitated by technology. It has made trade, movement of people, and communication possible and easy around the world. Ruud Lubbets in his article "Globalization and Sustainable Development" describes globalization as "the phenomenon that the degree of global human interaction increases to such an extent that both its primary effects and the reactions it provokes, give rise to numerous new developments"(1999:1). Globalization is the interaction between economies, technologies and politics. It creates an environment that reduces state regulation of the market thus promoting a more dominant role for large multinational corporations. Globalization has already changed our world drastically: CNN is with us 24 hours a day, the internet and E-mail are

globally instantaneous methods of information collection and communication(Sacks, 2002: 28). On the contrary, globalization has negative consequences. For instance, the recent Asian currency crisis affected not only Asia, but all financial markets worldwide. Instability in one area quickly speeds to others. Another consequence of globalization is that more countries are adopting the political model of democracy in combination with the free market approach of economics(Alli, *et al,* 2007:89). In the midst of all these exchanges there have been calls and efforts made for formal intercultural study of cultures and philosophies of different race and people in order to enhance better communication and human living. This is what informs the whole idea of intercultural philosophy.

Whenever the subject of intercultural philosophy is mentioned it is with the consciousness that there has been contact or, at least, a mutual awareness among cultures – particularly those of Europe, Asia, and Africa – for millennia. This contact has increased significantly since the early modern period. With this contact have come encounters with a wide range of practices, cultures, religions, and, particularly, of wisdom or philosophical traditions. The extents of the differences among them have often, but not always, been obvious, and there have been varying responses to these encounters: sometimes incomprehension, sometimes rejection and denigration, but sometimes active engagement (Sweet, 2014:1). In intercultural philosophy, there has not only been an effort by philosophers from varied cultural and traditional backgrounds engaged in a vigorous dialogue with one another in mutual respect, but also the recognition that one's own philosophical views are not complete, that there are other, legitimate philosophical views, and that one's own views may need a rearticulation or even revision(Sweet, 2014:1). It is on the basis of this significance of intercultural philosophy that informs the rationale for a study of some aspects of African life styles and thought systems to demonstrate that Africans are not only humans but also have rich philosophy and cultural values that have been and still are relevant to this globalized world. In fact, their worldviews and thought systems are replete with the values of unity, solidarity, interconnectedness and holistic harmony that are founded on rich philosophical systems. In view of this, this paper is made of four parts: the first part focuses on the context for the analysis of African cultures and thought systems. The second part explores the African lifestyle and thought systems, the third part deals with the relevance of the values found therein in African thought systems and lifestyles to our contemporary world. The last part is the conclusion.

The Context for the Analysis of African Cultures and Thought Systems

Before the issues of African cultures and thought systems will be discussed, there is an urgent need for the interrogation of the question, does Africa exist? The question seems like waking a dead horse from death because this question has long been debated about but this is in order to attend to the challenges of the huge impacts of imperialism and globalisation on Africa. Also, there is need to discuss in brief if Africa and Africans exist because of the Eurocentric narratives put forward by some European scholars such as Hegel, Levy-Bruh, Kant, Hume and others. The Eurocentric arguments are a ploy to push forward the European superiority narrative over the Africans. According to Mohanty Chandra, Eurocentrism comes alive when "third world legal, economic, religious and familial structures are treated as phenomena to be judged by Western standards [...] When these structures are defined as 'underdeveloped' or 'developing" (1984: 71). According to Hegel, "in Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness had not yet attained to the realisation of any substantial existence [...] Thus distinction between himself as an individual and the universality of his essential being, the African in the uniform, undeveloped oneness of his existence has not yet attained" (1956: 93). This was not enough for

him, he further stressed that Africa, "is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit" (Hegel, 1956, p. 99). For him, their understanding of Africa "is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature" (Hegel, 1956: 99). In line with this, Africans were labeled as "primitive" by Levy–Bruhl. Following this; Europeans held that primitives are irrational, pre–logical, among other things (1923: 36). David Hume in his work *The Treatise of Human Nature* and predominantly his essay 'Of National Characters' first published in 1748, for instance, writes:

> I am apt to suspect the Negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilised nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilised nation of that complexion, or even any individual eminent either in action or speculation (1978:77).

The German scholar, Immanuel Kant who did not travel more than a day's ride away from his home town, Prussia, claims that:

> The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have even been set free, still not a single one was even found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality, even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour. The religion of fetishes so widespread among them is perhaps a sort of idolatry that sinks as deeply into the trifling as appears to be possible to human nature. A bird's feather, a cow's horn, a conch shell, or any other common object, as soon as it becomes consecrated by a few words, is an object of veneration and of invocation in swearing oaths. The blacks are very vain but in the Negro's way, and so talkative that they must be driven apart from each other with thrashings(1950: 21).

The aim of these false claims and act of denigration of Africans was to enthrone the Eurocentric ideals in terms of culture, politics, religion and economy. Hence, Africa exists and Africans do exist. To put this in proper perspective, African continent has the second largest population in the world after the Asian continent. It has around one billion populace. As regards its land mass, it occupyies 11,724,000 square meter of land mass(*Encyclopedia Britannica on Africa,* 2023). It is considered the cradle of life, that is, the continent from which the first family, hominidae was birthed according to archeological findings. Africa has given rise to several civilizations such as the Kingdom of Kush, the Land of Punt, Carthage, the Kingdom of Aksum, and the Mali Empire with its Timbuktu. It has been recorded that civilization began in Africa, precisely Egypt (Clayton, 2020: 4). There is high level of variations among Africans ranging from their languages, morphology, cultures and knowledge systems. However, Africans have areas of commonalities in terms of values and world view. Let us turn attention to African culture and thought systems by first exploring the concept of culture.

Culture

Edward B. Taylor defines culture as that which involves knowledge, conviction, art, ethics, regulation, customs or any other capabilities and habits attained by man as a member of society. As for Bello (1991, p. 189) culture is "the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenge of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours". On the other hand, Aziza conceives culture as the totality of the pattern of behaviour of a particular group of people. It includes everything that makes them distinct from any other group of people for instance, their greeting habits, dressing, social norms and taboos, food, songs and dance patterns, rites of passages from birth, through marriage to death, traditional occupations, religious as well as philosophical beliefs (2001: 31).

Culture as a way of life of a people is trangenerational in nature through a means of socialization by a people. Fafunwa supports this view when he asserts that:

> The child just grows into and within the cultural heritage of his people. He imbibes it. Culture, in traditional society, is not taught; it is caught. The child observes, imbibes and mimics the action of his elders and siblings. He watches the naming ceremonies, religious services, marriage rituals, funeral obsequies. He witnesses the coronation of a king or chief, the annual yam festival, the annual dance and acrobatic displays of guilds and age groups or his relations in the activities. The child in a traditional society cannot escape his cultural and physical environments (1974, 48).

For Njoku, culture is a means of learning and exchange among members of a group from one generation to another. He stresses that the human person learns a culture via membership in the group that is, in a community of ideas. Furthermore, culture has three usages: (1) elitarian means the acquisition of great amount of knowledge, either in general or in some particular fields of study. A well cultured person then is one who has great knowledge in science, philosophy, etc. (2) Pedagogical means the education, formation and cultivation of man for the realization of his personality. (3) Anthropological means the characteristics of behaviour of a group of people (Njoku, 2015: 2). Accordingly, culture in philosophical anthropology holds it that one cannot realize one's social fulfillment without expressing one's proper life. One expresses oneself through language, arts and other avenues which one embodies and communicates by means of one's ideas in the socio-cultural world. Against this background then, the person is regarded as *homo culturalis*: a culture-making being"(Njoku, 2015: 2).

Culture can also be said to be material and non-material. The material aspect of culture involves the visible tactile objects such as artefacts and crafts, which man is able to create in order to survive while the non-material aspect of culture has to do with the norms and mores of the people. In view of this, we have beliefs about what is morally right and morally wrong. Culture is not only material and non-material it is dynamic (Idang, 2015: 100). This implies that culture constantly changes. Antia asserts that "culture is not fixed and permanent. It is always changed and modified by man through contacts with and absorption of other peoples' cultures, a process known as assimilation" (2005: 17). According to Etuk "cultures are not static, they change. Indeed culture needs to change; which wants to remain static and resistant to change would not be a living culture" (2002: 25). One thing stands out clearly about the issue of culture and that is the fact that there is no society that exists without a culture. It is wise to assert that culture is a human activity that is common among every social group. It suffices to hold that culture as people's way of life means that all social groupings have their way of life which also

implies their world views, thought systems, political, and economic systems. This is why it is ridiculous when Western scholars claim that Africans are "primitive", lack history, religion and even philosophy. What then approximates to African culture since African cultures are numerous?

African Cultures and Thought Systems
In order to understand African culture and thought system there is need for the understanding of African metaphysics. This is because it is that aspect of African philosophy that specifically studies the African distinctive notion of reality and existence. In African metaphysics, reality is conceived as one and universal but conceived differently by individuals based on their conceptions of life which makes everything around them meaningful. Within African understanding of reality, the African mind thinks in hierarchical categories and modes as against thinking in single, isolated and individualistic manner. It understands reality as a relationship of things and therefore analyzes phenomena in terms of cause and effect, balance and conflict. Any metaphysical study worthy of its salt brings under its focus of study both transcendental and particulars of individual existence. It is in view of this that Jonathan Chimakonam asserts that "in African philosophy we study reality of which being is at the center" (2013: 73). Earlier before him, Godfrey O. Ozumba holds that the basis of African metaphysics is 'Being' with all its ontological appurtenances. These include personality, substance, causality, soul, etc (Ozumba, 2004: 2). What then is African metaphysics which aids in the study of African reality? According to Ozumba, African metaphysics is the African way of perceiving, interpreting and making meaning out of interactions, among beings, and reality in general. It is the totality of the African's perception of reality. African metaphysics therefore include systematization of African perspective as it relates to being and existence (Ozumba, 2004: 2).

African metaphysics is holistic. Its logic underlies the basis for the standards and expectations of the African in the sense that the metaphysical worldview of the African defines his/her attitude to situations and issues in everyday living. With the multiplex of cultures in Africa, we cannot argue that all African communities uphold the same standards nor share the same expectations but the basis and underlying principles of their cultural values are basically the same. Thus, Lovemore Mbigi asserts that, "Although African cultures display awesome diversity, they also show remarkable similarities" (Mbigi, 2005: 75). For instance, the conception of a person in both Yoruba and Akan cultures are similar fundamentally but slightly different. A person is constituted by the body and some other entities. A person, then, is held in Akan and Yoruba philosophies to consist broadly of physical (bodily) and extra-bodily entities. In Akan thought, the physical is called *honam* (body) while the extra-bodily in turn consists of two logically distinguishable entities – the *sunsum* (spirit) and *ɔkra* (soul). In Yoruba philosophy, the *ara* (body) is held together with a purely nonphysical entity (*emi* – the soul) and both *okan* (the heart) and *ori* (the head, „inner head") which he describes as partly physical and partly non-physical. However, it was also suggested that the translation of *emi* as soul was a confusion. There, he defined *emi* only as the active principle of life, the lifegiving element put in place by the deity (Majeed, 2014: 44). For the African, the personhood of the individual does not come with birth. The person is one who has attained the status of a responsible member of the community(Onah, 2002: 78). David Lutz rightly observes that, "one of the most striking features of the cultures of sub-Sahara Africa is their non-individualistic character" (2009, pp. 313 – 328). Personhood evolves from how the individual relates with other human and living beings, (Sogolo, 1993: 190 -191). The community is the cornerstone in African thought and life (Mbigi, 2005: 75). Therefore, African metaphysics conceives the human person as a communal being.

"People are not just individuals, living in a state of independence, but part of a community, living in relationships and interdependence" (Turaki, 2006: 36). This fact is corroborated by John Mbiti, who argues that one becomes conscious of one's being only in relation to other beings, to be aware of one's responsibilities, duties and privileges towards oneself and others. One experiences pain and joy with the corporate group that consists of relatives, neighbours, kinsmen, alive or dead (ancestors), thus, "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti, 1992: 124 – 129).

In the context of the narrative approach, an individual becomes a person when he/she is an adult who can fend for him/herself and is able to reason judiciously and support a conjugal relation through which a family is raised. Along with these are a host of other obligations to the kinfolk and the community that obliges an individual and define personhood. Thus, personhood excludes infants and social misfits (Onah, 2002: 78). What this foregoing analysis shows is that the person in African traditional thought system exists, not just as an individual but also as a member of a group and as a member of a community. The person is communitarian by nature because as an individual member of a group and a community, one constantly interacts with and interpenetrates others(Ndubuisi, 2004: 425). Oyeshile agrees with this, for according to him, as well as being communitarian, the person is also "other things by nature". By other things he means the person exercises other attributes like rationality, the capacity for virtue, evaluating and making moral judgments and therefore, capable of making a choice. These are not attributes that the community bestows on the individual, rather the individual develops them and they are nurtured within the community (2006: 114 -115). The biggest challenge with African thought system and philosophy is the issue of lack of documentation in terms of storage of ideas in writing. This poses a danger in the field of African philosophy generally. It hinders critical after-thought reflection that written experiences afford the human intellect. Besides, "a mere mental acquaintance with reality cannot guarantee tenacity and longevity of ideas" (Onah, 2002: 2). We lose mentally stored ideas from time to time and we make efforts to recapitulate them. In the process of reconstructing our undocumented experiences, some aspects of past experiences are never remembered. Nonetheless, as Joseph Omoregbe writes, "the African store their ideas in form of folklores, folk wisdom, mythologies, traditional proverb, religious worldviews, etc" (1996: 6). Although not comparable to documentation in writing, this form of preservation of ideas afford the traditional African the opportunity to reflect further and more critically on past experiences and shared beliefs. What then is the relevance of African culture and thought systems to the globalized world?

Relevance of African culture and Thought Systems to the Globalized World

The process of globalization is facilitated by technology which dislocates humans from both time and space and projects them into a world where the future and past exist simultaneously. This technology comes from but one place – education. As we experience globalization and its effects we realize that the only way to accept it (or fight it) is through knowledge. A growing inter-independence through technology is bringing people together. People are better able to communicate with, understand, and learn from each other using technology as a standard context. We are looking beyond our sectarian religionism nationalities, genders, and cultures towards the global village. In this village, all people are citizens of planet Earth, where diversity is at least tolerated in the name of peace and profit. A world is being created where people cooperate and collaborate to overcome common challenges. This increased interdependence is seen in such areas as the military intervention in Kosovo, the joint space program of the U.S.

and Russia, and the global impact of such bodies as the World Bank and the IMF(Alli, *et al.,* 2007: 1).

In spite of these perceived positive values which globalization and modernization bring to the world it carries other baggies along which can be referred to as discontents of globalization. According to Stiglitz in his work *Globalization and its Discontents* expresses the discontent, with the state of global regulatory institutions like the IMF. He points out that, while globalization is in theory a force for good and has helped countless developing countries grow, it has also been the root cause of economic failures. Stiglitz explains that there is a discrepancy between theory and practice and that poor regulation on the part of the IMF has made globalization a destructive rather than constructive force. He compares the actions of the World Bank with those of the IMF to emphasize the weaknesses of the latter. It principally argues that the Fund centers too much on imposing a precise economic theory on the countries it seeks to help, to the point of paying no attention to domestic indicators that might distort its projected model (Stiglitz, 2002: 23-52). Stiglitz in Chapter 3 of his work explores how dogged pursuit of privatization, liberalization, and stabilization as ends in themselves have caused IMF policies to fail in countries that need structural support (Stiglitz, 2002: 53-88). He finally argues that, should the IMF become more transparent and practical, it can still become a reliable institution that protects global economic stability. Jonathan Sacks asserts that globalization has profoundly destabilizing effects. Its benefits are not spread evenly. There are winners and losers, within and between countries. The digital device has heightened inequalities. There are 1.3 billion people – 22 percent of the world's population – living below the poverty line; 841 million are malnourished; 880 million are without access to medical care. One billion lack adequate shelter; 1.3 billion lack access to safe drinking water; 2.6 billion do not have access to sanitation. Among the children of the world, 113 million – two-thirds of them girls – go without schooling; 150 million are malnourished; 30,000 die each day from preventable diseases (Sacks, 2002: 29).

There are a lot of challenges ranging from global climate change, extreme global poverty, challenges of cultural suppression and exclusion, existential crises like war, conflicts, human identity crises due to historical experiences of colonialism and the rest. There is the challenge of human alienation in the quest of capitalist wealth creation, global health crises and the rise of pandemics which require multifaceted approaches by all and sundry to deal with them appropriately. There is also the issue of moral bankruptcy. It is against these backgrounds that the values inherent in African cultures and thought systems can be useful in contributing to better ways of handling things in the world. African philosophy often emphasizes communal values, social harmony, and interconnectedness. These principles resonate with contemporary discussions on sustainability, global cooperation, and ethical living. African traditions emphasize holistic health, considering physical, mental, and spiritual aspects. In today's world, there's a growing interest in holistic well-being and alternative medicine. African philosophy often has strong connections to nature and the environment. These perspectives offer insights into sustainable living and ecological balance, which are crucial in addressing today's environmental challenges. These philosophies offer different perspectives on knowledge acquisition, epistemology, and the nature of reality. Embracing diverse ways of understanding truth and wisdom can enrich contemporary discourse and encourage open-mindedness. In an increasingly globalized world, understanding and appreciating diverse cultures is essential. African philosophy contributes significantly to global cultural diversity, promoting mutual respect and understanding among different societies. African philosophy advocates for social justice, equality, and human rights. Their principles can guide contemporary discussions on social justice movements, inclusivity, and equity.

Conclusion

This paper has set out to interrogate some aspects of African lifestyles and thought systems with the aim of showing that it has rich cultures and philosophies that have been of great relevance to the world and are still relevant to this globalized world. The paper demonstrates that African philosophy often emphasizes communal values, social harmony, and interconnectedness. These principles resonate with contemporary discussions on sustainability, global cooperation, and ethical living. African traditions emphasize holistic health, considering physical, mental, and spiritual aspects. In today's world, there is a growing interest in holistic well-being and alternative medicine. African philosophy often has strong connections to nature and the environment. These perspectives offer insights into sustainable living and ecological balance, which are crucial in addressing today's environmental challenges. These philosophies offer different perspectives on knowledge acquisition, epistemology, and the nature of reality. Embracing diverse ways of understanding truth and wisdom can enrich contemporary discourse and encourage open-mindedness. In an increasingly globalized world, understanding and appreciating diverse cultures is essential. African philosophy contributes significantly to global cultural diversity, promoting mutual respect and understanding among different societies. African philosophy advocates for social justice, equality, and human rights. Their principles can guide contemporary discussions on social justice movements, inclusivity, and equity.

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