

# Selective Cultural Synthesis: A New Look at Globalization and African Cultural Identity

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## **Abstract**

*In Africa, the cultural structure of globalization presents specific problems which border on whether the process of globalization is beneficial or not. African scholars have responded to the challenges of globalization on culture in various ways. The responses are focused on cultural revival or cultural integration. The positions taken by scholars for and against the effects of the phenomenon of globalization on cultures and values are usually too extreme. In view of the overwhelming shortcomings of these extreme approaches to cultural globalization, the paper recommends the possibility of cultural syncretism as a viable option and attempts to synthesize these two positions from which African scholars have approached the effects of globalization on African culture and identity. This is done to chart a new course for Africa's participation in the globalization process. Africa needs to identify itself with an indigenous cultural philosophy and political ideology through which rapid development can be made.*

*Keywords: Africa, culture, globalization, identity*

## **Introduction**

Globalization is not a new concept in scientific and humanistic studies, but as familiar as it may be, it is not easy to be given a univocal definition. To some, it is civilizing. To some, it is destructive. Others see it as a path to perpetual servitude for the third world. In some quarters, it is believed to be an inevitable panacea to Africa's plight (Nabudere, 2000). Fundamentally, globalization is a concept that embeds many other concepts such as culture, politics and economy. Thus, understanding globalization involves understanding some of these key concepts and delving into literature to review scholars' ideas on the concepts. This paper is specifically aimed at reconsidering the phenomenon of globalization and the impacts it has on African cultural identity.

## **The Idea of Globalization**

Globalization is not an easy task to define. The term "globalization" is a popular concept. Yet at its very core, it is filled with both ambiguity and ambivalence so that neither its meaning nor its value is agreed upon. One of the reasons for this, as identified by Adejumobi (2003: 90), is that "globalization is still unfolding, it is a social relations that has shaken, and continues to shake our very foundations." This perhaps explains why Nabudere (2000:17) submits

that “the definitional field is nevertheless full of confusion. However, Giddens (1991:64) describes globalization as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which links distant and distinct localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice-versa. From the same perspective, Held (1999:84) points out that:

Although in its simplistic sense, globalization refers to the widening, deepening and speeding up of global interconnection . . . it can be located on a continuum with the local, national and regional. At one end of the continuum lies social and economic relations and networks which are organized on a local and/or national basis. . . . It can refer to those spatial temporal processes of change which underpin a transformation in the organization of human affairs by linking together. . . . A satisfactory definition of globalization must capture each of these elements: extensity, intensity, velocity and impact.

The concept of globalization contextually refers to the interactive activities of human beings within the globe or world-order. The concept arises from the dealings of people within the universe in which they live and interact. “It is a consequence of increased human mobility, it has greatly increased trade and capital flow” (Ezeani, 2005:71).

## **Culture**

Culture here is defined as “the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, habits and any capabilities acquired by man as a member of society” (Taylor, 1871). In the same vein, Linton (1945) affirms that culture is “social heredity, which is transmitted from one generation to another with the accumulation of individual experiences.” Similarly, culture can be seen as a way of life which is transmitted from one generation to another (Beattie, 1968). It is their underlying distinguishing factor from other people and their culture. Culture can also be viewed as an embodiment of the different ideas and artifacts developed or adopted by a group of people in order to cope with the basic challenges of life. This point is given a clear expression by Porter (1972:5), who asserts that:

Culture is the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, meanings, beliefs, values, religion, concept of self, the universe and self-universe relationship, hierarchy of status, roles, expectations, spatial relations and time concepts acquired by a large group of people in the course of generation through individual and group striving.

Thompson (1991:26), using the same perspective as Porter, notes that:

Culture is the distinctive ways of society at a given point in time. It embraces a particular people’s ways of thinking, feelings, believing and behaving and the systems of related technologies and material goods that allow members of a given society to adjust to the society’s physical and social environment.

## **Identity and Cultural Identity**

Philosophically, identity can be considered as sameness. It is whatever makes an entity definable and recognizable. We can say that it is all about whom a person is, the qualities of a person or group that make them different from others. In fact, members of any group, through language, dressing, religion, etc., have ways of identifying one another.

Cultural identity is the identity or feeling of belonging to (by self-conception and self-perception) nationality, religion, social class, generation or any kind of social group that has its own distinct cultures. Cultural identity is those attributes, behavioral patterns, lifestyles, social structures and norms that distinguish a people from other sets of people. Culture is something that we learn. Culture is dynamic and adapts to changing circumstances. Meanwhile, one of the aspects of culture is identity. This can also be used to determine our ways of life, the values, beliefs and attitudes that we use in everyday life. In essence, the culture of a people is their identity as it affords them due recognition.

## **Globalization and African Cultural Identity**

The impact of globalization on African cultural values is not just a matter of simple statistics and reports. It is indeed a diagnostic line of analysis to consider its pluses and minuses (Monsali, 2003:3). Globalization as an outstanding phenomenon consists of social, economic and political adjustments that people may embrace to epitomize their culture and incorporate it with the world. Implicit in the concept from the cultural perspective is the belief that the whole world is tending towards a homogenous culture. Hence, globalization helps to promote cultural integration of the world and calls for the removal of cultural barriers.

Though it cannot be challenged that globalization is a vital process towards transfer of knowledge and education around the world, a higher percentage of scholars still insists that it has negative effects on cultures and civilization. It is in the same vein that Henriot (1998:19) claims that “in Africa, this cultural structure of globalization presents specific problems.” One of such problems that globalization poses to African culture is rightly captured by Akande (2002: 25):

...African culture has been decimated more. More importantly, colonization paved the way for today's cultural globalization by leaving the colonized in a state of cultural disorientation and consequently vulnerable to continuing cultural invasion.

This disorientation manifests itself in one or two extreme forms. One is in the exaggerated attachment to an often reinvented past in the name of tradition and culture. The second concerns attempts at wholesale adoption of anything and everything foreign.

There are various reactions to the process and phenomenon of globaliza-

tion. These reactions can be generally grouped into two, cultural revival and cultural integration.

### **Cultural Revival**

Cultural revivalists are conservatives. In the words of Oduwole (2012:89), “the conservatives deny such a trend as globalization and they tend to defuse globalization by playing down the shift or even encourage a rollback of the process.” This group would want the process of globalization reversed. The position of the proponents of the cultural revival approach to globalization is that Africans should discover what they were previously and take steps to be such again. To further buttress this point, Ali (2004) maintains that “Africa needs to identify with an indigenous cultural philosophy, value and indigenous political ideology through which a radical development can be made in the twenty-first century world order.” They believe that the universalization or globalization of values and cultures stands to mutilate, adulterate and jettison the originality of particular intrinsic values, cultures and by extension, identity. They claim that this form of adulteration is evident in Africa, where vital indigenous cultural values that are necessary for Africa’s development have been sacrificed on the altar of neocolonialism.

Owing to the fact that the process of globalization disrupts traditional cultural identities, opponents of the movement have suggested that the task of Africans should be towards “the revival of Africa’s cultural heritage in its honest, authentic and functional spirit...” (Biko, 1978: 18). The position of the cultural revivalists is that the liberation of African culture has to be premised on its own indigenous cultural philosophy. Indeed, the modernization of Africa and African civilization has to be seen and approached from the hermeneutical perspective. This is to say “just as Western philosophy begot Western civilization and Chinese philosophy fostered the great Chinese culture, African philosophy should do the same for Africa” (Okeregbu, 2004: 25).

In essence, the contemporary African should seek meaning within the limits of African cultural affinities rather than in cultural universalism or globalization, which promotes nothing short of neo-colonialism and cultural dependence. Summer gives a clue to the step for achieving this cultural revival:

The right step is the way which our ancestors used and which has been handed down. The tradition is its own warrant. It is not held subject to verification by experience. The notion of right is in the folkways. It is not outside of them, of independent origin, and brought to test them. In the folkways, whatever is, is right. This is because they are traditional, and therefore contain in themselves the authority of the ancestral goals. When we come to the folkways we are at the end of our analysis. (Summer, 1906: 28)

In effect, the revivalists hold that for contemporary Africans to evolve a dy-

namic culture that is capable of putting the continent at the level of comparative cultural advantage, efforts should be made to address the crisis of relevance of social, cultural and political institutions and recognize the potentials in them in forging cultural standards that will match with contemporary realities. What this implies is that “contemporary Africa needs to revive its own culture with a view to promoting its own social value, scientific value, ideological value, moral value, practical value, aesthetical value . . . (Udeani, 2004: 16). These values, if they are to be made relevant to Africa’s cultural development in the contemporary world, have to stem from indigenous African institutions. In this regard, Africa needs to shun cultural imperialism or any attempt to impose on the continent what is called cultural globalization.

### **Cultural Integration**

The second category of African scholars charting ways in which the havoc wrecked on African cultural values can be reversed are the integrationists. The cultural integrationists are also referred to as “liberals.” The position of the cultural integrationists is obviously different from that of the cultural revivalists who suggest that contemporary Africa needs to revive her own culture with a view to promoting her own social values. Their main submission is that Africa can only experience little or no development (in all areas of existence) if Africa were to distance itself from the other parts of the globalized world. Hence, they “acknowledge the reality of globalization and celebrate the presumed dividend of globalization” (Oduwole, 2012). They confidently and dogmatically promote globalization as a means to universal prosperity, peace and freedom. The point is simple, and this concerns the view that Africans necessarily have to identify with the world community in the quest for development, as isolation is no longer practicable.

One major setback of globalization on African culture, as identified by Oyeshile (2002: 300) is that in the contemporary world, we have an African who has been alienated from his indigenous African culture and who has not grasped the alien culture which he tries to imitate. In spite of this fact, the cultural integrationists still maintain that the challenge of modernity, which is characterized by an innovative spirit, also makes it impossible for a culture to remain isolated from other developments in their cultures. To them, the pursuit of a rigid African identity becomes impossible and undesirable. Hence, the proposal of the cultural revivalists is “irrelevant to the pursuit of the task of improving the condition of the people in Africa” (Oladipo, 1995:33).

### **Imperatives of Selective Cultural Synthesis**

One evident feature of globalization is the tendency to bring about cultural homogeneity in communication, consumption patterns, technology and even pol-

icy framework. It subtly brings about the universalization of Western cultural preferences. “It implies greater connectedness and de-territorialization. Walters (1995) succinctly puts it in the following words:

Although globalization predates modernization, modernization in particular generates media that can permeate and dissolve boundaries between localities and political entities and thus allow cultural transmission to take place at an increasingly rapid rate. It has several effects, first, it allowed trade between localities to be transacted across a wide and generalized range of products. . . . The marketization of capital, localized kinship based concentrations of capital and allowed its accumulation on an ever-widening scale.

Walters tends to be saying that the dynamics of globalization enhance the transfer of artifacts, ideas, cultures and tendencies. Besides, higher cultures have the potency to drive out or kill lesser cultures, thereby paving the way for the predominance of a perceived higher culture. In his words, “the mass media knit the global culture together by means of content as well as by means of language. We now look at the world through global spectacles’ (Walters, 1995).

It is worthwhile to note that globalization is in general a differentiating as well as a homogenizing process. Indeed Arnason (1990) implies this when he notes that it pluralizes the world by recognizing the value of cultural niches and local abilities. It weakens the putative nexus between nations and states, reabsorbing ethnic minorities and allowing the reconstitution of nations across former states. It may sound paradoxical, but this author wants us to note two possibilities in globalization. The possibility towards cultural homogeneity and the tendency for multiculturalism. In the opinion of Itall (1992), this brings the center to the periphery. It introduces possibilities for new ethnic identities to culture on the periphery.

One point that must seriously be considered is that nations are being put in between these two tendencies of homogenization and cultural heterogeneity. Homogenous nation-states have, as a consequence, moved in the direction of multiculturalism through consumer culture and overwhelming effects of technological advancement. Technologies have increased the speed and have also broadened the distribution of cultural elements beyond communities and national frontiers. When not properly embraced, globalization has the tendency to endanger cultural identity.

Globalization, when critically embraced, can help in the marketing of culture. One of the greatest challenges Nigeria has to battle with is that it is the agglomeration of people with a diverse cultural life. The country is a heterogeneous society. Prior to globalism, the country now called Nigeria was inhabited by different peoples, empires and kingdoms with advanced traditions and cultures. The possibility of a global village powered by rapid technological initia-

tives will make it easy for these cultures to be marketed to other parts of the globe.

However, it is believed that the process has disastrous implications. It promotes Euro-American values and lifestyles and undermines other local cultures in a systematic and uncritical manner. The integrity and independence of local and national social organizations tend to be diminished by forces of globalization. A scholar like Albrow (1994) will not support this view. As he explains,

Globalization is a process that integrates the diversities of humankind. This process is based on and justified by the social and rational nature of human constitution. As social and rational beings, humans increasingly become aware of their interdependence. Globalization is the logical culmination of this increasing awareness.

Giknup et al (2015:15) buttress this point further:

It involves the deliberate dissolution of impediments to human interaction and the promotion of opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue. Such a process is regarded as anticipated by the very constitution of human beings. It is a means of realizing the vast potentials of human persons. As such, globalization is desirable. . . .

These writers consider globalization as an inevitable process characterized by intensification of sociocultural relations on a worldwide scale. This process is catalyzed by technological, economic and political trends operative in the contemporary world.

A good approach to globalization will be eclectic or synthetic. A pessimistic condemnation of globalization fails to appreciate the positive possibilities of the process. In the same vein, uncritical celebration of globalization fails to come to grips with the limitation and vulnerability inherent in the human conditions. In line with this, there is a need to decolonize, synthesize and localize globalization in Africa.

A good philosophy of globalization must tolerate cultural synthesis. Cultural synthesis is the capacity of cultures to qualitatively and quantitatively enrich one another. This is predicated on the assumption that individual cultures, though function in unique ways, are incomplete and must be complementary. In isolation, no culture can be perfect. The perfection of a culture calls for interaction with other cultures. Hence, "individual culture is viewed as generative elements that result in higher sociocultural synthesis. The diversity and differentiations of sociocultural life should serve for the realization of a higher and more comprehensive integration of humanity" (Stephen, 2015:3). It will imply a living unity of mutual appreciation and completion in the diversity and variety of ways of life (Beck, 2002:63).

Globalization is a current powered by different trends. Hence a selective epistemology is needed to address it. Halps (1995) identifies two responses to this globalizing trend—translation and trading. Translation is syncretistic re-

sponse in which groups that inhabit more than one culture seek to develop a new form of expression that is entirely separate from their origin. Tradition is ethnic fundamentalism. This is what Hall (1992) explains as an attempt to re-discover the untainted origin of an ethnic group in history. Globalization must be based on a well ordered philosophy. A well synthesized thought pattern. As Galloway (1956:7) said many years ago:

Not all philosophies are useful or worthwhile. Some have no roots in the life of the community. This is when philosophy becomes useless verbiage . . . merely to transport the current debates of European philosophers to a Nigerian setting would be just as useless and irrelevant an undertaking. On the other hand, merely to perpetuate traditional African thought forms into a situation where they are no longer relevant would be an equally lifeless and uncreative activity. All these are relevant but only insofar as they tend to assist us to formulate our own problems more clearly.

The core of Galloway's contention is that any discipline that will enhance development must not be too rigid, but pragmatically oriented. Reasoning with Galloway as stated above, one can quickly infer that transfer of ideas and technology is not bad if this will fundamentally address the problem faced by people in a given spatio-temporal locality. However, one can say that in most African countries, there is a very poor level of awareness in matters of differentiation with regard to the nature of those concepts that have to deal with foreign goods and services, with foreign technology and scientific achievements. The point is highlighted by Asouzu (2007:318) that:

At this level of articulation and experience, foreign things, technological and scientific, are almost always seen in very positive light. The most radical form of this phenomenon is the unconscious belief that even the most fundamental socioeconomic problems of African countries can be resolved through the means of foreign intervention in the form of technological transfer and adoption of foreign ideologies, systems and principles.

It is suicidal for a sick person, by way of analogy, to reject a therapy because it comes from an enemy. Hence, it will be totally wrong to totally reject foreign influence but when the relationship between foreign technology and indigenous technology is unidirectional, in favour of the foreign ones, we must be extra-careful. Such a relationship must be overhauled. There is a great need for reassessing the pattern of such relationship. Globalization paves way for easy acquisition of technology. Africans want to boast of what Europe has without delving into the creative intelligence behind such. If this trend is unchecked, it portends terrible danger to the development of the African continent. Explaining this further, Asouzu (2007) maintains that one of the worst forms of such dangers is alienation from reality which is one of the radical forms in which false consciousness finds expression.

It is on this note that Jayaweera (1986:33) affirms that "a need of technolo-



gy of sufficient potential to influence socioeconomic processes on a global scale cannot originate out of the blue.” Hence, “it is important to look not just at the technology but also at the political economy in which it is being developed to consider what type of organizations and corporations are associated with it” (Elliot, 1986:106).

The issue is that persistent borrowing of technologies cannot liberate Africa from the present morass of underdevelopment. On the strength of this, Oke (2003:120) advocates that:

an urgent need to blend native and foreign techniques. This, hopefully, would facilitate a scientific leap of a kind not seen now in either exclusively Western paradigm or the local African traditions.

In essence, a complementary blending of thought and practice is the most viable route to a satisfactory scientific and technological culture for Africa. In effect, to bail itself out of the present deplorable situation, there is a need to embark on conceptual decolonization lest the deluge of the homogenizing cultural wave of Europe and America sweep Africa away. This idea of conceptual decolonization is one of the core points of Kwasi Wiredu’s philosophy. Wiredu (1995:22) puts it thus:

By conceptual decolonization, I mean two complementary things. On the negative side, I mean avoiding or reversing through a critical conceptual self-awareness the unexamined assimilation in our thought, that is, the thought of contemporary African philosophers of the conceptual frameworks embedded in the foreign philosophical traditions that have had an impact on African life and thought. And on the positive side, I mean exploiting as much as is judicious the resources of our own indigenous conceptual schemes in our philosophical meditations on even the most technical problems of contemporary philosophy. . . .

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

There is no doubt that globalization poses a great challenge to African culture and identity. It is a positive force for development and at the same time a potential catalyst for cultural disintegration. Globalization will continue to reinforce the interdependencies among different countries, deepen partnership, but when it is one-directional, the receiving nations can be destabilized with a huge population of the people marginalized without proper policy. Globalization tends to make countries pursue common policies regardless of their level of development or location. This will permit free and indiscriminate operation of transnational corporations and reconstruct economic and political relations in line with a particular set of interests.

However, for Africa to harness the benefits of globalization without necessarily endangering the norms and ethos of African humanism, it is recommended that Africa needs to develop a policy for development which must be

formulated from within and connected to the global world according to experiences and terms dictated by African cultures. Similarly, Africa needs to develop a system of education which maximally uses the African indigenous languages. This will help in sustaining the languages, intellectualizing them and defending their beauty before the younger generations. Closely related to this is that in Africa, a virile culture of indigenous technology must be generated and well-funded to avoid the negative impacts of unguarded transfer of technology.

Finally, African culture and identity must be critically interpreted, using prevailing pragmatic thinking. If solution to a critical problem abounds outside the culture, it is not bad to embrace such, provided it will not further deepen the crisis faced by the continent.

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