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Globalization: Acculturation or Cultural Erosion? A Historical Reflection

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This paper is a historical reflection on contemporary African culture history. It situates globalization within the context of Africa's role in the world. It examines the human dimension, the interaction of human beings globally, the migration of people from their original homes, and their settlement in new abodes. In addition, migration has raised the issue of the status of migrants in their adopted countries. Indeed, the growing incidence of African migration is currently at the center of various debates on the African continent and in the host countries.

Introduction

Our emphasis will be the impact of globalization on the developing world; in essence, the impact on those of us who seem largely to be at its receiving end. My country, Nigeria, has certainly been at the receiving end of the global trend. This paper will focus primarily on the effect of the interactions between Africa and the world. We pose the overriding question: would these interactions promote acculturation or are Africans at the risk of being victims of cultural erosion? Are we holding fast to the basic tenets of our own culture while borrowing some aspects of external culture to improve on it? Are we exercising enough discretion as to what to choose from the external culture or are we taking all, hook, line, and sinker, until our own way of life is completely obliterated and nothing is left? Will we lose our roots, only to be sustained by the cultural norms and practices that are external to us?

It is, of course, important at the very beginning to look at the term globalization itself and be aware of the various inputs into that concept. There are indications that globalization is a term coined as a formal concept in the latter half of the 20th century, and it has subsequently permeated popular

consciousness by the 1980s. It refers to the increasing connectivity, integration, and interdependence of the world community. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica Online, globalization is "a phenomenon by which the experience of everyday life, as influenced by the diffusion of commodities and ideas, reflects a standardization of cultural expressions around the world" (Globalization, cultural, 2009). There are many facets to globalization. It could be globalization of the economy, of information, of technology, of food, of travel and tourism, of ecosystems, etc. We must, however, remind ourselves of the fact that human interaction between different parts of the world is not a new thing. World history is replete with examples of such interactions, shaping and reshaping people's cultures and way of life; for example, many world religions, in particular Christianity and Islam, have spread from their original homes to many part of the world. However, globalization has been driven of late by advances in information technology which makes it possible for the thoughts, views, and products of one country to reach other parts of the globe without too much effort. It has also led to agreements to remove restrictions on free trade and the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO), World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to mediate trade disputes and set up a uniform trading platform.

For this paper, the bottom line is the human factor, the growing interdependence of peoples and countries. Globalization poses a challenge to all citizens of the world in many different ways. It is inevitable that we cannot escape its impact; it has, therefore, provoked discussion both by those who support it and those who see it as a dangerous trend. Even religious bodies have lent their voices to that discourse. For instance, the Jehovah Witnesses' Newsletter of May 2002 included an article entitled "Globalization: Curse or Cure?" The World Council of Churches has also turned its searchlight on the possible implications of globalization. Those of us in the developing world cannot but agree with K. Anthony Appiah (Sassen, 1998) that the balance has shifted. External influences are becoming more present and exerting greater influence on our lives. The emerging reality is a world in which our nations are diminishing in influence.

What then will be our fate? Are we going to be part of the global world which the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohammad, has described as an example of "another garment for the Westernization of the world?" (Mohammad, 1996) Will it mean the wearing away of our identity as a people with our own history, traditions, and way of life? We stand the risk of being victims of this option more significantly as we do not have the technology to do more than accommodate what is being offered to us globally,

nor are we fully prepared to deal with this new influx and to accommodate it on our own terms; indeed, we do not have as yet the capacity to develop the right infrastructure to sustain even our present way of life and culture.

We should, however, not accept this pessimistic view of our future in this globalized world without an understanding of the development within the context of our lives. Before the fate implied by this option befalls us, we must see certain things clearly. We must agree on our definition of culture. In 1988, Nigeria formulated a Cultural Policy which enunciated the meaning of culture. The Policy defined culture as:

> the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempt to meet the challenges of living in an environment which gives order and meaning to their social; economic, aesthetic, and religious norms and modes of organization, thus distinguishing them as a people from their neighbours. It comprises material, institutional, philosophical and creative aspects, their social, political and legal environs and structure, their creative concern e.g. literature, visual and performing arts which are normally moulded by as well as help mould other aspects of culture (Nigeria, 1988).

The Policy goes on to highlight some of the salient aspects particularly its mores, values, and traditions. We do have our way of life which has evolved over centuries of our living in this environment and rising to the challenges it brings. This way of life has not been static. What will happen to this way of life?

A critical reflection on our history must precede any effort to prescribe our future as a people. We must hearken back to the record of our interaction with other parts of the world. As Wole Soyinka pointed out in his *Interventions IV*, globalization as it affected us in Africa did not begin with the present articulation of the word, but previously manifested itself in many forms. He pointed to many ancient adventures in globalization before what he describes as its current "overtly economic onslaught" (Soyinka, 2006). For us in Africa there is certainly a historical dimension which can be a pointer to what our future in a globalized world is likely to be unless we show an awareness of its pitfalls and are determined to hold fast to those values which have sustained us as a people.

The Slave Trade

The current globalization "adventure" is not our first contact with the world at large particularly outside the African continent. Our interaction of which we have incontrovertible evidence began first with the Greeks and Romans of the classical era, followed by the Arabs and later the Europeans. Our encounters with the latter two involved the large scale enslavement of our people.

The trade in African captives had been a feature of our interaction with the Arabs and the Europeans. The Arab slave trade particularly with East Africa went on for many centuries, followed by the Atlantic slave trade which began in the 15th century and lasted for four centuries. Much has been written about the Atlantic slave trade; indeed, many parts of the world marked the bicentenary of its abolition by the United Kingdom in 1807 and the United States in 1808. Its genesis was the division of the newly discovered world between Spain and Portugal by the fiat of the Roman Catholic Pope in the 15th century. That Papal division led to the intensification of rivalry to discover new lands, which in turn intensified the exploitation of the New World—the Americas and the West Indies. All of these became a huge source of wealth for Europe.

The triangular trade developed, in which Africans became the chief commodity in the trade between Europe, Africa, and the New World. In collaboration with some African rulers who became rich from the profit of the trade, Africans were captured, sold, and taken to the West Indies and Americas to work in the mines and fields, and in return, the European traders took gold, cotton, tobacco, molasses, etc. to Europe; from Europe, gin, rum, tobacco, textiles, etc. were taken by the European slavers to Africa.

There were hardly any redeeming features of that trade for the African continent. The violence that the struggle for the capture of slaves bred led to the collapse as well as instability of many African states. Able-bodied men and women in the prime of their lives, who could have made positive contributions to the development of their communities, were taken away. Walter Rodney, in the popular book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa,* concluded that the Trans Atlantic Slave trade and European contact led Africa into a "gale force wind which shipwrecked a few societies, set many others off course and generally slowed their rate of advance" (Rodney, 1972). It also left a legacy of racism where others see Africans in the guise of slaves. Indeed, a few slave-owning countries have apologized or shown some contrition for their role in the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade, which did so much to destroy the continent and demean its people. Recently, the Mayor of London apologized and France has designated May 1st as a day of remembrance; August 3rd has also been declared a special

day to mark the end of the abolition of slavery. Further, African-Americans, including former United State Democratic Presidential Candidate Jesse Jackson and Randall Robinson have demanded reparations for the African human and material losses.

Colonialism

While the slave trade devastated Africa, the Africans that remained on the continent could still be said to be in control of their destiny. That soon changed. The next interaction between Africa and Europeans came in the form of colonial rule, which lasted for about 70 years from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century. Africans lost their independence and came under the domination of European colonial powers, notably, the British, French, Belgians, Portuguese, Spanish, and Germans.

The French and the British practices of colonialism provide good examples of the impact of colonialism on the African population. Both countries were anxious to bring their colonies under firm control to be able to exploit their resources. It was largely the story of exploitation in a more subtle form under the guise of a civilizing mission. The French stated categorically their desire of spreading French civilization and culture. It was a policy of assimilation to make Africans into model French citizens without any regard for Africa's culture and history. That policy provoked eventually a reaction by their African subjects, that of asserting African culture which became known as Negritude. Thereafter, other attempts were made to keep the African colonies within the French fold. The ultimate effort was that of the creation of a French community under President Charles de Gaulle. The community was to bring all French territories, including France under one government and nationality with France still being the dominant voice. But, by 1960 this policy was also rejected. It was apparent that all these effects were designed to ensure that African material and human resources were developed to meet the needs of the French people.

The British approach to the control of its colonies was different but the objective was the same. It was the policy of indirect rule; the scholars of the University of Ibadan, The Ibadan History School, notably, Atanda (1973), Afigbo (1972) and others have written extensively about this system of government in Nigeria. While it planned to secure the resources of the colonies, it did not aim at assimilating the Africans. Its approach was to rule through the known traditional institutions of the people with modifications which ensured British control. This system saw the emergence of Warrant Chiefs in southeastern Nigeria and Sole Native Authorities in Northern and Southwestern Nigeria. The

Warrant Chiefs were appointed without any concern for the known traditions of governance. Ostensibly, all these Chiefs were still rulers of their people, but they were now in reality expected to carry out the policy enunciated by their new colonial overlords. They were, in consequence, placed in a situation in which they were shorn of the traditional constitutional constraints which in the past ensured that they carried out the will of their own people. Of course, these administrative devices provoked resistance. The women in particular were major losers; they were no longer given the traditional recognition which they had enjoyed in the past and they no longer had any input into government. This development was in sharp contrast to the significant position which the *Iyalode* (leader of the women) had in the past; for example, in Ibadan, *Iyalode* Lanlatu was a signatory to the agreement between the British government and Ibadan authorities in 1893. That formal agreement brought Ibadan under the jurisdiction of the British.

The women reacted violently against this policy of indirect rule. The stories of revolt under Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome Kuti in Abeokuta and the Aba Women's War in southeastern Nigeria are well documented in the history of that period (Awe, 1999 and 2001). The women showed that colonial administration flew in the face of the people's tradition. Thereafter, that form of administration was reviewed to make it more acceptable to the people, but it was still a galling experience as the British remained in control until the granting of independence in 1960.

In spite of some seemingly beneficial trappings of colonialism, such as limited Western education, overall colonialism had a negative impact on African development. According to Walter Rodney, as a result of colonialism African development was "blunted, halted and turned back" (Rodney, 1972). African lands were seized in places like Kenya, and central and southern Africa, where white settlement was possible and the Africans thereafter became landless in their own countries. In other places they became producers of raw materials to feed the industries of Europe; there was virtually no transfer of technology. Africa became importers of finished, cheap European products; they virtually gave up their iron working which could have gradually become the basis of their industrial development.

The Postcolonial Era

For us in Africa, it seems as if the way has been paved for this global assault by our two previous experiences, i.e., the slave trade and colonialism. The challenges for us are great, because our new independent states are

underdeveloped. They do not have much economic power in spite of their natural resources; they are not engaged significantly in production, nor can many of them boast of being stable nations with a system of government that can improve the quality of life of their people. Nevertheless new ideas, new developments, new visions, and new lifestyles are being beamed at us willy-nilly. Indeed the ratio of what is settled within each nation to what has travelled has changed. The balance has shifted. More ideas are coming from outside than any time before in our history. For us in the developing countries this should be a matter of concern. Some of these ideas are assaults on our beliefs, ideals, and ways of life, and have a negative impact on our development.

A few examples of this assault will suffice. Currently on our television is the program, Big Brother Africa II, a reality T.V. program which has 24-hour coverage of real life events involving chosen individuals. The prize for the winner is $100,000. It is a highly interactive program and a good example of the power of technology, especially the mobile telephone and the Internet. The current program, according to one of our foremost journalists, Reuben Abati of Nigerian *Guardian* newspaper, had played up all the negatives making it look like a terrible experiment in on-air pornography. He wrote, "It is a mindless, sex and booze-driven manipulation of reality" (Abati, 2007).

We are faced with a technology which we seem unable to control at a critical period in our development. In Nigeria, we now have the specter of the emergence of young people who are known as *yahoo yahoo boys* and the Internet 419ners (Adogame, 2008). The economic crisis of the 1980s and 1990s has given rise to a group of educated young men and women fraudsters who, in a desperate bid to acquire wealth, resort to what has become known as Advance Fee Fraud; it is a criminal act, a conspiracy between dubious Nigerians and gullible foreigners who want to make money for which they have not worked, according to Farida Waziri in her book *Advance Free Fraud, Natural Security and the Law* (Waziri, 2005). It is the payment of an advance fee in any form, under fake pretenses, contrary to section 419 of the Criminal Code Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 1990 CAP 77, Vol. 5 page 3125. The perpetration of this kind of fraud has been facilitated by the proliferation and worldwide spread of the new communication technology and its characteristic flow of information. These youngsters interact with their victims through online computer communication. Electronic mails are sent through free e-mail service providers such as Yahoo and Hotmail.

Apart from producing a group of morally decadent young men and women who want to get rich quick by fraudulent means and see no virtue in hard work, this crime has implications for our national and economic security as a

developing country. It scares away those foreigners who want to do business with us; it also has a negative effect on Nigeria's international image. Nigeria is often regarded as one of the most corrupt countries in the world and our citizens are treated shabbily once they leave our shores.

There is also another downside for us in this business of globalization. The free market facilitates the flooding of our countries with foreign products at the expense of our own products, which then struggle to achieve better quality because we do not have yet the mastery of science and technology for that purpose. Consequently, some of our industries are closing down and our people are thrown out of work. Grinding poverty is driving many to migrate to countries of the North often at the risk of their lives. But many of these developed countries desire only our material resources not the human beings from our end of the globe. Many countries and states in the developed world want to keep their countries small and white. They devise stringent immigration laws and conditions of entry to keep those immigrants especially from the developing countries out. Indeed one developed country, it is alleged, states quite categorically that it does not want African immigrants because they are not civilized? (Vaughan, 2005). Feminists have also pointed out the unfair treatment meted to African women in places like France where they are not allowed to enjoy full citizenship rights (Sou, 2007).

At the same time our tangible cultural heritage, our artefacts, which provide evidence of the degree of sophistication which our art and culture attained before our unfortunate experience with the slave trade and colonialism, were forcibly removed during these encounters; they are now kept in metropolitan museums to boost Western tourism. There has been a great deal of debate about the propriety of keeping these pieces of art away from their original homes, ostensibly because they have a global significance. There is a tendency to forget that this art belongs to a living culture that has deep historical and social value which goes beyond the aesthetic and monetary values they hold in exile.

Yet we must not give up, not because we should relish the idea of a fight per se, but because we have a culture whose many parts we can be proud of. Moreover the notion of Africans being a people without a history or record of any contribution to the world's development and civilization dies hard. For us the battle for racial equality is not over. We must keep this in focus and constantly remind the rest of the world that we are proud heirs of a goodly heritage comparable in many respects to what can be obtained elsewhere.

There are obvious examples to substantiate this claim. Robert Armstrong, a former director of the Institute of African Studies in the University of Ibadan, in his paper given in 1975, discussed the continuing relevance of African culture

to modern life. He pointed out that in the field of art, for example, nearly all first rank painters and sculptures of Europe have come under the direct influence of African art during their careers (Armstrong, 1975). As one of our young artists, Moyo Ogundipe (2008), pointed out, the world of art changed when Western art came in contact with African art. African artists have taken art to the level of spirituality. Armstrong pointed out that artists like Picasso, Matisse, and Henry Moore got new inspiration and ideas from looking at African sculptures and other art forms. He identified three distinct streams of artistic influence from Africa, including European artists converted to African art forms. We do have highly artistic murals and body paintings. In music, we have jazz which is the oldest synthesis of African music with European traditions, the rumbas, spirituals, calypsos, and the Candomblé music of Brazil. Nor have the original traditional forms of music lost their significance. The drums are still in existence in many African societies. They are still mnemonic devices which remind us in speech, song, and accompanying dances of our cultural heritage. They constitute a reflection of an urbane society and in some cases the dignity of African royalty (Layiwola, 2008).

Of late, UNESCO (2000) has drawn international attention to our oral traditions and their significance in our society. In 2005, that organization recognized the *Ifa* literary corpus of Southwestern Nigeria and elevated it to the status of a master piece of the oral, intangible heritage of humanity. It has gone on to encourage the establishment of an institute to ensure that the *Ifa* divination system does not perish.[3] Indeed two years earlier, in 2003, the Gelede mask of Nigeria and Benin Republic gained the same recognition as the *Ifa* literary corpus for its artistic features, its literature, its dance, and its music. The Osun traditional worship and festival in Osogbo with its artistic features and symbolism has also been acknowledge as a cultural heritage deserving of attention by UNESCO and the people of that town.

Conclusion

What must we do to ensure that these aspects of our culture are not lost? First, as I have indicated earlier, we must come to terms with the fact that the emerging reality of the world which we are witnessing and in which we live is one in which nations are diminishing in influence. This fact presents us with a challenge as we strive to preserve our identity as a people with a culture and a way of life. It is, indeed, a great challenge to us in Nigeria, blessed as we are with resources which can make us a great nation. It is being proposed that by the year 2020, Nigeria would become one of the 20 leading economies of the world.

We must therefore aspire to a new vision of development, one that stresses equality of opportunity for all citizens. This demands selfless commitment to governance and the development of an honest and informed leadership that can mobilize the populace to share its aspirations. We must strive for universal human rights and a people-centered development within the context of our multicultural and multireligious existence. Emphasis has to be on education. Nigeria hopes to have achieved education for all (EFA) by 2015; yet universal basic education still eludes us even though it is one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). That education must be of the right kind. Certainly we need numeracy and literacy, but we must also have the education that stresses our values, in spite of the new craze especially among the elite for communication in the English language. We must encourage our children to speak our own languages which are so rich in conveying different aspects of our culture. We cannot emphasize enough the fact that our languages are picturesque, beautiful, and full of imageries that reflect our way of life and environment. The Yoruba language, for example, is now being taught in Japan, the United States, and other countries (Olabode, 2008). By neglecting that language we run the risk of having to go to those places to learn that language in its most idiomatic form or having their experts coming here to teach us! The teaching and playing of our games, e.g. the *Ayo* game which includes numeracy and mathematical concepts, should be encouraged. The *Ayo* game in particular can compete favorably with imported games like Ludo, Monopoly, and chess.

In addition, we must stress our traditional ethical and moral values. The Yoruba, for example, have the concept of *Omoluabi,* a person who in private and public life shows regard for others and possesses integrity. Our oral traditions are replete with these values and ideas which we must not lose. We must also not abandon our traditional ways of transmitting knowledge. In the field of medicine we had accumulated over the years the knowledge of the use of our herbs and plants to cure disease before the advent of Western medicine. Even in governance the idea of the rule of law and democracy was not foreign to our traditional institutions of government. What we need also is a policy of science and technology development using our resources to meet the needs of our people. We will ensure that our tradition and culture form the unyielding foundation of our development, and only borrow ideas from other sources to improve.

We must not yield to cultural erosion; we must not take the foreign cultures being inflicted on us hook, line, and sinker. In a recent publication by the Nigerian Academy of Holders, entitled "Towards an African Renaissance," the editor, Steve Ogude, pointed out that all the three papers in that publication

addressed one central issue: how to integrate traditional and foreign cultural practice to create a richer and a more authentic Nigerian culture (Ogude, 2003). As Mahatma Ghandi said, "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any" (UNEP, 2009). So must we. We certainly must leave ourselves open to the ideas and developments from the globalized world, but our own foundation of what we hold dear must be secure and strong enough to resist unsavory and negative influences from outside.

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Endnotes

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