

Globalization and the Consequential Effect of Universalization of Western Cultures on Peripheral Others

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Abstract

Globalization is a multifaceted, widespread phenomenon affecting people all over the world. It simply connotes worldwide interconnectedness and the exchange of ideas, cultures, technology, peoples, goods and services. It is reputed as having both positive and negative dimensions and being driven by Western and Asian capitals, concepts, technology, products, etc. Keen observation of globalization has revealed its lopsidedness and tendency to impose foreign cultures, particularly, of the Western variants and their products on erstwhile colonized and, developing nations of the world; termed ‘the peripheral others’. This has manifested in the supplant of their indigenous cultures and practices such as language, religion, values, dressings, belief systems, and arts, among many others. This study therefore seeks to highlight and draw attention to this global cultural anomaly with the intention of waking up the affected peripheral cultures to the imbalance inherent in the universalization of Western cultures and the dangers in the wholesale adoption of the same. The study is library-based but also involves deductions from the realities of everyday life. The descriptive qualitative method, involving verbal explanation, was used to expound the study and establish the thesis of the universalization of Western cultures on peripheral others. The study denounces the indiscriminate adoption of foreign cultures calls for the reversal of the trend and suggests as best for sustainable development, a blend of local cultural products and the best of global techniques.

Keywords: Globalization, Global cultural anomaly, Universalization of Western cultures, Indigenous cultures, Peripheral cultures

Introduction

The concern of this study is the far-reaching effect of globalization on peripheral cultures of the world, particularly, those of Africa and especially, Nigeria, where studies have revealed the overwhelming influence of unfamiliar Western cultures on the Indigenous ones and, the people, perhaps due to their long history of colonization and continued appendage to the Western cultures. The effect of these alien cultures has been largely blamed for the disruption in the orientation and development of the peripheral peoples and, their unremitting backwardness. Globalization is a complex experience and term which has not only engaged the attention of scholars but which according to Ukpokolo, captures the very nature of the present age (275). Its essence is summed up as worldwide interconnectedness and the exchange of ideas, cultures, technology, peoples, goods and services. While Ogbuewu describes it as “an age-long phenomenon which has recently gained prominence as a subject of intellectual attention and discourse” (x), globalization, observes Abdullah, is double-faced “like the Roman god, Janus”; radiating both positive and negative influences (iii). Awonusi defines it as the “universalization of concepts, movements, technology, markets etc.” (85). To Osofisan, globalization is a project driven by Western and recently, Asian capital and technology (2). This view is shared by

Iwara (20), Nasidi (54-55) and Heinz (qtd. in Momoh 74-75). Iwara contends that the concept is seen to be synonymous with Westernization or Americanization because its engines are propelled by Western Europe and America. Tsaaio presents globalization as “an exacting jealous deity...” attracting and turning world cultures into “hybrids and mongrels” (10). These are achieved through the infusion of foreign elements into indigenous cultural practices. Globalization, Tsaaio affirms, is “crushingly antagonistic... hegemonic... exclusivist... a cultural warfare intended at the commodification of African and other peripheral arts and cultures around the world” (8-20).

The foregoing represents the views of some scholars on globalization. Amongst its many attributes are its ubiquitous nature and unavoidability (Naswen 1-10), which make it inescapable whether in its positive or negative dimension. Its negative dimension as observed by scholars includes its propensity to Westernize or Americanize the whole world (Iwara 19-36), turning world cultures into “hybrids and mongrels” (Tsaaio 7-21). It also includes denial of identity (Afigbo 99-123), social conflict (Mazrui 11), consequent upon the imposition of foreign cultures (Ayantayo 134-148), demonization of African cultures and cultural icons (Aiyejina 12), leading to “afropessimism” (Jeyifo 16), “cultural inferiorization and cannibalization” which has made Africa a consumer rather than a producer of culture (Tsaaio 7-8), all of which has alienated the continent from herself (Olupona 17). Globalization has also been observed to be a liberating force. This is seen in the movement of people across cultural and geographical lines in search of opportunities such as residencies, scholarship, seminars and exhibitions which have created a borderlessness that has helped transform the world. The building of bridges and networks of information and knowledge owing to globalization has also freed people from the shackles of ignorance about other peoples and cultures through global exchanges, the internet, books and journals (Layiwola 189).

The massive development in research and technology which has enhanced telecommunications, transportation, marketing and sales across boundaries and has brought about perfection to the tools, materials and scope of art, a component of culture, is also considered a benefit of globalization (Mittelman 229; Aniakor, 92-93; Naswen 5, 9; Idiong 125; Fleming 406). The aforementioned summations of literature on globalization touch on different facets of the phenomenon but have left a gap in the non-coverage of the effect of Western cultures mainstreamed into the visual cultures of the peripheral nations under the pretext of globalization. This is the lacuna that this study seeks to cover by examining specifically the strange manifestations paraded as art by some Nigerian artists who have deviated and come under the influence of globalized Western art practices and artists, and their universalized concepts. The study is library-based, both private and public libraries were visited for data collection through consultation of authors, texts, and diverse views on the topic. Deductions were also made from realities of the daily life of the Nigerian people/artists regarding the topic as observed by the researcher. The descriptive qualitative method was adopted, this involves the verbal explanation of the various dimensions of globalization and the establishment of the notion of universalization of Western cultures on peripheral others.

Culture and Its Attributes

Culture has been defined variously; I will be aligning with two definitions of the term. The first, by the *Cultural Policy for Nigeria*, puts it as, “the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenges of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes of the organization thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours” (5). The second definition by Edward Tylor, describes culture as “a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other

capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1). From the two definitions, we can observe that a wide range of things and practices such as religion, clothing, language, cuisine, etc. are accommodated under the wide umbrella of culture, especially when they have developed over time. Amongst its many attributes, culture has been held to be dynamic, that is, capable of reinventing itself using internal and external factors, it is non-hereditary, it is acquired through learning and not through the biological process and that claims of superiority of one culture over the other are often based on sentiments as no culture is deemed superior to the others.

Art

Art is a major component of culture and has broadly been defined as a creative expression of people’s ways of life. In the particular case of Nigeria, it is her most important asset and contribution to world culture (Wangboje 1; Willett 27), and for this reason, this study shall be leaning more on art, than all the other components of culture to explicate its thesis. Other components such as language, religion, clothing, cuisine, marriage, governance, etc. could also have been used due to global influences on them but because of the pivotal place of art among other cultural elements, and also, because there is art in all these other cultural elements either in their practice or product. Art is the quality that gives them the finesse edge. Nigeria, according to Wangboje and Willett became internationally recognised through her exquisite sculptures in wood, ivory, clay and bronze. From the period of production of these world-acclaimed masterpieces, that is, between 900 B.C. and A.D. 200 for Nok, A.D. 900 for Igbo Ukwu, A.D. 1100-1400 for Ife, A.D. 1400 for Owo, A.D. 1140-1690 for Benin (Eyo, *Two Thousand Years* 7, 80, 120, 130, 146), to the present times, Nigerian art has undergone a lot of transformation as a result of creativity and experimentation by the artists and increased contact with the outside world, particularly the West. Vogel (14), Kasfir (7), Fagg (123) and Okeke (6) affirm the influence of the contact of Africans, their art and artists with the West citing the new “range of media, techniques, patrons and ideas available to artists” and the interference in “traditional institutions... governments... art and religious practice”.

Substantiating this position, Kasfir submits that “the twentieth century and the advent of colonial rule were a time of major disruption for traditional institutions, governments and religious practice.” She says this period is “commonly treated as a time of decline and disintegration in the traditional arts” (7). This disintegration Vogel says, is occasioned by the intermix of foreign concepts, materials and theories with the traditional arts such that the outcome is no longer ‘pure’ and original but can better be described as “Africa digesting the West” (14). This view is also shared by Fagg, that there is no authentic African art beyond the point of contact between Africa and the West... (121). In other words, contemporary Nigerian arts, as a result of contact with the outside world, engendered by the powerful machinery of globalization have taken up foreign traits such that a great number of their products are no longer solely representative of the ethos of the people but of alien cultures and technologies. For example, photography, digital art, computer graphics and animation, virtual art, Arabic symbolism and many more are new imported forms, mostly technologically driven, derived from globalization. They have taken firm roots and have become parts of the contemporary practice of art in Nigeria.

Traditional African art, a corpus which Wangboje and Willett observed, brought Africa to world fame have characteristics which include their frontal conception and execution, that is, they were made to be seen directly from the front, they are symbolic representations rather than replications of the exact likeness of their subjects, they were stylized, idealized or abstracted. They are symmetrical and angular. They also show some conventionalism based on the beliefs of the producer culture, for example, they

were not made to reflect natural or seen proportions, the heads of Yoruba sculptural pieces, for example, were exaggerated and made to be about one-third of the entire body length or size. This was based on the esteem the Yoruba accorded the head, *ori*, as the seat and, determinant of one's destiny (Oyelola 10; Visona, Poynor and Cole 11). Benin plaques, just like Egyptian murals were made to portray their figures hierarchically, that is, according to their ascribed societal importance. African arts were mainly made in answer to existential problems, hence, the tag, "art for life's sake" to underscore their functionalism as different from "art for art's sake" which fittingly captures the Western approach to art.

African art began to reflect the effect of globalization, brought about through physical contact and interaction with people from other cultures, through religions, education, books, technology, the internet, and so on. As a result, there were changes in the range of materials, tools, philosophy, purpose, subject, style and outlook of the works, which are now seen in the light of "Africa digesting the West" (Vogel 14). It is important to state that similar changes were brought upon other areas of life that constitute the culture of the people. The indigenous languages were side-lined, English, French and Portuguese were introduced and made lingua franca in different parts of Africa, foreign religions such as Christianity, Islam, Eckankar, and Grail Movement were made to supplant traditional religions, while other cultural facets such as cuisine, clothing, education governance system, ethics, lifestyle, hospitality, interpersonal relationship, marriage, and so on were grossly affected and weakened by the wind of globalization, thus making Tsaaio to conclude that "Western cultural models" are flaunted as canons of "cultural excellence in the name of universality in consonance with the universal mission of globalization" (14). African artists of different generations responded differently to global influences.

The traditional artists captured their contact and interaction with the Europeans in their works as shown in the example of Benin and Yoruba artists in their depiction of the 16th-century Queen Idia mask and a 19th-century door panel by Olowe of Ise, respectively, on which images of Europeans were incorporated into the sculptural pieces. Also, Ben Enwonwu, the foremost Nigerian sculptor and painter, even though trained in England and could have continued in the European representational tradition, opted for the Negritude philosophy of espousing the Black and African personality in his works. His works portray sufficient local content to distinguish them as African. Some students of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria, which later became Ahmadu Bello University also advocated for local content in their wholly European curriculum formulated by European teachers. Their advocacy yielded one of the earliest movements in art in Nigeria, known as Natural Synthesis, which simply means a blend of the best in the artistic philosophies of the global and the local. Other flourishing Nigerian art movements such as *Ulism* and *Onaism* are traceable to their efforts.

Other examples of responses to global influences include the Osogbo experimental school or workshop in the early 60s by Ulli and Georgina Beier, the German cultural activist and his spouse whereby young school leavers with no previous training in the arts were introduced to the arts, that were shorn of modern academicism, and which produced artists such as Jimoh Buraimoh, reputed to be the inventor of bead painting, Taiwo Olaniyi, Muraina Oyelami, Rufus Ogundele, Bisi Fabunmi, etc. Other artists, like Uche Okeke, Obiora Udechukwu, Lamidi Fakeye, Nike Okundaye, Tola Wewe, Wole Lagunju, Victor Ekpuk, etc. countered Western influences with local initiatives. It was therefore surprising that, while Pablo Picasso and George Braque were admired for their creativity in adopting forms from African artworks, their African counterparts who were similarly adopting forms from Western art were not so praised. Whereas, the dynamism responsible for the "new art" being produced

by African artists was similar to that with which Pablo Picasso and other artists of the Cubism movement produced their works, by adapting forms from African sculptural pieces. But while Picasso was appreciated for his inventiveness, his African counterparts were seen as “digesting the West” (Vogel 14) or producing the “extension of Europe in Africa” (Fagg 121).

The fear expressed for the discontinuation of authentic African art as a result of intermixing with outside influences was not similarly expressed for Picasso and European art that borrowed copiously from African art. This inconsistency has made Okafor query whether when a work or a person is influenced, such is no longer authentic. Africans, she argues, speak English; a foreign language and yet remain Africans. Acculturation, she contends is universal and should not detract from Africans’ and African artworks’ Africanness (Okafor). Ever since, there has been an increase in the exchange of people, knowledge, programmes, products, etc. which has resulted in the intermix of ideas, styles and techniques in art across borders. Naturally, since the West is richer, more focused and coordinated, they have assumed leadership in the promotion and articulation of the direction of art and cultural matters globally. One of the criticisms/attributes of globalization is its tendency for “universalization of concepts...” (Awonusi 85), which because of the hold of the West on its machinery has led to efforts at “Westernization or Americanization” of world cultures (Iwara 20), a scheme that has continued to project and mainstream Western cultures into the global pool. Western languages have become the lingua franca in many parts of Africa, so also Western education, dressing, marriages, artistic practices, etc. have been adopted by the culturally colonized and, the peripheral cultures.

The dichotomy formerly between African and Western philosophies of art, captured with the art for life’s sake and art for art’s sake classifications have dissolved as most visual arts practices and products in Africa have been influenced by alien practices that have made them come under art for art’s sake grouping. These influences are channelled through Western and Arabic education, through sponsorship of art programmes, online exhibitions and so on. There are many practices which previously may not have been accepted as art that are presently promoted as art. Art has become so liberalized that all sorts of practices have found acceptance under its wide umbrella, a few examples suffice. Brogan Driscoll, in the *Huffington Post*, reports Casey Jenkins, the feminist performance artist and her latest work titled 'Casting off My Womb', on which she spent 28 days knitting from her vagina. The process involves inserting a skein of wool in her vagina... and then pulling out the thread to knit (Driscoll). Also, an Australian woman, Marcey Hawk, has reportedly become famous for her ability to paint with her breasts and sign her pictures with her nipple (“Nigerian Tribune”). From the African traditional perspective, these stated examples would be considered products of exhibitionism or even lunacy rather than art. Such would not be accorded veneration the way it has found acceptance in Western liberalism and art. But as a result of the universalization of concepts through globalization, similar practices to the ones described above are beginning to be mainstreamed as art in Africa.



Lucy Azubuike, *The Whisper*, 2009. A simulation of women's menstrual pad stains. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Lucy Azubuike, for example, in her exhibition titled, *Like a Virgin*, held at the Center for Contemporary Art, Lagos, featured *The Whisper*, among other bewildering works. *The Whisper* is a simulation of women's menstrual pad stains. The piece, according to the artist, was inspired by the need to bring feminine matters more into public space and discourse (Azubuike, *Online Interview*). Menstrual cycles and issues by tradition are private matters in Africa and Nigeria, hardly discussed openly. The promotion of menstrual issues through art may be seen as an aberration and a product of global influences. Global influences are not new in African artworks. There is hardly any contemporary artist in Africa who has not in one way or the other come under the influence of global artistic concepts, materials or philosophy. The various "isms" that characterized artistic practice through the ages, such as primitivism, naturalism, realism, pointillism, impressionism, cubism, surrealism, modernism and postmodernism feature in artworks made by African visual artists. Even contemporary artists who engage in the carryover of traditional arts no longer use the crude implements of old as there are modern substitutes which make the work less tedious and produce greater finesse.

What is strange to Africa however, is the shift of viewpoint and the elevation of the weird as art. The Center for Contemporary Art, Lagos had another exhibition titled *Thrashing*, by Kainebe Osahenye in which he exhibited *Casualties*, an installation made of thousands of crushed and burnt empty cans, the type that are usually found on waste dump sites. The exhibition of the piece (*Casualties*) as artwork caused quite a stir in the Lagos art scene as reported by Layiwola (193). The display was perceived as strange to Nigerian aesthetic taste and a product of sheepish aping of Western art. The display of waste materials as art is out of the traditional expectation of art in Nigeria. It is borne out of post-modern experimentations to break new grounds in artistic expression. The Center for Contemporary Art (CCA), a foremost independent promotional and educational outfit was founded in 2007 by Bisi Silva (1962-2019), a Nigerian curator, "to provide a platform for the development, presentation, and discussion of contemporary visual art and culture" ("CCA Lagos"). From the onset, the Center's preference for the highly experimental brand of art was registered in its choice of artists, discourses,

exhibitions and direction. The Center was unrivalled in the quest for mainstreaming global practices as they relate to the new, unconventional mode of creative expression in Nigerian artistic practices. Not a few people were worried about the direction it charted but the Centre, while the founder lived, attracted sponsorships and recognition, especially from Western bodies and institutions.



Kainebe Osahenye, *Casualties*, Burnt Cans, 2009, Installation. Photo: Courtesy of the artist

Kelani Abass was one of the Center's favourite artists. Kelani Abass is an award-winning Nigerian artist who is popular in the Lagos axis for his naturalistic style, in the tradition of the Yaba College of Technology School of Art, where he studied. His subjects were mainly human beings, cast in different cultural, occupational and recreational roles. He also painted landscapes, animals and cultural objects but he was essentially a figure painter. In his 2013 exhibition titled *Asiko* (Time), curated by Bisi Silva's CCA, the new direction of Kelani Abass' paintings had become manifest and this was partly attributable to CCA's influence. His subjects had changed from humans to machines, calendars and albums with which he presented his family business of printing and history. He deployed the same naturalistic verve hitherto used in expressing human figures to machines and these other subjects. CCA, judging by the examples of Lucy Azubuike's *The Whisper*, Kainebe Osahenye's *Casualties*, and Kelani Abass' *Asiko*, is one of the channels through which new media art and novel global artistic practices were introduced into the Nigerian art scene. The CCA is admittedly non-interested in conventional art practices and styles, notwithstanding that they are practised in the present and therefore qualify as contemporary art. To a great extent, they opened up the art space in Lagos to new ideas and practices, however, the adoption of new trends in art should be done with caution, especially when such is as strange as the simulation of menstrual pad and the exhibition of same. This is viewed in many quarters as an encroachment of the degenerate tendencies of the post-modern age.

Universalization of Art: How Desirable?

Awonusi had hinged his definition of globalization on its propensity to universalize concepts, movements, technology, markets, etc., art inclusive. Going by Awonusi's definition and the definition

of art as the unique creative expression of a people's ways of life, the universalization of art consequent upon globalization therefore implies the denial of identities of the receiver cultures whose art is displaced following the spread and adoption of alien practices. It also confers supremacy on the producer of the universalized culture, whose practices are imposed on all through the machinery of globalization. As I have argued elsewhere, the beauty of art is in its diversity, not uniformity. "When practice is seen from one point as different from individuals' points, experiences and beliefs, then the definition of art as a creative expression of individuals and peoples has been negated" (Onipede 132). Artistic practices in different parts of the globe are meant to reflect the people in those parts, their beliefs, idiosyncrasies and values. But when practices in Europe, the Americas, Asia, Australia and Africa are indistinguishable due to globalization and universalization of concepts, then, a lot of damage can be said to have been done to art and creativity generally. Also, the inescapability of globalization has been a major attribute of the phenomenon, as observed by Naswen (1-10).

This quality infers that globalization is a truth of existence and as such, unavoidable and that its impact is felt everywhere due to the interconnectivity of the world via ideas, technology, goods, services, markets, etc. This ubiquitous nature of globalization then raises another question; that of the acceptable extent of adoption of its tenets and products, such that the local will not be entirely displaced in favour of the global, especially when the phenomenon is seen in the negative light of "emerging world disorder" (Ofulue 121), as a knife cutting the things that hold the people together (Achebe 160), loss of cultural identity in aspects such as language, music, dressing, values, religions, arts, etc., and generally portending inequality and great disadvantages to developing countries (Omonzejie 90-91). Accepted that the world is presently globalized and nations are interdependent on one another in many areas, some of which are beneficial, what is wrong however is the adoption of every globalized product just for the sake of it, or, because of its availability (Oyenuga 143). This position is supported by Afigbo, that notwithstanding the ready availability of global products, Africans and other peripheral cultures can still preserve their core values and identities while adopting relevant Western cultures to modernize themselves (112). Peripheral cultures will begin to achieve desired developments when their visions, aspirations and energies are hinged on their values and cultural heritage. This viewpoint is shared by Emmanuel Ayandele, who states that "no nation is born out of a cultural womb alien to it" (qtd. in Babawale 7) and Edward Wilmot Blyden's belief that "no people can profit by or be helped under institutions which are not the result of their character" (qtd. in Afigbo 116). What is needed therefore for sustainable development, is a careful and selective adoption and blend of relevant global cultural practices with local ones. Afigbo (116) aligns with this standpoint and calls on the Black and African elite "to stop whoring after alien epistemologies, Western or Eastern ..." at the expense of the Indigenous ones, while Rabindranath Tagore, qtd. in Okoye (37) posits that "we can only play host to the world by not disowning our home, our own culture."

Conclusion

The study examined the effect of the universalization of Western culture and cultural practices on the peripheral cultures of Africa, especially Nigeria. The study also observed that African cultures are more at the mercy of the West, due to among other reasons, the compelling forces of globalization, propelled by Western capital and, the indifference of the Africans themselves to the wholesale adoption and consumption of Western and other foreign products and, their nonchalance towards the development, promotion and globalization of indigenous cultural products. Whereas there are volumes of works on African culture and cultural practices by Western scholars, there is comparatively little quantity of similar works by the Africans themselves, who should be more concerned about their

own. “Hence we had a situation,” according to Chambers, “in which the acknowledged experts (authors) in the field of African art (culture) were not even African and not even Black” (126). It is for this reason that the study concludes that there is an urgent need to reverse the trend and reclaim lost ground. That notwithstanding the unavailability of globalization because of its pervasive presence, African/Nigerian cultures should be wary and selective of their products and should only adopt those that are relevant to their developmental purposes, that no nation has attained true development while despising and abandoning its cultural products and embracing those of others. The best formulae towards sustainable development are realizable through a blend of local cultural products and the best of global techniques. That identity is paramount in human civilization and this can only be sustained and projected by espousing indigenous knowledge, values and products.

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