

Review

The role of cultural diversity in the enhancement of international co-operation: A Muslim perspective

H. A. Abdulsalam

Faculty of Arts, University of Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria.

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The environment in which man is born or evolved plays a significant role in his life. It emits in him a special way of living a life which later develops to what is known as a culture. Thus man is caught in meshes of customs, superstitions, selfish desires and, possibly, incorrect teachings which, sometimes have undesirable bearing on him. This development may make him pugnacious, unclean, false, and slavish and hankering after what is wrong or forbidden and deflected from the love of his fellowmen and unconsciously from the pure worship of the one True God. It is against this backdrop that an attempt will be made in this paper to look at the role of cultural diversity in the enhancement of international co-operation.

Key words: Culture, cultural diversity, beliefs, customs.

INTRODUCTION

Meaning of culture

It is often accepted without the slightest reservation that it is not easy to define a subject or a term. This is simply because the multiplicity of human thought and the diversity of perception reflect in the opinion of people about issues. It is, therefore, worthy to note that an unprofessional but informed attempt will only be made to explain the concept of culture especially as it relates to this topic. Cambridge English Dictionary defines culture as “the way of life especially general customs and beliefs of a particular group of people at a particular time.” Another but similar opinion explains the term as “the beliefs, ways of life, art and customs that are shared and accepted by people in a particular society.” All the above definitions of culture can fit well in a myriad of cultures in several societies. For example “the belief aspects of the Yoruba people in their traditional religion involve the worship of deities such as Ogun, Ifa, Esu, Obatala, etc. which can be referred to as the belief system of the

culture” (Kofoworola, 2009).

However, if one tries to carefully examine culture as a “way of life” as conceived above, one will surely begin to perceive the conservative implication in the functionality of culture. For example, Eric Anum exposes the die-hard nature of culture as it affects the Ga people in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana in their funeral ceremony in his article entitled: “Six feet at last: Christianization of death in the New Testament (I Thessalonians 4: 13-5: 11) and among Ga Christians” (Anum, 2005). The analysis he made provides a detailed and insightful fact about the religious syncretism of the Ga people. As Kofoworola (2009) admits, Anum refers to the issue of syncretism as “the strategies adopted by Ga Christians in responding to the issues concerning death and bereavement”.

It suffices to say here, therefore, that the Longman’s definition is an indication that the functionality of culture operates within a given society, thus carving for itself some kind of “cultural identity”. Further to this, culture is seen within the conceptual implication of the group of

E-mail: abdulsalam.hashir@yahoo.com. Tel: +2348035749228.

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people as “the attitudes and beliefs about something that are shared by a particular group of people or in a particular organization.” This concept could be understood within the framework of people with shared beliefs and practices, that is, a group of people whose shared beliefs and practices identify the particular place, class or time to which they belong. Thus the languages spoken by different peoples and nations can be used to determine their identity. Invariably, therefore, languages can be applied in Africa such as Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Ewe, Fante, Asante, Dagbani, Swahili, Arabic, etc, to determine and describe the national and cultural identities of the speakers of such languages in a given environment other-wise known as geographical entity.

MEANING OF DIVERSITY

Diversity could, however, be better understood if it is considered or expressed as the opposite of identity, individuality, uniqueness, or distinctiveness. While identity is defined as “the qualities and attitudes that a person or a group of people have that make them different from other people,” diversity on the other hand, is “to change or change something so that there is greater variety.” The relevant example that could be derived from the above definition is that the patterns of family life are diversifying and changing. Thus, a culture turns to be or becomes diversified with the arrival of people from different places such as immigrants. In other words, by diversity, one’s mind is cast onto the fact that an assorted caliber of people with totally different civilization, societal, traditional, ethic and customary backgrounds come together intentionally or accidentally to live under the canopy of the same geographical locale. The reference to the “beliefs” of the people in the definition of culture earlier on, is of conceptual significance in the analysis of both negative and positive impact of the cultural diversity among the people of the world whose origin and evolution stem from the same source. Thus belief which is the basis of cultural affinity is a matter so dear to the people’s heart and which cannot easily be expurgated because it represents the state of the mind.

As it was observed earlier, beliefs, ways of life, and customs are matters which are interrelated in human affairs and of significance in the issues of cultural affinity. Thus the positive or negative impact of cultural identity will depend on the inherent dynamism of the art of a particular culture. This is the reason why one may not have any choice than to agree with Kofoworola (2009) when he submits:

The referential use of impact here is meant to determine the relative quality of the arts in breaking the narrow confines of a particular culture to a universal level of acceptability and practice.

It can, therefore, be observed from the aforementioned

submissions that the definition of culture could be described as containing some kind of tendentious leanings towards the cultural affinity of different nations of the world. More so people of different cultural identities are brought together as one in the symbolic application of artistic devices to represent the ideas in terms of national flags, music, anthems, inter-tribal marriages and the like.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND ITS DIMENSIONS

The expression “Cultural diversity” is often collectively construed to mean the relationship underpinning the variegation of ethnicity. It is, however, necessary that the expression is deciphered within the structure of an expansive framework in which it acknowledges the inimitable characteristics or natural traits of all individuals. This all-encompassing framework seeking to unravel the extent of denotation of cultural diversity will focus the uniqueness of the ethnic, religious and dialectical, as well as the ideo-philosophical dimensions of culture. It is also necessary to acknowledge that cultural diversity also incorporates an assorted degrees or elements of culture. With the conceptual background already created, it can now be understood that cultural diversity can be described as a multiplicity of “ethnic, gender, racial, and socioeconomic variety in a situation, institution, or group; the coexistence of different ethnic, gender, racial, and socioeconomic groups within one social unit” (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/cultural%20diversity>). Unfortunately, one important but often abused expression, “race”, which multiplicity in a given environmental space has been one of the underpinning factors of the aforementioned perspective of cultural diversity has been challenged as having no scientific basis or ground. The new Macquarie ABC Dictionary states thus:

Because the 19th century classification of humans into distinct races has been challenged scientifically, and has been misused, many now prefer to avoid this term when referring to a group of humans, and to replace it with another term such as ‘peoples’ or ‘community’ (Bernaid et al.2003).

The foundation of intercultural understanding, appreciation, indulgence, tolerance and sympathy is the appreciation and subsequent recognition of the wonderful ways in which two cultures resemble one another and thereafter knowing that these “resemblances usually surface through an examination of the differences” (Valdes, 1986 [as cited at <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/cdip/assets/downloads/GIF%201.pdf>]). Yet, rather erroneously, these differences have been used as the justification for intercultural exploitation, discrimination, and abuse. Little thought is put into the question: ‘How boring would the world be if there were to be unity of gender, ethnicity, and religion, as well as socio-political and economic

philosophy within one social unit? So that the only language people would speak would be, say English, the only way people would reach their destination would be by car: One would then imagine that the world then is in an uncontrollable chaos.

Humans must disagree to agree, while recognizing that every culture and its aspects are unique in its own atmosphere and such an atmosphere needs not conform to every body's own to make any aspect of a culture work.

Jean Snell, clinical professor of Teacher Education at the University of Maryland, once remarked that:

There is a richness that comes ... I have learned so much and the most important and awe inspiring thing that I have learned is that we are so much more alike than we think.

(<http://ask.reference.com/related/Why+Is+Cultural+Diversity+Important?qsrc=2892&l=dir&o=10601>).

In a statement at a ceremony for "ECF Princess Margriet Award for Cultural Diversity" under the kind auspices of Her Royal Highness, Princess Margriet, the European Cultural Foundations and the Dutch Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs, in Europe in 2008, the laureate Stuart Hall indicated thus:

Cultural diversity is the name we give to a certain kind of 'learning', which gives us insight into the inner landscapes of how other people live their lives, how they experience and dream their worlds; how they cope with the broken hopes and possibilities of making a new life in a strange land; how they try to resolve the contradictory realities of belongingness; and how they, in turn – disturbingly - see into ours. It teaches us how to express, to find significant form, whatever the medium, for our innermost thoughts, feelings and desires. Learning through culture and the arts works by indirection. It is the slow, mutual, dialogic unfolding of reciprocal understanding. It 'teaches' us in ways which pure information, knowledge of the rational and logical kind, cannot supply. It constitutes in practice that acknowledgement of our radical dependence on 'the other'; on 'the other' who completes us, who is our 'constitutive outside'; on what Jacques Lacan called that radically de-centering experience of seeing ourselves 'from the place of the other'. It may stop us from projecting our fears and anxieties – the 'bad' parts of ourselves - into 'the other'. This is a kind of 'knowledge' which teaches us how to listen and look, to learn through listening and looking, and vice versa. It learns through the body, as well as the mind and the intellect. Its terrain is that of the imagination (<http://www.eurocult.org/uploads/docs/1148.pdf>).

It must have been realized from the above extracts that cultural diversity exists by nature to bring about variety in the life of humanity. If one environment gets monotonous

and unexciting to one individual or group of individuals, another environment of diversity will provide an inspiring alternative.

The dimensions of cultural diversity can be grouped under primary and secondary. The primary dimensions include age, ethnic heritage, gender, mental/physical abilities and characteristics, colour affiliation, and sexual orientation. These variations are important dimensions of cultural diversity as they put forth a significant impact on one's initial or immediate socialisation and a dominant and protracted influence on one's knowhow, experiences, values, assumptions and expectations throughout every stage of his life. The secondary dimensions include among others family background, natural or geographical background, exposure to learning or level of comprehension, language background and religion. The aggregation of the aforementioned dimensions of diversity impacts on every human being in society and each of them introduces a stratum of complication to human identity and it is the dynamic interaction among all the dimensions that influence self-image, values, opportunities and expectations. Together, the primary and secondary dimensions of diversity give definition and meaning to our lives by contributing to a synergistic, integrated whole– the diverse person (<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/cdip/assets/downloads/GIF%201.pdf>).

CAUSES OF CULTURAL DIVERSITIES

A myriad of reasons could be advanced for cultural diversity. But because of limitation of this work, it suffices to identify geographical location or catchment area, language, and custom and dressing as some of the basic causes of cultural diversity, under which some other alien elements would creep in. These elements include among other things, history, language, religion, social system, customs and traditions. All these elements are of significance in the conceptual framework of reference to the definition of "culture" namely beliefs, customs, traditions or ways of life and cultural heritage.

The elements are therefore seen from different perspectives by people in a given environment. In other words, elements of negativity or positivity would be penetrating as a result of either superiority or inferiority complex depending on the advancement of the people involved either through factors of educational development, superiority of language, exposure to other advanced cultural affinities and the like. These negative indices of such a traumatic experience often lead to identity crisis which could negate international co-operation. The African experience could be used here as a springboard for the entire globe as taken from the research book titled, "African survivals in Trinidad and Tobago" when it is said thus:

"For over a quarter two problems have plagued African

on both sides of the Atlantic as well as white and black students of New World Culture history. The first and most important in the matter of New World Black peoples alleged failure to regard themselves as Africans or agreeing to be identified as such. The second is the equally controversial problem of establishing the identity, geographically and ethically, of the black people who were forcefully taken out of Africa under the 'Atlantic Slave Trade' for some four centuries and whose descendants today inhabit North and South America and the West Indies (Elder, 1988)"

If the quotation above is positively considered one would venture into saying that, apart from the traumatic experience of warfare and slavery as well as deprivation of fundamental human rights, the fact remains that the Africans involved in the movement had gotten another abode for cultural conglomeration and absorptions which could, to some extent, be adopted advantageously. Secondly, if they (Africans) are seen as humans by their host after four centuries of "settlement" in another man's land, but under the same planet, the quest should be for enhancement of international co-operation. They (Africans) should not see themselves as people who live on borrowed culture who often go to extremes that their models and mentors had never intended (Yarindra, 1921).

The above submission so far indicates that the environmental or geographical diversity provides a good example of the influence of nature on the identity of culture. For example Kofoworola (2009) asserts that "the geographical factors of influence can be observed in certain features of cultural identity, which he identifies as the following: The physical structures of the body, characteristics behaviours, occupations, costumes, make-ups and modes of dress, modes of greetings, types of foods, mannerisms, customs, etc. Consequently, the natural or geographical factor provides us with the influence of nature as a major determinant of cultural identity.

From the aforementioned, one could assert without any fear of contradiction that several reasons are responsible for people's desire towards their cultural identity. The pride of history and cultural values are driving forces in this regard. Thus, there is fervent desire by the people to preserve their culture, yet one should not lose sight of the fact that the acclaimed culture evolved from a single pair. Culture, they say dies very hard, the preservation of one's culture is a quest for the knowledge of the past which could be regarded as the torch bearer of the cultural heritage, and the motivator of the future direction; yet, it should not be to the detriment of international co-operation.

Another important cause of cultural diversity is language. Language is an important determinant of our level of understanding and a sure vehicle of communication in every culture. Indeed, it is a notable index of culture,

experience of reality, and the only means of communication of cultural values. It is a system of communication or speech with its own set of conventions. Language can also be used in ways which exclude, reject, or discriminate against specific social groups. Language, no matter the intention of the speaker or writer, has the potential to bring three problems in every social setting: Exclusion, definition of people in stereotypical ways, and degradation of other people's perception. Language can distinguish or differentiate people from others in the ways in which they are spoken (style of communication) and the style of writing.

Custom and dressing are also another cause of cultural diversity. The way people dress speak volumes about cultural identities. By this token, Africans are distinguished by the way they dress. Ghanaians can be distinguished from Nigerians by the way each of them dresses. During occasions, both the noble and the commoners in these geographical settings display their artistic style or beauty through dressing or the use of certain specific cloths made from specific fabrics. In Ghana, for example, there is the smug among the ethnic groups of the north, where as among the Asante of the interior, cloths made from 'kente' are a privileged style for both the noble and the commoners. Even foot wear has variations. Among the Fante and the Asante of Ghana, the 'Ahemaa' is a privileged foot wear for the noble class. Among the Yoruba in Nigeria, a combination of the smug and a hat tilted to either the ear or the forehead is a customary dress. Customarily, drumming and dancing, musketeering of guns are common characteristics of celebrations during festivals among most ethnic groups in Ghana. The custom surrounding the disposal and treatment of dead bodies varies across cultures. While some, like Indians, burn down the dead bodies into ashes before burial, other ethnic groups would like to bury them even in their homes while still others, like Egyptians, mummify them. These diversities must exist to bring about variety in outlook and thought.

ENHANCING INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION WITH CULTURAL DIVERSITY

It has been said previously that environment, resources and other material things are the major influences on cultural change or diversity, yet judging cultures on their own terms make a tremendous impact on international cooperation. The principle is that people should not judge the behaviour of others using the standards of their own culture, and that each culture must be analyzed on its own merit. Sudden exposure to unfamiliar culture, the feelings of confusion and anxiety experienced by somebody suddenly as a result of encountering unfamiliar cultural environment, should not constitute barrier to one's relationship with such a people. This fruitful result can better be fetched if one tries to surrender

unconditionally one's thoughts about one's own culture and at any material moment attempts to understand other people's own through the "bracketing" of one's culture. This is because if one faces or tries to understand other people's culture from the spectacles of his own or by using the standards set by his own, one will likely be biased and in so doing judge incorrectly and subsequently be unfavourably disposed towards that culture and its people.

It is an incontrovertible fact that each nation or tribe of the globe has its cultural heritage which includes folklore, religion, history, philosophy, traditions, customs, myths and legends. These cultural phenomena should be studied with unbiased mind and intellectualism with a notion to know the nitty-gritty of those people's cultural heritage and with a view to seeing areas of identity and diversity. This would enhance cultural affinity, through the identification of the possible areas of similarity or otherwise. Cultures look alike; it is the people who have different ways of perceiving those look-alikes. The core point that should be effectively ruminated upon and pondered over is the universality of religion from which the uniqueness of the Supreme is understood; being, the cause of all causes and the originator of these cultural diversities. From the Islamic concept of brotherhood, the Qur'an has this to say:

O mankind We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and make you into nations and tribes that you may know each other (Not) that you may despise (each other) ... (Qur'an 49: 13) [the emphasis is mine].

This Qur'anic declaration, according to Yusuf Ali "is addressed to all mankind and not only to the Muslims (one religious brotherhood) (Yusuf, 1411 AH). The simple reason is that mankind is descended from one pair of parents. Yusuf Ali further says in this respect that "their tribes, races and nations are convenient labels by which we may know certain differing characteristics" (Yusuf, 1411 AH). An Arab poet lends credence to this Qur'anic assertion when he says: "their (mankind) father is Adam and their mother is Hawwah" (Shawai, 1411). A cursory look at the Qur'anic verse shows, as emphasized, that the purpose of diversity in man's cultural identities is for identification of one another and not to despise one another.

Thus, international co-operation can be realised if mankind see themselves as an entity from the same source and that differences in colour, race, nation and culture are mere unifying factors and accidental in order to appreciate the organic whole of the universe and the wonders of the Greatest Fashioner and Designer – God. Qur'an 2: 213 says further "mankind was one single nation". It says elsewhere "mankind was but one nation but differed, later" (Qur'an 10: 19). These verses are undisputable pointers to the fact that all mankind was created one and God's message to mankind is in essence one, the message of unity and truth. But, as

Yusuf Ali submits, "selfishness and egotism got hold of man, certain differences sprang up between individuals, races, and nations, and in His (Allah) infinite mercies, He sent them messengers and messages to suit their varying mentality" (Yusuf, 1411 AH).

It is therefore a conviction that knowledge about other people's cultural heritage and critical appraisal of their customary practices will go a long way in creating a conducive atmosphere for the enhancement of international co-operation through cultural diversities. Of significance is the fact that the origin of man is an indivisible entity. It is observed that cultural revivalism is a strong tool for the understanding of cultural diversities, and through that a congenial atmosphere would be created for international co-operation.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines the potentiality of cultural revivalism as an instrument in the propagation of cultural affinity. It observes, however, that a claim to cultural superiority might be counterproductive in the quest for the universalism of the fundamental human rights, freedom and social justice. Efforts were made to show case the need to make the pursuits of cultural revivalism desirable for international co-operation. It is however, observed that the source of man is one indivisible entity and that mankind should strive to promote cordiality, peace and tranquility in human relations through the study of differing cultures.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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