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MULTICULTURALISM: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

By

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May I begin by thanking the African Union Commission for inviting me to speak on the topic *"Multiculturalism: A Critical Perspective,* in this all important conference. Indeed, it is most gratifying to note that with the advent of globalization, which has intensified artificial boundaries created by colonialism, and reduced the world into a global economic unit, Africa's unity in diversity must be of urgent necessity, if Africa is to come to table of humanity on equal terms with the rest of the world. This is so because, for Africa to make any meaningful headway in terms of her developmental efforts, Africa's development must be conceived on the basis of her diverse cultures. Therefore, any developmental plan that does not recognize or take into cognizance Africa's very rich cultural potentials is bound to fail. In this regard, the examples of the South East Asian tigers such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore etc, comes to mind. According to Ali Mazuri the South East Asian countries witnessed rapid socio-economic development by 'scientification' of their languages. And, it is on this basis that the theme of this conference. *"Unity in Diversity for Africa's Development"*, becomes very relevant.

Africa, whichever way we may look at it, remains in deep crisis. I do not intend to be pessimistic, but the truth is that the crisis posed by politics, economy, culture are deepening. However, underneath these crises are sites of aspiration, struggle, hope and commitment in order to usher in the much desired change necessary for her growth and development. Therefore, one of the major challenges of leadership in Africa has been the inability to generate, package and implement viable and effective programmes for growth and development. It is worrisome that there is not one area of human endeavour where Africa could be said to have been so successful that its example should be a lesson or a model to the world; her abundant human and material resources notwithstanding.

To fully understand and appreciate the meaning of Multiculturalism, it is important that we first clarify the concept of Culture, to enable us underscore its relevance in a globalised world, and also be able to harness the full potentials of Multiculturalism, in building a veritable strong and united Africa that we would all be proud of.

What then is Culture?

Culture has been defined as the patterns of behaviour and thinking that people living in a social group learn, create and share (Encarta, 2006). According to Edward Tylor (1891) Culture is *"that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, law, morals, customs and all other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society".* The Nigerian Cultural Policy (1988), defines Culture as *"the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempt to meet the challenges of living in their environment which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and mode of organization thus distinguishing a people from their neighbour".* Another comprehensive definition of Culture was adopted by UNESCO in 1982. It defined Culture as *"the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material,*

intellectual and emotional features that characterizes a society or social group, and includes not only arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs".

From the above definitions, we can deduce that the basic equalities that distinguish African Cultures are our extended family system, and codes governing relations between old and young, our concept of mutual social responsibility and communal spirit, our deep sense of humour embedded in our folkways, our belief in Supreme Being and our pattern of birth and death ceremonies etc. These things cover the entire gamut of African Cultures and they have deep meaning for us irrespective of tribe or clan. They are the qualities that shape our lives as Africans, and I believe they can have positive impact on our quest for unity in diversity towards development. As Otite (2010) observed, one of the greatest features of our cultures is the ability to be creative in responding to new challenges of the environment. Challenges posed by our different environments in the grassland, forest and riverine areas, motivate people to reflect on apparently insurmountable problems and improve strategies or adopt new technologies to overcome them. Our creative energies are sources of success in our survival in difficult and threatening situations.

Multiculturalism:

Multiculturalism remains one of the most crucial issues in many countries of the world, particularly Africa, no thanks to colonialism that has polarized and created artificial boundaries which caused divisions among peoples that were supposed to be one. Thus, Multiculturalism is one of the inescapable consequences and fallout of colonialism, therefore, African States must enact and redesign policies that will ensure peaceful co-existence if the 21st Century is to be regarded as the decade for Africa's development.

The term Multiculturalism means many cultures that co-exist within a geographical unit. Nigeria, like many other countries in Africa, with an estimated population of over 160 million people, and about 450 ethnic-bound cultures and society that co-exist is thus, defined by Multiculturalism. According to Andrew Heywood as quoted by Ayo kehinde, Multiculturalism is *"celebration of communal diversity, typically based on either the right of different groups to respect and recognition, or the alleged benefits to the larger society of moral and cultural diversity"*. For J. Mokwunyei 2012, Multiculturalism is seen as the appreciation, acceptance and promotion of multiple cultures within a given society with the resultant possibility of accelerated growth and development. Similar to the above definition is that offered by the Wikipedia Encyclopedia and it states that: *Multiculturalism is the appreciation, acceptance or promotion of multiple cultures, applied to the demographic make-up of specific place, usually at the organizational level, e.g schools, businesses, neighbourhoods, cities or nation.*

From the definitions above, one thing that readily comes to mind is that, Multiculturalism is the encapsulation of multiple cultures that co-exists within a well defined territory. Each member of the group within these cultures must respect and recognize every person's right for mutual and harmonious co-existence.

3

Kofi Annan puts it more clearly when he stated that tolerance, inter-cultural dialogue and respect for diversity are more essential than ever in a world where people are becoming more and more closely inter-connected. Thus, Multiculturalism itself does not constitute a problem. The problem lies in the failure and inability to recognize and appreciate other people's culture. Therefore, Multiculturalism presupposes that while appreciating our culture we must as a matter of necessity respect other people's philosophies and their way of live. It is worthy to note that mere tolerance of group differences fall short of treating members of a particular culture group (minority group) as equal citizens in a pluralistic society, but sincere recognition and positive accommodation of group differences are necessary in building a viable society. According to Otite (2010), *People react to the social phenomenon of Multiculturalism in a positive or negative way. For instance, under the minority rule in South Africa, the apartheid regime designed a policy ostensibly to separate development of Africans and non Africans, which was a policy of socio-cultural segregation, without respect for cultural differences. In that process, the more powerful white minority under took land seizures and forced the relocation of Africans into Bantustan homelands.* This kind of attitude and action is inimical to growth and development as it fans the embers of ethnic sentiment with its resultant consequences that are invariably unpleasant.

Leadership Challenge in Africa

It would be a repetition of the obvious to state that Africa is a multicultural and pluralistic society. In such a heterogeneous society, it is not unexpected that the problems of complexities will arise as a result of cultural differences. Thus, issues such as tribalism, ethnic sentiment, mediocrity and social injustice usually take the centre stage. Reacting to the problem of ethnic and tribal sentiments in Nigeria, Otite (1990) as quoted by Etang opines that; *"The ethnic virus has been one of the most important causes of social crisis and political instability in Nigeria; and ethnicity has been perceived in general as a major obstacle to the overall politico-economic development of the country".*

More often than not, scholars in Nigeria have always alluded the fact that the 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria by Lord Lugard was a marriage of strange bed fellows. As it is in Nigeria, so it is in other African countries. Consequently the British colonial policy of divide-and-rule instigated inter-ethno religious suspicion, residential segregation and antagonism among various communal groups. The ethnic problem in Nigeria is indeed the "National question" around which our great deal of our national life revolves, and in the name of which all sorts of crimes have been perpetuated against the nation (Ikime 1987).

It is important at this point to stress that the creation of Nigeria into a single entity was a forced merger of diverse peoples done by the colonial master without the input of the affected people but rather as a matter of administrative convenience. As earlier observed, the artificial creation worsened inter-ethnic tension and animosities in the nation's history.

Leadership Defined

It was the veteran writer and master story teller, Chinua Achebe who once said that there is nothing absolutely wrong with the Nigerian character. That the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. And I believe that this statement applies to other countries of Africa.

Be that as it may, there is no universal consensus definition of leadership. As there are scholars, so also there are several definitions of leadership depending on the perception of the definer. We may define Leadership as the ability to motivate and inspire people towards achieving a particular objective. According to Blondel 1987, Wildavsky 2006, Leadership is ... to lead, to show the way, to guide, influence. On the other hand, Keller maintains that a leader chooses a particular course of action and then in some ways gets others to go along, or more subtly, the leader encourages the led, to choose the way that the group will follow.

The above definitions agree with the definition of Northouse (2004) who sees leadership as a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal. Thus, we shall conceptualize political leadership as the ability and process of influencing and mobilizing the people to achieve a political end. Therefore, to understand leadership challenge in a multicultural society, recourse to our colonial history becomes most alluring.

Before the colonial era, there had been a diversity of ethnic cultures within Africa. These ethnic groups traded and interacted within and among themselves. Life to Africans was relatively simple. Though, sometimes there were frictions among them. However, during colonial rule, the British colonialist with their counterpart elsewhere came with an invidious manipulative skill which was used to set one group against the other in practical fulfillment of their colonial mission. They deliberately apply their divide-and-rule policy to permanently keep Africans apart, for their own interest. The colonial masters built on the cultural and religious differences of the people and re-inforced the antagonism between them. Thus, an opportunity was provided for the continual exploitation of Africans. This continuous subjugation and exploitation of Africans by Europeans led to so many violent resistances in the continent. Prominent among them was the Aba women riot of 1929, which was a resistance on the imposition of tax on women by the colonial master. There was also the Mau Mau crisis in Kenya, etc. Thus, the Whitemen were perceived by Africans as usurpers and exploiters who cannot be trusted. The western powers ignored existing ethnic, linguistic and religious affinities between groups of people, destroyed culturally-based political institutions, imposing artificial zones of influence, which led to an increase in ongoing conflicts and wars, ethnic cleansing and mass movement of refugees.

However, in pre-independent Africa, the political leaders who took over power from the colonialists failed to redefine leadership in a way that it will take into consideration the historical and cultural differences of the people. Instead, they copied the systems and methods of the colonial masters and inherited the weak structures which they left behind. As mentioned earlier, the political elite who inherited power followed the examples of the colonialists. Therefore, these African leaders have since been battling with how to reconcile and build harmonious relationship across ethnic divides. Painfully, the differences along cultural lines are exploited to fan the embers of ethnicity and

5

religious bigotry. Ironically, the often touted 'Unity in Diversity' became a mere political gimmick. Babafemi Badejo (2008) captured it this way:

> *Ethnicity that used to be merely a basis for identity also became the main basis for power Competition. In effect, African leaders returned to their respective ethnic groups to either Stress the need for the group to keep the spoils of power struggle or argued the need to be supported, in order to share out of the spoils portrayed as concentrated in the hands of another ethnic group. Thus, competition for power sharpened ethnic identities.*

In Nigeria forinstance, the 1959 election marked the beginning of ethnic politics in the country. The political parties as at that time were formed along ethnic line. The Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) of the Hausa/Fulani was in control of the North, the Igbo led National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC) was in charge of the Eastern region while the Action Group was in control of the Western region of the country. The 1959 election witnessed massive defeat by the NPC of the North due to the orchestrated plan of the British to hand over power to them. According to Iwara (2004), *parties and the political elites conscious of the high cost of defeat at the polls, sought to acquire solid political bases pandering to their ethnic supporters. It worked for them. The Hausa/Fulani NPC enjoyed hegemony over the Hausa/Fulani of the core North; the AG ruled the Western region and the Igbo led NCNC captured the Eastern region.* From 1959 to date, all elections in Nigeria have followed this ethnic line. The political class often manipulates ethnic and religious sentiment for their own interest, while leaving the masses impoverished and uncared for. Kwesi Prah (2011) sums this up when he said that: *ethno-cultural characteristics are in themselves not inherently detrimental. Doubtlessly, they have in the past been exploited by colonialists for their own purposes; and, from the late colonial period through to the present, they have been frequently misused by African elites to mobilize narrowly base support for even narrowly interest.*

However, a visionary leadership can channel multiculturalism for proper economic development. Two examples drawn from Nigeria are FESTAC'77 and the Contemporary NOLLYWOOD Enterprises. Till tomorrow, the gain of FESTAC'77 in Nigeria's economic and social history has been unrivalled. While NOLLYWOOD is already a breakthrough in the theatre world. Both experiences are fuelled and strengthened by multiculturalism.

Conclusion

From the discussions of the preceding paragraphs, it has been observed that multiculturalism itself is not detrimental but could be used as a platform to usher in the much needed paradigm shift if Africa is to come to terms with its developmental needs. Multiculturalism presents to us enormous opportunity to tap into our very rich culture for growth and development. As highlighted earlier, the problem of multiculturalism in Africa lies in the continual politicization of ethnicity and religion by political elites for their own interest. For Africa to experience rapid socio-cultural and economic growth, political leaders in the continent must shun all manners of ethnic and religious sentiments, invest

massively on our rich cultural values. Therefore, *why should we waste time and money in search for symbols of unity, which may turn out to be 'dangerous and misleading' when all we need to forge a national unity is to draw from complementary values embedded in many of our over-arching cultural institution. (Uchedu 1988).* Thus, there should be an urgent response to cultural diversity from African leaders in the review of our immigration policies to curb the incidence of xenophobia, ethnic and religious clashes and all manners of political violence in Africa. In enacting these policies and programmes, care should be taken to build on our shared attributes, which Otite (2010), referred to as "*traits*". These traits which are common to us as Africans include; culture of hardwork, respect for elders, culture of hospitality, communalism, transparency and accountability, popular participation, mutual dependence as social insurance and creativity. For Africa to meet the challenges of the 21st century, all the indices of socio-cultural development highlighted above should be incorporated in her developmental plan of action.

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