

Constructivism and the Quest for Cross Cultural Understanding

PAUL O. FOLORUNSO
Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria.

Abstract. Culture is a human legacy bequeathed through human interactions with nature and the universe which he lives. It entails human capacity to express and act within specific environmental contingencies. Culture is the totality of man represented in the phenomena of knowledge, arts, morals, law, and custom as acquired by man in his society. However, culture is diverse and relative to people at specific periods, this diversity has generated spates of reaction among scholars. Our intention in this work is really not to examine the tension created as a result of human cultural diversity but to argue that a constructivist view of culture is key towards achieving cultural harmony that seeks understanding in uniqueness and differences for a better world. Constructivism is the hallmark of open-mindedness which enables us to recognize our differences and still able to absorb consciously from others.

Keywords: culture, cross-cultural, understanding, constructivist, relative and diverse.

1. Introduction

An alternative to universalist and relativist approaches to the problem of cultural understanding is constructivism. Here we propose to explore those issues central to cross-cultural understanding itself. This understanding is a product of open-mindedness which constructivism seeks to achieve in order to make the world a better place. Cross-cultural

understanding could be viewed as a kind of ‘understanding of relations – an understanding that draws on the relations between different disciplines in order to position the observer ‘to see’ and thus be in a position “to understand” the world from the perspective of the other’’. Hence, the “other” in this case should also be assessed significantly from the point of understanding its own reality. We are therefore compelled to drive our judgements within the circle not alien to the perspective of the “other’’. Thus:

To engage the reality of the “other” requires that we see multiple aspects of that reality through the eyes of the “other” themselves – through the eyes of its philosophers, historians, writers and artists – those who provide us with critical perspective of the “others” lived experiences.

The import of the argument is other culture is significant and instead of engaging in relativistic cultural principles constructivism employs a dialectical method of rationality which is not only self-reflexive but also able to engage itself with a variety of different cultural perspective so that the “other” can be accommodated in the scheme of things. It is a truism that this task might be an herculean one since it may be difficult to agree based on shared understanding, however, common grounds can be constructed through a dialogical process in which both sides critically engage in a reflective manner what is positive and negative in their perspective cultural domains by trying again to integrate the progressive ones. The reason is for them to be able to strike a balance and when we look

through our culture, we shall understand that none is absolutely 'set apart'. There are traces of one in the other, some truths and values are in fact true and right for all people. These truths and values can become the basis of our understanding where we can generate specific cross-cultural agreement and therefore engender universal norms or truths as a result.

As argued by the constructivist, knowledge, truth and values are carefully constructed from the mind's engagement with reality and experience and not really a product of abstract articulation. It means humans can know nothing about the world if it relies solely on its mental processes and therefore concepts cannot be formulated without real interactions with the external world. In this way, concepts like; justice, beauty, values, aesthetics or simply put the universals etc. may be meaningless if they are not seen as properties arising out of human mind or human comprehension individuated in particular observable phenomena.

They seemed not to possess objective existence except when it is craftily created by the thinking mind, hence, "the world in and of itself produces no concepts, just as the human mind in the absence of interaction with the world produces no concepts." It is this interaction with nature and the sociological environment that determines the formation of the mind and this is the reason John Locke contends that the mind of humans at birth is *tabularaca*. Henry Putnam argues "the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world." Here Putnam seems to be of the view that whatever is culturally constructed by the mind cannot be done in isolation from the objective world and so culture is man's interaction with his immediate environment, Hence, both the mind and the world are connected. So, culture is a function of the human mind in engagement with the world and therefore all values and norms already accepted are human construct and human creation.

It is precisely because all norms are constructed that they can be reconstructed in ways which enable us to comprehend the world better and interact with it more successfully ... If new

norms can be constructed within culture, there is no reason why they cannot also be constructed between cultures.

The human person who is the agent that carries culture around him is ever ready to expand his cultural horizons and this of course demonstrates the natural capacity of man as dynamic being that is inclined towards learning from the 'other'. Because of this dynamic nature, that is the reason the constructivist viewed that just as new norms and values arise within cultures, they can also be adapted and constructed between cultures. The implication here is that culture diffuses itself through interaction and interaction is the point of convergence where different cultures meet to give way to a new one. Today, the world becomes a global village because it has interacted with one another through the instrumentality of science and technology; a new world order is evolving apart from colonialism and imperialism which in a way have altered the psyche especially of most African States. These have affected them both positively and negatively. The bottom line is, in our contemporary world there may be no traditional man or 'primitive' man again. Given this fact, then, the need to reconstruct, redirect our dogmatic tenacity to values, meanings, norms and aesthetics to reflect the modern ethos that can make all humanity across culture live a better life.

There is also the need for constructive moral dialogue in cross-cultural understanding. In order to achieve this, there has to be a general moral dialogue imbued with the intention to examine common norms and values shared by all. Though, one may agree that this attempt seems to be a difficult one but nevertheless, it is an avenue through which and understanding can be reached. Dialogue here involved a situation whereby people are consciously involved in the attempt to go into the analysis of what is to be moral rights and wrongs that binds the entire life circle, within individuals and groups in a cultural milieu. The assumption here is that citizens of the world have to be united perhaps to take an inventory of shared values that will form their guide to life, if such is possible. There are so many moral issues bewitching our world

today ranging from euthanasia, abortion, cloning, surrogate motherhood, human sacrifices, genocide, homicide, patricide, and the list is endless which in a way may have both socio-political and cultural dimensions. The question therefore is what may be the guide globally in this circumstance? It is for this reason that Etzioni contends vehemently that:

Societies need shared formulation of the good, and cannot function only on the basis of negotiated settlements of differences between individual and subgroup formations of the good. And it assumes that the processes that lead to such shared formulations entail dialogues that concern values and not merely deliberations over empirical facts or logically derived notions. They are not merely a matter of reasonable people coming to terms, but people of divergent convictions finding a common normative ground.

Obviously, this position is one that is critical especially with the caveat that such endeavour should not be handed to few people who may trivialize the formation of the supposed cross-cultural values. It must be one in which 'divergent convictions' are grounded and one which take into cognizance the diversity of human culture. This endeavour is strictly to lead to a formulation of global values. Although, worldwide moral dialogues maybe absolutely difficult they are nevertheless achievable. Difficult in the sense that the powerful nations are always dominating the less powerful ones especially when lending their 'moral voices' on global issues and when such global issue do not favour them. In other words, to achieve global moral dialogue, it is necessary to raise 'moral voices' especially when they truly reflect the desire of the people of a society that is raising them, should be raised cross-culturally. Implied here may be that if all 'moral voices' are raised, it means we could have array of voices leaving us with varieties or multiplicity of moral values and choices since all nations for instance may be advancing their own moral cause. What then could be the yard-stick determining genuine moral claims that can enjoy global acceptance? Etzioni contends succinctly that "the fact that initially there is an array of voices does not mean that no convergence of moral claims is

possible." For him, the possibility of this convergence for global values was demonstrated when the world raised their voices in the past decades against the "legitimacy of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, and Marxism" which paved way for ideal democratic rules which most nations enjoy in our contemporary world. The point in question at this juncture is that, is it necessary to raise moral voices globally and across culture in order to foster the core of human values or what is globally shared to be common to humanity. Etzioni further affirms:

To call on all people to respect the same set of core values does not entail arguing that all have to follow the same path of economic development, enjoy the same music, or have the same table manners. At issue are core values such as respecting human dignity by not warring or tolerating genocide, being responsive to all the members of the respective communities, rather than being in the service of small elites.

The above looks beautifully appealing seeing that it bears on the core of human values. But my worry from the foregoing is that much as this list of values can have general imports, their causes in the societies may differ from one another. That is, the cause of ethnic genocide in Rwanda for instance may not be the same in Yugoslavia, meaning that it is apparent that nations forming a global alliance in attending to cross-cultural problems will in the final analysis have to return to the source of individual socio-political problems for cure and thereby making cross-cultural alliance to resolve global moral problem a futile engagement. This seems to make Etzioni's suggestion one that is not sacrosanct. But with this argument there seems to be a light at the end of the tunnel especially with the contention that world-wide moral voice should not go in the way of the relativists but charged all societies to respect the rights of others to lay moral claims on them just as they can also do on others. By this he is advocating a mutual or symbiotic moral relationship to build a global family that is open-minded and that embraces one another in the spirit of cosmopolitanism. Thus, the dialogue will only engender cooperation, understanding and not chastisement. In this way, "the West should realize that it is well within its legitimate role of

world-community building when it criticizes China for its violation of human rights. And China should be viewed as equally legitimate when it criticizes US society for its neglect of filial duties.”

The above call for mutual alliance in cross-cultural understanding is a possibility given the practical and theoretical nature of culture as put forward earlier, culture is a human enterprise and no human species world over is exclusively and essentially apart without some overlapping similarities. Even the relativists cannot claim a culture ‘set apart’ without the influences from other human categories. It is for this reason that a probable understanding can be achieved. Ludwig Wittgenstein gives a symmetrical analogy of culture in his famous notion of family resemblance. For him, there is no single essential property which is shared by all things that we refer to as a game. They are ‘a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing.’ The idea can be applied both to the relation of members between cultures and within cultures. In this way, culture is viewed as a comprehensive entity that is capable of overlapping with other cultures and this enables us to observe similarities between cultures. Nancy Fraser did not mince words when she observes that culture are woven of many strands, and some of these strands will be shared by those whose identities otherwise diverge. This implies that there is an ever expanding identity in diversities which makes dialogues realistic in cultural enterprise. The fact here underscores the reason why I seem to agree with Etzioni that global moral dialogue and voices can be heard in the bid to restore cross-cultural understanding. It implies again that all vestiges of absolutism of both universalism and relativism are to be jettisoned. It is a truism that both makes contribution to the theory of culture, nevertheless their extremes are inimical to the development of global cooperation. It seems Lawson offers a way out on how interactions between cultures are to be convoked so as to underplay the absolutism of the above theories of culture. For him, “we need to take account of both the general (universalism) and the particular (relativism), of sameness and difference. We may well see ‘otherness’ as

constituted by difference, but this does not mean that we cannot also see the self in the other.” What this suggests is to embark on a cultural synthesis attuned to human realities, existence and peaceful coexistence. Again, it suggests an abandonment of divisive thinking towards a dialectical mode of thought that enables ongoing dialogue among cultures rather than fencing or locking our world to others and others to us.

2. Learning from Other Cultures as a Veritable Instrument for Effective Development

The idea of cross-cultural understanding should not only dwell on having basis to do comparison of cultures but also it must involve how concepts within and between cultures are used in relation to particular situated experiences. This attempt may enable us to avoid misjudgment. The degree of our experience of other culture will inform the way we relate with the culture, in this way, effective assessment or evaluation of other cultures can only be made when we truly experience it the way it is. The point here is our experience arms us with audacity to make objective reference to the world views of different cultures.

The above supposition is what the earliest philosophers and anthropologists failed to realize in their evaluation of some cultural realities about Africa. It is important to draw and learn from other cultures even though it may seem initially difficult to interiorize an alien conceptual frame work or categories but they can still be learned since man itself is an open project of many possibilities. Evanoff submit: *to deny that the ways of alien cultures can be learned is to commit ourselves to the problematic view that people from other culture are biologically incapable of thinking, acting, or feeling in the ways of another culture. Precisely because human nature is not immutable we always have the capacity to learn new ways of thinking, acting, and feeling.*

Obviously human being is potentially disposed to learn the thought system of other culture this ultimately inform my initial position that man is a possibility of different capacities. This view is

apparently supported by the cognitive psychologists when Talmy holds “there has evolved in the human species an innately determined brain system whose principle function is the acquisition, exercise, and imparting of culture.” Obviously, from the nature of man as a dynamic agent it is possible to learn and acquire the mode of rationality and values of thought systems that are not ours if we truly show interest. The significance of this attempt is that by engaging in the world views of other cultures we gain assess more objectively into the cultural categories of others instead of evaluating the world from the perspective of our own biases. It is important for cross-cultural understanding to be deeply rooted and this can be done when alien cultures are assessed through the lens of their cultures so as to better our knowledge of other cultures. It is then we can objectively critique the patterns of life and culture different from ours in the same way, people from other cultures different from ours may also reciprocate the same respect accorded them. In this way, dialogue which is the effective instrument for cross-cultural understanding can be enabled. Thus:

People from other cultures may be able to learn from our experiences and in the process dialogue based on an emphatic cross-cultural understanding of different traditions becomes possible. A willingness to learn from other cultures does not mean the outright abandoning of one’s own cultural traditions and values, although in the process of exposing ourselves to different ways of thinking we will inevitably be led to a penetrating reexamination of our own culture and values.

As a result of the healthy romance between and within cultures makes our horizons of culture opened to vista of opportunities and we gain a wider range of views across board which will in the final analysis integrate us as community of people that is not totally strange to one another. Through this medium we make ideas within our cultures to crisscross and actively engage the fundamentals of another culture and naturally, in what may look like Hegelian dialectics some anachronistic elements through this dialectical process will give way to a better synthesis. This is what Wiredu and Oladipo passionately

expressed in the African situation especially the obvious socio-economic transition of Africa from primitivism to modernity. There is a sharp departure from the traditional past and the task of the contemporary Africa.

The obvious fact is; the reality in the continent is that traditional thought is inadequate for the industrialization of contemporary Africa society. “Of particular significance in this respect is the role of industrialization as an agent of modernization and development and its impact on contemporary Africa societies.” No doubt, the advent of industrialization and modernization have had so much multiplier effect on the psyche and the entire life in African societies, so that traditional approach can no longer be sustained or is fast giving way to the best practices initiated by science and technology. Observing that Africa does not need to remain stagnant in the past that is why Wiredu advocated for a cross-cultural blending. Hence, he contends “there is an urgent need for conceptual decolonization in African philosophy.” That is, we must strip ourselves of the vestiges of non-useful cultural elements to embrace the progressive ones even if it is alien to our tradition. As a result he argues, “it is not desirable to ignore developments in other cultures” The fact above is a cross-cultural advocacy and a clarion call to learn from other cultures so that one is not locked out of civilization: science and technology seems to be one such area that should be tapped and harness to the benefit of African society. This implies that we should undermine the effects of cultural differences at this level to learn the progressive aspect of science and technology for socio-economic emancipation from poverty, hunger and diseases. The import of this argument is that it is not in all cases that we can claim cultural relativism or cultural self-identity even though as Appiah noted “differences in colonial experience have also played their part in shaping the continent’s diversities” but we must also learn and borrow consciously from others especially now that the world has turned to a global village, African society most especially cannot avoid joining the moving train, hence, we may be left behind civilization. It may even be uncultured given the dynamic nature of man to

observe in another culture element that can enhance the status of man's development and refuse to imbibe it or adapt it to our own all in the name of cultural relativism or self-identity. So, ongoing dialogue is a veritable instrument for cultural integration and this of course does not imply that the identity of each may go comatose. Wiredu clearly demonstrate this when he contends that "a culture can shed off many of its traits and gather foreign accretions without losing its identity." Wiredu seems to be comfortable with individuals, groups and most importantly Africa to be committed to a kind of bicultural framework through integrating at least some values, ideas of the other culture into Africa's own way of thinking.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, given the cultural mix, a third culture can be created at least theoretically which does not reflect exclusively either of the previous ones thereby creating different identities from the ones before, a kind of cultural hybridity. It is no gainsaying the fact that in today Africa and it may be like that for other continents, that it may be difficult to have complete traditional societies uninfluenced by others cultural elements. The cosmopolitan nature of modern world is one that enables and encourages relationship either at bilateral or multi-lateral levels to the extent that the world is now open to various forms of divisions of labour. Even in the area of morality, there is a global voice against man's inhumanity to man that is why when problems seems to transcend the boundaries of culture, then cross-cultural dialogue are constructed as a way out. That is why dialogue is important because it enables people from diverse cultures to work together on problems of mutual concern. Dower was emphatic in his own cross-cultural morality when he maintains "where the lines of cause and effect run across nation-states, so do the lines of moral responsibility." So, as said earlier cross-cultural interaction may bring about new horizons of experience and therefore avoid relapsing into extremism or absolutism which is evident in relativism and universalism.

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