Bridging Gaps, Dismantling Walls: A Case for Integrative Global Dialogue

By

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Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the fundamentals of truth, peace and justice in a violent and degenerating postcolonial African globalized world bogged down by poverty, sterility and disease. These are discernible through the capitalist structures of Metropolitan power brokers as evidenced in the reality of an insidious political economy entrenched in hegemonic globalization. We shall underline the import of dialogic encounters, hinged on regenerating communication, as a necessary step towards collaboration, tolerance, mutual respect and understanding. Our discussion will underscore alliances and synergy built on equity, accountability and integration. These ideals have been fore grounded in vigorous postcolonial discourse in the quest to adorn the subaltern subject of the colonial and neo-colonial master with an audible voice. The paper will conclude that productive dialogue presupposes effective and humanistic communication which eschews stereotypical mass-culture. This should inevitably melt inequities and dissolve walls and frontiers without any risk of trespassing borders.

Introduction

Polarities are distinct markers of differences and variegations which pervade the globe. These are but mere perceptions encrusted in the collective unconscious and even the subliminal. Walls were constructed in ancient civilizations to protect cities. These later ceded to walls of oppression and intimidation that shut off “the other” perceived as an outsider, an outcast. Physical walls were equally divisive and exclusive. An example of such walls is the Berlin wall built by the East Germans to shut out the neighbouring West Germany. The tearing down of the wall in November 1989 became a symbol of reunification and brotherhood for the two Germanys. It would appear that that singular act anticipated the current chimerical quest of breaking frontiers in the bid to create a utopian global village.

This paper aims at examining the stark realities of exclusion and hegemony in the globalization process of integrating economies, politics and cultures. Global economic inequities will be underscored in the discussion of a lopsided political
economy which has undermined democracy and development of the emerging economies in Africa. Mass culture will be reviewed in the social relations of power, domination and subordination which are discernible in some cultural texts. In addressing these seminal issues, we shall try to foreground the role which intellectuals have to play in advocating integrative dialogue for world peace.

Hegemony in World Economy

Hegemony is nurtured by the assertion of power and the dynamic of imposing ideologies. Hegemony has been defined as:

The power or dominance that one social group holds over others. This can refer to the “asymmetrical interdependence” of political economic-cultural relations between and among nation states, social classes within a nation… But hegemony is more of gaining and maintaining power.¹

Hegemony is evidently centred on power and ideology. Maintenance of power could be sustained by ideologies which are passed down from one generation to another. Consequently majority of people imbibe these ideologies. Not only do they accept the dominance of the powerful few, they get used to the status quo.

Clearly, hegemony constitutes the substratum of Friedrich Engel’s and Karl Marx’s socialist treatise to the masses, The Communist Manifesto (1948) which addresses capitalist oppression of the less privileged. Over the years, capital has remained in the hands of a few who have ridden roughshod over the dispossessed and voiceless poor. Majority of this class of people reside in the third world, particularly Africa, which is still controlled remotely by the Metropolis. In the words of Osai:

Of more than 250 sovereign nations on earth, forty are rated as poorest in the world and thirty of these are in Africa. The 1996 Human Development index (HDI), a publication of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) presents an iridescent evidence of the increasing polarization between the rich and the poor and this holds true within, as well as, between nations.²

The gap appears to be widening further over the years due to what is referred to as the “dependency paradigm”. The emerging economies of these African countries lie in the hands of their former colonial masters who take all the vital economic decisions concerning their states. The aftermath is the perpetual subjection of these poor states to the powerful North. This is a paradox since these states are the mass producers of raw materials which are used to boost the industrial outputs of the North. The finished products are eventually shipped back to Africa in a spiraling vicious circle that undermines the African moment.
The lucid exploitation of Africa’s human and natural resources could be traced back to the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century. With the change from the domestic or cottage industry to the factory system, the attendant rapid industrial expansion necessitated the search for new basic materials from the South. Of note is the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade which had proceeded this era. The master/slave relationship between the North and the South consequently got perpetuated by Africa’s dependency on the Metropolis. This situation has been perpetrated by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank), International Monetary Fund (IMF), General Agreement of Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and Paris Club. Huge external debts have thus loomed in the bottomless pit of deficits and metropolitan neo-colonial agency. The debt crisis syndrome has essentially become a familiar refrain in the new monolithic colonial economy in the New World Order.  

There can be no doubt that the international economic relations between the North and the South have placed the former at a vantage point. In subordinating the South they have continuously regulated the world economy. Consider, for instance, the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) which the World Bank introduced and imposed on the South in the 1980’s and 1990’s. This resulted in austerity measures such as devaluation of the local currency, wage freeze and job loss. Nigerian socialist and feminist critic, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie is of the view that the devaluation of Nigerian currency, the naira, ultimately led to drastic brain drain. Ogundipe-Leslie, herself, is one of the professionals who left the country in the 1980’s. Challenging the rationale of Structural Adjustment Policy, the critic contends:

Yet the beguiling song of the policy was that trade would be liberalized so that local producers would compete, in the import and export trade, producing goods for export. How can the local industrialists produce goods to compete with goods from Britain, Japan, France, Germany and the U.S. when these local industrialists could not fund the production of raw material, pay for the fuel and electricity needs for their machines, pay their workers a decent wage, etc. Even simple local industries manufacturing writing paper, feminine hygiene products, soap and cosmetics had to close down. How could the local bourgeoisie compete, given their devalued naira.  

These local factories were doomed to collapse since they could not compete favourably with the industrialists based in the North. The Nigerian consumer who has been accustomed to products from Europe and the U.S.A would not replace those “imported” goods with locally produced ones. Even when the Government banned such goods in a bid to encourage local producers, the consumer would rather pay much more for the smuggled items. The profusion of asymmetrical economies in the world international political economy has further been exacerbated by the swirling eddies of globalization.
The Paradox of Modern Globalization

The first era of globalization was ushered in by the Industrial Revolution of the late 18th century and early 19th century. In the quest for raw materials in far away colonies, the North effected the integration of economies. Regions like the Island Pacific and Sub-Saharan Africa became integrated in the world system. The world wars, however, disintegrated this system in the first half of the 20th century. There was a lull before modern globalization concepts became distinct in the later part of the 20th century, about 1990. Globalisation has relentlessly striven to break down borders and cross frontiers. Today we have doctors without borders and other professionals working away from their national precincts to assist humanity.

The economic facets of globalization are bared in free trade agreements and negotiations under the auspices of World Trade Organization (W.T.O) with the World Bank acting as the Chief Monitor. Attempts have been made to liberalize trade and reduce tariff. In the de-industrialization of the United States of America which is, undoubtedly, the global hub, a development strategy known as the Export-Based Industrialization (EBI) has been put in place to involve the Newly Industrialized Countries (NIC’s). These countries include China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Vietnam. It should be noted that African countries are not included in this industrialization process. African markets are, however, glutted with products from these areas which differ markedly in quality from those shipped to Western markets. The better quality specifications of the latter go further to illustrate the politics of development and hegemony.

Western nations have benefited a great deal from the globalization trend. Free trade has flourished to the detriment of third world population whose labour has been visibly exploited. The integration of financial market has promoted human trafficking and sex slavery across the borders. A number of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO’s) have been set up in Nigeria to stem the tide of trafficking young Nigerian women to Europe - particularly Italy and the Netherlands.

The silver lining in the cloud of the problematic of global market is the advancement of information technology which has tried to transform the world into a global village. It is possible today to communicate freely with people from other parts of the world. Many have, nevertheless, pondered over the possibility of an integrated global society devoid of national borders. In Nigeria most embassies subject visa applicants to humiliations and dehumanization, indicating that their national borders are constricting rather than opening up. The borders that are surely widening are the ‘net’ borders. Zacher deftly posits that people are still citizens of their own countries.
and not global citizens since national borders have not been actually erased. The reality of the growing networking of the globalization has rendered them “global netizens”. This does not however mean their homogenization but the conservation of their differences. Hicks on his own part has noted that while advances in telecommunication and information technologies have forged a single world economy, they have worsened current international problems and created gaps. As he puts it:

They have often created wider gaps between rich and poor; between the powerful and the powerless. They have driven a “high-tech” wedge between those who have access to information technologies and those who do not. Moreover the combination of a global market with advanced digital communication technologies has created a small minority of “high tech” informational and corporate elites and a large majority of “low tech” laborers who are working long hours for low wages.

True, these “high-tech walls’ of the elite have shut out poor peasants and the rural dwellers in Africa, who have no access whatsoever to the internet. In most cases some of them, including educated urban dwellers may not even be computer literate. Seclusion as well as fragmentation is viewed as an off-shoot of cultural imperialism which globalization distinctly promotes. This will take us to the next segment which delineates mass culture as it relates to cultural global capitalism.

**Fragments and Stereotypes in Mass Culture**

Widely disseminated through the mass media, mass culture is a viable vehicle of globalization. It could also serve as a tool of culture imperialism. Synonymous with popular culture, it tends to gorge the gullible consumer with information in a way it wants it received. This is facilitated by its close association with the mass media which influences it. It encompasses a set of cultural norms and values which emanate from a set of common experience of people from the same cultural background.

It is obvious that modern communication and electronic media have transmitted mass culture to inert and vulnerable consumers whose inactivity consists in their inability to communicate with one another. In view of this grim reality, mass culture globalizes through advertisements, television, cinema, photographs. Stereotypes are handed down mechanically to a passive audience of different generations. Consider for example the image of a buxom black woman with big buttocks and thick lips. This connotes sensuality and sexual prowess. Black men are portrayed in most Western movies either as dumb servants or as hitmen. These are racist representations of black people based on ideologies of race which subordinate, repress and exclude.
In his analysis of some recent films, Bromley wonders what role cinematic narrative could play in “producing versions of the ‘global’, which are dialogical, unconditional, inherently ethical, resistant to appropriation and openly engaged with the distant and the different”. In his own review of components of critical cultural studies, Kellner notes that “it is important to stress the importance of analyzing cultural texts within their system of production and distribution often referred to as the political economy of culture”. People who have been “living in different worlds” should interact more with one another and eschew differences as a step to achieving universality. This is the objective of critical cultural studies which attacks sexism, racism, or bias against specific social groups (i.e. gays, intellectuals and so on) and criticizes texts that promote any kind of domination and oppression. In sum, cultural studies espouses multi-culturalist politics as well as “media pedagogy” that raises awareness of hegemony in cultural texts.

Critical cultural studies thus presupposes independent thinking in the intellectual. Edward Said contends that an intellectual is a “cultural interpreter,” a “political activist”. Citing C. Wright Mills, Said rephrases the independent thinker’s task thus:

The independent artist and intellectual are among the few remaining personalities equipped to resist the stereotyping and consequent death of genuinely living things. Fresh perception now involves the capacity to continually unmask and to smash the stereotypes of vision and intellect with which modern communication (i.e. modern systems of representations) swamp us. These worlds of mass-art and mass-thought are increasingly geared to the demands of politics. That is why it is in politics that intellectual solidarity and effort must be centred. If the thinker does not relate himself to the value of truth in political struggle, he cannot responsibly cope with the whole of life experience.

It is significant to note that Said’s intellectual can be located among the grass roots, in Gramsci’s sense. This intellectual is committed to the dissemination of ideas and knowledge. He should also be independent enough to engage in productive and holistic political struggles in the path of truth, justice and peace. For him truth is the potent tool that dissipates and dismantles prejudices, divisiveness, intolerance and inequality.

**Integrative Dialogue as Productive**

Dialogue is integrative when it is based on the interrelations of culture. By culture we mean the institutionalized pattern of beliefs, thoughts and behaviour of human beings handed down by tradition as an accepted way of life. Every social group is identified by its cultural norms, values and attitudes. Culture embraces
religion and social structure as well as the artistic manifestations or artifacts which are characteristic of a community. Deemed an antonym of nature in the binaries reviewed by most feminist philosophers, culture is the totality of a people’s experience in time and space. Today, with the spiraling of globalization trends which aim at homogeneity, culture appears to be losing its essence. Underlining inter-culturality, Demenchonok has astutely observed that:

Cultural processes are in crisis: the disappearance of many ethnic socio-cultural traditions and the so-called “homogenization” which replaces original cultures by commercialized pseudo-cultural surrogates has resulted in a cultural wasteland. Finally as if all this were not enough, there is evidence of the traumatic and degenerative impact on man himself, taking the form of an anthropological crisis. The environmental, socio-cultural and anthropological crises are symptoms of a contemporary civilization disease syndrome.\(^\text{12}\)

Intercultural dialogue recognizes difference, accommodates integration and promotes a new form of universality.

May it be reiterated that integrative dialogue which is inter cultural in some aspects presupposes the principle of multiculturalism which “affirms the worth of different types of culture and cultural groups, claiming for instance that black, Latino, Asian, Native American, gay and lesbian and other oppressed and marginal voices have their own validity and importance”.\(^\text{13}\) These are marginalized cultural groups that have not only been silenced but have also been excluded from the mainstream as “the other” in quest of an identity.

The subject of identity has also been the main concern of postcolonial intellectuals such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha. Nettled by sustained global economic asymmetry over the years and the category “third world”, Spivak deconstructively proffers the truth about gender, ethnicity and class. Spivak uses the term ‘subaltern’ adapted from Gramsci for the voiceless, colonized non-elite who cannot even be spoken for by the Western intellectual. This is indicative of exclusion in dialogue. Homi Bhabha’s main concern is with social marginality encoded in both canonical and non-canonical cultural forms. Heterogeneity and diversity are seen as distinct markers of cultures. The problematics of identity are linked with ethnicity and race.

Integrative Dialogue, inclusive in all aspects, incorporates ecofeminist discourse. Given the fact that women are usually associated with nature rather than culture and ecology encompasses animals, plants, people and their socio-cultural concerns in the environment, culture and nature are inextricably linked in this ideology. Ecofeminist theories have striven at deconstructing age-old patriarchal
thoughts including Aristotelian profound exclusive concerns with the phenomena of the world which did not include women and animals as moral beings. Biodiversity comprises the framework of the aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems and habitats which maintain essential living resources such as forests, wildlife, fisheries. A ‘seamless web’ between human, plant and animal life - the flora and fauna – is thus underset by the aliveness of these organisms.

Biodiversity, a facet of ecofeminism is therefore a negation of Cartesian anthropocentric postulate that only beings with souls should merit one’s critical attention. Rene Descartes propounded the non-status theory which subordinates creatures without souls. This has generated a lot of debates among modern philosophers and theorists who contend that this non-status theory is the matrix of environmental degradation. Deep ecology, an aspect of environmental theory has been criticized within the ecofeminist movement as being insensitive to human and animal pain in the ‘biotic community’ of nature. Indian ecofeminist, Vandana Shiva, observes of the third world environment, “the violence of nature, which seems intrinsic to the dominant development model, is also associated with violence to women who depend on nature for drawing sustenance for themselves, their families, their societies”. Given the unique socio-culturally prescribed role of the third world woman, any act of violence on nature erodes her spirit and vitality.

In the same vein, Nigerian writer, and environmentalist Ken Saro-Wiwa, infused with the ideology of ecofeminism and human rights, decried the subjugation of women as well as the degradation of the environment and the oppression of the impoverished Ogonis in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria by multi-national companies in the course of oil exploration and exploitation. Saro-Wiwa died for this cause and the politico-cultural debate continued after his death. Today, however, the debate has been overtaken by extreme violence in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) has openly confronted the Nigerian government on human rights abuses and environmental degeneration in the Niger Delta region. Other shady groups have committed crimes such as robbery, murder and kidnapping under the guise of the Niger Delta cause. The aftermath is a state of insecurity in the Niger Delta area.

The solution to this problem does not necessarily lie in coercive measures but integrative dialogue that should bridge ethnic, racial, tribal, religious, gender and class gaps. This should include the government, the repressed citizens, the militants and the multi-national companies including the Directors based in the Headquarters in Europe and the U.S.A. Such a dialogic encounter should consider socio/cultural differences and ideological leanings in the quest for peace.
Integrative dialogue should be intra and inter–visionary. Its inclusive and cohesive ideals should commence from the national level. When various nations are able to resolve their differences, it would be easier to imbibe the tenets of multiculturalism and interculturality. A ‘fresh perception’ of people, ‘different worlds’, environment, otherness, nature and the entire global culture will be duly realized.

CONCLUSION

Our discussion has shown that the world is in dire need of social and human change. The current global disquiet and violence are the corollary of socio/political repression, exclusion, economic asymmetry and injustice, intolerance, stereotypical convictions induced by a bigoted, capitalist mass culture, arrogance and selfishness of the ruling class, racism and chauvinism. These global vices have erected monstrous barricades, cavernous gullies, disruptive hiatus in dialogue and debilitating communication breakdown in a mass society. Clearly, a non-hegemonic and humanly globalized world is a function of non-exclusion and varied integration hinged on a new cultural universality and productive dialogue that will include the subaltern subject, nature and the entire environment.

The road to global peace and justice can be paved by the Saidian intellectual – the cultural interpreter, the political activist, the “traveller through place and time”. As he succinctly puts it:

The goal of speaking the truth is, in so administered a mass society as ours, mainly to project a better state of affairs and one that corresponds more closely to a set of moral principles – peace, reconciliation, abatement of suffering – applied to known facts.16

The time to regenerate the “failed global culture” is this opportune moment that CHANGE, emblemized in a Colossal Cultural Hybrid, has been institutionalized.

Notes

1. Lull (2003:61)
2. Osai (2004:18)
3. Opara (2004:vi)
5. Zacher (2002:64)
6. Hicks (2007:20)
7. My experience as a young undergraduate in France is worth mentioning here. I was standing on the platform at a railway station with a friend, a Nigerian too. We were waiting for our train. Suddenly, from a coach full of school boys were cries of “Sex, Sex, Sex”. Those boys, who I am sure, had never been to Africa and had, perhaps, never come in close contact with Africans, had seen in two black ladies at the station the purported symbol of sex handed down by mass culture via the mass media.

10. Ibid., 18
11. Cited in Oboe and Gultieri (2008:5)
12. Demenchonok (2005:3)
15. Cited in Donovan (2001:218)
16. See Oboe and Gualtieri (2008:6)

REFERENCES


