

Impact of Globalization on Traditional African Religion and Cultural Conflict

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to discuss the impact of the paradigm of global culture on African tradition particularly on the role of African traditional women in conflict prevention and resolution. Global culture, a part of globalization, has not only transported the good side of the economic and social development across the globe but has also changed in the culture of host communities. Some changes include the mode of production and the way things are done, while others include the symbolic interaction or the appreciation of how social facts are to be seen and appreciated. For example, the change from collectivism social structure that characterizes African society to individualism structure that characterizes the market-oriented culture of western society. This change is without doubt that “Globalization is one of the most important and developed theories of the twentieth century” (Ritzer, 2008: 230). However, one aspect that justifies the importance of this development is the culture (termed civilization in other areas) that the application of this concept transports from one location to another. This cultural aspect may be economic, marketing oriented, or just a change in rationale behavior of consumption and production. Nevertheless, this change questions the static existence of rapport, the role that traditional culture plays in the life of African communities, and the impact traditional religions still have on the essence of African culture. These questions are raised as we discuss globalization as an economic culture and a source of conflict due to the imperative change in methods of production and consumption. This paper will also discuss the negative

impact of the incoming culture of globalization on traditional religion as well as the traditional role of women in African culture.

2. What is Globalization?

Globalization, “an economic culture?”

Globalization is defined as an “increasing integration of the world’s economies, including the movement toward trade” (Mankiw, 2007: 192). In this definition, the concept “trade” is a comparison of domestic price without trade to world price. This concept recalls the theory of comparative advantage of David Ricardo¹. Based on his theory, the principle of comparative advantage shows that trade can make everyone better off by reducing the opportunity cost of producing a specific good². For most of social theorists, “Globalization is the spread of worldwide practices, relations, consciousness, and organization of social life... that transforms people around the world with some transformation being dramatic” (Ritzer, 2008: 573). This is a cultural transformation that also affects cultural identity of people that are being transformed.

The increase of the cultural value consciousness was also analyzed by Fuller (1995) as a source of the dynamic of culture conflict. Fuller (1995: 152) concluded that:

Systems of international marketing and communications create freeways for the mass import of foreign cultural materials--food, drugs, clothing, music, films, books, and television programs, even values--with the concomitant loss of control over societies, symbols and myths. Such cultural anxieties are welcome fuel to more radical political groups that call for cultural authenticity, preservation of

¹ David Ricardo (1772-1823), a British economist follower of Adam Smith (the father of modern economic theory). He developed the theory of comparative advantage, in attempt to put on a sound theoretical basis the study of international commerce, and, in particular, to demonstrate the advantage of international trade between countries. This theory will become the fundamental justification of the essence of free trade and globalization on one hand with its cultural domination on the other hand.

² For further interest in the theory of comparative advantage, read Maneschi, A. (1998). *Comparative Advantage in International Trade: A Historical Perspective*, Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgar.

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traditional and religious values, and rejection of the alien cultural antigens. Big Macs become in-your-face symbols of American power--political, economic, and military--over weak or hesitant societies and states.

The idea of global culture would not be evenly applied in all African countries where the concepts of State and Nation mean different realities. In most of African countries and even in some western countries like Belgium, the concept of nation translates ethnic group. Each ethnic group has its own cultural specificity that defines the membership to that community.

Globalization, “a socio-economic necessity?”

Theories of globalization can be “categorized under three main headings: economic, political, and cultural theories” (Ritzer, 2008: 230). Although in this discussion I am more interested in the cultural impact of globalization on social values of local societies, let me reiterate that at the first glance, globalization is mainly viewed as the “increasing integration of the world’s economies, including the movement toward free trade” (Mankiw, 2007: 193). In the light of the theory of exchanges, free trade has its own intentional advantage: the comparative advantage described by David Ricardo (cited by Mankiw, 2007: 55). “The conclusions of Adam Smith and David Ricardo on gains from trade have held up well over time. Even though economists often disagree on question of trade policy; they are, however, united in support of free trade” (Mankiw, 2007: 35). In my opinion, this policy related to organization of free trade alienates cultures and creates conflicts. Conflicts that surface because of the fact that “globalization as an expansion of linkages around the world tends to break down national borders (remove the boundaries of relative cultural considerations) and bring people (with different cultural values) into closer contact with other people, product and information” (Hird et al, 2007: 87, emphasize was made). This closeness creates an object of conflict. For example, conflict in socialization systems and the difference in symbolic interaction between these different people, conflict

in appreciation of relative value or imposition and practice of a global culture.

In his essay on “*The World Revolution of Westernization*”, Theodore H. Von Laue (1987, cited by Davidheiser, lecture notes, fall 2009, week 5) makes similar argument in relation with the adverse effects of westernization of global culture when he argues that:

The world revolution of westernization has covered the world and all its diversity with a thick layer of separate but interrelated uniformities. The first and outermost layer is the hardest, concerned with power and statehood. It stems from the universal urge of individual and collective life to prevail through the arts of peace or war, to impose change on others rather than be changed by them. In the absence of a universal culture, conflict is bound to be the form of violence as the ultimate of communication (pp. 334, 335, cited by Davidheiser, lecture notes, fall 2009, week 5).

This consideration led Davidheiser to infer: “While the state power became the dominant feature in global system during the 20th century, so was also the wide spread conflict within the modern state system” (Davidheiser, lecture note week 5, fall 2009).

Globalization is an intensification of global social relations that links distant markets or location. Robertson (1992: 8) refers to globalization as both “the compression of the world and intensification of consciousness of the world as whole”. Although globalization is “a quantitative shift toward a global economic system that is based on a consolidated global marketplace for production and consumption” (Holm and Sorensen, 1995: 5), its application creates more gaps between cheaper-labor countries and capital oriented countries. Labor-economy oriented countries are rewarded base on low costs in production effort and high costs in buying this same product. In different situations, it is believed that it is not lower wages paid to export workers’ work that make labor-oriented economies poor; rather, it is the market requirements of globalization that drive these countries into poverty so that any work conditions is much better than the alternative.

3. Globalization and Conflict Creation

Robinson (cited by Ritzer, 2008: 573) argues that globalization “emerged as a result of a series of developments internal to social theory, notably the reaction against earlier perspectives such as modernization theory”. Ritzer (2008: 231) emphasizes, “Although economic and political issues are of great importance, it is cultural issues and cultural theories that attract the most attention in sociology”. The change in the mode or system of production creates conflict in most of labor oriented African society. In these societies, the introduction of heavy technology for mass production increases unemployment. This increase in unemployment has many social crises, which are the basis for social conflict.

The above discussion is suggestive of a positive correlation that exists between globalization and conflicts. These conflicts can be identity conflict, cultural conflict or economic conflict.

While an economic conflict may be clearly identifiable and easily resolved, a perception of cultural deprivation or identity domination may create more profound problems that are not easy to resolve. Lerche (1998) suggests that if the human needs and rights issues involved are not adequately addressed, the increase and intensity of social conflict associated with globalization are likely to increase in the future. In this landscape and under the conditions of a subject-oriented Western civilization, the negative perception of socioeconomic globalization is seen in African culture as the latest and most intense consequence of man’s collective “drive for power” because of negative social outcome and frustration caused by globalization on cultural beliefs of local society. As an ideological tool, globalization is considered to be “rather crude tool in the hands of the power centers of the industrialized world to gradually impose (under the disguise of economic liberalism) global hegemony and a neocolonial order upon the rest of the world” (Köchler, 1986). This is the consideration that most of African nations have when it becomes to globalization. Therefore, instead of welcoming what may be the positive side of the practice of globalization, the social result and economic disasters that globalization

creates, makes African nations questions the goodwill of its practitioners.

4. Globalization on African Religion and the Role of Woman in Conflict Resolution

4.1 Religion and Cultural Structure of Traditional African Society

In recent reflection about the role of women in African traditional religion, the core discussion was the conversion of African women's role from their traditional management and policy maker task to housekeeping role as it was translated in intrinsic value of modernism. This change was posed as a conflict between implementation of the new civilization with its religious practice and retention of African tradition practices and religious values.

When Karl Marx (cited by Ritzer, 2008: 70) theorized religion as an ideology by referring to it as "the opiate of the people", in my view, he was also referring to the unrevealed side of the rationale of civilization (through the imported and imposed western religious practice) or modernity. Modernity/civilization in which people's actions are directed by the motivation of their selfish-satisfaction of their egotistical needs. For Marx: "religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless condition" (cited by Ritzer, op cit). Thus, in his theory of class and by focusing on the "forces of production, Marx was able to predict historical trends that allowed him to identify where political action could be effective" (Ritzer, 2008: 73). This conception is also found in the principle of economics that says: rational people think at the margin. Means "people do systematically and purposefully their best to achieve their objectives" (Mankiw, 2007: 6). This also means that people would take a specific action only if the outcome of this action is of interest to them. One could infer that when exported to African countries, the hidden side of modernism was materialist interests and not only human or social development. Civilization was just another concept of domination; imposition of incoming new culture over traditional culture values. In the society studied by Marx, religion was used as an ideology of domination. Also, in the same framework,

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Ritzer (2008: 78) indicates that “Durkheim studies were driven by his concern about the moral health of modern society”. However, in African tradition, religion was used as a vehicle of moral and spiritual values. From earlier age, children learn moral and other societal values by the way of traditional religion and other socialization paradigm. Myths and rituals were used in teaching children what gods accept or forbid. (The word “gods” is used here as a concept, a social force/tool for socialization; an abstract presence of an invisible most powerful master who looks over everything. Because these “gods” represent the will of the society, they are not to be used by individuals for materialistic purpose). Society knows that these gods are able to positively or negatively punish and answer prayers. For example, while modern laws determine who is right or wrong in a dispute within a social group, the gods’ law is an individualized law. Since it is between an individual and a specific god, there is no conflict between group members based on what they had done wrong.

The theory of socialization and social interaction teach that humans are transformed in their social group through a process of acquiring culture and other gestures from parents and other social group members and social facts that happen in the environment in which the person lives (Ritzer, 2008). In African tradition, collective socialization is important in the process of personality formation. In fact, while much of our personality is the direct result of our interaction with our parents (enculturation), the group socialization process (rituals and traditional religion in this case) can shape it in particular directions by enforcing specific beliefs and attitudes as well as selectively providing experiences. That (is) how African traditional society was organized in developing the collective consciousness of the society. This was the traditional African education system that needs to be incorporated in new education system if the latter is to succeed.

In fact, when a formal education system incorporates local cultural values, it creates a successful socialization that results in uniformity within a society. Group members will develop same social consciousness and adopt an acceptable uniform social behavior. However, when an incoming culture (in this case civilization/modernism) seeks

to totally replace the existing cultural value, it causes social frustration and generates maladjustment of group members to this new system which leads to the “demise” of the traditional society. New behaviors that meet the new cultural values are persuasively created as they collision with the existing values. Like volcano, this confrontational situation steers and spirals social conflicts. If the African’s system of modernity does not include its traditional system of socialization, civilization as we know will always be a failure.

4.2 Women in Traditional African Culture

“Tradition” to a concept that is used (in this context and environment) in comparison to the concept “civilization” which is in turn related to the presence/arrival of Western population in local African societies, “Traditional or traditionalism” would then take a negative connotation as it is opposed to modern or modernism. This self-evaluation of the west surfaced many frustrations in African societies. These frustrations may be from the economic; political; religious and even social standpoint. For example, Williams Ene (2008), “The colonialists came with the belief that women were to remain creatures of the private domain. Women were to preoccupy themselves with domestic issues and leave the ‘real work’ of ruling and running the nation in terms of politics and economics in particular to the men. The role and position of the pre-colonial African women did not conform to this concept of women. Hence, the implementation of policies seated in this myopic perception of women led to the erosion of women’s position in society”. This was the socialization that African society had to adopt.

However, while in the West, the presence of women in the group of work force is most of the time related to the Industrial Revolution and the War World I epoch. In this era, women in most of African societies (Ghana, Rwanda, Egypt, and others), were in position of Queen Mother, giving women a visible political authority. Women were Queens even when they were married to African Kings; they had a major role in royal decision and public policy. African traditional story indicates that colonists separated men from women in this way, so that men would be positioned to (the) type of work

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that women were not selected to do. Their “house-hold” role made them closer to the “master” in implementation of the African proverb that says: “educating a woman is educating the whole society”. Women were to translate into their society the new culture of civilization that they were supposed to be learning by working in the “master’s house”.

The traditional African women would then add to their traditional role of socialization and education and circulate the new culture through the format of storytelling.

In the traditional African society, the absence of Western-type of library justified the development of storytelling techniques that circulate the large number of myths that characterizes the process of education and social socialization. Every African people (tribe) has its own body of myths, stories, legends and oral history that most of the time are used as public policy or rule of wisdom in resolving social conflicts.

In his studies, Mbiti (1988) demonstrated the position of women in African traditional society through the role “of myths in dealing with the origin of human beings and the role of women in African society, since women are featured very prominently in these myths”. According to Mbiti (1988), some of these myths, especially the one related to man’s origin in traditional African religion shows that “woman is always or nearly always mentioned. In many of these cases, even the name of the first woman is given in the myths, and some myths mention only the name of the woman and not of the man. In many of these myths, it is said that the first human pair was lowered by God from the sky to the ground (earth). Example, the myths of the Akamba, Turkana, Luo, Luhya and others in Kenya; these of the Baganda and Banyoro in Uganda; these of the Tutsi in Rwanda; of the Bomba and Ila in Zambia; these of the Yoruba and Ibo in Nigeria, and many others”. In order to comprehend most of these myths, one must situate himself in the society in which the myth is applicable. When dealing with custody battle in the West, for example, the first consideration is always to let the child live with the mother. In African culture, this kind of myth translates a policy that in fact shows the importance of mother in the life of the society. Religion was and still is intensively practiced in African

societies. This is what Karl Marx calls “opium of people” that most of traditional laws are infused in African societies.

These laws are carried out through the process of socialization, Symbolic and Social interaction. This process largely discussed by Blumer (cited by Schellenberg, 1996: 68) when he laid down basic premises of symbolic interactionism that: “(1) human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them; (2) the meaning of such things is derived from, or rises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows.....”. In other words, this means that things, just like social roles, are given meanings in society in which they are used and accepted.

Mbiti (1988) also indicates that although blames of misfortune have been placed in women, “through the myths of origin, we get a picture of the woman as someone placed by God in a special position. She shares with Him the creative process of life. In some ways her position and her role in these myths eclipses the position of the husband (male). She is in a real sense the mother of human beings, the dispenser of life, howbeit as an agent of God.” In most of African societies, women were/are viewed as “life giver.” Because of this role, they were not sent to war or exercise a warrior role as this role contradicts the first one. Additionally, women participated in all royal court deliberations that the death sentence of a minor (less than 21 years old boy) would be considered. Mbiti (1988) justifies this by saying that “women are extremely valuable in the sight of society. Not only do they bear life, but they nurse, they cherish, they give warmth, they care for life since all human life passes through their own bodies”. Thus, through their role in religion, in African societies, women are more ready and have more abilities to mediate, resolve social conflicts than men, whose role is just to create them.

5. Conclusion

Davidheiser indicates in his lecture notes (Culture and Conflict, fall trimester 2009, week 1) that “Post-modernism or post-structuralism are the contemporary expressions of the particularistic view. Like its predecessors, post-

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structuralism privileges context and questions approaches that seek to identify stable structures or units". This excerpt translates an excellent function of a culture. A culture that denotes individual identity as it refers to a specific psychological environment (ethnic is a western way to identify geographic location). In this way, the process of socialization is unique and fits a group of persons that accept a well-defined process of interactionism: gesture, jokes and language. The essentially western definition of culture identifies a culture transformation that is generated by the clash of culture. The process of globalization for example allows two different cultures to either coexist or create a dynamic or transformation to a new and third type of culture, one to be absorbed by the other. If the new incoming culture dominates local culture to absorb it, it sources a conflict between the two cultures. In its static state, culture describes the identity of a defined social group. The dynamicity state of culture simply indicates a cohabitation/coexistence of two different cultures. This coexistence does not translate either identity in this case. It is an acculturation of identity. Consideration not shared by Bayart (2005) who argues that culture is static and not dynamic. People would keep or do not change their identity. With this consideration, Bayart supports the idea of monoculture. Although the fact that the identification is a product of cultures, the culture of human being, which is not to confuse with personal identity that defines each individual as unique.

However, the idea of a monoculture or a global society would not help the resolution of social conflicts. "It is not surprising therefore that theories of international relations and conflict that focus on material concern or scarcity, which would denote a unique rationale in mediation process, will be less sympathetic to the uses of culture than will cognitivist theories of international relations or conflict" (Avruch, 1998: 35. emphasize was made). In my view, the African cultural conflict has to be resolved from African cultural perspective and not from the imposition of global culture of globalization. An etic cultural approach of westernization would be more concerned with the rationale of scarcity while an emic approach of cultural relativism would reflect on "individual experience from which culture is

a derivative” of disputing/ conflicting perceptions. It is at this point that the positivism and idealism of economic globalization theory would less define the cultural globalization unless it translates the idea of imposition and colonization like in the North-South debate. In this debate, the North is supposedly in possession of all solutions pertaining to all social conflicts that arise in the Southern hemisphere (the debate between modernism and traditionalism, which results in westernization of traditional culture). The concept of modernity is an obvious example used to discount any cultural meaning attached to African system of production. Modernity in this case is same as “an evolutionist consideration that stressed the universal character of a single Culture, which different societies arrayed from savage to civilized” (Avruch, 1998: 7). To the contrary, however, I know a social group in Congo where a husband of a wife that is the most solicited by other men is proud of the choice he made on his wife since these solicitations are indications of his wife’s beauty. With the arrival of missionary, these solicitations were classified as sins and therefore become social offenses and bear not only a moral condemnation but also a court sentence. What the “civilization mission” did not understand was the inside satisfaction that both spouses get from the practice that it just emptied. The culture value of the practice was a positive factor of the marriage stability that should have been a crucial element of cultural consideration of this social group by the missionary. Nowadays, the missionary (with the western religion) is considered as the source of marital dissatisfaction in this social group.

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