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Cultural Diversity and Globalisation: An Intercultural Hermeneutical (African) Perspective

Abstract:

In our today's global age one of the central challenges facing Africa is that of coming to terms positively with her cultural diversity. Furthermore Africa is confronted with the challenge of global cultural diversity that has been characteristic of our global age. One of the questions raised here is how can the intrinsic African cultural diversity be made comprehensible not only to non-Africans but also to Africans themselves? Talking of understanding makes the issue a hermeneutical one. Hence the following questions, how can this hermeneutical challenge be mastered? What tools are required in order to accomplish this mission?

Any efforts towards accomplishing this task must have to put many dimensions into consideration. These include, among other things, the historical, regional, political, economic, etc. Such efforts would imply not only Africa being occupied with herself culturally, she on the other side needs to become relevantly conscious of the implications of these cultural dynamisms, understand it with reference to herself and the rest of the global community and finally interpret this phenomenon from an African perspective. These are the issues being addressed in this paper.

Agenda

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Introduction

One of the central aspects of globalisation today is the issue of cultural diversity. More than ever before the different cultures of the world are culturally drawn so closely on different levels. This proximity makes not only the issue, but also the challenges and in lesser cases, the chances of cultural diversity within the process of globalisation more conscious. This awareness of cultural diversity has led to diverse opinions and reactions within the global community. Scholars differ on the prospects and implications of this development.

Globalisation, Africa and Cultural Diversity

The issue of globalisation is certainly an issue of development both politically, technologically, economically culturally etc. There is a link between culture and development. This is especially when development is seen more broadly. This link between culture and development could be seen from the point of view that culture can serve as ultimate catalyst or even hindrance for development. Considering the position of Africa today within the process of globalisation, this would entail, examining the relationship between culture in terms of cultural diversity and globalisation from an African perspective. For Africans globalisation in its present form implies an ever-increasing process of marginalization.

A closer look on Africa from the perspective of cultural diversity reveals that there is an inherent and intrinsic relationship between Africa and cultural diversity which could be likened to the identity-relationship between the snake and lengthy body. Cultural diversity is a central part of the African collective identity. This central aspect of the African identity has not always proven to be a blessing for Africa in dealing with herself and also in her history especially in her encounter with the rest of the world. This is due to, among other things, the fact that the intrinsic African cultural diversity is dominantly an ethnicised cultural diversity. This implies that the respective African cultures are specifically bounded and integrated mostly within particular groups. These define different parts of the continent in contradistinction to one another, emphasizing more of the differences and local contextualities at the expense of the collective Africa perspective.

The African "regional cultures were broken up and destroyed (or at least radically altered) primarily by the European and Islamic incursions going back some 500 years. The slave trade, introduction of new diseases, forced colonization, foreign language and religious impositions, and alien administration threw most of the continent into social, religious, political, and cultural confusion. Some of these regional cultures once had great civilizations and Kingdoms but a minimum of texts survived to record their ideas and achievements. What remains of them are fragmentary pictures: icons from ritual life, histories of smaller communities passed on orally.... A true recovery, however, of these regional cultures...of a pre-colonial (sic) Africa, is extremely problematic—and this is made even more problematic by the nature of developments in the postcolonial experience."¹

In the global age of today "local contexts in the world are more and more dissolving into a worldwide network of interaction under the influence of technological innovations that have reduced to virtually zero the costs (in terms of time and money) of communication and information. Globalization was, in the first instance, observed with regard to transnational movements of capital along electronic media but in the meantime turns out to have important cultural dimensions."² Globalisation in its present form and stage strongly promotes a "meta- local world culture, without local specificity and local validity... and hence devastating for any localizing cultural identity like the African one."³ This makes it all the more necessary to pose the question of cultural diversity and globalisation from an African perspective.

Cultural diversity here has to be seen from two sides: the diversity intrinsic within the African cultural landscape and the diversity of cultures with which Africans are now being more intensively confronted within the process of globalisation. Globalisation, as stated above, is not simply an economic phenomenon but also "a new stage in the

¹ Bell, R.H., *Understanding African Philosophy – A Cross-Cultural Approach to Classical and Contemporary Issues*, New York & London, Routledge, 2002, p. ix.

² Van Binsbergen, W., "Can ICT belong in Africa, or is ICT owned by the North Atlantic region?" http://www.shikanda.net/general/WIM_ICT_situating.pdf retrieved 03. Jan. 2007 p. 118

³ Ibid, 123

evolution of humankind and hence of creation as a whole. As it constitutes a new way of being in terms of the whole and hence relationally, the issue becomes that of living with all the peoples and cultures of the world."⁴ In Africa particularly globalisation, through its trespassing on cultures undermines acculturation and human relations and creates a conflicting situation.⁵ This is a hermeneutical challenge for Africa. Africa is called upon to address, understand and interpret both her own and the global predicaments and cultural diversity for herself within the context of our today's global age. "Such contextualisation (like the issue of conflicts in Africa) implies, among the rest, that ... Africans (sic) themselves provide the definitions of the criteria necessary to deal with conflict, together with the supporting structures needed to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts in Africa."⁶ For Africans this hermeneutical task entails understanding and interpreting the two forms of cultural diversity within the frame of globalisation, global age and "village" in terms of their own possibilities.

On Intercultural Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics grew up as an effort to describe more subtle and comprehensive patterns of comprehension, more specifically the "historical" and "humanistic" modes of understanding. As the study of interpretation and understanding of texts, it "involves two different and interacting focuses of attention: (1) the event of understanding a text, and (2) the more encompassing question of what understanding and interpretation as such are."⁷

Though hermeneutics is not a household word be it in philosophy or literary criticism, not to talk of common areas of human activities, most of the human daily actions could be termed hermeneutical.

Most of these are efforts towards or processes of interpretation and understanding. One needs to consider the ubiquity of interpretation and the generality of the usage of the term interpretation. In fact, from the time we wake up in the morning until we sink into sleep, we are "interpreting". On waking we glance at the bedside clock and interpret its meaning: we recall what day it is, and in grasping the meaning of the day we are already primordially recalling ourselves the way we are placed in the world and our plans for the future; we rise and must interpret the words and gestures of those we meet on the daily round. Interpretation is, then, perhaps the most basic act of human thinking; indeed existing itself may be said to be a process of interpretation.⁸

In our global world of today, existence in itself could be understood as a "constant process of interpretation". "The science of hermeneutics as an act of interpretation and understanding undergoes a fundamental change in today's global context... and it experiences an unprecedented widening of its horizons..."⁹ The issue might then boil down to the question of what kind of interpretation do one need today to grasp the dynamics of globalisation especially with regards to African cultural diversity.

The foregoing indicates that we need a new form of approach when it comes to understanding within the context of African cultural diversity today. The kind of hermeneutics needed here is the intercultural form. This is due to the fact that, among others, what is involved here entails a laying open of a culture or cultures, a laying out that implies "reasonable explanation" and translation not only within a single culture but from one cultural world into the other.¹⁰ "Thus in approaching Africa...we must work hard to determine what is significant from the point of view of its people. Understanding anything is always tied to its surroundings, which include language, customs, geography, iconic traditions, and especially the ordinary practices of its people."¹¹

The above also applies when one tries to understand ones own culture and the other's culture For Africa this would imply that it involves the

⁴ McLean, G.F., *Hermeneutics for a Global Age*, Washington D.C., The Council for Research in Value and Philosophy, 2003, p.2.

⁵ Dalfovo, A.T. "From Global Interests to Cultural Values." in: Blanchette, O. et al (eds) *Philosophical Challenges and Opportunities of Globalization*. Vol. 1 p. 267.

⁶ Ibid. P. 268

⁷ Palmer R.E. *Hermeneutics – Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*, Evanston 1969, p.8

⁸ Ibid P. 8f

⁹ Mall A.R. *Intercultural Philosophy*, Lanham, p. 15

¹⁰ Palmer R.E., p.13

¹¹ Bell, Ibid.p.1

process of bringing African cultures and equally non-African cultures to the understanding of Africans and non-Africans in such a way that they would be in a position to serve as catalysts for Africans within the process of globalisation. This is more so for what applies to the understanding between Africans and non-Africans apply equally to Africans among themselves and between the different local African cultures.

The hermeneutic entailed here involves a type of mediation and "message bringing" process for Africans for themselves; from African cultures, through Africans, to themselves and to non-Africans on the one hand and on the other hand letting other non-African cultures address the African cultural worlds especially within the context of globalisation. There is need for a "laying open" of the African cultures to Africans themselves and non-Africans. This will imply a discursive process in understanding. Africa here has to assert herself and her cultures. This leads to a "laying out" i.e. explaining it to both parties involved. This implies three dimensions. Firstly the culture in question African or non-African has to express itself. This is a stage where it will be left for this particular culture in its peculiarities to express itself as such. This is not an issue of instrumentalising the cultures, be it by its members or external agents to achieve any other purpose. The central purpose must be that of making this particular culture be appropriately understood. Hence an honest effort towards objective self expression of the culture in question is presupposed.

Subsequent to this is the phase of explanation. Explanation emphasizes the discursive aspect of understanding a culture. It makes the explanatory rather than the expressive dimensions in cultural encounter the main focus. The primary goal here is to explain a culture, rationalize on it and make clear both to its members and non-members. Here that which is brought to expression in the first phase, in our case a particular African culture for instance, will have to be made intelligible not only to the culturally other or cultural outsider but also to the members of the particular African culture in question. This includes an introduction into, and invitation to participate in the intrinsic logic, values, judgments, conclusions etc, of this particular culture in question.

This is followed by the phase of translation. Among other things, translation brings the particular African culture to a kind of clash with itself through its members and also with the cultural world of the non-members. The already expressed and explained

particular African culture gets translated into the cultural framework of the real (spatial and temporal) contextuality of its members and to non-members. This gives room, among others, for critical self reflexion, dialogue and what would be an understanding of the culture in question.

Cultural diversity within the context of Globalisation from an intercultural hermeneutical (African) perspective would, at the long run, mean a laying bare of African and non-African cultures, a laying out that implies an explanation not only to the outsiders but also to ourselves coupled with a translation from the African cultural into the non-African world and vice versa. This will go a long way in reversing the negative dynamics of the intrinsic African cultural diversity and make the diverse African cultures serve as ultimate catalyst for development of Africa in our global age.

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