Multiculturalism and the Challenges of Heterogeneity in Postcolonial Africa

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Abstract

Regardless of the beneficial elements that foreground a heterogeneous society that entails a diverse nature of people of plural cultures, this paper interrogates why it seemingly appears that the heterogeneity in postcolonial Africa is riddled with violent conflicts, incessant civil wars, insurgency, inter-ethnic or tribal conflicts as well as inter-religious crises. Rather than abating it, the diverse nature of cultural affiliations in Africa seems to be contributing to the deepening nature of the conflicts on the continent. Recognition of, respect for, and tolerance of cultural differences appear evasive within societies that are heterogeneous in culture and language. No doubt, the nature and significance of the diverse languages and culture in precolonial Africa, both in their structures and concepts, as symbols of communication and practice became eroded with the imposition of foreign languages, particularly French and English, beginning from colonial times. This linguistic dimension changed the nature of communication in postcolonial Africa with an enhanced linguistic crisis contributing to further violent conflicts within the heterogeneous African environment. While the damaging and denigrating effects of colonial influences on Africa are acknowledged, it is no longer a sufficient factor contributing to the menace of violent conflicts that continue to pelt Africa in postcolonial times. The challenges of diverse cultures and languages that have become definitive of heterogeneous African societies in postcolonial period are not farfetched from the same challenges that multicultural societies are faced. However, it thus appears that people of diverse cultural linings that are in multicultural societies, in other climes, live harmoniously among themselves. Although multiculturalism is not without its own theoretical challenges, the expectation in this paper is that given the socio-cultural, economic and political successes that many multicultural societies have recorded, such practical lessons can be distilled for heterogeneous postcolonial African societies. The objective is to attain a desired level of peaceful coexistence where cultural and language differences would be a strength rather than a menace.

Keywords: multiculturalism, colonialism, pluralism, postcolonial state

Introduction: The Nature of Heterogeneity in Postcolonial Africa

Large-scale violent conflicts resulting from inter-tribal and ethnic conflicts and religious wars can be said to characterize many developing countries in postcolonial Africa. Postcolonial Africa is largely pluralistic and heterogeneous, with many states comprising more than one ethnic nationality; each having its own culture, language, and way of life. The benefits that ordinarily should accrue from such plurality of cultures and differences in terms of peaceful co-exist-

ence among the people are being eroded due to intolerance, lack of mutual respect and non-recognition of the latent rights of others.

Some arguments have been advanced concerning how the antecedent of violent conflicts in plural-postcolonial Africa cannot be divorced from its root in slavery, slave trade, and colonialism. One angle to look at the issue is to examine the claim that the roots of these conflicts can be largely traced to the incursion of colonialism, which planted the seed of intolerance and violent conflicts in Africa during the colonial times (Afisi 2009: 61). The contending argument is that colonialism subsumed different cultural background, language, socio-political background and beliefs under the umbrella "Africa" without the interest of people, but for the sole interest and satisfaction of imperial European powers. Colonial society was an involuntary union "imposed by the colonial power and by the force of economic circumstances" (Furnivall 1948: 307). Examples of this are: the Akan speaking peoples who were split between Ghana and cote d' lvoire; the Ewe ethnic group which was also split between Ghana and Togo, and many Yoruba people that are found in the Benin Republic (Aremu, 2010: 552).

However, other perspectives have narrowed the incessant violent conflicts in postcolonial Africa as mainly the results of many factors, other than colonialism alone, ranging from poverty, political, social and economic inequalities between groups, economic stagnation, poor government services, bad leadership and governance, human rights violations, high unemployment and corruption (Annan 2014).

Colonialism and other factors aside, the uniquely sparse advantages of learning about different cultures and languages, and the capacity to become tolerant of the ways, mannerism and attitudes of people of other cultures, which are entailed in a heterogeneous society, are merits, among others, that ought to ensure peoples harmonious coexistence. In spite of these considerations, the tendency for majority groups within a heterogeneous society to discriminate or dominate minority groups in socioeconomic and political affairs, often breed conflicts among majority groups themselves, or between majority groups and minority groups. This peculiar demerit underlies the prevalent occurrences that have completely boggled the peace of postcolonial Africa. These incidences can reasonably explain why there have been numerous violent conflicts recorded in postcolonial Africa.

There have been violent conflicts in West Africa, particularly in Liberia's violent civil war which occurred in December 1989, Sierra Leone in 1991, Guinea-Bissau in 1998, and Cote d'Ivoire in 2002. There are emerging violent conflicts in many other Africa countries such as in Mali's ethnic war involving the surfacing of the National Movement for Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), Tuareg rebels and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (AQIM). There is the Niger Delta conflicts and its modus operandi of kidnapping of expatriates within the region.

There is also Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria, extending to Niger and Cameroon (Annan 2014). In spite of the differing stances on root of Africa's woes, proffering suitable solutions for end to violent conflicts in postcolonial Africa has remained a constant challenge. The efforts at instituting policies and frameworks by different governments and regional blocks have not yielded much peace and stability.

Various theoretical frameworks are available in consideration for reasons that people of heterogeneous societies ought to coexist in peace. Immanuel Kant's famous essay, 'Towards Perpetual Peace' advocates a cosmopolitan notion of peace which would avoid a perpetual state of war. Although Kant points out that perpetual peace may not be ultimately attainable, it is desirable to institute a "league of nations" which would be a rational adjudicator on conflicts arising between states. The "league of nations" is to operate in ensuring that the citizens are optimistic of the best possible attainment of peace. To Kant, the citizens should work towards perpetual peace (Kant 1983:126).

It is the same kind of spirit with which Kant's attempt at a cosmopolitan vision of perpetual peace that Emmanuel Levinas offers a peculiar notion of peace that embodies an ethical responsibility of an individual towards the other. His perception of peace relates to the act of responsibility every individual is required to perform to others. This act of responsibility requires an act of justice and peaceful coexistence to others. Levinas' advocacy for an act of peace by the individual towards the other leverages on the ontological or metaphysical claims about the social nature of the self and normative claims about the value of the community to the individual. In his book, *Humanism of the Others* Levinas discusses the importance of understanding one's humanity through the humanity of others (Levinas 2003: 218). It is this understanding of the essentials of being-with-others, to use Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* that represents the essence of communitarian existence of being in peaceful co-existence with others.

Kant's notion of peace carries a universalistic worldview, while Levinas' notion of peace relates to how peace is enshrined when it is transmitted from an individual to the others within the community. Both notions have implications for how peace can be attained in the incessant theatre of conflicts in postcolonial Africa. Both Kant and Levinas' concepts embody the general features of multiculturalism; where multiculturalism lays emphasis on the recognition of the importance of individual culture, and the understanding that the world is made up of people from different cultures and backgrounds who would have a common view of tolerance, respect and peaceful co-existence. These cultures entail the people's way of life which includes their mode of dressing, language, dance, food, music, art, greeting, and so on (Tiryakian 2003: 19). Where the heterogeneous nature of African societies has failed to attain the desired tolerance

and peaceful coexistence on the continent, many critical lessons from societies which are multicultural in nature can be distilled for proper attainment of peaceful coexistence in postcolonial Africa.

Strictly speaking, multiculturalism is centered on ideas about political accommodation of ethnic diversities. It is termed political because the responses to the various issues and the challenges faced in each society will depend entirely on the issues at stake in the countries involved. Although the socio-historical reality of multiculturalism in Western societies, such as the United States of America, Canada, Australian and New Zealand, came as a result of migration, many of these Western countries are devising new policies that are responsive to persistent cultural differences. These Governments are developing appropriate policies to be able to manage the nature of multiculturalism that their societies have become (Rex 1995: 52).

The situation in postcolonial Africa societies differ essentially from the West. Heterogeneity characterizes the nature of multiculturalism that exists in virtually all African societies. Evidently, most African states have had the inability to manage the politics and economy of this heterogeneity. Recognition of individual cultures, one's positioning in the sociopolitical context, and the value placed on equality, the trio which Raihanah M.M in his paper, "Multiculturalism and the Politics of Expression: An Appraisal,"states as the framework in which multiculturalism can be better understood, are lacking in the context of Africa. Aside from colonialism which has often been attributed as the root of Africa's underdevelopment, what has mostly contributed to the difficulty in attaining a stable political and economic structure in Africa is the negative consequences of ethnicity and religion. As a result, postcolonial Africa is experiencing an enormous incidences of inter-ethnic clashes, ethnic cleansing, insolence, religious and violent conflicts and genocide, all which have culminated in poverty, diseases, illiteracy, unemployment, bad leadership and above all underdevelopment.

Clearly in postcolonial Africa, the nature of heterogeneity is heightened by its inability to explore the benefits of plural ethnicity for peaceful co-existence and national developments. It is as a result of this concern that this paper distils the prospects of multiculturalism as a call for peaceful coexistence and tolerance in postcolonial Africa. In exploring these benefits, it is pertinent to critically highlight the three basic features of multiculturalism as contextualization for the desired harmonious accommodation of ethnic and cultural differences leading to peaceful co-existence in postcolonial Africa.

Multiculturalism Conceptualized

The term "multicultural" is an empirical demographic condition referring to a society (which may or may not be a nation-state but may also include an em-

pire) having two or more ethnic groups, each having cultural traits that may have some overlap with the other group(s), yet is distinctive enough to form a different cultural identity and community" (Tiryakian, 2003:23).

There are a number of issues that multiculturalism is aimed at addressing. These issues are targeted at ensuring that individual rights, the recognition and the labelling of equal rights to all cultures within a range of diverse cultures are respected. These issues include; acculturation and assimilation; identity politics; and group rights.

On acculturation and assimilation

These are two very important concepts that describe crosscultural effects on both minorities as well as majorities in societies that are multiethnic and multicultural in nature. The process of acculturation simply refers to the ability of a minority community within a multicultural society to retain its own culture but cannot remain isolated and so, is affected by the majority culture in such a way that it adapts to some aspects of the majority culture. This process of acculturation leads to the process of assimilation. By assimilation, people of a culture learn to adapt to the ways of the majority culture. However, there is a loss of one's own culture as a person gives more value to the cultural aspects of the majority community in the process of assimilation. One vivid example is the case in the United States where the only way you were able to melt into the pot is by assimilating—becoming similar—to the dominant or "hegemonic" white culture (Jay 2011: 3).

There is a downside to what these principles of acculturation and assimilation portend. They portend a violation of human rights, as well as non-recognition of the equal rights of all cultures. A number of critical multiculturalists such as Stephen Bigger have argued against acculturation and assimilation principles. In his review of *Changing Multiculturalism*, Bigger has argued that multiculturalism is an "emancipatory commitment to social justice and the egalitarian democracy that accompanies it" (Bigger 1998: 26). With this view, critical multiculturalism seeks to preserve distinctly different ethnic, racial, or cultural communities without melting them into a common culture. Critical multiculturalism is also called "cultural pluralism," as it envisions a society with many different cultures living equally and side-by-side (Jay 2011: 3).

On Identity Politics- Identity politics is an important element in multiculturalism which emphasizes a commitment to valuing disrespected identities and changing dominant patterns of representation and communication that marginalize certain groups (Young 1990; Taylor 1992; Gutmann 2003). It is a political position that focuses upon the interest and perspectives of groups that people identify with. Identity politics includes the ways in which people's pol-

itics may be shaped by aspects of their identity through loosely correlated social organizations.

The very core issue at the center of identity politics concerns the question of whether identity is political in nature. Gregory Jay avows that one problem with certain strands of multiculturalism is their reliance on "identity politics." To him, identity politics refers to the tendency to define one's political and social identity and interests purely in terms of some group category: race, ethnicity, class, gender, nationality and religion. The problems associated with acculturation and assimilation in the America's "common culture" led many people to identify with a particular group, rather than with the nation—a nation, after all, whose policies they believed had excluded or oppressed them. People increasingly called themselves by hybrid names: Native-Americans, African-Americans, Latino-Americans, Asian-Americans, Gay-Americans, etc., in an explosion of hyphenation (Jay 2011: 4).

On group rights

No doubt, the process of acculturation and assimilation where minority groups—immigrants as well as indigenous peoples—were typically expected to assimilate into majority cultures led to the principle of identity politics. So with identity politics different cultural societies began to identify themselves with social, economic and political interest groups. Different groups began to emerge and group rights enveloped cultural identity.

The historical exigency of explaining the emergence and evolution of multiculturalism, particularly as it occurred in most Western countries can be linked to globalization and postcolonialism (Jay 2011: 1). The socio-economic and political issues that began to arise in postcolonial societies brought about economic and political instability. Globalization provided the leverage where the once ruled colonies began to experience an influx of migrants into a previously homogeneous cities or regions of Europe and the Americas. These cities became the meeting grounds for different ethnic, racial, religious, and national groups, challenging the political and cultural system to accommodate this diversity (Jay 2011: 1). Particularly interesting is that the children of these new immigrants, like those before them, presented fresh questions to teachers who were unfamiliar with their languages, belief systems, customs, and ways of life. How these children were to be educated, and how the curriculum was to be reformed to meet their needs, became matters of continued debate (Jay 2011: 1).

Much of the concern of migrants in moving from their old, to living in their new places of settlement often center on two main issues: the ability of the migrants to adapt favorably to new cultures; and the possibility of finding an enabling environment where the cultures in which the migrants are accustomed over the years can be continued in practice. It is these kinds of challenges that

authorities of host societies have continued to face in terms of ensuring that rights of every individual to cultural identity is entrenched within a society that witnesses diversities in cultures. The primary objective of multiculturalism is to address this sort of challenges. Rightly, multiculturalism aims at "abandoning the myth of homogeneous and monocultural nation-states" and "recognizing rights to cultural maintenance and community formation," and linking these to social equality and protection from discrimination Stephen (Castles 2000: 5). Within this perspective, multiculturalism can be viewed as representing a kind of corrective to assimilationist approaches and policies surrounding the national incorporation of immigrants (Vertovec 2001:3).

What is noteworthy is that multiculturalism does not only call attention to equality of cultures, but it also calls for equal representation and treatment of each culture as unique in itself. This is the basis why multiculturalism invokes terms such as "assimilation," "integration" and "tolerance." It is therefore pertinent at this juncture to consider the seeming survival of multiculturalism in Europe, Canada and America, as a mechanism for the management of identity-related conflicts in plural, postcolonial states of Africa. Our contention is that the relatively successful mechanisms of multiculturalism can be used to synthetically manage, at least to some extent, the troubled relics of violent conflict engagements of postcolonial Africa.

Prospects and Challenges of Multiculturalism for Postcolonial Africa

What the term multiculturalism embeds focuses on a wide range of policies that strengthen a harmonious existence of various cultures in a society. Its objectives are the advocacy of equal respect to all these cultures, the maintenance of cultural diversity, and an establishment of one's cultural identity in a range of diverse cultures within a given society. Ultimately, multiculturalism is a political philosophical ideology which emphasizes on the moral and political obligation of how government should respond to cultural diversity.

At the core of its objectives, multiculturalism brings to fore strategies and policies that can be adopted to govern and manage the problems of diversity and multiplicity which multicultural societies throw up (Hall, 2000: 209). With this, multiculturalism holds "the general notion that group differences should be the basis for mutual respect and that these differences should be valued" (Purdie-Vaughns & Walton 2011:159).

One problem with postcolonial Africa is the failure to recognize that minority cultures have equal values and respects in comparable with other major ones. In other words, the minority voices are often subsumed under the majority voices. This call and agitation for equal representation, equal treatment, and equal social and political recognition often lead to inter-ethnic violent conflicts. The non-recognition of minority cultures "implies exclusion and

marginalization from "full participation" in the community; thus recognition struggles are struggles for participation and influence over the boundaries and meaning of citizenship" (Hobson & Lister 2002: 40). However, Africa heterogeneity can learn from multiculturalism, which advocates for the inclusion and recognition of diverse cultures in the society.

No doubt, some African societies, such as South Africa, have appropriated the tenets of multiculturalism as a veritable tool of dealing with ethnic, religious and political conflicts, particularly in postapartheid era. Yoichi Mine's (n.d) paper, "Multiculturalism in South Africa: The 1994 Regime Revisited," acknowledged the fact that ethnic and racial segregation has drastically reduced in South Africa since the inoculation of multiculturalism into the 1994 constitution. This is because the 1994 constitution recognizes, "first, a compulsory coalition of major political parties, second, proportional representation, and thirdly, devaluation of executive power to the newly established nine provinces" (Mine n.d:17). These three principles of multiculturalism in the constitution gave room for the recognition of both minority cultures and ethnic minorities in political affairs of the country. There exist no more segregation between black, and white in South Africa (Mine, n.d.: 19). With this, the gap of political inequalities between urban and rural South Africans are breached through consensus among all segments of the population.

In spite of the above stated prospects, opinions differ regarding the challenges that multiculturalism still pose to that society. Berker & Leilde have argued that while multiculturalism posited culture inclusion in South Africa, it has explicitly embodied class inequality. To them,

> the nature of elite accommodation in the society appears to exclude the underclass who, in reaction, are developing strategies of survival beyond civil society, strategies based upon sources of local sociality as well as upon antisocial behavior (Berker & Leilde, 2003:33).

In this light, they call for a multiculturalism policy that will "embrace underclass institutions by offering them both material havens of survival and cultural badges of honour within, rather than without, emergent civil society" (Berker & Leilde 2003:33).

Other aspects of prospective national development in postcolonial Africa for which multiculturalism can be extended is Africa's educational system. Using Namibian educational system as a paradigm, Andree-Jeanne Tötemeyer (1995), advocates for a multicultural education in Africa. He mourns the decadence of Namibian languages in institutions of learning. To enhance good academic performance among Namibian students, he claims that there is a need for a "good policy towards multi-lingual education, the development of and publishing in multiple languages and the promotion of libraries and a reading culture . . ." (Tötemeyer 1995:15).

The case is strong for a multilingual educational development in Africa which would enhance the study of various fields of human endeavours through indigenous languages of particular cultures. Teaching and learning resources in mathematics, biology, and other sciences would be better understood and effectively assimilated when they are taught and learnt in indigenous languages. Multicultural education would be a" unifying force" in postcolonial multicultural Africa (Takalani 2015). Multicultural education recognizes cultural pluralism by making individuals respect and recognize differences in culture, language and lifestyle. Multicultural education provides a framework for addressing social, economic, political and educational inequalities. It reduces the pain and discrimination that members of some ethnic and racial groups experience because of their unique racial, physical, and cultural characteristics (Mashau, Kone & Mutshaeni 2015:244).

On the above showing, one attendant prospect of multiculturalism for postcolonial Africa is its capacity to diminish tensions that arise from ethnic, religious and political crisis in Africa. Multiculturalism has the potential to render equal voice to both minority and majority cultures and ethnicity. While recognizing the latent voices of every culture multiculturalism in Africa would unify Africa within political and public sphere, and through a cultural education that respects the values embedded in all cultures.

In all of these, certain challenges that multiculturalism may be incapable of addressing relate to the issue of crisis of identity in its diverse cultural manifestations. It remains to be seen how the features of multiculturalism in terms of recognition, respect and toleration continue to foster peaceful coexistence in the face of continuous perceived injustices and structural inequalities within political sphere.

One problem that has been noted about multiculturalism is its over-emphasis on cultural uniqueness, recognition and integration, which seems to have clouded it from seeing the separatism that permeates political and economic inequalities in Africa. It appears that for as long as certain ethnic groups remain among poor, ill-educated, unskilled; and marginalized, where the possibilities of cultivating respect for other cultural identity, even the possibilities of self-respect, are greatly undermined, it might be a recipe for crisis (Raz 1994:78). Where there are reasons for a group to see itself as being victimized and disempowered, proportionate to the accruing advantages to other groups, peace and stability will remain under serious threat.

Conclusion

In a heterogeneous society, value compatibility is a serious issue in the discourse on tolerance. This is because the idea of toleration suggests an acceptance of all values that are not mutually exclusive. Recorded experiences have

however revealed that heterogeneity, especially as it is in Africa, has been incapable of inculcating a value of toleration. This failure to tolerate the differences in other people's culture and points of view has repeatedly threatened peaceful coexistence. There are evident irreconcilable values in the public sphere of engagements within a heterogeneous society. It is therefore with the perceived limitations of heterogeneity that this paper supports the position that the enduring strengths of multiculturalism are aptly embraced in order to considerably minimize the menace of violent conflicts in postcolonial Africa.

One element in multiculturalism is that cultural recognition through mutual respect is key to unity in every society. So for postcolonial Africa, mutual respect would likely lead to several stable cultural communities where peaceful coexistence among the people is attainable. The adoption of the principles of multiculturalism in postcolonial Africa would breed a general climate of trust among cultural groups which would have a welcoming cultural, socioeconomic and political outcomes for the benefit of the continent.

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