

## AFRICA'S SELF DEFINITION IN A PLURALIST WORLD

**Sylvester Idemudia ODIA, Ph.D.**

Department of Philosophy, University of Benin, Benin City

[slyodia2002@yahoo.com](mailto:slyodia2002@yahoo.com); [sylvester.odia@uniben.edu](mailto:sylvester.odia@uniben.edu)

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.12241.35684

&

**Cyril-Mary Pius OLATUNJI, Ph.D.**

Department of Philosophy, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-AkoKo

[cyrilbukryp@yahoo.com](mailto:cyrilbukryp@yahoo.com)

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.12241.35684

### **Abstract**

*The looming trend of cultural assertion in our world is both indisputable and indestructible. The phenomenon therefore cannot be taken with levity or ignored. Arguably, it is an offshoot of the epistemological crises that attend the modernist tradition and consequently of its post-modernist offspring. This growing trend necessitates a need for Africa to assert her cultural difference from which it can project self-identity. Since Africans are part of humanity, they share many things in common with people from other socio-cultural settings. However an authentic African cultural identity will be based on that which is in some ways peculiar to Africans in their cultural practices. While avoiding misguided relativism as well as the fixed stereotypical conception of culture, which, paradoxically, breed not only polarism, but also negative pluralism, parochialism, ethnocentrism and primitivism, this paper espouses positive plurality as a means of ensuring genuine and original contribution of Africa to the aesthetic goal of globalisation. The underlying assumption of this paper is that, in Africa and for Africa, a genuine cultural identity will reinforce positive national growth and development based on the fundamental principle of plurality which ultimately enhances the dignity of the human person.*

**Keywords:** African Cultural Identity, Cultural Integration, Cultural Pluralism, Cultural Relativism, Epistemological Crises

### **Introduction**

The emerging trend of cultural assertion in our world is momentarily unavoidable and glaringly so. This looming colossus must therefore be given the seriousness it deserves. Arguably, it is an offshoot of the epistemological crises that attend the modernist tradition and consequently of its post-modernist

offspring, which currently has given birth to pluralism in all aspects of life. This growing trend necessitates a need for Africa to assert her cultural difference from which it can project self-identity. Since Africans are part of humanity, they share many things in common with people from other socio-cultural settings. However an authentic African cultural identity will be based on that which is in some ways peculiar to Africans in their cultural practices. While avoiding relativism as well as fixed and stereotypical conception of culture, which, paradoxically, breeds not only polarism, but also negative pluralism, parochialism, ethnocentrism and primitivism, this paper advocates a unique form of 'glocalisation'. The underlying assumption of this paper is that, in Africa and for Africa, a genuine rootedness in cultural identity will reinforce positive national growth and development based on the fundamental principle of plurality which ultimately enhances the dignity of the human person.

Cultures and peoples are becoming more conscious of their differences by the day. Even the individual person is getting fixated to seeing differences. To stress these differences some have agitated for cultural relativism, while others who oppose cultural relativism have argued for some sort of objectivity as a method of maintaining standards even though there is no consensus as to which culture should be used as a paradigm to assess all other cultures. The search for an appropriate theoretical position has itself encouraged the current agitation for pluralism which this paper advocates and which is also the very point of departure in this discourse. From this stand point, using the method of critical analysis, the paper examines the consequence of pluralism on Africa as a society on the one hand and proposes an African self-definition as a better way of Africa maintaining its identity in the midst of the looming unavoidable cultural pluralism on the other hand.

### **Relativism and Cultural Pluralism**

Cultural relativism is an offshoot of epistemic relativism, which arguably has been championed by V. W. O. Quine. According to Quine, "the physical objects and the gods differ only in degree and not in kind. Both sorts of entities enter our conceptions only as cultural posits."<sup>1</sup> By arguing this way Quine intends to say that the distinctions traditionally made between the synthetic and the analytic and between the mythical and the empirical are misleading and unnecessary because they are all products of various experiences. Although it is difficult to

---

<sup>1</sup>W. V. O. Quine "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", *The Philosophical Review* 60: 1951, 20-43. Reprinted in *From a Logical Point of View*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1953).

give a one final interpretation of Quine because even though he tends to referring to experience as diverse phenomena, it is also obvious that the diversity presupposes some general agreement or even universality on what is meant by experience in the first place. Hence, Quine further argues that the implied diversity does not in any way hinder intercultural communication. This difficulty in reference to understanding Quine notwithstanding, he lays the foundation for a lively debate on relativism.<sup>2</sup> This relativist trend has also been advocated by Thomas Kuhn who contends that change takes place revolutionary when mutually exclusive paradigms compete to substitute or displace one another in a somewhat political manner.<sup>3</sup> By implication, there is no one ideal or best paradigm. Rather, there are numerous competing paradigms in a competition in which the emergence or ascendance of one among the competing paradigms do not in any way indicate that the emergent one is better than those defeated. Each of the paradigms are as good or bad as the other only that one is luckier or more politically fierce than other relegated ones. Wittgenstein also argues that ideas cannot be understood apart from the contexts that produces them. In Wittgenstein's opinion philosophical problems are complications resulting from philosophers' attempts to interpret words independent of the context, usage, and grammar that produce them, which he describes as "language gone on holiday."<sup>4</sup>

From the epistemological debate on knowledge relativity springs the corresponding question of cultural relativity and consequently of the belief in cultural relativity called cultural relativism. Relativism is the view that our knowledge, ethical and aesthetic views and values "are dependent on the social or conceptual systems that underpin them."<sup>5</sup> Put differently, relativism is the position that knowledge or standards are functions of the evaluating standard. It argues that all evaluations are value laden. Relativists reject absolutes<sup>6</sup> in favour of "relational facts about what is allowed or forbidden by particular epistemic system."<sup>7</sup> They also reject universalism, objectivism, and monism. In addition, cultural relativism rejects the use of any given culture as a paradigm to judge any

---

<sup>2</sup> W. V. O. Quine, *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> T. S. Kuhn, *The structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

<sup>4</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G.E.M. Anscombe (trans.), (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958).

<sup>5</sup> M. Baghramian, *Relativism*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> B. Rosen, *Ethical Theory: Strategies and Concepts*, (California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1993), p. 159.

<sup>7</sup> P. Boghossian, "Epistemic Relativism Defended", in Alvin I. Goldman and Dennis Whitcomb (eds.), *Social Epistemology: Essential Readings*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 44.

other culture. Perhaps B. Hallen and J.O Sodipo<sup>8</sup> would appreciably count as some of the most recent advocates of cultural relativism. However Johnson J. Puthenpurackal articulates the ideals of cultural relativism uniquely thus:

According to relativism the idea of absolute or universal truth is a myth. The customs of different societies are all that exist. These customs cannot be said to be right or wrong because there is no independent standard to judge them. Every standard is culture-bound.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, Maria Baghramian sees cultural relativism as an aspect of social relativism that argues that “there can be no such thing as a culturally neutral criterion for adjudicating between conflicting claims arising from different cultural contexts.”<sup>10</sup> Recently too, Paul Boghossian, applying Richard Rorty’s arguments adapted from *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979),<sup>11</sup> defended epistemic relativism. According to Boghossian, Wittgenstein’s comparison in *On Certainty* (608-612) of those who believe in physics with those who believe in oracles, and Evans-Pritchard’s studies of the Azande people who explain reality by consulting oracles, show that:

The most that any epistemic practice will be able to say, when confronted by a fundamentally different, genuine alternative, self-supporting epistemic practice, is that it is correct by its own lights, whereas the alternative isn’t. But that cannot yield a *justification* of the one practice over the other, without begging the question.<sup>12</sup>

However, relativism fails, says Baghramian, in its response to “irreconcilable diversity and contingency” and its “inability to compare and evaluate what lies outside our immediate cultural and conceptual surroundings” thus leading to parochialism and ethnocentrism.<sup>13</sup> In spite of the arguments against relativism in general, it speaks in favour of tolerance, open-mindedness, and liberation “from

---

<sup>8</sup>H. Sodipo and B. Hallen, *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft*, (London: Ethnographica Ltd. 1986), pp.15-39.

<sup>9</sup> J. J. Puthenpurackal (ed.), “Introduction”, in *Pluralism Of Pluralism: A Pluralistic Probe into Philosophizing*, ACPI Philosophy Series, 7, (Bangalore, India: Asian Trading Corporation, 2006), p. 105.

<sup>10</sup>M. Baghramian, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup>R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 328-331.

<sup>12</sup>P. Boghossian, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>13</sup>M. Baghramian, *op. cit.*, p. 232

the shackles of the dominant paradigm.”<sup>14</sup> This value of relativism, amongst others, is captured by pluralism.

We currently live in the postmodern world where ‘uniformity’ has become a myth.<sup>15</sup> Relativists, in the postmodern spirit consider absolute or universal truth a myth.<sup>16</sup> Pluralism agrees with relativism in rejecting monistic versions of reality. But disagrees with relativism in allowing limits to the scope of diversity, and distinguishes “between better and worse, or more and less fruitful or productive, conceptual systems.”<sup>17</sup> Pluralism also believes that “there are culture-transcendent constraints on what is an acceptable belief -or value-system”<sup>18</sup> which allows for “comparisons between different conceptual frameworks and perspectives”<sup>19</sup>, and “acknowledge the possibility of giving preference to one framework over others, without embracing ethnocentrism or parochialism.”<sup>20</sup>

Cultural differences are felt more today than ever before. The mass media has made it possible for peoples of different cultures to know that “there are people who ‘think’ and ‘act’ differently.”<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, pluralism provides context-independent ground for resolving conflicts between incommensurable and incompatible values. This context-independent ground is essentially a respect for human life found in all cultures and among all societies. Coupled with the respect for human life (which includes promoting life as much as possible) is the prohibition of murder and lying. Though exceptions and disagreement to these values exist in some cultures and societies; “this disagreement exists against a background of agreement on the larger issues.”<sup>22</sup>

While admitting varieties and incompatible paradigms, pluralism aims at an existential dialogue among them.<sup>23</sup> The existential dialogue is built on the

---

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p.10

<sup>15</sup>J. J. Puthenpurackal, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>16</sup>J. Venattumattam, “Pluralism and Relativism”, in Johnson J. Puthenpurackal (ed.), *Pluralism Of Pluralism: A Pluralistic Probe into Philosophizing*, ACPI Philosophy Series, 7, (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2006), p.105.

<sup>17</sup>M. Baghramian, op. cit., p. 233.

<sup>18</sup>Idem.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 244

<sup>20</sup>Idem.

<sup>21</sup>J. J. Puthenpurackal, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>22</sup>J. Venattumattam, op. cit., p. 118.

<sup>23</sup>J. J. Puthenpurackal, op. Cit. p. 20.

principle that no single culture or people totally embody the whole of human experiences. We have equal approaches and different perspectives on reality with none superior or prior to the other.<sup>24</sup> Equal approaches and different perspectives imply that each human person, as a cultural person, comes into the world of pluralities rooted in his or her own cultural identity. As pure as one's own cultural identity may be, there is need for integration and enrichment through complementing one's own culture with other cultures for no culture is self-sufficient or complete in itself.<sup>25</sup> Integration does not mean interpreting one's own culture with the paradigm of another culture or to copy the values of another culture and paste it in one's own. It also does not mean proliferating foreign cultural practices in one's own culture. "It means rather to be touched, to be coloured, to be influenced, to be inspired by the other without losing one's identity."<sup>26</sup>

In other words, to integrate demands that one reads, from within one's own rootedness in one's cultural, another culture that one wants to be complemented with following Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction. Here there is no monopoly of meaning, and no centre for, in union with Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, the centre is moved to plurality of centres.<sup>27</sup> Having read from one's own cultural centre, one now implement in one's own culture what has been read. By so doing one achieves a form of unity with the human race that expresses itself in diversity.<sup>28</sup>

Another principle of pluralism is that all thoughts and cultural patterns belong to humanity as a whole. So, no group of persons or cultures can lay claim in a monopolistic way to them.<sup>29</sup> Thus, according to S. O. Arifalo,

All cultural or philosophical units have a universal character insofar as they belong to the *being* of humanity, although they are born and rooted in

---

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 24-25.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>27</sup>N. Wa Thiong'O (1993), "Moving the Centre: Towards a Pluralism of Culture", in P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux (eds.), *The African Philosophy Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>28</sup>J. Venattumattam, op. cit., p. 119.

<sup>29</sup>J. J. Puthenpurackal, "Pluralism: A Philosophical Clarification of the Notion", op. cit., p. 32.

a specific somewhere. This gives an added reason for each unit to be integrated with every other – the *identity* with the *alterity*.<sup>30</sup>

To properly integrate as Africans demands a proper rootedness in African culture. Let us now take a look at the African cultural identity.

### **Global Plurality, African Cultural Identity and Cultural Integration**

To begin with, we are aware that Africa as a continent contains many and diverse cultures and peoples, such that we can hardly talk of Africa as a people, a culture or a political or social system. What is peculiar to a given culture in Africa may be different from another culture. Arriving at a definite and clear analysis of what African cultural identity is, is itself a complete intellectual discourse. It is an enormous job that gives the impression of impossibility to come up with an identity that will not leave out any culture in Africa. Hence this paper does not pretend to have identified a factor that perfectly represents the whole of Africa or to have found another conglomerate in which the whole of Africa could be represented. In fact, much of collective and collaborative actions did not emerge in Africa until the rise of the need to combat the colonialists. An example was the delegate of educated Lagosians and representatives of Oba and chiefs from the interior of Yoruba land to London in 1913 to protest a land ownership law.<sup>31</sup> The event according to Arifalo, marked the first time a collective action would be organized that would comprise of the entire Yoruba.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, reference to Africa only indicates certain qualities that could be found in some of the numerous African societies and cultures and sufficient to be representative of Africa.

In a manner similar to the situation of Africa, the concept ‘global’ refers to the entire human society which is equally made up of tremendously numerous cultures and sub-cultures. However, for so long, the Western culture has been erroneously taken or accepted as the global culture. Several things including the dominance of some Western languages as well as modern technology that takes its root from the West certainly have contributed to the ascendance of the Western culture as the global culture. There is no point rehearsing all the contributing factors here. Like the case of Africa where Tanzania has not become “the African culture” in spite of the dominance of Kiswahili. This explains

---

<sup>30</sup>S. O. Arifalo, *The Egbe Omo Oduduwa: A study in Ethnic and Cultural Nationalism*, (Akure: Stebak Books and Publishers, 2001), p. 5.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 33.

perhaps, why Ngugi Wa Thiong’O is right advocating that ‘the centre’ be moved from Europe toward many centres – Africa, Asia, and South America. He did not agitate for moving the centre away from Europe to another one, let alone to Africa. He opposes generalizing and universalizing any culture as the global culture.”<sup>33</sup> He consequently supports shifting the centre from Europe to a multiplicity of centres, a pluralism of centres.<sup>34</sup>

Still around the question of cultural identity as Cocodia puts it: “the world-wide surge in the number and violence of open conflicts revolving around ethnic ...a powerful reminder that communal identities are...potent forces in contemporary politics.”<sup>35</sup> The foregoing arguments notwithstanding, we are conversant with the debate between the traditionalists and the modernist over African cultural identity. In post-colonial Africa, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to live completely uninfluenced by other cultures, especially Western culture. Integrating with other cultures in line with the view of the modernist will go against the principles of proper rootedness in the African culture from which integration with other cultures should take place. Oladipo proposes a third way that logically transcends the tradition-modernist divide. According to Olusegun Oladipo:

to honour the past without being imprisoned by it; that we can develop an awareness of our cultural and intellectual traditions while, at the same time, we recognize their limitations; that, indeed, we can work within a tradition, and at the same time, move beyond it, that we can explore developments in other philosophies without endangering the evolution of our own philosophical tradition.<sup>36</sup>

The ‘third way’ proposed by Oladipo supports pluralism and situates the integration of other cultures and philosophies within the framework of an evolving African philosophical tradition. Oladipo, in collaboration with Wiredu, propose some aspects of African culture as examples of African cultural identity. These include dance, dressing, music, recreation, style of courtship, and a few

---

<sup>33</sup>N. Wa Thiong’O, op. cit., p. 53.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>35</sup>J. Cocodia, Exhuming Trends in Ethnic Conflict and Cooperation in Africa: some selected states”, *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2008, pp. 9-26.

<sup>36</sup>O. Oladipo, *The Third Way in African Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Kwasi Wiredu*, (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2002), p. 13.

others.<sup>37</sup> To the list may be added African way of naming human persons and veneration of ancestors.

While an unmitigated implementation of the Oladipo-Wiredu's "third way" may not completely address all issues surrounding cultural identity in Africa it at least points stake holders in the appropriate direction in the search for solution. Although as writing in philosophy, there should be more of analysis and diagnosis than prescriptions of therapy, any prescription should be given at least some further explanatory analyses. Following the suggestions and principles of the "third way" it would imply by practical application on factors such as names, food and music that there would be some mental reorientation. For instance, traditionally in Africa, names (human or people's names) tell the historical experiences of the family of the bearer as well as their future aspirations. It is difficult however for a foreign language to completely and satisfactorily capture a personal experience of an African. At the same time, it is difficult to be under the illusion, at least since the colonial contact, to believe that the foreign languages of the colonialists bears no conceptual relevance on the personal experiences of Africans to whom colonialism itself is a formidable personal and collective experience.

By implication, it is very important that Africans bear African names. If as a result of religious contamination or exposure to other cultures an African also has non-African names, it is more tolerable compared to when an African has no African name. African names are meaningful and speak volumes of African cultural beliefs and practices. While it would be over ambitious and a somewhat puritan project to imagine that some or all of African cultures or communities could remain un-touched by other non-African cultures in this age of globalization, by the same token, it would be unrealistic to imagine that Africans can completely avoid taking foreign names as it would be unhelpful to propose that all Africans should take only foreign names. Hence, the "third way" is not only most logical, but also a natural course and choice for the emerging generations.

One unique thing about food crops is that they select the environment in which they can grow and produce. Unfortunately, P. Gheddo had earlier argued, perhaps ignorantly or following the testimonies of some who were ignorant of what Africans do, to conclude that "Africans before they were brought out of

---

<sup>37</sup>O. Oladipo, "The Issue of African Self-Definition in the Contemporary World", in *Core Issues in African Philosophy*, Olusegun Oladipo (ed.), (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2006), p. 65.

their isolation, did not look for progress, but for balancing, maintenance of the status quo..."<sup>38</sup> and in contrast to the Western man, the Africans feared, contemplated, respected, divinized and submitted to nature, rather than violate and transform it.<sup>39</sup> Gheddo's assertion is perhaps as a result of ignorance because though it is undeniable that Africans respect nature, it would be too ambitious on his part to assume that he knows why Africans do what they do. For instance, Yoruba people have a common saying that *Eponle l'abubutan aye, iyi Eledumare nikan ni kii tan*. This translates manageably as: there is nothing inexhaustible on earth, only the creator's honour does not end. For instance, there are some food crops common to the African environment and are traditionally symbolic to Africans. Yam, for example, is very symbolic to some tribes in Nigeria, and they celebrate yam festivals to this effect and in Gheddo's language, these Africans divinise yam. What he does not know is that perhaps, Africans may simply have realised the limitedness of all material resources and therefore carefully designed their own way of ensuring some continuity amidst unstoppable but controllable changes. After all it is also undeniable that eating food crops grown in one's environment ensures healthier living and that nature itself in the final analysis is far more therapeutic than any modern technology. Consequently, reliance on Africa grown foods and crops and understanding their significance helps in promoting and sustaining African cultural practices.

Clothing, dressing, fashion and even tribal marks on the faces are also expressions of cultural identity. Of particular interest is dance and music because of its prominence in contemporary society. Dance is also a form of cultural identity. Different cultures different, though similar, dances. Dancing and music go together reflecting one form of culture or the other. No particular music or dance is superior to another. It is all a matter of preference. It is therefore erroneous in religious circles to believe that some music and dance (a product of a particular culture) is heavenly or of God while some others are not. African music and dance is beautiful, inferior to none and a gift from God. They express the rich, deep and entertaining aspects of African art and culture.

In a world of cultural pluralities, especially in Africa (which has its own culture as well as the culture of those who colonized it), an in-depth study of African cultural values and philosophy is paramount. This will help secure a solid base upon which cultural integration can take place. Most of the courses taught in our

---

<sup>38</sup>P. Gheddo, *Why is the Third World Poor?* K. Sullivan (trans.), (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973), pp. 43-44.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid*, p.44.

tertiary institutions are tailored after the growth and development of other cultures (especially the science and technology of Western culture). For instance, not much, if anything, is done in terms of teaching and research in African medicine. In the social and management sciences, the values of foreign cultures are being taught and recommended. The solutions proffered to problems in these foreign cultures are domesticated as solutions to African problems. These are examples of the 'cut and paste' approach of integration we already rejected in this work. An adequate cultural identity for Africa upon which integration can take place will accept solutions to African problems that has been adapted to suit the social and traditional values of Africa.

Philosophy is not left out of the process of integrating cultural identity in Africa. The teaching of African philosophy in African universities seems superficial, one of paying a mere lip service compared to the teaching of European philosophy. Most departments have a full curriculum on the history of Western philosophy. Not much is being done in a similar vein to develop African philosophy. Yet, as it has been rightly observed by J. Obi Oguejiofor, "With such paltry exposure to African philosophy students are ironically expected to make a summersault and become sudden experts in African philosophy at the graduate studies."<sup>40</sup> This further explains why African graduates of philosophy thrive more in the philosophy of other cultures than that of their own African culture. This situation needs to be rectified for a proper integration of African philosophy with other philosophies and consequently, of African culture(s) with other cultures.

### **Conclusion**

African cultural identity in a world of pluralities calls first and foremost for a proper understanding of pluralism which is beyond mere acceptance and tolerance of the 'other' while refusing to integrate positive values from other cultures. Since we are all human persons, and no one culture is auto-sufficient in human experiences, there is need for integration to help cultures grow and develop along respect for human life and promoting human wellbeing, while at the same time maintain their uniqueness and differences. There is beauty in variety of cultures just as we find in colours, music and nature in general.

A proper understanding of pluralism demands that we reject relativism since it breeds parochialism and ethnocentrism. It also demands that the African, like

---

<sup>40</sup>J. O. Oguejiofor, "In Praise of African Philosophy", *Inaugural Lecture Series*, No. 14, (Awka: Nnamdi Azikiwe University, 2010), p. 22.

any other person of other continents, be 'rooted' in his or her own cultural beliefs and practices. It is from being 'rooted' in African cultural beliefs and practices that the African can properly engage in a meaningful integration – an integration that maintains the unique African cultural identity while at the same time embraces the positive values of other cultures. By so doing one's humanity is enriched and broadened as one enjoys the unity in diversity that pluralities in nature already demonstrate to us.