From Cultural Diversity to Universality for Attainment of Peace, Justice, and Harmony in Africa

By

Elizabeth Chinwe Okeke

Abstract

The clamour for recognition and superiority has given rise to multi-cultural countries and daunting conflicts in different parts of Africa including Nigeria, a country with major rural illiterate population. Hence, consistent reports of significant loss of lives, property, insecurity and related vices contribute immensely to delay the achievement of social, economic and political development, in spite of both individual and joint efforts of national and international governments and non-governmental organizations. Based on a critical examination of the concepts of peace, justice and harmony, in relation to the democratic peace theory, the paper differentiates between cultural identity and societal culture. Consequently, it proposes adequate group representation of different cultures and the use of constructive dialogue for exchange of ideas and knowledge to provide the right step towards achieving sustainable cultural universality among different cultures and pave way for peace, justice and harmony.

Introduction

The tendency to preserve culture for group identity in a multi-cultural environment appears to constitute a cog-in-the-wheel of attaining the much needed peace, justice and harmony in personal relations for achieving successful globalization of socio-economic and political conditions of different countries of the world. Culture is historically derived and could be considered as the inventions made by great minds over time, all of which guide human behaviour for successful harmonious living and meeting the needs of people with diverse characteristics in an environment at any given period of time. Culture therefore is evolving. It constitutes habits, beliefs, traditions, customs and abilities of a group and is passed among and between members from one generation to another. However, since human beings are not static, aspects of culture are liable to change in order to meet the needs and interests of the group at any point in time. This demands learning by societal members. As Kenkel and Voland (1975:68) rightly observe:

Learned responses have tremendous advantage over instincts, for what has been learned can be either modified or replaced by a new and better response. Particularly, if the learning capacity is high, as in humans, reliance on learned responses provides a truly remarkable advantage in the struggle for survival.
From Kenkel and Voland’s observation, culture is of great importance in the provision of a common healthy ground for societal members to understand themselves and operate within their set of common interest which is developed over time. By so doing, the cohesion, co-operation and integration of society are achieved and sustained.

Africa is a multicultural continent and each country is, to an extent, unique, in her cultural content. Within each country, there are many ethnic groups and each tries to protect her group identity with the belief that such an attempt provides an avenue to unlimited opportunities to achieving the country’s Golden Fleece. William (2004:v) notes that such intentions constitute “… a preponderant reason for pervasive conflict in modern Africa”. African Unification Front – AUF (2009:2) sees culture as “… the primary manifestation of divisions caused by neocolonial management and neocolonial interference of the constituent states of the African Union”. Wordu (2004:165), discussing the anatomy of African conflicts, refers to Africa as “… a continent at war with itself”. In defense of his statement, Wordu (2004:165 – 166), referring to Vogt and Aminu observes:

42 out of 50 African countries have experienced social unrests culminating in civil wars … in 1999 (alone) a fifth of all Africans lived in war-torn countries … in 2001, there were roughly 50 active wars and armed conflicts in the continent … with 20,000 people killed and 2 million displaced alone in Sierra Leone, and the continent loses approximately $15 billion dollars annually as a result of conflicts.

In Nigeria, records of conflicts include the conflicts between Hausa/Fulani and the indigenous population in parts of the North as well as the Ijaws and the Itsekiris in the south, to mention a few.

On the other hand, the long period of Apartheid in South Africa recorded the imposition of the white military’s culture on the majority black culture. This brought along with it immense shading of blood and untold hardship, poverty and loss of lives and property in the region, all of which continue to linger in the minds of the people till date. On the other hand, in parts of Rwanda, Somalia, Zaire (now Republic of Congo) and Zimbabwe, apart from sporadic political upheavals, cultural differences have equally contributed their toll with the resultant insecurity and life-threatening conditions, in spite of lives and property which continue to be lost.

These reported disheartening situations in parts of Africa continue to weaken and prolong the integration of Africa. Consequently, they cannot be left unattended to. African countries must seek ways to achieve universality of existing multi-culture in order not to be left out in the globalizing world. Okeke (2006:330), recognizing the multifarious cultures existing in Africa emphasizes,
the … need (for African countries) to unite in order to discover the lone gem they are made of. This is achievable by burying their differences, setting themselves free from their colonial chains and traditional cultures, all of which seem to linger and perpetuate the differences among them, resulting to their ever exploiting and developing nature.

For the call to be a reality, all hands must be on deck. African men and women as well as the youths have to be united to pursue their common goal. The illiterates among them have to be educated and given the right orientation. In addition, peace and justice should be sought, achieved and sustained in all spheres for Africa’s dream to be a reality.

**An Overview of Democratic Peace Theory**

Recognizing many definitions of democracy provided by scholars, this paper adheres to Hook’s (1966:9) position:

> There is common agreement that democracy as a way of life can flourish only when differences of opinion can be negotiated by free, critical discussion in which those who at any time, and on any question, are a minority, may become the majority, provided they abide by democratic processes.

From Hook’s submission, democracy welcomes reasoned and constructive dialogue without any exercise of power or superiority. With the understanding that democracy connotes true representation of different groups of interest, democratic peace theory or liberal democracy argues that wars are rare among and between democracies. In addition, there is the possibility of achieving alliance and collaboration between themselves, since majority of group members do not support to engage in any conflict or war. Among other things, to supporters of this theory, in their different but related explanations of the relationship between democracy and peace, there is a unanimous agreement that conflicts are equally rare between democracies. To them, systematic violence is not generally common within democracies (Doyle, 1983, Ray, 1998; Maoz and Abdolali, 1989; Maoz and Russett, 1992). While Maoz and Abdolali, concentrated their studies on occurrences of conflicts, Maoz and Russett’s study, among other things, dwelt on indentifying the relationships between peace and democracy which was found to be positively significant. It is interesting to note that since empirical studies continue to support the significant relationship between democracy and peace, many countries of the world such as USA, parts of Europe and Africa adopt and retain democracy in their political systems.

On the other hand, democracy cannot be achieved by force initiated either externally or internally. As Gleditsch, Christiansen and Hegre (2004) argue, forced democracy can only prevail temporarily but is likely to generate frictions
which degenerate to societal instability, conflicts and, in some cases, wars. Forced democracy can be equated with Kant’s direct democracy where every individual’s will is not adequately carried along. Instead, the executive power imposes authority which is generally contrary to the majority will, hence in opposition to liberty. This therefore calls for proper understanding of group members with regard to shared values, beliefs and interests for peace to be achieved and sustained for societal progress. In other words, the imposition of a different culture threatens the stability of the original culture.

Democratic peace calls for justice. Justice relates to orderliness without any prejudice of both individuals and things in society. In agreement with Rawls (1999:2), “justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought”. In any system where peace, justice and harmony prevail, there is bound to be progress among the entire population and their environment. In other words, there is equal opportunity for every individual to prove his mettle for his survival as well as the survival and progress of his environment, without any fear of injustice and conflict.

In spite of minor criticisms levied against democratic peace theory, scholars in both idealistic and classical liberalist schools widely accept its importance in policy formulation and change in society. In this paper, justice (redistributive justice) is considered to relate to fairness, equity and empathy. This recognizes Rawls’ (1999:266) two principles of justice:

(i) Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all.

(ii) Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle and attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.

In recognition of the above submission Rummel (1997) sees democracy as a situation where the executive power “… are elected in competitive elections with a secret ballot, where there is freedom of speech, religion, and organization and a constitutional framework of law to which the government is subordinate and that guarantees equal rights”.

61
Colonialism, Culture and Democracy: The African Experience

In Africa, colonialism has left an indelible mark of conflicts and wars within and between countries. The imposition and attempt to perpetuate foreign/external executive power subjected the traditional values, customs, beliefs and interests of Africans in their different entities to a state of confusion, especially in a situation where over 50% of the population constitute the illiterates. Consequently, in the effort to re-instate the long-standing knowledge and practices, the African population experience oppositions and conflicts within and between countries in the continent. As Fanon (1997:647) notes:

A natural culture under colonial administration is a contested culture whose destruction is sought in systematic fashion. It very quickly becomes a culture condemned to secrecy. This idea of a clandestine culture is immediately seen in the reactions of the occupying power which interprets attachment to traditions as faithfulness to the spirit of the nation and as a refusal to submit. This persistence in following forms of cultures which are already condemned to extinction is already a demonstration of nationality; but it is a demonstration which is a throwback to the laws of inertia.

Given Fanon’s observation, many African countries have found themselves at the cross-road, especially in the areas of adjusting to suit in the present socio-economic and political order. The era (1965-1997) of Mobutu Sese Seko as the President of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) attempted to ‘purge the country of all colonial cultural influence’. Consequently, he engaged in many ways to challenge the rise of communism.

In Tanzania, differences in value-orientations contribute immensely to conflicts of varying degrees. Discussing the value-orientation of native Tanzanians and Europeans who reside side-by-side with Tanzanians, Mayer, Boness and Louw (2008) observe that the differences in the cultural values of the two groups are at par. This scenario contributes significantly to occasional conflicts experienced in the country. In the words of Malan (2008:5) with reference to the case of Tanzania, “… different value-orientations … seem to be most prone to lead to conflict and to approach that individuals, groups and mediators may adopt to resolve such conflicts and avoid repetitions of similar incidents”.

In Sierra Leone, intra-state conflict was the order of the day especially in late 1990s and Pratt (1999) reported that foreign intrusion in the Sierra Leone conflicts posed a serious problem as the foreign troops supported the rebels without minding the disruption of the norms and beliefs of the people. To the rebel group, their reason for brutal attacks of the civilians was to create a ‘revolutionary egalitarian system’, thereby disrupting the entire value-system of the country and creating an opportunity for foreign troops to take over the country.
In parts of West Africa, such as Senegal, Ivory Coast, Nigeria and Cameroon, the traditional cultures of farmers and herders used to exist side-by-side without much conflict. In recent times with the introduction of international market and industrial economy, the emerging changes in environmental conditions and demography as well as the sporadic conflicts are now being experienced between the two cultural groups. While reporting the findings of Davidheiser and Luna, Malan (2008:6) notes that “however well-intentioned, the top-down importation of Western models of ‘development’ and ‘production’ systems proved to be incompatible with the time-proven custom of mutually beneficial symbiosis”.

Achieving Universality of Culture in Africa for Peace, Justice and Harmony

As Reichart (2006:23) argues, “… no country or culture readily accepts the imposition of a universal human right when the right clashes with indigenous viewpoint”. Attainment of development among African countries continues to be significantly delayed due to conflicts and wars arising from clashes between and among cultures. The situation observed by Reichart appears to be applicable in the case of African countries. There must be a rethink on how to unite. It cannot be through clashes, conflicts and wars. Stones, knives, guns, bombs and all instruments of war must be kept aside. Wounds must be healed and broken ribs and legs repositioned. The differences have to be identified and resolved while identifying the common values, beliefs, norms and interests as they relate to the present. Interdependence has to be sought for all hands to be on deck in the reconstruction of ‘new’ Africa. Africans, themselves must be prepared to bury their differences without creating any loop hole; take the bull by the horn and take the lead in the pursuit of peace, justice and harmony in the continent. They know their values as well as their areas of need and interest to be able to place their priorities.

Referring to Leff, Malan (2008:5) observes:

… there is the crucially important task of reintegrating former combatants into their fellow-human networks. They should restore and rebuild relationships with partners, parents, children, relatives, neighbours and communities. There are also the more general relationships that usually have to be repaired or improved after a war – those for instance, that cross the lines between ethnic, religions, income and gender groups.

Leff’s (2008) contribution is quite relevant in achieving universality of cultures in Africa.

The Way Forward

People - adults (males and females) as well as youths need to be rehabilitated, re-orientated and re-integrated into different value systems. This
should be a gradual process where each interest group should be democratically represented. With due respect to Rawls’ (1999) two principles of justice (as noted earlier in this paper) which recognize fairness, equity and empathy as well as the fact that “… there is evidence for the view that there is a cohesive unity among all worldly things …” (Shannon, 2006:421), there is hope for African countries to re-unite, despite the multicultural nature. Culture is created. As human beings are not static but dynamic, elements of culture are not equally static but are liable to change. Hence, Sugiharto (2006:4580) sees culture to consist of “… loosely connected elements that can be ordered and reordered in accordance with changing circumstances, such as when beliefs and values become incompatible with each other, politics is in tension between opposing visions and factions …”. The globalizing world calls for modifications and, in some cases, changes in some elements of culture for successful integration of the entire world. African countries must not be left behind to remain a developing continent. Bridges have to be built and valleys must be leveled for a smooth and steady march from the North, through the central part, to the South, incorporating the East and West for Africa to be seen as one whole.

Beginning with universal and functional education as well as the application of constructive dialogue for exchange of ideas and knowledge, the differences are bound to be buried, while universality will, no doubt, be retained. Particular attention should be paid in providing cross-cultural awareness, sensitivity and understanding. The knowledge of these are necessary in the study of inter and intra group relations in order to achieve smooth transition.

Among the efforts made and are still being made to achieve successful integration of the African countries, the operations of the Civil Society Organization (CSO) in the area of conflict resolution in Africa is worth mentioning. CSO is a non-governmental organization that offers a range of activities especially in the area of acting as opposing group “to State dominance of public sphere and civil activities (Wordu, 2004:9). The successes recorded by observers, with particular reference to pursuance and implementation of human right policies, opposing the imposition of military and undemocratic governments in parts of Africa, provide a positive step towards achieving a brighter future for Africa. Ebo (2006:4) earlier notes:

Africa needs Synergy, Solidarity and Co-operation, not infighting. We can never attain true greatness by maligning, fighting and destroying one another. An Igbo proverb has it that ‘when brothers go to war with one another, strangers reap the benefit.

Ebo’s observation provides an avenue through which Africans themselves must not overlook. Through co-operation and adequate in-house consultation, the right choices for true representation have to be made. With reasoned dialogue,
forgetting the mind of individual worth and promoting the spirit of oneness, all hatchets will be buried and progress will be achieved in the African continent.

Conclusion

The re-curing incidents of conflicts and wars in African countries, no doubt, are as a result of the operations of a number of factors of which cultural diversity initiated either internally or externally plays a prominent role. The resultant effects have left indelible mark on the people and their environment of which if nothing is done, the continued operations of these factors have the tendency of blocking the opportunities for achieving progress in the continent. One of the greatest challenges in this modern period is to create a world where every member, age and gender not-withstanding, lives in dignity, peace and harmony in a hospital environment that they cherish and care for. Consequently, there is an urgent call for people to rethink on how to achieve maximum integration and co-operation for peace and justice to prevail. Constructive dialogue among duly elected and knowledgeable representatives of all the groups concerned, starting from Africans themselves, is hereby proposed for African countries to occupy their rightful positions and contribute maximally to the success of the globalizing world, their multicultural nature not-withstanding. As Ebo (2002:5) rightly emphasizes: “The ability to accept sound advice and reconstructive criticisms is a mark of a good leader. Constructive criticisms are social favours”. Africa already has people of such high integrity and other positive characteristics. It is the duty of Africans to identify them, without any religious or ethnic bias, encourage and support them to provide the lead.

References


