

GLOBALIZATION AND AFRICAN COMMON NORMS: A PHILOSOPHICAL INTROSPECTION

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to show that globalization as a practice and a phenomenon is attuned to the norms, traditions and mental makeup of many African societies. Incidentally, it has equally demonstrated that, more than formal institutions and complex legal systems. The earliest and most enduring superstructure of globalization are to be found in norms around salient social practice, and this is where African societies not only differ from, but also have an edge over Western ones. Five major norms that support globalization in Africa on areas including: Trade; strong economic activities has existed in Africa before the emergence of slave trade, Communalism; norms around the practice of communal help have existed in Africa before colonialism, and still exist today, Arts and literature; a deeper look into the African artistic tradition would reveal that the continent has been gradually moving towards unity of form, taste and purpose in arts, literature and music for centuries, Language and Communication; nothing speaks loud about the common root and complex relationships of African civilization than language, and Gendered division of labour; a common chord runs through traditional societies in sub-Saharan Africa with respect to economic sex-dependency. The paper passionately submits that Africa is most amenable for globalization and further predicted that African norms will continue to make conditions favorable for development of globalization in a way in which the continent will be less exposed to globalization's excesses.

Keywords:

Introduction

When modern scholars write about the rediscovery of Africa, it is not the opening up of hitherto impenetrable swathes of forests and unnavigable rivers that they often allude to. More often than not, their focus is on bringing to light instances where Africa has blazed a trail in human civilization, or, (in the worn-out metaphor of classical imperialism), aiming to bring out the lighter side of the presumably 'dark continent.'

The rationale for Afrocentric scholarship (or whatever it is called) is not just to prove that those who propagated the Africa-has-no-history hypothesis were actually bent on helping to 'justify the colonial mission and its dispossessions' (Davidson, 1992: 52).

Rather, it is also determined to show that Africa did not just make equal contributions to the progress of the human race, but actually was at the vanguard of this progress. There seem not to be a corresponding consensus in identifying ontological factors which predisposed African nations to adapt effectively to globalization.

This study was able to identify five major norms that both drove the proto-globalization of Africa in pre-colonial times, and facilitates its ability to leverage on contemporary globalization.

Africans were the first globalists, due to the ability of African societies to develop norms and practices that cut across tribal, political, regional, economic and social matrices. These norms persist till today, further propelling Africa's march to globalization as we have it today.

The Nexus Between Philosophy, Philosophers and African Norms

Philosophers have always set the pace as well as announced the closure of any meaningful area of human knowledge. Their initiating forays direct a whole army of scholars into a knowledge frontier; their grim resignation signals the end of a slow and steady process of demystification, which transforms a body of knowledge from being a mere branch of philosophy to a full-fledged science. In accordance with this Kondratieff cycle of philosophical journey, it is not surprising that the scholar who blew the first trumpet for globalization was the philosopher Martin Heidegger.

Norms are accepted standards or ways of behaving or doing things that most people agree with. Merriam-Webster has three interrelated definitions of norms. One, as an established standard or average; two, as a set standard of development or achievement usually derived from the average or median achievement of a large group; three, as a pattern or trait taken to be typical in the behavior of a social group.

From the above analysis, we can see that norms do not necessarily have the seal of the law, though long accepted norms can be instituted into the legal structure in the course of time. They are sociological rather than political; consensual rather than legal. To borrow from the evolutionary school of law, norms grow with the growth, matures with the maturity and dies with the osteoporosis or death of a people.

Following this perspective, the norms of globalization would be understood in this essay as consisting of those practices and praxis which have developed over time to shape a pattern of relationship as well as create a bond of unity between coexisting contemporary societies. 'So far as Africa is concerned, norms have developed around salient areas of interrelationship as African societies intermingled, synthesized, fractured, warred, and reconciled, even during the times when most parts of the world was plunged in darkness...' (Rodney, 1972).

Can we therefore say that Africa is the cradle of globalization? Definitely yes. Most of the complex systems and inventions of today are simply improvements on what is 'a broad and vivid process of human development.' (Davidson, 1974:16-17).

Africa: Background to Globalization

Globalization is seen in different spectra. Two major views, however, dominate. The first presupposes the fact of bringing the entire globe into a common sphere, in which countries that emerged victorious in the race to industrialization/modernization, and,

within them, the lords of finance and captains of industry—the big bonus bankers and the fat-cat capitalists (Ferguson, 2008)—predominate.

The second views it from a rather rudimentary lens, as the gradual economic and sociocultural integration of the world leading to the death of distance (Friedman, 1995) and making the world flat (Cairncross, 1997). It is against the first view of globalization that critics react, like the controversial reactions to the WTO meeting at Seattle in 1999.

The second conception of globalization has left critics, scholars and observers blowing hot and cold over its mixed legacy. On a positive note, it accounts for the upsurge in international trade which picked up during the period that is now referred as mercantilism, but also sowed the seeds for capitalist exploitation of a fast rising proletariat population.

Other free economy dispensations in global trade and finance, like neo mercantilism, classical liberal and neoliberal capitalism, have been sources of great increase in global income as well as sources of misery to increasingly large sections of the world population. This paper does not intend to dwell on the merits and/or demerits of any of these measures. Rather, it aspires to take a more historical perspective to globalization, and to locate the phenomenon in the matrix of reinforcing relationships among disparate societies, and the mutual exchange of ideas and practices in ancient societies, with emphasis on pre-colonial African societies.

Norms Based On Common Trade Links

In reality, the experience of economic relationships between African kingdoms and empires dates to the distant past.

From very early times, there has been 'considerable trade going between Arabia and the whole of the Indian Ocean area, especially the East African coast, Zanzibar and Madagascar' (Davidson, 1974:17). Again, in a classic study of trade and politics among kingdoms around the axis of the Niger Delta, Dike provides solid evidence of economic interrelationships which gave rise to common economic practices among these people, centuries before the start of the slave trade (Dike, 1952). This has been affirmed by later studies. Rodney (1982) traces a long trade network between the forests of Eastern Nigeria, across Benin, through the Yoruba and Dahomey states, to the old kingdoms of Ghana (Rodney, 1982).

Today, the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AFCFTA) has been designed to help African countries put in place a system that facilitates free movement of capital and labour. One remarkable thing about AFCFTA that tends to escape the attention of the uninformed is how the trade routes designated under AFCFTA run in the same direction, as trade routes through which societies in old Africa exchanged goods and services with each other. Clearly, the old norms prevail.

Communality and Mutual Aid Norms

The most widespread example of mutual help practiced in most parts of Africa is the *isusu*--a system of contribution and sharing of small savings among groups of micro

lenders and micro consumers. Though social and political theorists, especially Marxists, contend that communalism is purported to be one of the most primeval types economic systems, only ante-dating primitive subsistence, aspects of communalism are still present in contemporary African economic practices.

Thus there is empirical evidence that sharing economies or mutual aid societies have existed in Africa before the age of globalization. What globalization has done is to simply give a fillip to what is essentially part and parcel of the African (to use the words of Joseph Stalin) mental make-up. Take the merry-go-rounds in Kenya, for instance. The merry-go-rounds have survived in Kenya, from the ashes of mutual aid practices several centuries ago. These are groups of consumers pledged to provide mutual aid to each other, often in the form of small business capital contribution.

There is also the *asakya*, a system of sharing water according to need. It was practiced in Arab-speaking countries in olden days, and have been exported to Spain (Neuwirth, 2017). It helps address acute water shortage prevalent in the Middle East and North Africa. A prominent example of African norms that have been adapted and improved with globalization is the Igbo Apprenticeship System (IAS). Originally developed around self-help norms at the level of the clan, the IAS has been transformed to a veritable tool of national economic participation and international trade (Ekekwe, 2022). Alaba International Market-- the flagship project of this business model--- is ten thousand merchants-strong, and does over 4 billion USD worth of business per annum, making it the biggest electronics market in West Africa. Neuwirth rightly refers to it as the largest business incubation platform in the world (Neuwirth, 2017).

Common Norms in Arts and Literature

The ease with which African societies adapted to the centrifugal forces of globalization in arts, literature and entertainment has been interpreted as evidencing the unique gifts which Africans have in the arts and humanity pursuits, in contrast to Europeans and Asians who have made more invaluable contributions in the sciences.

In fact, Africa has been a source of artistic creativity and inspiration to people from other continents, with whom it had related in matters of trade, war, diplomacy and other aspects of political economy. There may not be enough substantial proof of the exact nature and extent of this influence, but there is no denying the fact that there were 'literary consequences' to the early 'contact between Arab merchants (and other non-Africans) and local cultures' in Africa (Gerard, 2007: 17).

It is paradoxical that Africa, being one of the primeval human civilizations that left no enviable written records and books, has 'left graphic marks of its history everywhere' even more than literate civilizations. In fact, Africa is the continent with the largest number of recorded rock art paintings, populated by crowds of painters who are eager to record, to pray, or to celebrate. (Ricard, 2007:7). Graphic representation is present everywhere in Africa. In view of this, the claim that Africa bestowed no form of script or writing to mankind can be argued, given that 'cave paintings are indeed a kind of writing,' that can communicate across cultures and eras because it is a universal code (Ricard, 2007:7).

Language and Communication Norms

The origin of many languages seem to be lost in antiquity, but the study of language can reveal to us how deeply connected the human family has been, and for how long. In other words, though 'it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to tell, for instance, who first spoke Igbo, where, when and how it was spoken, how related Igbo is to other languages and how long this relationship stretches to the past can however be known (Odoemenam, 2006).

In a groundbreaking research, Atkinson found not only evidence of the African origin of languages, but how what could be regarded as the first language which was born in Africa, was progressively developed, modified, re-made, and split from earlier sources as the human migration chain continued to elongate (Atkinson, 2011).

Thus, language was the first carrier of norms, cultures, practices and folk spirit between one African society and another, and from Africa to the rest of the world. What one could call 'the primordial interconnectivity and interrelationship within African societies and between African and non-African societies' are proof that inter-group communications have long been occurring in Africa. African kingdoms and tribes have been forging relationships, alliances and connections using language as a tool, long before the idea of globalization was ever conceived. It is certainly difficult to put a date on it, but we can be sure that this has been ongoing for thousands of years. Unarguably, these common linguistic patterns or norms evidences a primordial form of globalization. Today, linguists have developed a complex pattern of classification of languages, where language families and divisions attest to common origin from a proto-language. How best to determine the length of this cross fertilization of linguistic patterns is a crucial task. Let us, again take Igbo language for instance. Igbo language, "started when the Igbo nation started, and has since come to be known as the indigenous language of the people. All other African languages are also indigenous to their owners." In fact, "all vernacular languages pre-date the country' (Odoemenam, 2006).

Norms on Gendered Division of Labour

Taken to a higher level of analysis, what contemporary scholars call Feminist Economics and Gender Political Economy (Bechio, 2020) actually started in Africa.

Women were (perhaps wrongly) regarded as being placed below men in the socioeconomic calibration of most traditional societies, which still persists in some modern societies. This was an exigency which traditional societies fashioned to ensure a steady source for the replacement and continuation of the society. This has given rise to norms which totally ceded the child care industry and its allied institutions to females (Nwaogwugwu, 2021; Nnajiolor, Anozie and Onyiluka, 2022).

Though the situation detailed above developed from what universal norms were guiding male-female relationships, we are not to lose sight of the fact that different societies developed norms on the proper balance of male-female power, which were unique to their conditions. For instance, in traditional Igbo societies in particular, and some parts of Nigeria in general, women were participants both in economic production and social replacement, in different degrees.

In the pre-colonial times, there was a pattern of division of labour along gender lines peculiar to some indigenous Nigerian societies, which enabled women to control such occupations as food processing, mat weaving, pottery making, and cooking. Though communal land rights precluded women from owning land, women had access to land through their husbands or parents. Although headship of the household was reserved for men in Nigeria as in every patrilineal system, older women had control of the labour of younger family members.

In addition to the fact that women performed strategic functions by default, it is also on record that in some Nigerian societies, women were constitutionally empowered to assume leadership positions. In politics, women were not as docile or powerless as contemporary ideas tend to portray them. The basic unit of political organization was the family, and in the common matrifocal arrangement (which), allowed a woman to gain considerable authority over her children, a woman and her offspring could form a major bloc in the household. 'Power and privileges in a household were also based on age and gender, thereby allowing senior women to have a voice on many issues. Because the private and public arenas were intertwined, a woman's ability to control resources and people in a household was at the same time an exercise in public power. She could use food production to gain respect. She could control her children and influence men through this power. She could evoke the power of the spirit or gods in her favour. Or she could simply withdraw and use the kitchen as her own personal domicile for interaction with her colleagues, friends, and children' (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2010:4).

Drawing from the above ideas, one can advance the thesis that the disempowerment and economic disenfranchisement of Nigerian women is a later-day development. In a classic summary, it can be seen that:

The most serious threat to the influence and privileges of women occurred during the 20th century, when patriarchy combined with colonial changes to alter gender relations. As male chiefs collaborated with the British colonial administration in collecting taxes and governing, the position of female chiefs declined in importance. When the economy became increasingly geared toward the production of cash crops for export, Nigerian men and European firms dominated the distribution of rubber, cocoa, qq (peanuts), and palm oil. Women, pushed to the background, were forced to shift to the production of subsistence crops. A previous land-tenure system that had prevented land alienation gave way to land commercialization, favouring those with access to money gained from the sale of cash crops. Western-style education also favoured boys over girls and thus largely excluded women from many of the new occupations introduced by colonialism (Encyclopedia, 2010:6)

Conclusion

The impact of globalization on Africa is a subject matter of considerable interest to scholars of African and non-African persuasion. Within this praxis, the rate at which Africa has been integrated into the so-called "global village" has been a source of marvel to observers.

This study therefore concluded that Africa was the cradle of globalization, and African

nations could still experience a unique form of globalization greased by their peculiar norms, in which they will be cushioned against globalization's excesses and backlashes.

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