

# The Challenge of Globalist Perceptions in a Literary and Political Theory

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Perceptions of human nature have a far-reaching influence on individual opinion and public policy in a way that is not readily perceptible. A meaningful appreciation of the current phenomenon of globalization is inextricably bound to perceptions of human nature and what can be made of it. Two different perceptions of human nature underlie the current debate. The first is the absolutist perception which upholds the possibility of a uniform standard in human conduct and values. This perception would imply that human society will eventually evolve in one culture dimension, or will be conquered by a superior culture. This absolutism is from the onset based on confrontation. The other is the relativist approach which contends that cultural diversity among nations requires that different standards be recommended in areas of human rights, political and literary theory, religious beliefs, and the concept of development.

This brief essay, which does not purport to exhaust every African dimension of the issue, is a humble contribution to that debate. It rejects both the absolutist and the relativist perceptions, and proposes a third option whose universalism is derived from a hybridization which in turn takes its rationale from the invisible innate humanness rather than the dictates of environment and culture.

The environmental factors making for differences in perceptions on human nature are secondary rather than primarily, and that the seemingly divergent world views underlying the opposition between universalist and relativist perceptions in

matters of African literary, political theory, and the concept of development are, contrary to popular opinion, conciliable and complementary .

The concept of Globalization has had its classical ramifications in the form of the concern of the Greek and Roman Empires to raise a single community of diverse nationalities acknowledging the authority of a single Emperor. The underlying perception here was the primacy of the inner qualities of man over custom, culture and even external physical traits of peoples. It equally implies an undertaking to cultivate the “good” in the human being. Their Platonist perceptions, and the implications thereof are not shared by all.

The question “what is the nature of man ?” has received different answers. It is pertinent to note that contrary to the general impression that we all have faith in the decency of human conduct :

Anti-Platonists like Nietzsche reply that the attempts to stop people from murdering, raping, and castrating each other are, in the long run doomed to fail — for the real truth about human nature is that we are a uniquely nasty and dangerous kind of animal. When contemporary admirers of Plato claim that all featherless bipeds... have the same inalienable rights, admirers of Nietzsche reply that the very idea of “inalienable human rights” is, like the idea of a special added ingredient, a laughable feeble attempt by the weaker member of the species to fend off the stronger.<sup>1</sup>

Without taking sides in this debate on the essential content of human nature I would like to indicate that this debate has practical contemporary implications for Africa’s political and economic development especially in the context of the present drive for globalism in commerce and Human Rights. For if human nature is doom-bound then it would follow that the rest of the world is awaiting the kind of chaos and collapse which now holds sway in some political communities in Africa (and the Third World) today.

This concern becomes clearer when we remember, for instance, that at the 1993 Conference on Human Rights in Vienna a number of Third World countries contended that there was the need to relativize and diversify the current UN Regime of Human Rights. Their central argument was that it was too Western in both its foundations and outlook, and was thus not applicable to countries of different cultural and political experience. One of the objections to this was made by Warren

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1. Rorty, Richard. “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality”, in : Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley (eds.), *On Human Rights : The Oxford Amnesty Lectures*. New York : Basic Books, 1993, 115.

Christopher, then US Secretary of State who stated that : “we cannot let cultural relativism become the last refuge of repression.”<sup>2</sup>

The issue raises the question as to whether or not there is a different and separate African / Third World Human Nature to warrant the stipulation of different standards of human rights in this part of the world. Such a concession would be seen as giving credence to the spurious claim that Third World or non-Western rulers and customs are naturally benign and need no restrictions, which can only inhibit their good work.

Africa’s transition from mono-ethnic traditional political systems to multi-ethnic governance has been characterized by the relativist perception of political power. For example, the imposition of the one-party state in the years immediately after independence was defended by arguments such as the following advanced by Julius Nyerere, then President of the Republic of Tanzania :

The European and American parties came into being as the result of existing social and economic divisions — the second party [that is, the opposition] being formed to challenge the monopoly of political power by some aristocratic or capitalist group. Our parties had a different origin.<sup>3</sup>

Nyerere concluded this view with the assertion that African conditions were not suitable for the imitation of “the political structure of a totally dissimilar society”.

The exaltation of such devious perceptions largely contributed to the political chaos characterized by self-appointed military leadership, bureaucratic corruption, and armed opposition to governments which have “won free and fair elections” by cashing in on their self-appointed incumbency.

The political chaos in contemporary Africa, despite centuries of political stability and economic development, is indicative of the fact that the change in environmental political conditions has only brought to the fore the real determinants of political perceptions — the innate desire to move away from pain towards pleasure. This primary human aspiration is not alien to any culture. It refutes the claims of cultural relativism, and proves that human normative systems are founded on some innate concerns and aspirations common to Humanity, rather than on the transient

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2. Warren, Christopher, quoted by Puchala, Donald J. “The Ethics of Globalism”, *The 1995 John W. Holmes Memorial Lectures*. Report and Papers, 1995, N° 3.

3. Nyerere, Julius. *Democracy and the Party System*. Dar-es-Salaam, 1963, 15.

and superficial vagaries of the environment culture and experience. It is this element that will dictate the direction and the pace of the hybrid universalism. In Africa it will be instrumental in determining the size of African states, and the extent of African strategies for survival and growth in the on-going phenomenon of globalization.

The central contention here is that there exists an intrinsic element common to all humans, irrespective of cultural backgrounds and environmental features. Concepts of freedom and aesthetics may thus vary in cultures but the essentials of human aspirations are undeniably the same everywhere. Those are neither learned nor acquired ; they are innate to human nature. For instance, the experiences which led 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe to condemn tyranny, to endorse liberty, to sanctify property, to enthrone justice and equality of citizens, to extol peace and to prescribe democracy are desires which no perception can deny to be universally desirable by all cultures. This permeates and supercedes the environmental trivialities of relativism.

The rejection of the torrents of philosophical absolutism has a tributary current in literary theory. Nor is this surprising. The somatic sequence of parochial universalist perceptions had to be all-engulfing. It produced a counterclaim which accused the universalist position of erroneously reifying logical patterns into empirical constructs which did not take into account non-Western perspectives. Bishop sums up this perception of African literary aesthetics as follows :

Western critics were approaching African literature as though from a position of authority and not , as should have been the case, as students of comparative literature. The Western position was ambiguous perhaps because of the colonial hangovers that were dissipated less quickly in the arts than in politics.<sup>4</sup>

This oversight could well be attributed to the perception of literature which is anchored in the literary canons of the Western traditions. The African reaction to it was to device or at any rate to insist on the admittance and inclusion of the unique peculiarities of African artistic features in the universal aesthetics patrimony.

The essence of Bishop's assertion, like many other, was to demand that African aesthetic models be recognized and taken into account by any theory that could be considered universal. From the African perspective therefore, the universalist perception of critical standards could only be a hybrid standard, a melange of art forms

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4. Bishop, Rand. *African Literature, African Critics : The Formation of Critical standards, 1947-1966*. London : Greenwood, 1988, 172.

from diverse cultures. It was in this context that African criticism came to emphasize the use of African languages for Africa's literary audience, or at least one which adapted European languages to the linguistic and models comprehensible to Africans. In matters of language, Creole and Pidgin, for instance, acquired the status of fully-fledged linguistic mediums of literary expression, just as the basic didactic roles of oral African literature and various forms of artistic expression were affirmed and upheld to be as valid and not inferior to any forms elsewhere in the world. Among those who advanced this perception of African literature and art is Claude Lévi-Strauss, who described the high quality of African art in these words :

Des travaux récents sur la sculpture africaine montre que le sculpteur est un artiste, que cet artiste est connu, quelquefois très loin à la ronde, et que le public indigène sait reconnaître le style propre de chaque auteur, de masque ou de statue.<sup>5</sup>

This is a feature of all artistic production in all communities everywhere. It has universalist connotations. Implicitly this crave for inclusion or better still a rejection of an exclusivist definition of the universal art form was indicative of the fact that the intuitive rather than the environmental and experiential was seen as primarily in accounting for the perception of literary experience and theory. Thus the truly universal was innately derived and superceded the transient, the superficial, and the relative. It is equally all-embracing This universalism was more appealing than that derived from the imposition of a restricted and restrictive (Western) perception of the universal.

It must also be mentioned that this is reinforced by its religious ramifications as well. Here again, as in literary theory, development, and political theory , African perspectives have weighed in favor of the primacy of the inborn/transcendent, rather than the environmental and the experiential, in determining the formulation of perception. The usual recognition of the need for pluralism as the essence of universalism is upheld. This, for instance, is the implication of Tutu's contention that :

There must then be a plurality of theologies, because we do not all apprehend or respond to the transcendent in exactly the same way, nor can we be expected to express our experience in the same way. And this is no cause for lament. Precisely the opposite — it is a reason for rejoicing because it makes mandatory our need for one another because our partial theologies will of necessity require to be corrected by other more or less partial theologies. It reinforces the motif of interdependence which is the inalienable characteristic of the body of Christ.<sup>6</sup>

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5. Charbonnier, J. *Entretiens avec Lévi-Strauss*. Paris : Plon, 1961, 70.

The central duality of perception — the innate and the experiential (environmental) — certainly influences the debate on Africa's economic and political development. Western Absolutism had a tendency to perceive every cultural difference as hierarchical and thereby hoped that in matters of civilization Africa was an egg that must develop into the chicken that Europe is. Among those whose analysis and research have helped to debunk such pretensions is British historian Basil Davidson who opines that :

The best of modern European and North American anthropologists have altogether abandoned the old condescension : what they are now concerned with is to show how African society developed as it did, why it did not develop differently, and why in general, its forms of development deserve study and respect.<sup>7</sup>

It must be noted that Davidson's perception as regards African development is emphasizing the existence of a common human capacity, not merely to adapt to the environment but also to evolve the sophisticated edifice called culture. The fact that culture itself is not stable but is in fact created for human convenience, equally goes to reinforce the primacy of the innate over the environmental in the formulation of human perceptions. We are talking here about something that supercedes culture — that element in man which has dictated the respect for the right to food, clothing, and shelter ; and has prescribed the distinction between right and wrong (on whatever criteria or circumstances it may be based). It is this invisible thread which confers on this unique species the monopoly of the activities of cooking, commerce, clothing, and literary beauty.

Since what is true in practice is more likely to be true in theory, theorists and advocates of both the relativist and absolutist perceptions must acknowledge that culture is derived from this intrinsic element and is created for the sole protection and advancement of that element of humanness. This is why norms contract or expand according to prevailing pressures. Whenever it becomes inimical to this primary purpose for which it was evolved, it is revised or discarded in favor of a better form.

In this sense neither man nor Human Rights is part of culture. Human Rights, therefore, cease to be part of culture and become something that transcend it. It will

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6. Tutu, Desmond. "Wither African Theology", in : Fashole-Luke, E. R. Gray, A. Hastings, and G. Tasié (ed.). *Christianity in Independent Africa*. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1978, 367-368.

7. Davidson, Basil. *Which Way Africa : The Search for a New Society*. London : Penguin Books, 1964, 77.

therefore follow that any argument in demand of different regimes of human rights in the name of cultural relativism is logically untenable and invalid. It will even be seen, from this angle at least, that the use of the term “human rights culture” (employed by the Argentine jurist and philosopher, Eduardo Rabossi in defense of the universal validity of a single regime of Human Rights ) actually enfeebles the universality of Human Rights. His expression “Human Rights Naturalized”,<sup>8</sup> however, seems more acceptable.

Another point which reinforces the rejection of the (relativist) exclusivist approach to Human Rights is that Human Rights are not an end in themselves but a means to an end. Their blessing must be seen only as an opportunity for people of different cultural environments to arrive at the full development of their human potential. Any relativist *a priori* to tailor any restriction in the name of such a volatile and unstable a thing as culture will not only compromise but also jeopardize personal and community freedoms.

It will be appropriate to round off this discussion by some pertinent observations. African skepticism is largely based on the idea that institutions such as colonization and imperialism, with its concomitant marginalization of the Third World are forms of globalism. This was undoubtedly an unpleasant experience. The problem has not been with the difference *per se* but with what we make of our differences. It must be said, however, that it behooves Africans themselves to take up the challenge to reorganize their structures and in order to evolve continental strategies capable of deriving from the opportunities offered by globalization. Needless to say that they also possess the inner abilities which other peoples have harnessed for their economic and political upliftment. This will unleash the impetus needed to make globalization more inclusive, participatory and beneficial to the global community. It will standardize the concept of universal Human Rights, and advance international co-operation through the mutual appreciation of the values and perspectives of one another in whatever fields — art, history, literature, etc.

Any push for some form of exclusivism in the name of cultural relativism is bound to prove abortive in the long-run. The European reaction to both the Cold War and the globalist phenomena, for example, is commendable. There, the racial and nationalist differences that resulted in the Napoleonic and Nazi wars have been reinterpreted and harnessed into a voluntary union of equals. Their success will demonstrate that the carnage of yesteryears should not be attributed to some intrinsic wickedness of human nature but to the inappropriate nature of types of systems

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8. Rorty, *ibid.*

they set in place in the hope of realizing their ideals. It will vindicate the possibility of the redirection of human energies for constructive development. It must also be underlined that the existence of multi-cultural nationalities such as the United States of America seriously refute the claim that there can be no uniform code of Human Rights for peoples of different cultural persuasions. The hollowness of the claims of moral relativism is therefore laid bare. The Human aspiration, rather than the fleeting grounds of culture, should therefore have more claim to be the maker and keeper of Human Rights. In literary theory and theology we have demonstrated the validity of inclusive aesthetic standards which take into account the diversity in the perception of beauty and its expression.

Admittedly, the twentieth century has been a century of horror. But only a one-sided and invalid analysis of its events can frighten us to abandon every hope and then resign to the inimical perception of inevitable doom of mankind. The other fact, however, is that this has been a century of hope and progress. And we cannot ignore that ours is a species with immense capacity for constructive endeavor. Rather than being apprehensive and fearful of the future by its horrifying lessons human nature man must stamp his will on destiny and by continuous vigilance and stubborn hope evolve unprecedented structures of harmony and justice.

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