Original Paper

Unity in Diversity: Religion Cum Language Argument for African Multiculturalism

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Abstract

Multiculturalism is a relatively new and engaging area of scholarship, and has been viewed variously from an interdisciplinary point of view especially as having more problems than it can resolve. Africa is also known as a hub for multiculturalism with a handful of ethnic and tribal groups. Despite the problems associated with multiculturalism such as diversity in language and cultural beliefs, this work attempts to x-ray the concept of "unity in diversity" from a religious cum language basis that supports the argument that multiculturalism from a traditional African point of view, is very beneficial, important and helpful rather than its negative perception. The method employed in the study is critical analysis.

Keywords

Multiculturalism, unity in diversity, Africa, religion and language

Résumé

En tant qu'un domaine nouveau de connaissance, le multiculturalisme est vu différemment dans plusieurs disciplines comme englobant plus de problèmes qu'il ne peut résoudre. L'Afrique est le moyeu du multiculturalisme avec de nombreux groupes ethniques et tribaux. En dépit des problèmes associés au multiculturalisme comme la diversité des langues et les différentes croyances culturelles et religieuses, cette étude tente donc, d'examiner le concept de l'unité dans la diversité à partir du dire que le multiculturalisme du point de vue traditionnel africain est important et bénéfique contrairement à sa perception négative. La méthodologie adoptée pour cette étude est celle d'une analyse critique.

Mots clés *: multiculturalisme, unité en diversité, Afrique, religion et langue.*

1. Introduction

One of the distinguishing features of culture is religion and language. These two simultaneously play some very important roles in the galvanization and preservation of a people's way of life there by giving it, a marked identity. Africa as a continent is home for hundreds if not thousands of tribes and ethnic groups with varied cultures. Despite this, Africans seem to share a lot in common as far as cultural norms and practices are concerned by virtue of their communalistic beliefs.

Multiculturalism is a contemporary ideology or movement of multiple groups of cultures existing within one society, largely due to the influx of immigrant communities or the acceptance advocacy of this phenomenon. The crisis in the world today such as wars and the refugee situations, has raised supporters of multi-culturalism who are of the opinion that different traditions and cultures can enrich a society. However, some critics argue that the acceptance of the culture of immigrants can create a lot of problems for the host community and her culture even if the acceptance of such cultures is endorsed by the State. There is the other side of the argument where the immigrants being put into ethnic boxes, where individual needs and rights become defined by virtue of the boxes into which people are put and those boxes are used to shape public policy that later makes diversity becomes difficult to manage.

In the case of Africa as a continent and her Nation States, her understanding of diversity is hinged on unity such that, in spite of her multi-cultural affinities and/or differences, Africans are well able to dwell together because of the common history they share. This paper therefore attempts to establish that, one continent where multiculturalism is rife and yet works perfectly is Africa because of her communalistic and shared history hence, Africa's unity lies in her diversity despite the multiplicity of her languages. Let us now proceed to discussing what multiculturalism connotes from the point of view of some scholars.

2. What Is Multiculturalism?

Multiculturalism as a concept, has a relatively young history. Even though it means various things to many scholars today, its origin is not in dispute as Bostock avers:

The term multiculturalism was coined in Canada in the 1960's and was used by the Trudeau Government to try to promote harmony between the pre-dominant French- Canadian and British-Canadian cultures, as well as with the various minority cultures (p. 32).

Ideally therefore, there is a spectrum between a monoculture where everyone is exactly the same, and the negative stereotype of multiculturalism where a society is totally divided into separate ethnic communities who never associate. In any authentic society, people will mix or associate with those of other races/cultures, while keeping some kind of social or cultural identity. Hence multiculturalism strives to assimilate, harmonize and enhance unity in the midst of diversity whether we are talking about the demographic, prescriptive or normative, holistic or liberal or political multiculturalism. To this Modood states that:

With much greater certainty one could state that the appeal of multiculturalism as a public policy has

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suffered considerable political damage, such that the argument that multiculturalism is a valuable means of remaking of public identities in order to achieve an equality of citizenship that is neither merely individualistic nor premised on assimilation, is not being embraced as broadly as it once might have been (5).

Multiculturalism no doubt for some, facilitated social fragmentation and divisions, distracted attention away from socio-economic disparities, encouraged moral hesitancy amongst 'native populations and international terrorism" Meer and Modood, (2).

However, while the above outlined points reveal the concerns and anxieties over multiculturalism, "other beneficiaries have included a number of competing political orientations concerned with promoting unity, variously conceived, alongside or in a greater degree to recognizing diversity" Modood and Meer (2).

The tenets of multiculturalism are very much essential as a political or socio-economic policy framework because of its rich diversity. The problem however, has always been to galvanize every culture into one mould so that unity can be attained. This is why in "political philosophy the question arose in attempts to define the nature of a good liberal society" Rex and Singh (4). Such a society, it had been thought, would involve the guarantee of the rights of individuals, but now the question asked is, whether such rights should be extended to groups? Questions have also been raised as to whether culturally distinct groups can co-exist in a single society because of several factors including language barriers as societies with single unitary culture are no longer likely in the modern world due to migration. Georgiou therefore asserts that "a truly multicultural society would make provision for the use of all languages in everyday affairs, including official transactions" (135). Before we go into full discussion about the religious and language question in African multiculturalism, let us examine other related issues to the essay.

3. African Worldview

The African worldview encapsulates all that makes Africans who they are. One cannot separate Africans from their belief system which informs their culture from where we have other component units like language, arts, architecture, cuisines, religion and so on. Even though Africa as a continent is comprised of heterogeneous societies, ethnic groups and tribes, it nevertheless, has a homogenous outlook to reality. It is often called tradition, and tradition as Oladipo will say "is a set of enduring or recurring beliefs, values, linguistic and other symbolic usages and social practices, which define a people's way of life" (12).

African worldview or ontology, the science or nature of being, is traceable to common ancestral lineage and destiny that almost all Africans share, which the most active period of colonization (the scramble for Africa) has not been able to erase. The history of Africa goes beyond her colonization period thus, Belt stated that:

Parts of Africa like Egypt and ancient Abyssinia (present – day Ethiopia and Eritrea) have long

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traditions of written history and civilizations older than Greek civilization; … But what are now known as the sub-Saharan Nation States, those largely carved out by a few European countries in 1884 for the convenience of their colonizing interest, reflect larger regional cultures and traditions than their boundaries suggest. These regional cultures were broken up and destroyed (or at least radically altered) primarily by the European and Islamic incursions going back some 500 years (x).

The point that is being stressed here is that Africa has always existed as one entity without fragmentation despite its vastness and multicultural outlook. The wonders of this must be hinged on a common bond of unity that crisscrosses her culture. Though a lot of history must have been lost, Bell avers that: "what remains of them are fragmentary pictures: icons from ritual life, histories of smaller communities passed on orally. Some form of governance preserved in village life, a few written records, judicial judgements, clerical texts, and a rich and a diverse artistic heritage. Most important, however, is a reflective memory carried forward for generations of a people whose dignity and way of life simply would not die" (xi).

Another defining feature of African worldview is her religion or religious inclination. In fact, culture in Africa is influenced by religion. Religion defines a being and its hierarchy making it easier to hold certain beliefs about God, the ancestors, spirits and so on, perhaps this informs why Africans are regarded as too religious. Mbiti would say that, "African Religions and philosophy deal almost exclusively with traditional concepts and practices in those societies which have not been either, Christian or Muslim in any deep way, before the colonial period in Africa" (xi). Let us now proceed to discussing a little about the concept of unity in diversity.

4. Unity in Diversity

The concept is popularly used today in almost all spheres of life. It is used as a political, economic, social, religious or cultural slogan. It tells about the possibility of gaining unity amidst diversity. The question goes thus: how is it that, there is a basic unity in the midst of amazing diversity of things in the universe? This reality is indeed puzzling and mind bugging, yet it is factual. Looking at the world or the universe for instance, there are lots of fluxes or various degrees of diversity, but in the midst of all these, there is an underlying unity. On the social and political level, the concept is viewed by Lalonde as:

Unity without uniformity and diversity without fragmentation that shifts focus from unity based on a mere tolerance of physical, cultural, linguistic, social, religious, political, ideological and/or psychological differences towards a more complex unity based on an understanding that difference enhances human interactions (4).

Unity in diversity clearly captures the ideology behind multiculturalism. It is a statement that has a very rich truth as evident in the universe and in human relations. There is unity amidst diversity and this is not potentially construed but an actuality. This is why it is easier to delineate the possibility and actuality of attaining a multicultural existence within the African worldview, a feat that may not be

possible elsewhere. One may ask how this can be in actuality especially with differences in languages, among people of different cultures? This question will be evaluated shortly, but before then, let us first examine what language is, in order to understand its nature and objectives.

5. Understanding the Nature and Purpose of Language

Language has been viewed differently for different usages. It has been seen and used as a tool for effective communication. It has been used to order and categorize reality. It has been used to make meaning to our existence. It has also been used to unmask the veil of ignorance. Language is the genius of human rationality and development and it has assumed a different dimension with its artificial creation and systematization. However, as Coupland will observe:

One of the premises of a critical approach to language and society is that, it is possible to launch some sort of resistance to ideological constraint. Sociolinguists are interested in language ideologies because exposing taken- for- granted, social - structuring assumptions about language might provide the means to challenge and to loosen their effects (99).

Despite the limitations of language, it is purposive and important by reason of the fact that, it helps to formulate the most general and pervasive facts about the world, including an enumeration of the most basic categories to which entities belong and some depiction of their interrelation. To this end, the language we use to talk about the world is as crucial as meaning is, at the foundation of language, for what will be the use of language if it does not convey meaning and makes sense of reality?

Language is also understood as the means for cultural identity and assimilation. Language also features prominently in religious worship. A people's destiny is bound by the speaking and understanding of a particular language, which can percolate into thinking and belief. Thus, the definition of culture by Sapir is very apt; he sees culture as "what a society does and thinks" (207). What a society does and think is done in language. Raday also gives a holistic account of culture as:

…a macro concept because it is definitive of human society… Anthropologists commonly use the term "culture" to refer to a society or group in which many or all people live and think in the same ways. Similarly, any group of people who share a common culture and, in particular, common rules of behavior and a basic form of social organization constitute a society (666).

Language is one of the most forceful instruments for social cohesion. A society operates by virtue of language structure. It is a means of communication and understanding which fosters unity amongst a group of people with a peculiar identity. Language can be simple or complex; however, the outcome of language, it is a pointer to the sophistication of the human mind and what it is capable of attaining or achieving. Abbassi et al see language as being used to:

Maintain and convey culture and cultural ties. Different ideas stem from differing language used within one's culture and the whole intertwining of these relationships starts at one's birth. Language may refer either to the specifically human capacity for acquiring and using complex system of communication or to a specific instance of such a complex co-communication. Human language is highly complex in that,

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it is based on a set of rules relating symbols to their meanings, thereby forming an infinite member of possible innovative utterances from a finite number of elements (84).

6. Critical Evaluation

The whole idea of multiculturalism from our discourse so far is to unify diversity arising from a multicultural situation. This does not seem to be an easy task to undertake because of complexities occasioned by culture and its components. Thus, it becomes much easier to achieve this unity in a monoculture society and not in a multi-culture. This argument will seem to hold a lot of implication for Africa as a continent because of its multicultural reality. Howbeit, the reverse is the case as the fact still remains that, despite the multicultural underpinning of Africa, there is unity in diversity as a result of certain cultural similarities such as religion.

Mbiti makes made this point vividly when he asserts that "I am, because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (108-109). Africa may appear multicultural but in reality, it is mono-cultural by reason of religion. As Raday opines:

Religion is a part of culture in its wider sense. It might even be said that it is an integral part of culture. What exactly constitutes religion remains a conundrum… usually such definitions include some transcendental belief in or service to the divine (667).

Before the advent of Christianity or Islam to Africa, Africa had her own traditional religion with belief in various hierarchies of beings: God, the Supreme Being is at the apex of this hierarchy, followed by spirits, ancestors, man, animals and plants. This belief permeates through traditional Africa without exception, despite differences in language and established bond of unity of all with a common destiny. Awolalu even noted that:

When we speak of African traditional religion, we mean the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the Africans. It is the religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans and which is being practiced today in various forms and shades and intensities by a very large number of Africans including individuals who claim to be Muslims or Christians (1).

As far as multiculturalism is concern, there must be a rallying or confluence point, or some kind of understanding that will foster unity amongst people of various cultures. If this missing link is not reconciled, there cannot be unity in diversity. This is why Georgiou (1984) made a case for language. This seems to suggest that, there must be elements in cultures that can foster a harmonious relationship amongst humans. This being the case, it makes it easier to understand why traditional Africa did not have problems with a multicultural society or such dispositions because the unity of the people is premised upon their collective heritage via religion.

Language to the Africans is not an instrument for division, but one that binds her people together because of their collective beliefs through religion so that, what language couldn't achieve, religion could. This explains why heterogeneous traditional Africa does not have conflict with multiculturalism because there is something more forceful and binding than it. Thus, Beyers while talking about the

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sanctity of a unified African society avers:

African traditional religion exhibits specific understanding of the place of the individual in community. There is a dynamic natural bond between the individual, the extended family, the clan or the tribe, and the ancestors, nature and God… This is not merely a social understanding, but extends ontologically (5).

As we tie our thoughts and arguments together, it is imperative to state that, the benefits of multiculturalism are enormous and one of which is unity in diversity. The world we live in today is in dire need of unity in diversity hence the creation of bodies like African Union (AU), Economic Community of West African States(ECOWAS), United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organization(NATO), COMMON WEALTH and so on. These bodies try to make the point that a people have something very unique in common which is the delineation. This is the reason why it becomes easier to look for indices of social cohesion in culture which a people share. Once we can pinpoint that out, it becomes easier to make a case for multiculturalism and this is one of the salient contributions of this paper to scholarship.

7. Conclusion

This work sets out to use the very important concept of "unity in diversity" to make a case and to justify why the term multiculturalism with its antecedent problems is possible in the African continent because of the binding nature of African culture that is founded on traditional religion and language. African culture which by nature is heterogeneous, has a homogenous outlook via her religion which harmonizes and enhances unity amongst all, irrespective of demographic or geographic consideration. And for this reason, there is much to be done that will foster unity in Africa beyond just rhetoric's and the creation of bodies like the AU. If Africa must get it right and be united under one God and destiny, it must look inward to the common strands that bind all and that will be found in her culture. Africa's multiculturalism is therefore not a curse but a blessing if it can be galvanized to bringing about the desired unity in factionalized modern Africa. As we conclude, it is germane to state categorically that what multiple languages cannot achieve under multiculturalism, religion can; and language is also a medium of religious propagation.

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