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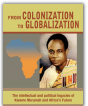
The Social Implications of A Global Culture To Africa: Kenya's Case

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Abstract

Globalization is bringing people from different parts of the world closer than ever before. In essence, a global village is being created, and in turn a global culture. A growing number of people in the world are exposed to the same news in the same format through international news agencies. Further, the same people are exposed to international mass marketing of industrial goods and services. The end results of this include sweeping changes in politics and economic orientations. But most of all is the effect that these developments have on the social orientations of national cultures, particularly to Africa.

What is the social implication of similar global experiences to Africa in general and to Kenya in particular? This paper reflects on how African values are getting transformed by the effects of globalization. The paper recognizes that each nation has its distinctive traditions, social and intellectual orientations. A nation is therefore a cultural system. Globalization is seen, in this paper, as a means of cultural imperialism. By the virtue that the culture of a nation is a product of its history, culture becomes important in determining the social policies of a nation. The paper expounds on possible means that Africa in general and Kenya in particular, can use to withstand globalization pressure and maintain its cultural values and identity.

Keywords: Kenya, Culture, Globalization

1. Introduction

The world is in a continuous state of homogenization. It is the first time in history that virtually every individual at every level of society can sense the impact of international changes (Rothcop 1997). The walls of nations are coming down and their internal structures are becoming dis-assembled and merged into a 'global state'. Communities are becoming delocalised and the once separate items in the mosaic of cultures are leaking, merging into one another (Friedman 1994). Discreet groups in society have become more familiar with one another, allied and commingled becoming more alike. In essence, a global culture is being created. Values pertinent to one social environment are no longer constrained to their origin (Asante 1989). To a large extent, globalization is promoting integration of the world and it is calling for removal of cultural barriers. According to Moussali (2003), while this may be vital for the globe, it has negative effects on most cultures and civilizations.

This paper discusses the implications of a global culture to Africa in general and to Kenya in particular. The most prominent idea, in the paper, is that a nation is a cultural system. Culture is seen to be embedded within the history of a nation, thereby becoming an important tool in the formulation and implementation of a nation's political, economic and intellectual policies. Most of all, however, is the relationship between culture and the social ties of a society. Culture is seen as a social stabilizer. It is the way a given people have grown to adapt to their environment, to rationalize their existence, to find order and perhaps, even

happiness (Teheranian 1977). Any change in a nation's culture, without the due process of rationalization, implies a change in social orientation, and a damaging social stability (Ibid).

This paper introduces the rationale of a global culture from the perspective of an African society. The paper notes that what we may be referring to as a global culture is the culture of the developed nations as far as an average African is concerned. The paper then discusses African social values, which have been affected by the 'global culture.' These values include family ties and communal way of life, Social identity, intellectual property and language. Recommendations are given on ways through which African cultures can continue to evolve to meet the needs of the time without sacrificing their humanistic ethos.

1.2 A Global Culture?

Whereas international societies continue to interact with each other, technology is at the same time undermining and disempowering some societies and shifting power to some actors. There is indeed an imbalance between developing and developed countries as far as cultural dissemination systems are concerned, with the former being cultural recipients and the later disseminating their culture. Globalization has been used as a ground for the developed nations to impose their cultural values on the developing world. The United States of America, for example, is trying and succeeding in transforming the world into its own image. What we are witnessing is the 'Americanization' of the world. The scenario of the 'global culture' is best described in the following terms, "If there is a global village, it speaks American. It wears jeans, drinks coke, walks on swooshed shoes, recognizes Mickey mouse…" What is pertinent here is an aspect of cultural domination and it is seen by the third world as a means of cultural imperialism. Rothcop (1997) backs this by asserting that;

It is in the interest of the United States to ensure that if the world is moving towards a common language, it be English. If the world is moving towards common telecommunications, safety and quality standards, they be American; If the world is becoming linked by television, radio and music, the programming be American; and if common values are being developed, they be values with which Americans are comfortable.

Frenchette (1999) observes that "instead of widening our choices, globalization [seems] to be forcing us all into the same shallow consumerist culture, giving us the same appetite but leaving us more than ever unequal in our ability to satisfy them." The common aspect of the globalized culture is that it pursues the same "one size fits all' ideal (Muyale-Manenji 1998).

In Africa, when we speak of a global culture, we are constantly concerned about the breaking down of traditional lifeways and a general decline of cultural distinctions under the influence of a dominant culture (Asante 1989). The drivers of globalization have impacted on the services, ideas, lifestyle, language and every other component of culture. Having been recipients in the global village, African cultures have continued to experience pressures, most notably from modern economies, lifestyle, and western mass media. The intrusion of the society's cultural values is a matter of deep concern. This is because it is possible for some societies to bring values, hopes and dreams that may be totally inappropriate in the recipient society. Africa, for instance, is known for its emphasis on values such as communalism, family, respect for life, hospitality among others. The continent is also rich in cultures such as multiplicity of languages, intellectual property and a unique social identity of its members. However, these cultural values have come into strong confrontation by values communicated through western music, video and other international communication systems.

1.3 Communalism and Family Ties

Perhaps, nowhere else in the globe is the maxim 'every man is his brother's keeper' more pronounced than in Africa. The African society has profound regard to familial relationships and individual obligations to society. The extended family system is the most widely recognized manifestation of this value (Tehranian 1990), and the society has respect for authority and dependence on the extended family. There has been a

strong belief that what affects one member of the society is a matter of concern to all (Nii-Yarty 2003). Yet the value has come under severe stress, as African countries transform economically.

Traditional economic activities, which used to be sufficient at least for subsistence living, can no longer suffice. Family members who are part of the modern economy are unable to provide for the extended family. The continent is faced with competitive market activities, which emphasize value, encourage individualism and say little about obligations and commitment to the family and community. This has caused tension among members, resulting to a consistent cause of stress in African families. The stress has threatened the fundamental African value of communalism. The best indication of family tie stress is the emergence of street children and child homelessness, which has spread all over Africa. Street children are a consequence of the rising culture of capitalism and the declining significance of African indigenous values, under which children were reared in strong family kinship units. In Kenya, the origins of rising numbers of homeless children lie in economic and social conditions that have brought changes in cultural traditions and family structure (Njeru 2001). Globalization and neoliberal economic reforms are easy targets for blame on shattered family ties and social practices such as child fostering, which had previously provided a safety net for children. Henriot (1998) laments about loose family ties in the following words;

In a globally competitive labour market, how can we preserve time to care for ourselves, families, neighbours and friends? In a globally competitive economy, how do we find the resources to provide for those unable to provide for themselves?

The labour market, brought about by globalization, has also seen to it that needs that were once provided exclusively by unpaid family labour are now purchased from the market. In almost all societies in Africa, child sitting for example was done communally by family members; mostly mothers, sisters and grandmothers. The process of globalization, however, has brought about nuclearisation of the family where families are left to solve their own problems (Oppong 1992). Regarding care services in Kenya, women's increased participation in the labour force and the shifting of economic structures has seen transformations on these services. Most families employ house helps to take care of their children. In urban settings, children are taken to care centers and families have to pay for care services. The end result of these services is that children are brought up with little parental care, guidance, supervision, and socialization of family values.

The major actors in the globalization process have the notion that communalism, which is inherent in African culture may be the main hindrance to material development. This is true in Harrison and Huntington (2000), who are of the view that "individualism results in the accumulation of more capital." Faced with such sentiments, the community, once invested with deep meanings and encapsulating close-knit relations has mired in the profit motive and lost the communal spirit (Albow et.al 1997). In Kenya, for example, occasions like weddings, funerals, the birth of a child among others have in the past been issues of the whole community. However, due to exposure to foreign culture through the media, these occasions are becoming more and more of nuclear family events. Church weddings are no longer full to the brim, funerals are attended by few people while the birth of a child is a norm, nothing worth celebrating. This paper is of the view that Kenyans are sacrificing their fundamental happiness because of aping western values.

In their endeavor to impose their cultural values, what the global actors fail to realize, or simply ignore, is that Africa's values may not be found in material comforts as has been set by the standards of the modern world. African values are embedded within the spirit of communalism. It is through helping each other and participating in communal events that African people find joy and happiness. According to Kwame Nkrumah,

> We may lack those material comforts regarded as essential by the standards
>
> Of the modern world… But we have the gifts of laughter and joy, a love of

Music, family … While we seek the material, cultural and economic advancement, we shall not sacrifice the fundamental happiness (Nkrumah 1957).

1.4 Language.

The choice and use of language is a very important aspect in any cultural policy. Through language, people not only describe the world but also understand themselves. In the course of learning his/her language and how to use it, every individual acquires the bulk of his culture (Mathooko 2003). Language and culture are thus inseparable. Language is adversely used in transmission of culture. "it aids in transmission of ideas, transferring of property, curing illness, acquiring food, raising children, distributing power and settling disputes" (Kaggwa 2003). Thiong'o (1981) observes that language is inseparable from us as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history and specific relationship with the world. Reyhner (1993) contends that languages contain generations of wisdom, going back into antiquity. "Our worlds, our ways of saying things [mean] different ways of thinking, seeing and acting. Our languages are, therefore, the foundation of cultural heritage (Ibid)".

Given the pre-eminence of language as the primary and most universal expression of culture, any act or set of circumstances that lead to the superiority of one or several languages over others, whether intentional or not, raises crucial issues (Gakahu and Sewe 2005). Many indigenous languages, for example, are already teetering on the brink of extinction in the face of globalization. Out of 6,800 languages classified as threatened, 35% (2,400) are in Africa (Cheruiyot 2003).This is partly because the continent is totally dependent on foreign languages for transaction of her cultural, social political and economic business. The scenario is saddening because in African communities, social aspects, communal life, politics and culture are highly interwoven and [indigenous] language is the thread that holds them in place (Mathooko, Ibid).

In Kenya it is lamentable that 16 out of 42 languages are at risk of disappearing (Cheruiyot, Ibid). Bearing in mind that much of Kenya's regional and national culture is transmitted via ethnic languages, this figures are alarming (Mathooko, Ibid). Language death in the country is symptomatic of cultural death, because a way of life disappears with the death of a language. Languages are the most authentic ways through which Kenyan people and communities can retain and safeguard knowledge, wisdom and their nomenclature, passed down by their ancestors. Commenting about extinction of some languages in Kenya, the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP 2001) notes that;

Loosing a language and its cultural context is like burning a unique reference book from the natural world, because much of the African language is passed from generation to generation orally in artworks, in the designs of handicrafts such as baskets, rather than being written down.

In Africa, language also serves as an important symbol of group belonging, enabling groups to know what common heritage they share. Despite it's significance, most children from Kenya's elite background cannot speak their mother tongue. English, parents argue, is an absolute necessity and so they are content when children are fluent in it (Cheruiyot, Ibid).

In situations where they are not at a risk of extinction, languages of the developing countries have taken a back seat in economic, political and military issues. African languages, for example, have been excluded and deprived of their right to participate in international and national affairs. What we are witnessing in the world is a dominance of some few languages in important global aspects. La Ponce (1984) defines language dominance as the use of a few languages in scientific progress and political power. For example, about 60% of all military expenditures in the world are transacted in English, Russian and Chinese (Ibid). Ninety five per cent (95%)of the world's chemical knowledge is in only six languages: English, Russian, Japanese, German, French and Polish. In all other social activities, the English language has increasingly assumed the role of dominant world language. Thion'go (1981) terms the English language as a 'Cultural Bomb.' This is primarily because African nations have adopted the languages of the developed world,

mostly English, and consequently adopting their (developed world's) culture. The result is a general loss of identity and pride in native languages, its erasure being replaced by English.

1.5 Social Identity

African cultures are under pressure from international mass media in as far as social identity is concerned. Globalization is leading to the stripping away of identity among people. According to the interactionist theorists, social identity is synonymous with the way in which we more or less locate ourselves in the social world (Preston 1997). It marks the ways in which we are the same as others who share similar cultural identities offered by society, and the way we are different from those who do not (Woodward 1997). The difference between 'us' and 'them' is largely a matter of social identity.

One of the ways that 'global' social identity has been disseminated is through new electronic communication possibilities that bind the world together in previously unimaginable ways (Akande 2002). The media, for example, has been used as a large tool for shaping, reinforcing and defining the world. Through media images, African people are bombarded with ideals that are unfortunately not representative of themselves. Regrettably though, it is through these mediums that people are attempting to construct their identities (Emerson 2002). Gergen (1991) argues that when people are bombarded with myriad images, their reality changes incessantly as does their value system. There is a flux in one's sense of self. Such people often do not know what to belief in or what to stand for. According to Gergen (Ibid), an American who watches a film depicting some value orientation may assess the extent of realism in what is depicted. In contrast, a non-American is more likely to conclude what is depicted has a basis in American culture and therefore offers a plausible behavioral option.

This phenomenon may help explain why the youth in Kenya are so much preoccupied with transforming themselves into 'images of Americans'. Because of media exposure, young people in the country are latching on to the styles, symbols and language of imported music, television and film. The girls dress skimpily, speak with a 'twang' and bleach themselves while boys dress in baggy outfits and wear a lot of 'bling bling' The youth have lost control and interest of their own cultural practices and instead, cultivated western cultural values. This has affected their sense of identity. Muli (2001), commenting about the Kenyan youth says, "we are not quite sure where we belong, so our greatest influence right from now is from the [United] States and from Britain. That is what teaches [us] who we should be." Just like the Kenyan youth, a large section of the world's population dreams living like the characters in any other stereotyped American soap opera. What the media fail to tell the recipients is that the characters in these media are actors and they probably behave differently in their natural settings.

1.6 Intellectual Property

Every society has its own way of life, enshrined in their cultures and customs. These are the secrets that enable them to manage their habitats and to interact with nature in friendly sustainable ways (UNEP 2001). In Africa, nature's secrets are locked in songs, stories, art and handicrafts. In fact, art and culture form an integral part of social activities. However, these valuables may be lost forever as a result of growing globalization (Ibid). Perhaps, the most far reaching effects of cultural globalization is its effects on loss of intellectual property.

Kenya, for example, has lost its traditional 'kiondo' to the Japanese because of open market policies that have been made possible by the process of globalization. Though the 'kiondo' is an authentic Kenyan product in origin, countries from the Far East have began making the same product as though it is a genuine brainchild product of their own (Mwai 2006). The Japanese have modified the 'kiondo' with leather and hooks and have claimed its ownership.

Local traders fear that the country is also likely to lose ownership of it's traditional 'jiko'. The implication of such loss is a loss of income for the small traders in the country. Export of the 'kiondo', for instance, has over the years been regarded as an important income generating activity or job creation that has empowered local women in Kenya (Ibid).

1.7 Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the emerging global culture is primarily the culture of the citizens of the first world. Globalization seems as an inspiration to degrade other cultures in favour of a dominant one; or an attempt to certify the domination of one culture, mainly the modern version of western culture, over the others. It has a corrosive impact on people's existing values of who they are, what they want and what they respect, by attacking and undermining values and traditions. It has brought a scenario where 'superior' cultures eliminate 'inferior' opponents. In fact, it assumes almost a religious character, as greed becomes virtue, competition a commandment and profit a sign of salvation; dissenters are dismissed as non-believers. In Africa, the rapid economic, technological, social and political intrusion of foreign culture has put our cultural values in jeopardy and it has forced people to fear for the loss of their social characteristics. Africa's culture's role as a spontaneous and integral part of people's life is eroded. It has reduced its magnitude as the means of constructing societal values, reproducing group identity and building social cohesion. The end result becomes global integration at the expense of local disintegration. From this discussion, this paper recommends the following;

Though foreign values and structures are important in the development of indigenous cultures, Africa should devise ways of borrowing aspects of foreign culture, which are compatible with indigenous values and flourish alongside foreign cultures. African countries should embrace the process of globalization with caution and avoid the dominance or any claim of superiority by a 'super culture.' We should be at a point to say who we are and what we are and to demand the representation of what is beautiful and cultural.

It is important for Africa to look for those characteristics, which express universal ideals and values and encourage them from within the various cultures. We should collect myths, instruments, sayings and sounds that define what is a re-statement of identity.

The world should pursue alternative approaches that harmonize cultural diversities, not sameness of culture. In this respect, African countries should develop and strengthen communication at local level. Much of the African values are vulnerable and diluted because of over engagement in international media.

Policy makers in Africa should revive the use of African languages in their national affairs. The languages should be taught in schools up to certain education levels. This is because no country has developed in social, economic or political spheres using someone else's language. As Mathooko (2003) notes, People can barely be creative and innovative in a language they have to struggle with in order to command expression."

Policy makers in Africa and Kenya in particular should implement regulations that ensure protection of the country's intellectual property.

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