

Cultural diversity and globalisation: An intercultural hermeneutical (African) perspective

Chibueze C. Udeani

In today's global age, one of the central challenges facing Africa is that of coming to terms positively with its cultural diversity. Furthermore, Africa is confronted with the challenge of global cultural diversity that has been characteristic of our global age. One of the questions raised here is how the intrinsic African cultural diversity can be made comprehensible, not only to non-Africans, but also to Africans themselves. Talking of understanding makes the issue a hermeneutical one. Hence the following questions: How can this hermeneutical challenge be mastered? What tools are required in order to accomplish this mission? Any efforts towards accomplishing this task will have to take many dimensions into consideration. These include, among other things, the historical, regional, political, economic, and so on. Such efforts would imply, not only that Africa would be occupied with itself culturally, but also that it needs to become relevantly conscious of the implications of these cultural dynamisms, understand it with reference to itself and the rest of the global community and, finally, interpret this phenomenon from an African perspective. These are the issues being addressed in this chapter.

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Author's details

Dr Chibueze C. Udeani

Centre for Intercultural Theology and Study of Religions, Faculty of Theology, University of Salzburg, Austria

☎ +43 (0) 662 8044 2758

✉ chibueze.udeani@sbg.ac.at

🌐 <http://www.uni-salzburg.at/syt/chibueze.udeani>

Introduction

One of the central aspects of globalisation today is the issue of cultural diversity. More than ever before, the different cultures of the world are culturally drawn together closely on different levels. This proximity makes the issue, as well as the challenges and, in lesser cases, the chances of cultural diversity within the process of globalisation more conscious. This awareness of cultural diversity has led to diverse opinions and reactions within the global community. Scholars differ on the prospects and implications of this development.

Globalisation, Africa and cultural diversity

The issue of globalisation is certainly an issue of development, both politically, technologically, economically, culturally, and so on. There is a link between culture and development; this is especially so when development is viewed more broadly. This link could be seen from the point of view that culture can serve as an ultimate catalyst for, or even a hindrance to, development. Considering the position of Africa within the process of globalisation today, this would entail examining the relationship between culture, in terms of cultural diversity, and globalisation from an African perspective. For Africans, globalisation in its present form implies an ever-increasing process of marginalisation.

A closer look at Africa from the perspective of cultural diversity reveals that there is an inherent and intrinsic relationship between Africa and cultural diversity, which could be likened to the identity relationship between a snake and a lengthy body. Cultural diversity is a central part of the African collective identity. This central aspect of the African identity has not always proven to be a blessing for Africa in dealing with itself and also in its history, especially in its encounters with the rest of the world. This is due to, among other things, the fact that the intrinsic African cultural diversity is predominantly an ethnicised cultural diversity. This implies that the respective African cultures are specifically bounded and integrated mostly within particular groups. These define different parts of the continent in contradistinction to one another, emphasising more of the differences and local

contextualities at the expense of the collective African perspective. As Bell (2002:ix) states:

... [the African] regional cultures were broken up and destroyed (or at least radically altered) primarily by the European and Islamic incursions going back some 500 years. The slave trade, introduction of new diseases, forced colonization, foreign language and religious impositions, and alien administration threw most of the continent into social, religious, political, and cultural confusion. Some of these regional cultures once had great civilizations and kingdoms, but a minimum of texts survived to record their ideas and achievements. What remains of them are fragmentary pictures: icons from ritual life, histories of smaller communities passed on orally [...] A true recovery, however, of these regional cultures [...] of a pre-colonial Africa, is extremely problematic – and this is made even more problematic by the nature of developments in the postcolonial experience.

In the present global age, as Van Binsbergen (2004:118) describes it:

... local contexts in the world are more and more dissolving into a worldwide network of interaction under the influence of technological innovations that have reduced to virtually zero the costs (in terms of time and money) of communication and information. Globalization was, in the first instance, observed with regard to transnational movements of capital along electronic media, but in the meantime turns out to have important cultural dimensions.

Globalisation, in its present form and stage, strongly promotes a “meta-local world culture, without local specificity and local validity [...] and hence devastating for any localizing cultural identity like the African one” (Van Binsbergen, 2004:123). This makes it all the more necessary to pose the question of cultural diversity and globalisation from an African perspective.

Cultural diversity here has to be seen from two sides: the diversity intrinsic within the African cultural landscape, and the diversity of cultures with which Africans are now being more intensively confronted within the process of globalisation. Globalisation, as stated above, is not simply an economic phenomenon, but also “a new stage in the evolution of humankind and hence of creation as a whole. As it constitutes a

new way of being in terms of the whole and hence relationally, the issue becomes that of living with all the peoples and cultures of the world" (McLean, 2003:2).

In Africa, globalisation in particular, through its trespassing on cultures, undermines acculturation and human relations and creates a conflicting situation (Dalflovo, 2001:267). This is a hermeneutical challenge for Africa. Africa is called upon to address, understand and interpret both its own and the global predicaments and cultural diversity for itself within the context of the present global age. Dalflovo (2001:268) points out:

Such contextualisation (like the issue of conflicts in Africa) implies, among the rest, that [...] Africans themselves provide the definitions of the criteria necessary to deal with conflict, together with the supporting structures needed to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts in Africa.

For Africans, this hermeneutical task entails understanding and interpreting the two forms of cultural diversity within the frame of globalisation, the global age and "village" in terms of their own possibilities.

On intercultural hermeneutics

Hermeneutics developed as an effort to describe more subtle and comprehensive patterns of comprehension, more specifically the "historical" and "humanistic" modes of understanding. As the study of interpretation and understanding of texts, it "involves two different and interacting focuses of attention: the event of understanding a text, and the more encompassing question of what understanding and interpretation as such are" (Palmer, 1969:8).

Though hermeneutics is not a household word – be it in philosophy or literary criticism, not to mention common areas of human activities – most of the human daily actions could be termed hermeneutical. Most of these are efforts towards, or processes of, interpretation and understanding. One needs to consider the ubiquity of interpretation and the generality of the usage of the term "interpretation". In fact, from the time we wake up in the morning until we fall asleep, we are "interpreting". On waking we glance at the bedside clock and interpret its meaning. We

recall what day it is and in grasping the meaning of the day we are already primordially recalling ourselves in the way we are placed in the world and our plans for the future. We rise and must interpret the words and gestures of those we meet on the daily round. Interpretation is, then, perhaps the most basic act of human thinking; indeed, existing itself may be said to be a process of interpretation (Palmer, 1969:8ff).

In our present global world, existence in itself could be understood as a constant process of interpretation. "The science of hermeneutics as an act of interpretation and understanding undergoes a fundamental change in today's global context [...] and it experiences an unprecedented widening of its horizons" (Mall, 2000:15). The issue might then boil down to the question of what kind of interpretation one needs today to grasp the dynamics of globalisation, especially with regard to African cultural diversity.

The foregoing indicates that we need a new form of approach when it comes to understanding within the context of African cultural diversity today. The kind of hermeneutics needed here is the intercultural form. This is because, among other things, what is involved here entails a laying open of a culture or cultures, a laying out that implies "reasonable explanation" and translation not only within a single culture, but also from one cultural world into the other (Palmer, 1988:13). As Bell (2002:1) puts it:

Thus in approaching Africa [...] we must work hard to determine what is significant from the point of view of its people. Understanding anything is always tied to its surroundings, which include language, customs, geography, iconic traditions, and especially the ordinary practices of its people.

The above also applies when one tries to understand one's own culture and the other's culture. For Africa, this would imply that it involves the process of bringing African cultures, and equally non-African cultures, to the understanding of Africans and non-Africans in such a way that they would be in a position to serve as catalysts for Africans within the process of globalisation. What applies to the understanding between Africans and non-Africans applies equally to Africans among themselves and between the different local African cultures.

The hermeneutics entailed here involve a type of

mediation and “message-bringing” process for Africans for themselves; from African cultures, through Africans, to themselves and to non-Africans on the one hand, and on the other hand, letting other non-African cultures address the African cultural worlds, especially within the context of globalisation. There is a need for “laying open” African cultures to Africans themselves and non-Africans. This will imply a discursive process in understanding. Africa here has to assert itself and its cultures. This leads to a “laying out”; that is, explaining it to both parties involved. Three dimensions are implied, as set out below.

Firstly, the culture in question, be it African or non-African, has to express itself. This is a stage where it will be left for this particular culture in its peculiarities to express itself as such. This is not an issue of instrumentalising the cultures, be it by its members or external agents, to achieve any other purpose. The central purpose must be that of making this particular culture to be appropriately understood. Hence, an honest effort towards objective self-expression of the culture in question is presupposed.

Subsequent to this is the phase of explanation. Explanation emphasises the discursive aspect of understanding a culture. It makes the explanatory rather than the expressive dimensions in a cultural encounter the main focus. The primary goal here is to explain a culture, rationalise on it and make it clear both to its members and non-members. Here, that which is brought to expression in the first phase, in our case a particular African culture for instance, will have to be made intelligible, not only to the culturally other or cultural outsider, but also to the members of the particular African culture in question. This includes an introduction into, and invitation to participate in, the intrinsic logic, values, judgments, conclusions, etc. of the particular culture in question.

This is followed by the phase of translation. Among other things, translation brings the particular African culture into a kind of clash with itself through its members and also with the cultural world of the non-members. The already expressed and explained particular African culture gets translated into the cultural framework of the real (spatial and temporal) contextuality of its members and non-members. This gives room, among other things, for critical

self-reflection and dialogue, and what would be an understanding of the culture in question.

Cultural diversity in the context of globalisation from an intercultural hermeneutical (African) perspective would, in the long run, mean a laying bare of African and non-African cultures; a laying out that implies an explanation, not only to outsiders, but also to ourselves; coupled with a translation from the African cultural into the non-African world and vice versa. This will go a long way in reversing the negative dynamics of the intrinsic African cultural diversity and make the diverse African cultures serve as an ultimate catalyst for the development of Africa in our global age.

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