

A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY INTO THE POSSIBILITY OF A UNIVERSAL CULTURE

Joachim Ireruke Ukutsemuya, PhD

Directorate of General Studies Federal University of Petroleum Resources,
Effurun

Ukutsemuya@gmail.com

Abstract

Culture as a people's way of life is the common definition of culture. However, there is what is known as the proper definition of culture. It is a people's response to the challenges of existence in order to ensure the good life. This definition gives meaning to every other definition of culture as it is based on the essence of culture. This discourse assesses the possibility of the whole world having one and the same culture from the point of view of the proper definition. Through critical analysis it finds that, in the essence of what culture is all about, all cultures of the world are the same. However, this sameness in culture when it operates in particular situations of human environments, it diversifies. Thus, there is the call for universal and particular considerations in matters of people's attitude towards life. It is hoped that this will ensure a more peaceful world, reducing some of the unnecessary tensions in our world.

Keywords: Culture, Proper Definition, essence, Universal, particular and peaceful world

Introduction

As already indicated, we are operating by the strict conception of culture which is a people's inventions, material and immaterial to confront the problem of their existence in order to live the good life. Given the definition of culture as a people's response to challenges from their environments with the target of living satisfied and comfortable, could there be a sense in which one could talk about a universal culture, meaning a single culture for all peoples of the world? What about the differences of environments that we have around the world? Will these allow possibility of one culture for all in the world? Using the analytical methodology, this discourse sets out to explore the concept of culture, its possibility of universality and making recommendations there from, to guide relations among the different peoples of the world to ensure a peaceful co-existence that allows the cultivation of our world that serves all humans.

Culture

The “strict” conception of culture refers to the totality of a people’s response to the task of human existence. It is the series of solutions invented by a people to tackle the challenges of life in their environment. It is in this regard that culture is defined as the totality of a people’s way of life,¹ that is, their spiritual and material inventions consisting their ideas, institutions and material productions for survival and progress of their community. Anthony O’ Hear, elaborating on this idea of culture, says that this idea of culture comprises language, customs, morality, types of economy and technology, art and architecture, modes of entertainment, legal systems, religion, systems of education and upbringing, and much else besides; everything, in other words, by virtue of which members of a group endow their activities with meaning and significance.² This idea of culture is accessible to every member of the society as the society forms her young ones according to her way of life.

It is also important to note that because the strict conception of culture is open to reviewal of values or culture, by the fact of changing environment, it is in harmony with the etymological meaning of the word culture. The word culture derives from the Latin word “cultura”³ which referred to cultivation in farming. But this meaning soon took on rich, extended meanings, relating especially to the cultivation or improvement of something, as in individual education. From this understanding, by the 17th century, this process of personal cultivation had extended to an accepted marking of a state of superior cultivation or refinement. Consequently, writers began to differentiate between cultured and uncultured or vulgar. This differentiation brought about distinction of societies into civilized versus savage or barbarous peoples.⁴

The strict conception of culture as the totality of a people’s approach to life⁵ in order for them to live comfortably and satisfactorily, conceives life not as an already completed project but a project that is in the process of being completed. In this sense, we imagine all that comes on the way of the human person living comfortably and satisfactorily; we imagine the idea that the human person must invent to serve as a map in the direction that he/she must go in life in order to avoid the life of misery; we think of the inventions that he/she must make to avoid the hazards of nature and ensure life of comfort and satisfaction. Within this context, human life is conceived as insecurity as life on its own does not produce the ideas and materials that the human person needs to avoid the infra, toilsome and miserable life. The human person has to act by inventing ideas and

materials to guarantee satisfactorily living. The ideas and materials that are invented by the human person to enable him/her live satisfactorily and comfortably are what is referred to as culture. Culture therefore becomes the program of sustenance of the human person in form of ideas and materials invented. In this wise, the purpose of culture is to provide satisfaction, comfort and security for the human person in existence.

The Universality of Culture

We might begin by asking: what is meant by a universal culture? In answer to this question, it is important to note that a universal culture means the same culture for everybody in the world.⁶ It is what is meant by Neo-Kantianism when it talks of orientating mankind, of transforming it according to an idea, which is nothing other than the Kantian ideal of cosmopolitan humanity.⁷ The Neo-Kantian concept of man as a cultural phenomenon implies that real personal development lies in the shaping of the individual to ideals, in the adjustment of behavior to standards, to what should be done. These standards have universal validity. Biographical and instinctive impulse must be submitted to a superior, to the ideal. Freedom does not mean spontaneity; it is not appetite nor caprice, but thought and education, in other words, the active shaping of the individual by universal values.

There have been arguments against the idea of a universal culture. K. C Anyanwu, for instance, condemns the idea of a universal culture. In his opinion, every culture in the world comes from a unique environment. Different people have their different cultures.⁸ So that to have a universal culture for Anyanwu, amounts to proclaiming the superiority of one culture over others. He thinks that since peculiar environment generated different cultures, it will not be fair for one to be universalized at the expense of the others. His argument is within the context of the "superiority of western culture" over other cultures. He however accepts the possibility of dialogue among the cultures of the world not on the basis of superiority and inferiority but on the basis of mutual enrichment of each other.

Lucius Outlaw, entering the discourse of a universal culture, appears to be a moderate. He is against total relativism and total objectivism.⁹ In a nutshell, he accepts a universalism that gives place to particularism of different cultures. In arguing out his position, he acknowledges that the individual cultures live side by side with other cultures of the world in the globe. That to talk of elimination of universalism, amounts to individual

cultures living with other cultures in a global community without regulating norms. This of course translates to anarchy and chaos.⁶ Laws are needed to regulate activities of our global community. Universalism provides laws to regulate the living together of the different cultures in a single world. On the other hand, relativism, for Outlaw, respects the autonomy and dignity of individual cultures that make-up our global community.¹⁰

Wiredu acknowledges the existence of different cultures.¹¹ He holds that the relationship of superiority and inferiority should not exist among cultures. It is his view that different cultures of the world are capable of enriching one another. He particularly states that one of the benefits of interaction of the cultures of the world is that other cultures help us re-evaluate our own culture and its structure.¹² It is within this context he talks about the principle of charity¹³- that is, that other cultures have something to offer. This principle of charity connects with the principle of humanity- that is, that all human beings in the world are capable of rationality, being rational. Within the context of the respect that must be accorded all cultures, Wiredu, opines dialogue among cultures of the world implying that the west can benefit from the East, Africa and vice versa.

Ben-Ami Scharfstein in his support for cross-cultural dialogue, thinks it is time for western philosophers to study non-western philosophy with the same seriousness with which they study their own.¹⁴ He opines that western philosophy stands to gain from this interaction. It is this matter he expresses thus:

Contemporary philosophers of every western sort stand to gain in the variety of perspectives they can share, in the store of their ideas and nuances of ideas, and in their conceptual precision if they study non-western philosophies just as seriously (and, after they know them generally) as they study their own. When it will no longer be possible to maintain the old, exclusive habits of mind, philosophers will wonder how their predecessors could once have been so blind to what has become so plainly true. The sociology of the profession creates difficulties for a western philosopher who ventures outside the limits of western thought. But there are good philosophical reasons to be beyond our usual western selves and begin to philosophize in a more adequately human spirit.¹⁵

David Elliot in his review of the book of Jay Newman titled: "Inauthentic

culture and its Philosophical Critics” notes three reasons why Newman rejects the idea of relativism. First, contrary to many anthropologists, Newman insists that there are uniformities in human nature. Second, he holds that relativists must confront the basic fact that most people are fascinated by otherness and difference and regard these as sources of potential enlightenment. Finally, he holds that relativists must also confront the fact that “comparatively neutral” people can regularly and successfully judge the value of competing cultural products, even if these products are from different contexts.¹⁶ From the points above therefore, it will be clear that Newman acknowledges the reality of different cultures in a single world. He however does not believe that there cannot be interaction among these different cultures. For him the dialogue of these cultures can be rewarding to the partners.

Mahatma Gandhi recognizes the existence of different cultures. He however supports the idea of dialogue among the cultures of the world. He detests one culture imposing itself on others. He feels that if through dialogue a member of one culture feels like embracing other cultures, they should be free to do so. According to Manisha Barua, Gandhi felt that it is the duty of every cultured man and woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. To respect other religions, a study of their scriptures is a sacred duty. To understand the point of view of other faith requires tolerance, sympathy, broad mindedness, humility and willingness to recognize truth wherever it is to be found.¹⁷ The possession of these qualities, enables us to appreciate other’s faith, traditions, customs, culture and way of life. The prophets and seers of different religions brought to mankind the consciousness of the unity underlying the whole universe and a deep sense of brotherhood of man. Gandhi therefore felt a need of the comparative study of religions to pave the way for unity and brotherhood among the followers of different religions.¹⁸

Gandhi is not an uncritical recipient of culture. He had a critical attitude to the culture he inherited. Any aspect of his culture that does not make sense, he does not hesitate criticizing it and calling for a reform of it. This point is what Manisha makes about Gandhi as a Hinduist, when he says: “But Gandhi at the same time was very radical in his approach and he did not hesitate in criticizing those aspects of Hinduism which did not appeal to his reason.¹⁹” Gandhi sees God as the Truth that man seeks.²⁰ All human beings aspire to the truth. For Gandhi, different cultures should be respected. He thinks that any culture that will bring about the enhancement of the human

society should be adopted.

Gasset on his part, on the discourse of a universal culture, rejects a universalism that does not recognize particularism. It is this idea that Sanchez refers to when he says that on the basis of Gasset's intellectual commitment to the transformation of Spanish society, his thought was to evolve until he reached the conclusion that Spain's salvation could only be achieved by making use of its own energies and possibilities, its idiosyncrasies and historical reality.²¹ The Neo-Kantian – Gasset advocated man as a producer of culture, a creator of ideal forms, a human individual working towards the construction of a culture that would be valid for all mankind. Gasset gradually discovered that an individual of this kind is an abstraction, and that rationalism –which is a form of idealism – had forgotten the real and concrete man who lives in a real and concrete situation. It was necessary to look around this man for him to be revealed in his radical reality, and this meant overcoming the narrow – sightedness of rationalism.²² A new approach had to be adopted to the understanding of man, and Gasset's encounter with phenomenology²³ was to help him on this new intellectual path. His dissatisfaction with the concept of man as a cultural being began to grow in 1911 and this estrangement can be seen clearly in his meditations on Quixote, written in 1914. When he turned his attention to man himself, to his concrete reality, Gasset saw that man's being is the act of living; life is the radical and indispensable reality which must be taken as the basis for action, which must be made use of.²⁴ For Sanchez, this conviction of Gasset which prevented him from considering culture as an autonomous and independent sphere, was gradually to become one of the keys of his philosophy, as he was to remind us in his later years: 'the first thing, then, which philosophy must do is to define this fact, to define what my life, our life, the life of each one of us.'²⁵ Living is the radical way of being: all other things and ways of being are to be found in my life, within it, as a detail of it or reference to it.'²⁶ In the tug –of –war between nature and nurture, life and culture, the latter lost the dominance it had gained during the Ortega's idealistic stage and came to be thought of as a manifestation of life. Culture was henceforth felt to consist of living life to the full.

In all of the above therefore, the concrete human person who lives in a specific environment, has to be served by a culture emanating from the challenges of his/her specific environment. The meaning of this is that the idea of universal culture cannot do away with particularity of culture, by

which we mean culture created to confront challenges of living among a people in a specific environment.

It can then be said that while we could have the sense of universal culture by the fact that culture amongst humans is always synonymous with the sustenance of humans; making them have the good life as opposed to the toilsome and miserable existence, it is right to talk about the particularity of culture which situates the universal concept of culture within a specific environment and amongst a people. Thus, we have the universality and particularity senses of culture.

Conclusion

The very idea of the necessity of the universalistic and particularistic senses of culture should instruct humans about tolerance of one another. We all share in human condition by the very fact of the universal sense of culture that is the same among humans. Yet, we are to respect our differences by the fact of the particular sense of culture that emphasizes differences of environment giving us our unique identities. As the principle of charity stresses, by our rationality as humans, dialogue and not imposition among humans in terms of culture can be mutually very enriching for the good and advancement of our world.

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