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A CASE FOR A DIALOGUE OF CULTURES IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract

The paper traces the root causes of the antagonism that has existed between the major cultural groupings of the world and focuses on the need for dialogue through building bridges across cultures by way of recognising one another, accepting and coping with difference, reaching out to others, knowing them and speaking their 'language', healing ruptures in relationships on a permanent basis, dialoguing with people across cultural boundaries, dialoguing with people of difference classes, agreeing to disagree with others, fostering partnerships, helping to build capacities in others, and sharing knowledge. The paper advocates Saoshyantian discourse in man's relations with fellow human beings, that is, discourse that advocates that soul should be given to all human actions, be they in the religious, social, economic and political ideologies that shape our thoughts, our actions and our lives on a daily basis.

Keywords: Culture, Globalization, Dialogue, Africa, Otherness

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Prolegomena

This era of globalization calls on all to contribute to universal culture; gone are the days when things black were associated with the Black man and things white to the White man. Culture is neither black nor white. Rather, it stems from man's intercourse with his environment, the meaning he gives to life and his perception of the universe.

But what do we understand by the term "globalization"? This word is derived from the Latin word "globus", which means "ball" in English. The discovery of the Italian scientist, Galilei Galileo, thanks to the first ever telescope he had perfected, that the world was round and not flat as had hitherto been thought to be made the universe to be conceived as a "globe", a word derived from the Latin "globus". Conceived to be globe-shaped, the universe has come to signify a continuum – for the roundness of the globe, like that of a ball which is the translation of "globus", points to something without borders. Ironical as it is, the balls we see on the pitches of the world's famous stadia are conspicuously demarcated, which demarcation seems to underscore the idea of division that characterises the world. This irony of situation emanating from an apparent ignorance of what the word "globus" signifies emphasises man's consciousness of the existence of the great forces that shape his life as well as influence his relationship with his fellow man in what today is known as the global village. Hence, according to Jose Ocampo and Juan Martin (2003), globalization refers to the influence exerted at the local, national and regional levels by financial, economic, environmental, political, social and cultural processes that are global in scope. The implication here is that, as a concept, globalization is an octopus whose tentacles spring from its oval body to emphasise its uniqueness and far-reaching capacity to harm. Therefore, like the eight-armed

cephalopod that the octopus is, globalization is multi-faceted; that is, it is a composite of cultural, economic, political and social realities that characterise the world of today and the interface between them. This interface is facilitated by significant strides made by science and technology, especially in the domains of information and communication technologies and advances in transportation.

The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD, 1995: 9) characterises globalization by the following six trends:

i. the spread of liberal democracy
ii. the dominance of market forces
iii. the transformation of production systems and labour markets
iv. rapid technological change
v. the media revolution
vi. consumerism.

True, the spread of liberal democracy constitutes a veritable catalyst in the globalization process. Liberalism, it should be emphasised, conceives of politics as a competition among parties, each presumably expressing the aspirations of individual citizens. This idea of competition which informs liberal ideology can be extended to other domains of life, namely, culture, the economy and religion. Granted that liberalism is "[i]nterested in the maximization of individual pleasure and the achievement of individual grace and fulfilment" (Susman 1984: 70), the tradition recognises otherness as a reality of life. In other words, the tradition recognises the fact that someone or something exists in relation to others, and all combine to form a continuum.

The idea of "otherness" presupposes doubleness and difference, on the one hand, and identity and difference, on the other. The colonizer and the colonized, for example, are dialectical constructs each representing value systems

deeply rooted in specific cultures and worldviews. Similarly, the once colonized peoples are highly diverse in their nature and in their traditions, and as beings in culture they are both constructed and changing. Hence, while they may be the "other" from the colonizers, they are also different one from the other and from their own past. The same logic applies to other spheres – like the cultures or civilisations of the world, varying economic systems rooted in contrasting ideologies, different religious beliefs that are informed by divergent worldviews, and some fields of art, science and technology such as agriculture, architecture, cinema, literature, medicine, music and painting. Each of these fields in the global village exemplifies the concept of "otherness" that characterises the world we live in.

As seen earlier on, "difference" is a cardinal point in the whole concept of "otherness". He who emphasises "difference" is in other words emphasising separate entities in a given quality or in given qualities. But globalization calls for not only the recognition of "difference" but also the acceptance of and the coping with "difference". To cope with "difference" presupposes that bridges must be built between cultures and nations. Hence, the notion of dialogue in the era of globalization.

The Case

As early as 1888, the black thinker E.W. Blyden pointed out in his book, *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race* that Europeans consistently tended to see Africans as underdeveloped, even infantile versions of themselves, and that when Africans, by and by, shall enjoy the advantages of civilisation and culture, they will become like the European. In a similar vein, R.H. Lyons has noted the consistency with which nineteenth-century European commentators regarded blacks as inferior to whites in moral fibre, cultural

attainment and mental ability. G.W.F. Hegel, on his part, thought that Africa was a primitive land outside the flow of history. To him, Africa was a land of childhood which, lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, was enveloped in the mantle of night. This partly provided justification for European imperial conquest of Africa, the reason for such conquest being to bring civilisation to the primitive or barbaric. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has it that *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* is the District Commissioner's choice of the title of his book on the Igbo. This is a telling exemplification of this despicable portraiture of Africa and its peoples in Western circles, at least at the time. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* participates in this type of discourse on Africa vis-à-vis Europe.

Albeit, these errors of judgement emanated from the deep-rooted dichotomy between the black and the white race as well as from the disparity that existed and continue to exist between the people who make up the different ethnic groups and cultures of the world. Hence, the Hegelian vision of history led him and his German contemporaries to the ethnocentric conclusion that their European culture was the culmination of God's plan for humanity and to the nationalistic belief that Germany was supreme among the nations on earth. This idea of the supremacy of the self vis-à-vis the other has informed European and American view of Arabic culture and the peoples of the Middle East since the eighteenth century, as it has been pointed out by Edward Saïd in his celebrated book *Orientalism*. In this regard, Saïd posits that the West has tended to describe the Orient in terms of a set of simplistic assumptions and negative stereotypes. This explains why in the eyes of many in the Arab world George W. Bush's attitude towards Arabs was informed by this discourse of orientalism and not so much

by events like the terrorist attacks on World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington on September 11, 2001.

Suffice it to say that Bush's view of the Arab world following these attacks and the resulting orientation of his Middle East policies helped in raising certain controversies about Islam, the religion of the vast majority of Arabs, and these controversies provoked situations of conflict that pitted and continue to pit Islam against Christianity in some parts of the world. The conflict between these two world religions, insinuated by some as a conflict of civilisations, has only come to cap the telling denigration with which many well-meaning clerics of these religious bodies consider other religions or even other strains of their own very faith.

Witness the disdain, for example, with which some votaries of some world religions look at African Traditional Religions. Some have referred to the same God we worship with them as "the High-gods of Primitive Peoples" (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979: 13), the term aimed at showing that God as conceived by African peoples cannot be the same as the Supreme Being of the Bible. Whatever they choose to refer to that God, they may be oblivious of the fact that African creation myths have striking parallels with the one found in the Book of Genesis, which, after all, relates to a people as well, that is, the Hebrews, and not to all the peoples of the globe. Consider these examples. The Egyptian creation story has it that in the beginning there was only water, but that water was a powerful being called Nun. Out of Nun came Re. Re was very powerful. If he said the name of a thing then that thing would come into existence. Re named gods, goddesses, plants and animals. The very last thing that Re named was man. Then Re took on a human form in order to rule as the first Pharaoh

(Crystal, 1995). On its part, Boshongo creation story says that in the beginning there was only darkness, water and Bumba, the Great God. One day Bumba, in pain from a stomachache, vomited up the sun. The sun dried up some of the water, leaving land. Still in pain, Bumba vomited up the moon, the stars, and then some animals: the leopard, the crocodile, the turtle, the eagle, the white heron, one beetle, the goat and Yo, the fish. The last thing that he vomited was mankind. The animals and Bumba's three suns then created plants and the rest of the animals. (Leach, 1956: 145-146) Compare these myth with that of the Hebrew. It says in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. That the earth was formless and empty, that darkness was over the surface of the deep, and that the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. He then created light and separated the light from the darkness. He went on to separate the water from the sky and to create dry land, seed-bearing plants and trees, the sun, the moon, the stars, sea creatures, birds, livestock and, finally, man.

Whatever creation story we may be dealing with, it is clear that there is a Being who is the ultimate explanation of the genesis and sustenance of both man and all things, be they animate or inanimate, be they with flesh or without flesh. It is clear from the stories that creation was by way of the mouth or that the spoken word accompanied creation. Call that Being whatever you like: God, Allah, Re, Bumba, Olodumare, Nwi-ngong, Nyuymbom, and so on. It is clear in these stories that the human being is superior to all other creatures; that the human being is the central figure in the stories and that everything is seen in terms of its relation to man. Whatever creation story we are dealing with, we should bear in mind that creation reflects the good intentions and perfect nature of the Creator. In fact, one myth from the Fang people of Gabon does have a declaration of the

goodness of creation. Nzame, Mebere and Nkwa form a trinity for the Fang. Beier relates it thus: Nzame made everything: heaven, earth, sun, moon, stars, animals, plants; everything. When he had finished everything that we see today, he called Mebere and Nkwa and showed them his work. 'This is my work. Is it good?' They replied, 'Yes, you have done well' (Beier, 1966: 18). Whatever creation story we are dealing with, let it be clear in our minds that "[e]very people has a body of myths or sacred tales received from its antiquity. They are supernatural stories which man created to explain the problems and mysteries of life and death – his attempt to make sense of the bewildering complexities of existence" (Achebe, 1975: 35)

The case being made here is that despite being separated by numerous geographical barriers, many cultures have developed creation myths with the same basic elements. Our adherence, therefore, to a particular religion should not make us blind to those elements that unite us as translated by the commonalties between our creation myths. True, there are some significant differences between all of them that reinforce the individuality and uniqueness of each culture. These differences should not create a disposition of mind that makes us see the other as different from us, especially as we are all from one source, the mouth of the Creator, whether Divine breath created us or God vomited us up as believed by the Boshongo of Central Africa. The recognition and acceptance of difference and our ability to cope with it should enhance understanding, help build bridges and minimise the possibility of conflict. In this connection, inter-religious dialogue is not only necessary but it should constitute the basis of human understanding.

Let us take another example, this time based on the way belief can contribute in alienating people from science. This concerns an ailing young woman who refused to take

medication because she believed in the power of prayers. Of course, her prayers and those of her fellow fanatics in the faith precipitated her journey beyond. It was a telling example of the way belief can blind people from seeing or experiencing what medicine is capable of doing.

Like in the domain of religion, discrepant cultural experiences, accentuated by geographical and environmental discrepancies, should not be a source of conflict given that in the global village, different cultures are called upon to cross-fertilise one another. What is generally observed is that a number of things may happen when cultures encounter one another: similar experiences can be shared; there can be collaboration, negotiation and appropriation. This, however, presupposes that the parties concerned must do away with fear. Fear creates a phobia. Fear creates barriers. The parties must seek to know each other in depth. Knowledge of others is the spark of light that chases the darkness of fear. The Roman poet, Virgil, said in his celebrated epic poem, concerning imperialists: "I fear the Greeks, even when they are bringing gifts" (qtd. in Fonlon, 1966: 47). But this was said centuries ago when the Romans and the Greeks were at each other's throats. Anyone, any group of people, any nation today cannot afford to say this of others. Cultural encounter that meets with opposition and resistance may likely lead to displacement which, in itself, may lead to the ascendancy and descent of some cultures. But if cultural encounter is informed by the willingness to dialogue, cross-fertilisation takes place, and soul is given every human action.

Chinua Achebe tells us in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* that "No man can understand another whose language he does not speak (and 'language' here does not mean simply words, but a man's entire world view" (1975: 48). What this means, in effect, is that to get to the "other" one

must bridge the gulf that separates that person and himself. In a similar vein, bridges must be built between the different cultures and nations as well as between the different and often contrasting bodies of knowledge that characterise the worlds of science and technology. In this way, human understanding would be enhanced across the globe. It is often observed that failure in public office, economic slum, social strife and various forms of conflict come about as a result of a refusal to accept or cope with difference, lack of knowledge of others and ignorance of the 'language' others speak. Hence, how can disparity be mended, one may ask. It can be mended through dialogue and the building of bridges. Getting involved in dialogue and building bridges in the process concretely means:

1. Recognising others
2. Accepting and coping with difference
3. Reaching out to others, knowing them and speaking their 'language'
4. Healing ruptures in relationships on a permanent basis
5. Dialoguing with people across cultural boundaries
6. Dialoguing with people of difference classes
7. Agreeing to disagree with others
8. Fostering partnerships
9. Helping to build capacities in others
10. Sharing knowledge.

This way, we contribute in making the world the centre of universal civilisation. This way, we contribute in enhancing understanding among the peoples of the globe. This way, we contribute in ensuring a world order free of suspicion, free of hatred, free of treachery. This way, we contribute in peace building around the globe.

Conclusion

Discourses on the self and the other are seen not only in terms of the relationship between the West and the Empire or between the Occident and the Orient, but also in terms of discrepant experiences within given countries and regions of the world. These discourses have given rise to such concepts as cultural imperialism, the cultural integrity of the Empire, black consciousness, Indian soul, aboriginal culture, and so forth. These contrasting ideologies, based on the concepts of totalization and essentialization of cultures, help to emphasise the boundaries of the geographical and cultural territories of the world. However, the phenomena of displacement, migration, Diaspora and relocation that have informed postcolonial discourse call for another form of discourse that is tantamount to a clarion call – a town crier's call, so to speak – in the global village. This, I term the Saoshyantian discourse, a term derived from Saoshyant in Persian mythology. Saoshyant, literally translated as 'saviour', is the one who will come to renew all life at the end of time. He will remove every trace of the evil wrought in the world by Ahriman and usher in the 'second existence', uniting souls to their bodies.

Saoshyantian discourse, therefore, is discourse that advocates that soul should be given to all human actions. It seeks to establish a new order, a *modus operandi*, in man's relations with fellow human beings. It is discourse that has for it's province not only the classic definition of culture as credited to Edward B. Tylor but one that integrates the religious, social, economic and political ideologies that shape our thoughts, our actions and our lives on a daily basis, virtually. In this connection, this discourse boils down to a dialogue of cultures in the broadest sense of the word. It is dialogue that seeks to recognise, accept and cope with difference; dialogue that seeks to enable every group of

people, irrespective of creed and might, to contribute to universal civilisation; it is dialogue that seeks to build bridges between cultures and nations – the bridges of which will facilitate the cross-fertilization, construction and sustainability of the cultures of the world; it is dialogue that seeks to enhance understanding among nations and the peoples of the world; it is dialogue that seeks to eradicate conflicts or facilitate their resolution should they arise.

Note on Contributor

At the time of delivery of this paper, Nol Alembong was the Head of the Department of African Literature and Civilisations at the University of Yaounde I, Cameroon. Professor of African Literature and Civilisations, he is presently Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Buea. His areas of teaching and research are African oral literature, oral traditions and literature, cultural studies, and African religious beliefs. He is the author of two volumes of poetry, *The Passing Wind* (1990) and *Forest Echoes* (2010). He is also the author of *Cameroon's Western Grassland Incantations: Background, Society, Cosmology* (2010), and *Standpoints on African Orature* (2011) and an impressive number of articles published in scientific journals in and out of Cameroon. He contributed to and co-edited *Rupture et Transversalité de la Littérature Camerounaise* (2010).

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