Peace and violence in contemporary Africa: a possibility of intercultural dialogue?*

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Introduction

The questions of peace, violence and intercultural dialogue have dominated contemporary Africa to such an extent that so many fora have discussed and debated over these issues but with minimal results on the ground. At present, it should be admitted that Africa is replete with violence perpetrated, for instance, through wars waged on political, economic, religious, cultural and ethnic lines. The cases in point are: Rwanda, Burundi, Congo-Kinshasa, Somalia, Angola, Sudan, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Uganda just to mention a few.

Admittedly, questions of peace and violence should be discussed after a thorough analysis of issues concerning cultural universalism or relativism, the possibility of intercultural dialogue, and whether or not intercultural dialogue is consistent with either cultural relativism or universalism. These issues have been ably handled by Wiredu (1996) and Oruka (1993), for instance, and I won't say much in this paper except to make one or two observations on Otakpor's (1993) position. Thus, it should be noted at the outset that this paper assumes a linguistic conceptual scheme for determining cultural dialogue, using linguistic similarities/differences as its basis, which might be seen as a shortcoming of the paper.

Another weakness of this paper is that it lacks an in-depth research in the various African languages and cultures which would have necessitated a comparative analysis of several African cultures. Granted. I leave that for other scholars to address. Ultimately, this paper admits intercultural conflict in Africa and attempts to make the simple point that although there seems to be a clear notion/word for "peace" in some Southern African languages, there does not seem to be any for the term "violence". In other words, it seems that these African languages, Chichewa in particular, are capable of enlisting acts of violence without necessarily providing a general term for what is known as "violence" in English, for example.

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Initially, a few observations, comments and reactions to Otakpor(1993) who I regard as denying the possibility of intercultural dialogue.

Possibility of intercultural dialogue?

The possibility of intercultural dialogue has, surprisingly, been denied by mainly those who embrace cultural relativism. Otakpor (1993:58), for instance, makes a case for cultural relativism by arguing that culture is "essentially a boundary marker which not only separates man from animality, but also sets groups apart from one another. Evidence from both history and experience" he insists, "support the view that human beings are many and vary in customs, beliefs and outlook"

Now, the question is: What is cultural relativism? Following in the footsteps of Mitchell (1979), Otakpor (1993:60) defines cultural relativism as the doctrine that "a culture can only be understood in its own terms, and that standards from other cultures *cannot* (my emphasis) be applied to it", and "that culture moulds personality, and that the ideas of normality and deviance, for example, are relative to particular cultures". What is clear from Otakpor's rendition of cultural relativism is that it completely throws overboard the possibility of intercultural comprehension by denying, for instance, that a Yoruba can understand a Luo or a Zulu. Surely people from one culture have been acquainted with other cultural practices and customs, and even Otakpor himself is not an exception.

And here I should hasten to point out that even if it is granted that what is normal or deviant varies from one culture to another, the idea or principle of normality or deviance pervades all cultures.

However, Otakpor sees the defence of cultural relativism as lying not so much in the denial of concepts universally employed in various cultures as in the specific justifications of those concepts and notions in a particular culture. Quite rightly, he does admit the existence of "certain invariant ethical (and cultural) norms, certain invariant rules of good conduct common to the entire human family"; cites, as examples, the disapproval in any culture of " wanton killing, cheating, lying or the abuse of other persons"; and goes on to conclude that although all cultures disapprove of these acts, that "is not to say that the reasons behind the prohibitions are universalisable... the reasons are largely informed by particular customs and traditions... the reasons are culturally based and determined" (1993:60–61). But to admit the existence of moral or cultural concepts in disparate cultures is to accept the existence of universalisable concepts. And again, the fact that the justifications of such concepts are culture-specific does not imply the

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non-universalizability of the concepts in question; all what cultures do is to domesticate these pervasive concepts by providing their justification in specific cultural terms and expressions.

The concepts themselves, in my view, are and still remain universal; the means to them or the justification for them can be culture-specific and hence particular.

Cultural relativists go to the extent of denying cultural universals, the admission of the existence of which is seen by them as a defense for cultural universalism. As a cultural relativist, Otakpor, for instance, argues that "the possibility of a 'cultural universal' is remote because culture can only be in the particular and can be understood, if at all, only in that framework. There cannot be a culture universal because that negates the idea of a culture area, that is, the geographical area in which there is a high degree and consisting of traits and custom in substantial differences from other areas or regions. There is no one single way of life common to the entire human race though there is only one human race" (1993:59). Notice here the difference between 'cultural universal' and 'culture universal'. The former implies the existence of elements of a culture which also obtain in all other cultures whereas the latter implies, not elements of a culture, but rather a universal culture encompassing the whole human race. Now, that there is no universal culture is quite easy to assert, but that there are cultural universals is a bone of contention between cultural relativists and universalists.

Secondly, the fact that cultures thrive in specific geographical locations should not be a reason for denying the existence of cultural universal. Similarities and differences do prevail among cultures from different locations just as there are similarities and differences among humans from the same or different ethnic groups, races and cultures. Thus, the specific geographical locations of cultures do not in any way militate against the possibility of inter-cultural dialogue and comparison. The main weakness of cultural relativism is the overemphasis on cultural differences at the expense of cultural similarities. Cultures do interact at various levels and in varying degrees, and such similarities are possible only if both cultural differences and similarities are asserted. So much on cultural relativism. Let us now consider the case for cultural universalism.

Cultural universalists do in general admit cultural differences; that semantic structures differ from one culture or language to another; and that these differences do indeed to some extent influence the thought patterns of the language users. However, they argue that a cross-cultural discourse is possible because "all languages share a *small set* (my emphasis) of 'universal concepts'" which, from the point of view of cultural univer-

salism, can form a framework for not only "a cross-cultural understanding", but also a "cultural-independent formulation of philosophical problems" (Goddard *et al*, 1995:37). Notice the admission of the cultural universalists of the smallness of the set of universalisable concepts. This admission signals an implicit acceptance of the existence of dissimilarities among various cultures. And in pursuit of this line of argumentation Goddard *et al* (1995) claim that these universal concepts are semantic universals. These are words of substantives: I (*ine* in Chichewa), you (*iwe*), determiners: this (*ichi*), other (*china*), quantifiers: all (*zonse*), some (*zina*), attributes: big (*kulu*), small (*n'gono*), speech: say (*kamba*), word (*mawu*), actions: do (*chita*), move (*yenda*), existence: there is (*pali* or *kuli*), time: when (*liti*), logical notations : because (*chifukwa*), if (*ngati*), space: where (*kuti*), here (*pano*), under (*pansi*), intensifiers: very (*kwambiri*), partonomy: part of (*mbali*), and taxonomy. These items do exist in all languages, and as such Goddard *et al* call them universal semantic primes.

The existence of universal semantic primes provides an opportunity for an intercultural discourse because the primes "and their rules of combination constitute a kind of mini-language with the same expressive power as a full natural language; hence the term 'natural semantic meta-language (NSM)'. If a meaning analysis is composed purely in terms of universal semantic primes it can be readily 'transposed' without any loss or distortion of meaning into ... any other language" (Goddard *et al*, 1995:420).

Here, I must pose to point out that Goddard's cultural universalism goes a bit too far in that it seems to suggest the possibility of creating a universal language, composed of semantic primes, of which all natural languages are instances. Such a rendition runs the risk of ignoring and glossing over fundamental cultural differences, and the differences in the semantic structure of various languages. That Goddard *et al* (1995) fall prey to such a criticism is evidenced by their explicit denial of the possibility of incommensurable aspects of cultures and languages. "The discovery that there is a common core of linguistically embodied 'common conceptions'", they go on to argue, "means that there are no utterly irreconcilable conceptual differences between languages. Cultural differences between human groups do not reside in the existence of some basic concepts in one cultural group and their absence in another, but rather in the ways in which shared pool of basic concepts are utilized" (p.43). On this I could not disagree with Goddard *et al* more.

In fact, Goddard *et al* are so engrossed in such a line of argumentation that they don't see that the very examples they use is evidence against their claim. They quite clearly and aptly show that the notion of mind is culturally manufactured by the English language, and thus differs in connotation from the notion of soul or of *dusa* in Russian:

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"*mind* cannot even be rightly described as a 'Western' category, but is specifically and narrowly a category of *English*", they point out. "In reality, neither French, nor German, nor Russian, has the equivalent for *mind*" (p.45). Similarly, they, also put forward, as examples, words like 'freedom' in English, *libertas* in Latin, and *svoboda* in Russian to show the variance in meaning across the different languages and cultures (Goddard, 1995:49-56). What these examples are evidence of is not that they are part of the so called 'small set' of universal semantic primes, but rather that natural languages, in this case English, Latin, Russian, are notorious for containing incommensurable notions, terms and expression. Such examples should be caveats to wholesale cultural universalists.

Furthermore, what should also be borne in mind is, as Bouwhuijsen (1995) has ably pointed out, that even if it were granted that all natural languages share a common pool, albeit small, the intransitivity of the experiences of the relations of similarity and difference at the cultural level should not be lost sight of. "If we really are to understand cultures against the background of the experiences of their members, we should not reduce cultural differences, but magnify them instead" (Bouwhuijsen, 1995:98) because experiences of otherness, the alien cultures as the other, differ due to the intransitivity of the relation of difference (Bouwhuijsen, 1995:91 and 112).

Secondly, to suppose that, through these so called universal semantic primes, one culture can be described in the language of another by basically translating the system of beliefs of the original culture in question is to ignore the distinction between orthodoxic and orthopraxic cultures. Orthodoxic cultures are those that are regarded as possessing an underlying systems of beliefs which can be inferred from the people's customs, behaviour, and rituals whereas orthopraxic cultures do not value the reasons for the customs, attitudes and rituals nor their meanings, but rather how rituals and customs are correctly performed or followed. Studies have shown that the Akha of Thailand, the Gnau of New Guinea, the ancient Chinese and Romans had and "have no epistemic attitude towards their tradition"; and to describe their cultures as orthodoxic, as ones which are reflection of systems of beliefs, is to commit a category mistake. Of importance to these people is how to perform a particular ritual properly, rather than what the ritual means to them or what belief the ritual assumes to be true or false (Bouwhuijsen, 1995:100-103). Thus unlike orthodoxic cultures in which emphasis is placed on the meaning of, and reasons for, rituals and customs, orthopraxic cultures tend to be semantically indifferent to the interpretations of their rituals, behaviour and customs. And in this regard, some African cultures, certainly the Chewa of Central Africa, are orthopraxic in certain respects.

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Lastly, I would like to insist that, as can be seen from the foregoing discussion, inter-cultural discourse or dialogue is possible irrespective of whether one embraces cultur-al universalism or relativism. The significant difference between the two doctrines in that cultural universalism underscores similarity whereas relativism emphasises differ-ence. But both principles of similarity and difference are quintessential to dialogue. In fact, cultures do interact precisely because of their differences and similarities.

Orthopraxic cultures can and do engage themselves in dialogue with orthodoxic cul-tures just as universalists enjoy fruitful dialogues with relativists.

'Peace', 'dialogue' and 'violence' in some African languages

Some African languages have a clear term for 'peace'. For example, the word for peace in Chichewa is *mtendere*; in Tumbuka, *mutende*; in Bemba, *umutende*; and in Shona it is *runyararo*. However, there seems to be no general word for 'violence' in each of these languages. In Chichewa, for example, the closest are *chipwilikiti* and *chipolowe* which ,respectively, could be translated as 'chaos or confusion' and 'collective physi-cal conflict'. The latter seems a better approximation of 'violence' than the former because chaos or confusion is not necessarily violent whereas any physical conflict is bound to be violent. And in Tumbuka, there are several words, namely, *viwawa, mbe-mbe, nthimbanizgho* whereas in Shona, you have *hasha* and *ganyabvu*. In the case of Bemba, the only word that could be provided by those proficient in that language was *ulubuli* which has more to do with fighting than being violent in general.

Interestingly, these languages seem incapable of providing a translation of, for instance, the statements that 'Mr Banda is violent' or that 'The Zulus or Kikuyus or Tswanas are violent'. The closest translation of such statements in Chichewa, for instance, would be : *A Banda ndiwandeu* (Mr Banda likes fighting) or *Mazulu, Makikuyu, Matswana ndi wandewu* (Zulus, Kikuyus, Tswanas are fighters or like fighting). It must be admitted that fighting is an act of violence, and what Chichewa in this case is capable of doing is merely specify the act of violence although it, as a lan-guage, does not possess a general word for all violent acts.

From the foregoing observations, one might be tempted to argue that since these African languages have a term for 'peace' and not for 'violence', then they are a peace-loving people. But that would be misrepresenting the issue. Chichewa, for instance, does have a term for 'war' (*nkhondo*); and in Chewa culture it is recognized that *Kunkhondo kuli chipolowe* (At war there are fatal conflicts). In fact there is the

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Chichewa proverb: *Mnzako akatong'ola maso nawe tong'ola wako* (If a person protrudes his eyes you should also protrude yours), meaning that it is advisable to follow a tit-for-tat principle in situations of conflict. However, there are expressions which do indeed extol an attitude of pacifism. The proverb: '*Ukayenda siya phazi usasiye mlomo* (When you travel, leave your footprints, not your lips) expresses that message by advising that when in an alien culture or environment, one should always avoid conflicts.

Lastly, it should be pointed out that the Chewa culture, at least, seems to lean more towards pacifism, through dialogue (*kukambilana*), tolerance and compromise than towards violence as it is generally said and maintained that *Nkhondo kapena ndewu siyimanga mudzi* (War or fights do not build/consolidate villages).

Note

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