GLOBALIZATION, ALTERITY AND THE LOCAL: RECONSTRUCTING AND DECONSTRUCTING AFRICANITY

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Abstract

The reality is a construction. The reality of Africa is being continuously constructed by non-Africans despite the flatness of the world preached by globalization. The West continues to portray Africa as the home of underdevelopment, poverty, diseases and corruption while overlooking the successes recorded by the continent. This paper traces the genesis of this perception, its development over the years and recommends solutions to the malaise.

Keywords: Africa, Globalization, Alterity, Underdevelopment

Introduction

In the not too distant past, the talk was about the world becoming a village. But that is already here. The world is already a village because many parts of the world are connected and happenings in one part of the world are registered immediately in other parts of the world. This is globalization. Athletic competitions, civil unrest, World Bank meetings, presidential inaugurations and calamities are beamed across the world either as they happen or shortly after they commence. In the same vein, commerce has no boundaries anymore. Cross-border business interactions go on in various parts of the world round the clock. There are many people who live in one country and work for organizations that are domiciled in another with communications and interactions carried out in real time. Technology, ease of payment and improved learning have all collaborated to effect the reduction of the earth with a surface area of 510,072,000 km² into a small village. Although globalization is a relatively new term, acts of globalization have been with us for a long time. According to Andre Gunder Frank (1998), globalization has been in existence since the rise of trade links between Sumer and the Indus Valley Civilization in the third millennium B.C.

What is Globalization?

Roland Robertson (1992) defines globalization as the compression of the world and the intensification of the consciousness of the world as a whole. Martin Albrow and Elizabeth King (1990) also define globalization as all those processes by which the peoples of the world are incorporated into a single world society. David Held et al (1999) observe that: Although in its simplistic sense globalization refers to the widening, deepening and speeding up of global interconnection, such a definition begs further elaboration. ... Globalization can be located on a continuum with the local, national and regional. At one end of the continuum lie social and economic relations and networks which are organized on a local and/or national basis; at the other end lie social and economic relations and networks which crystallize on the wider scale of regional and global interactions. Globalization can refer to those spatial-temporal processes of change which underpin a transformation in the organization of human affairs by linking together and expanding human activity across regions and continents.
Thomas Larson (2001) says it is the process of world shrinkage, of distances getting shorter, things moving closer. It pertains to the increasing ease with which somebody on one side of the world can interact, to mutual benefit, with somebody on the other side of the world. Paul James (2005) defines globalization as the extension of social relations across world-space, defining that world-space in terms of the historically variable ways that it has been practised and socially understood through changing world-time. Claude Ake (1996) says: The process of globalization is many things of course. It is about structural differentiation and functional specialization in the world economy. It is about incremental inter-dependence, the growing spread and intensity of interactions among nations and about the nation-state coming under pressure from transnational phenomena, and so on. The process is complex, ambiguous and contradictory (Page 5).

**Distillation and Synchronization of Definitions**

A critical consideration of the definitions reveals that globalization has three components. These are; Politics, Economics and Culture. It will, therefore, be safe to state that the end of globalization is the political, economic and cultural integration of the world. Globalization can thus be defined as the miniaturization of the world through political, economic and cultural integration.

**Precursors of Globalization**

As noted earlier, globalization may be a new word but the concept has been in existence for centuries. The following are some of its forbears.

**Slave Trade**

Slavery in Africa predates the coming of the Europeans. There were chattel slaves (personal property of slave owners), bonded slaves, those who went into servitude to liquidate a loan and military slaves, used for the prosecution of wars. Apart from transatlantic slave trading, which was championed by Europe, there was also the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade prosecuted by Arabs. The Portuguese, who started transatlantic slave trade in the 15th century, did so to use Africans to cultivate sugar plantations in their country. They were later joined by other European countries.

To get slaves, African leaders engaged in inter and intra-tribal wars which were fuelled by Europeans. As documented in the Slave Trade Debates of England in the Early 19th Century, “All the old writers... concur in stating not only that wars are entered into for the sole purpose of making slaves, but that they are fomented by Europeans, with a view to that object.”

**Effects of Slave Trading**

According to Lovejoy, Paul E. (2012), The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database estimates that the Atlantic slave trade took around 12.8 million people between 1450 and 1900. Slave trade can be referred to as the commoditization of Africans because the act reduced them to sub-humans as they were traded in the market place like animals. Consequently, the continent was denied of a good number of its human resource who could have contributed greatly to its development. But aside the economic and demographic effects of the trade on the continent, it also affects the rating of Africans in the estimation of Europeans and others as they are seen as former slaves. This robs them of their self-worth as they have come to believe that the owner was superior to the owned.

**Colonialism**

Apparently in preparation for the post-slave trade era, Europeans who saw themselves as superior to Africans had a conference in Berlin between 1884 and 1885 where decisions on how to share African countries among them were taken. Thus began the era of colonialism.

According to Osterhammel (2005), Colonialism is a relationship between an indigenous (or forcibly imported) majority and a minority of foreign invaders. The fundamental decisions affecting the lives of the colonized people are made and implemented by the colonial rulers in pursuit of interests that are often defined in a distant metropolis. Rejecting cultural compromises with the colonized population, the colonizers are convinced of their own superiority and their ordained mandate to rule. (P.16)
Part of the effects of colonialism is that political and economic decisions were taken on behalf of the people by their overlords. The colonials see the colonized as being incapable of taking decisions on issues that affected them. So, all major decisions affecting their wellbeing were taken on their behalf. But perhaps worse than that is that colonialism also resulted in cultural imperialism because one of the aims of the colonizers was to achieve universalism. Colonialism spurred the spread of English language and culture. The languages of the colonized were ridiculed and those speaking them were called barbarians. Their religious practices were called paganism. In response, the colonized Africans began to imbibe the culture of the colonizers while disparaging their own. With that many Africans have become white people in black skins. Colonialism can be referred to as the subjugation of Africans. With the collapse of colonialism following the independence of many African countries after World War II, the West came up with a number of neo-colonialism ideas culminating in globalization, which is business without borders and a euphemism for the exploitation of Africa.

**Philosophy of Globalization**

One of the earliest philosophers of globalization was Adam Smith, regarded as the father of Economics. Smith (1776) says:

> It is the maxim of every prudent master of the family, never attempt to make at home what it will cost him more to make than buy … What is prudent in the conduct of every family can scarce be folly in that of a great kingdom If a foreign country can supply us with a commodity cheaper than we ourselves can make it, better buy it of them.

Smith also says, “As it is the power of exchanging that gives occasion to the division of labour, so the extent of this division must always be the extent of that power, or, in other words, by the extent of the market.”

Karl Marx (1884) observes that “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe...It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.”

David Ricardo (1817) says:

> A country … enabled to manufacture commodities with much less labour that her neighbours may, in return for such commodities, import a fraction of the corn required for its consumption, even if … corn could be grown with much less labour than in the country from which it was imported.

The import of all these is that globalization was not conceived to favour countries with limited production capacity; it was designed to spread the influence of the West with competitive production advantage to the rest of the world.

But there are also philosophers who did not just consider the economic aspect of globalization but also considered the benefits of ease of communication and interaction that it holds. One of these was Nicolas Tesla. According to him in a 1926 interview with Colliers Magazine observed that

> When wireless is perfectly applied the whole earth will be converted into a huge brain, which in fact it is, all things being particles of a real and rhythmic whole. We shall be able to communicate with one another instantly, irrespective of distance. Not only this, but through television and telephony we shall see and hear one another as perfectly as though we were face to face, despite intervening distances of thousands of miles; and the instruments through which we shall be able to do this will be amazingly simple compared with our present telephone. A man will be able to carry one in his vest pocket.

Marshal McLuhan, who coined the expression, global village, used the term to illustrate how the media was integrating the world by availing people of the happenings in different parts of the world. This was long before globalization gained the prominence it currently enjoys.

**Africa and Globalization**

Africa is badly positioned to benefit from globalization because it lacks any comparative advantage in the three major drivers of globalization viz; capital, technology and skills.
The theory of international trade states that cross-country trade leads to an improvement in division of labor which will result in an increase in productivity in each of the countries. This points to the fact that globalization thrives on specialisation. It is only those countries with remarkable comparative advantage in an area that can really benefit from it. Most African countries lack the required skill to convert natural resources to finished products which can give them any advantage in international business. Therefore, they are not benefiting from the process as much as they do.

In addition, they lack the technology and capital to make any remarkable impact. African leaders have realized that the continent is holding the wrong end of the stick with respect to globalization and have been commenting on this.

In 2000, Mr. Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations, said Africa could not wish away globalization. He, however, lamented that the opportunities in it are skewed in favour of the West while the whole world shared the burden of the process. He, therefore, proposed ‘inclusive globalization’ as a way of preventing the marginalization of billions of people. He explained that inclusive globalization is about managing the effects and forces of market positively in the service of humanity.

Annan’s view of globalization creating inequality is shared by Claude Ake, one of the most vocal African voices against globalization. Ake (1978) says “Globalization is uneven in its impact. It produces winners and losers. For it is not Hausa that is globalized but English; not Togolese technology but American and Japanese. The trajectory of the financial flows which fuel the global economy is well-known.”

Ake’s opposition to globalization is founded on his belief that it cannot result in development. According to him:

Development is not a project but a process. Development is the process by which people create and recreate themselves and their life circumstances to realize higher levels of civilization in accordance with their own choice and values. Talking about development necessarily implies talking about self-reliance. Development is about a people taking responsibility for producing a development project as well as providing the resources to carry it through (Ake 1996b,140).

He also argues that African problem is more political than economic. He opines thus:

We are never going to understand the current crisis in Africa much less contain it as long as we continue to think of it as an economic crisis, its economic consequences are serious as we know only too well but they are nonetheless incidental. Not only is the crisis essentially political in character, it is also political in its origin (Ake1992,58).

He further argues that the existing structure in most African states hinders equitable distribution of resources, adding that “unless this obstacle is overcome, there will be no improvement in the living conditions of the people...The point is not so much that the development project has failed as that it never got started in the first-place” (Ake 1996b,18).

So, unlike Annan who believes that Africans do not benefit much from globalization because of the conspiracy of the West against the continent, Ake is of the view that the existing social and political structures in Africa constitute the hurdle the continent has to cross to get to the globalization Eldorado.

**Alterity**

Alterity is otherness as against self; it is the other of two. It is the ability to distinguish between self and not-self, and to accept the existence of an alternative viewpoint. According to Brian Treanor (2007), alterity is that aspect of things, and others that is unfamiliar, alien, or obscure. To anthropologists, alterity is the “construction of cultural others.”

The idea of alterity emanated in Plato’s Sophist which features the Stranger in a dialogue on the ontological problems of being and non-being, of the One and the Other.

Other philosophers have taken the idea further.

One of these is Gayatri Spivak (1989) who identifies the four master words that give the modes of being that create alterity as; Nationalism, Internationalism, Secularism and Culturalism.
She argues that it is wrong for colonizers to write from the perspective of the colonized because members of the ruling class had far greater privilege than the altern (those other than the colonizers) and might not have a concise understanding of what the life of the altern is like. According to her, the problem that arises when members of the ruling class write from the perspective of the altern is that there could be false representations of what the history of the altern was actually like. She, however, notes that if one has to write the history of the other, then issues such as gender, race, ethnicity, and class must be factored in.

**Africanity**

It is the contribution of a culture to philosophizing that characterizes philosophy as American, Asian, European or African. Africanity speaks of the environment in which African philosophy is exercised. This is what makes its categorization as African possible. One of the champions of Africanity was Kwame Nkrumah, former Ghanaian President. Nkrumah (1964) states that:

> Our philosophy must find its weapons in the environment and living conditions of the African people. It is from those conditions that the intellectual content of our philosophy must be created. The emancipation of the African continent is the emancipation of man. This requires two aims: first, the restitution of the egalitarianism of the human society, and, second, the logistic mobilization of all our resources towards the attainment of that restitution. (P. 78).

Another famous Africanity philosopher was Leopold Senghor, former President of Senegal. Senghor (1969) came up with the concept of Negritude, which he defines as “the whole complex of civilized values, cultural, economic, social, political which characterize the black peoples, or more precisely, the Negro-African world” (p. 83).

Senghor (cited by Nwoko, 1988) presents four dimensions of negritude:

1. Cultural Negritude: This is the role of emotion as dominating the entire Negro-African cultural system.
2. Social Negritude: This sees the family as the centre of the social structure of the society. The strength of the society derives from that of the family.
3. Economic Negritude: This speaks of communality. In the African traditional society there is no personal property. He exemplifies this with the question of land which cannot be owned as wealth or property since it is considered a force or spirit.
4. Political Negritude: The African political system is based on humanism. The political system in Africa places emphasis on the importance of the individual. In Africa, a person is not just a statistical figure but an essential part of the society.

**Stereotypes about Africa**

A stereotype is an over-generalization about a people. This, according to Fischer (1970), is the fallacy of examining just one or very few examples or studying a single case, and generalizing that to be representative of the whole class of objects or phenomena. To the West, one acronym defines Africa. This is STUPID.

S stands for sleaze
T stands tardy
U stands for underdevelopment
P stands for poverty
I stands for illiteracy
D stands for diseases

The West sees Africa as underdeveloped. So, when they think of Africa, they see a continent of untapped mineral resources and underutilized potentialities. The West is also of the opinion that Africans are inept and incapable of managing their affairs.

How the West sees Africans determines how they relate with the people. Since they see Africa as underdeveloped, they tend to exploit the continent. According to Chimamanda Adichie, “To create a single story, you show a people as one thing and only one thing over and over again and that is what they become.”

Sequel to the stereotype, the average European or American considers himself as being a better person than an African.

A former President of Apartheid South Africa, P.W. Botha, captures this in a speech he delivered to his cabinet on August 15, 1985

We are not obliged even the least to try to prove to anybody and to the blacks that we are superior people. We have demonstrated that to the blacks in 1001 ways. The Republic of South Africa that we know of today has not been created by wishful thinking. We have created it at the expenses of intelligence, sweat and blood. We do not pretend like other whites that we like the blacks. The fact that, blacks look like human beings and act like human beings do not necessarily make them sensible human beings. Hedgehogs are not porcupines and lizards are not crocodiles because they look alike. If God had wanted us to be equal to the blacks, he would have created us all of a uniform colour and intellect. But he created us differently: Whites, Blacks, Yellow, Rulers and the ruled.

The stereotype can be understood in light of the Social Identity Theory which states that individuals sometimes think of themselves and act toward others in terms of characteristics and situations they share with other individuals because they belong to the same groups as them. When they do this, they operate in terms of their social identities and they act toward others on an intergroup level.

That is what the West has done with Africa.

Philosophical Basis for Western Stereotype of Africa

Charles Darwin (1859) in his evolution theory speaks of the “origin of species by natural selection”, which he explains to mean that nature selects certain species for survival and others for extinction. Berge (1973) says the Darwinian theory of superiority of some species above others was the rationale behind the many harmful practices of the 19th and 21st centuries.

According to him, it was the rationale behind the racism in Germany which culminated in the building of death camps in the 1940’s. It also gave rise to anti-African sentiments.

However, before Darwin came up with his theory, Linnaeus (1758) wrote that God had a hierarchy for all His creatures with human beings being the most superior. Going further, he states that even among humans, there is a hierarchy with the blacks at the base, closest to animals. In his ranking, he put Europeans at the head, saying they are light, lively and inventive. He puts the Americans next, describing them as “tenacious, contented, free and ruled by custom.” Asians are next and he says they are “stern, haughty, stingy and ruled by opinion.” Africans, which he puts last, he says are “cunning, slow, negligent and ruled by caprice.”

Hume (cited by Eze1998) says: “I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of neither that complexion, nor even an individual eminent in action or speculation” (p. 214).

Hegel (1956) also writes:

In Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realisation of any substantial existence.... Thus distinction between himself as an individual and
the universality of his essential being, the African in the uniform, undeveloped oneness of his existence has not yet attained. (p. 93).

**Deconstructing Africa**

To properly deconstruct Africa we have to turn to Gayatari Spivak and her modes of being that create alterity.

Spivak notes that every construct of one by the other is never accurate because the one doing the constructing does not share the same experience with the other being constructed. But beyond that, at the back of every race constructing another is the desire to show the one being constructed as inferior to the one doing the constructing. This is where Spivak’s four modes of being; nationalism, internationalism, secularity and culturalism come in.

Every framing or construction of one by the other is influenced by these factors.

A German and a Briton will most likely disagree with each other about the framing of their respective countries. Each one will want to defend his national values. That is nationalism. But the two will definitely agree on each other’s framing of Africa and will disagree with an African framing of their continent, especially if it is not favourable. That is internationalism. Religious differences and cultural affiliations also play a major role in framing people.

Working with these parameters, it becomes clear that it is not in the interest of the West to project Africa as a success. To legitimize its continual exploitation of the continent, it is best to frame Africa as the dark and backwaters continent that requires aid.

**Reconstructing Africa**

Chinua Achebe says if you don’t like another person’s story, write your own. Many scholars have written on reconstructing Africa. We pick Senghor as our guide. He shows that Africa has its own distinct cultural, economic, social and political systems which portray Africans being at par with the West. But this story has not been told enough.

To reconstruct Africanity, that is what Africa stands for, Africa must leverage on globalization to also import her own culture. One way of doing this is to float global media outfits which can rival CNN, VOA, Al Jazeera etc, to tell the authentic African story.

**Conclusion**

The facts are clear. Globalization is here and it is tilted against Africa. As noted by Annan, it cannot be wished away. The West has carved the image of a poor, sick, incompetent and corrupt people for Africans. The West has done this for two reasons. One, out of the limitedness of its understanding of the Other (Africa) and two because it serves its purpose to project the continent as such so as to continue with the exploitation of the continent’s resources and the deprivation of its people.

Another fact is that this construction of Africa by the West will not change of its own volition. The reconstruction will happen when Africa takes it upon itself to change the perspective of the rest of the world about itself. This will require a deliberate effort on the part of Africans to tell the positive side of their story. It will also require strong leadership as well as building strong institutions in Africa.

As observed by Ake (1991) the leadership that will change the African situation is such that will move public policy away from special interests towards common interests. This will mean in effect taking the interests of the subordinate classes as the measure of all things. A leadership that will take accountability of power to those over whom it is exercised; a leadership that will ensure effective popular participation in decision-making at all levels.

Then, Africa has to learn to be loud and repetitive about its own story to the rest of the world. To do this, it cannot rely on the media organizations owned and set up by the West to, among other things, spread untruths about Africa. It has to own its own media outfits and spread the true version of its history and story to the rest of the world.
References