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Globalization, Modernity, and Colonial Dispersal of Cultures

I was twenty-one when I first read Thomas Friedman's "The World is Flat." It was the early days of the Internet in Nigeria, and I was among the first in my generation to jump on this novelty that would, almost immediately, change the way we saw the world. For my friends and I, forward thinking youngsters who, although raised in extreme poverty, have managed to connect and take advantage of this global trend, Friedman's book's reinforced our central idea: that the world is, indeed, flat; and we could, by a single click of the mouse, tap into learning and career resources anywhere in the world. Within a space of four years, I visited two countries: Germany, where I lived and worked at a winter sports and Bavarian culture museum; and the United States, where I spent a week at a global youth conference with Dr. Jane Goodall. These adventures were made possible by the Internet; by sitting at a small cubicle in Southern Nigeria, researching and applying to youth leadership programs around the world.

At the Internet cafés where we paid to surf the net, the computers were American brands made in China, the rugs were imported from the Middle East, and the customers all wore jeans and T-shirts, some of which had the logos of American colleges or basketball teams. Out in the streets, it was not unusual to see young people in top Italian designer shoes and suits, some of course were made in China or somewhere in Nigeria but branded as the original from Europe. The cars were imported from all over the world;

some brands, like Porsche, now had showrooms in the country. In the big cities and in small towns, Nigerian banks expanded and innovated to position themselves as global players, with products that allowed for easy transactions, including the wireless transfer of funds from Nigeria to anywhere in the world.

The scenario I have described above summarizes Mr. Friedman's idea of globalization, one in which the world is flattened by wireless connections, in which jobs and transactions are not limited by time and physical boundaries. If I were to express his ideas in pictures, I would paint a towering tree with branches stretching forth from one corner of the world to another, with a transcontinental root system that connects the world's oceans, splitting through mountains and, on appearing on the other side, sprouting trunks and establishing itself as another, but the same, tree.

Friedman's view on globalization extrapolates imperialist conquests, otherwise known as the gradual obliteration of borders in search of wealth, which consequently led to the spread of ideas across the oceans. To an extent, he attempts to capture and narrate globalization in terms that are both familiar and unsettlingly reminiscent of the imperialist explorations:

“I set out for India by going due west, via Frankfurt. I had Lufthansa business class. I knew exactly which direction I was going thanks to the GPS map display on the screen that popped out of the armrest of my airline seat. I landed safely and on schedule. I too [like Columbus] encountered people called Indians. I too was searching for the sources of India's riches. Columbus was searching for hardware – precious

metal, silk and spices – the sources of wealth in his day. I was searching for software – brainpower, complex algorithms, knowledge workers, call centers, transmission prototypes, and breakthroughs in optical engineering – the sources of wealth in our day” (4).

There are three key ideas to glean from the parallel above. First, Friedman understands the historical complexities of globalization and how, at every turn, we must draw connections to previous occurrences and efforts that give impetus to globalization as we understand and experience it today. Second, Friedman’s emphasis is evidently on the historical present; consequently, as the book progresses, there is a dislocation from the historical past, some sort of anti-historicism that downplays the colossal import of the past as the forerunner of the present. Third, Friedman’s focus is on the tangibles of globalization. He calls them “software,” but as we know, the materialities of technological advancement are tangible, even though their conceptualization and workings might be abstract and unseen, the finished products are tangible.

Since Friedman’s focus is obviously on the present workings and manifestations of globalization – the staggering flattening of the universe – his work seems to ignore the original systems of global, cultural dispersals that prepared the ground for the thriving of today’s globalization. In other words, Friedman’s book, in a bid to capture the complexities of today’s indicators of globalization, does not pursue the more complex wirings of cultural imperialism and the reverse impact of other cultures on the West – the dispersal of cultures – which today, intended or not, oils the wheels of globalization.

In my experience, for instance, the Internet would have been useless if I did not speak English or any other international language; there are still little or no websites written entire in Ukwuani, my native dialect. As it were, the use of English as Nigeria's official language, a fallout of an earlier version of globalization, made it possible for modernization and technological changes to trickle down. Growing up in the mid to late 1990s, I fell in love with classical music and jazz, both of which were regular Sunday features at the local radio station. In addition, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens, and several literary selections from the West were required readings in schools.

Undoubtedly, the songs I listened to and the books I read were legacies of cultural imperialism. Nonetheless, they prepared and influenced the way I embraced the twentieth century and all it entails. Of this preparation, Achebe, reflecting on his own involuntary assimilation of Western culture, remarks: "What we read in the school library at Umuahia were the books English boys would read in England – *Treasure Island*, *Tom Brown's School Days*, *The Prisoner of Zenda*, *David Copperfield*" (21). Interestingly, this earlier version of globalization, which I would call the dispersal of cultures, became, but as one would suppose, the basis for Africa's contribution to global literary expressions. For one, there was a huge transition from oral narratives to textual documentation. We began to see poets like Christopher Okigbo drawing heavily from the musicality of Igbo oral poetics to script excellent poems in English, in the same way that Soyinka's poetry reflect his Yoruba heritage but expressed in English (Frazer 9). Commenting on the work of the Ghanaian poet, Kofi Awoonor, Robert Frazer notes: "When Kofi Awoonor published his *Rediscovery and Other Poems* in 1964, Ewe readers were not slow to notice a strong affinity between various of the poems and the *akpalu* dirges familiar to members of the

Ewe Language community” (16). While “drama and poetry . . . were an integral part of the African heritage [that] functioned within the oral tradition” (Darthorne 53), its transition to text was hugely dependent on the availability and accessibility of European languages. Although this, to a large extent and unfortunately, resulted in the demise of important oral aspects of culture, it provided a framework and a platform for sharing Africa’s heritage with the rest of the world. Indeed, it became a channel not only for the expression of creativity but also for the resistance of imperialism.

Perhaps the most significant remain of colonial cultural dispersal is the extrapolation of Western literature both for aesthetic reasons and as acts of postcolonial resistance. No one embodied this more than the Nigerian poet, Christopher Okigbo. Okigbo relied heavily on borrowed metaphors and imageries from elsewhere, via his background as a student of classics at the University College Ibadan. According to Robert Frazer, Okigbo’s work “is the product of a deeply sophisticated mind, as steeped in the mythologies of Europe, Asia, and the ancient world as in the folklore of the rural Igbo... ” (104). Frazer goes ahead to explain how Okigbo’s oeuvre is more or less a reflection of his place as a product of colonial cultural dispersal: “Okigbo was a man of wide and various reading in the literatures of Greece and Rome which he read while a student of classics at the University College of Ibadan, in the poetry and legend of ancient Babylon, which he encountered in [English] translation, and in the literatures of Europe and America, in which he retained a lively interest through out his live” (104).

Okigbo was not the only product of this cultural dispersal via colonial globalization. Achebe himself, as I earlier mentioned, was schooled in the same curriculum. He also read at the University College of Ibadan, and so was the Nobel

Laureate, Wole Soyinka. In her concise overview of Achebe's body of work, C.L. Innes alludes to the generation that was greatly influenced by the cultural dispersal I am implying here:

“From the church school, Achebe was selected in 1944 to attend the prestigious secondary school, Government College in Umuahia. Fellow students included Christopher Okigbo and Vincent Chukwemeka Ike; Gabriel Okara, Elechi Amadi and INC. Aniebo are also well known writers who were alumni of the college. Here, Achebe studied for the Cambridge School Certificate, following a course of study almost identical to that of secondary school pupils in England. He matriculated in 1948 . . . to study . . . at the University College, Ibadan, at that time affiliated to the University of London” (8).

The generation Innes' mentions here would go on to place African literature on the world map. Achebe and Soyinka would lecture in major universities around the world, raising and inspiring interests in African cultures. Most importantly, both would influence how Africa is narrated, and would correct existing stereotypes about African cultures.

Innes' work also draws our attention to Achebe's subtle extrapolation of non-African metaphors, some of which reflect his Christian background as the son of an Anglican preacher. But also, how he seeks to obliterate the “otherness” of his culture by borrowing from the global to express the local, via the English language and non-African metaphors: “Paradoxically, Achebe uses the written word brought by the colonizers in

order to record and recreate the oral world obliterated or denied them... Nevertheless, the novel itself *is* an attempt to reach, through self-conscious use of the language of one culture, the culture of another” (35). More specifically, Innes points to Achebe’s revision of biblical metaphors in *Things Fall Apart*, a borrowing and an attempt to communicate in terms that are global yet rooted in Igbo tradition:

“For instance, the parallel between Okonkwo’s sacrifice of Ikemefuna and the story of Abraham and Isaac is brought to the surface when Nwoye takes Isaac as his Christian name. Within the text itself, the occasional inclusion of phrases such as ‘nature . . . red in tooth and claw’ from Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, of literary words such as ‘valediction’ in otherwise non-British and non-literary idioms, serve to remind the reader of the contrasting worlds that have finally come together in the authorial consciousness” (35).

It is, therefore, reasonable to say that Achebe’s contribution to World Literatures in English, a postcolonial dispersal of African cultures, is, first of all, a product of cultural imperialism, a variant and an offshoot of colonial globalization.

Another titan of African literature who embodies the complexities of this back and forth dispersal is Wole Soyinka. In interrogating the complexities and multicultural metaphors of Soyinka’s work, Wilson Harris lays down a broad statement: “Every renaissance is in some degree a crisis of the tradition, a crisis of *seeing* or of responding to heterogeneous perspectives that lie half-buried, half-exposed . . .”(52). Harris’ overarching goal, however, is to interpret Soyinka’s play, *The Road*, as reflecting

elements of modernist aesthetics, and essentially revising pan-European metaphors, especially as it is portrayed in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, how the characters in Soyinka's play are faced with the same fate as those in Conrad's novella:

“The Professor reminds one of Conrad's unscrupulous Kurtz and the mute Murano of Kurtz's mute figures nailed to palisade or wall. It is indeed an uncanny correspondence but an alteration of destiny occurs. When Kurtz dies he is overwhelmed by dread or loss of soul. When the Professor dies, on the other hand, he appears to lose all fear of death on the road . . . “ (56).

While drawing these interesting parallels, Harris alludes to Pablo Picasso's works, and how their complexities share shreds of universal connectedness and resemblances to the aesthetics of Soyinka's work. Most importantly, however, is Harris's emphasis on the source of Picasso's inspiration, arguing that “The originality of [Picasso's work] was stimulated at an early stage by his profound instinct for the ‘mathematics’ of the African mask [which] led him to question the symmetries of complacency in Europe” (52).

There would, perhaps, be no modern European arts, as we know it today, without the strong influence of Picasso's genius. Similarly, Picasso's experimentation with cubist symmetries may not have happened without the influence of African arts. This is a connection that is not readily made, however, the visible influence of Picasso's encounter with African arts is too glaring to ignore.

In Paris of the 1900s, the Musee d' Ethnographie du Trocadero exhibited so-called exotic African arts, which had been removed from their ancestral lands in the

colonies. While these works were exhibited as mere exotic “curiosities” without aesthetic worth, fauvist artists like Henri Matisse saw it differently. Matisse would later introduced Picasso to African arts (Pennisi). Picasso would go on to incorporate elements of African arts in his work. Indeed, his desire to depart from conventional realism was answered by gravitating towards the abstractions of African arts (Pennisi).

The importation of African arts and artifact into Europe in the late nineteenth century triggered a new wave of interest in African culture. Art dealers and artists were fascinated by its novelty, complexities, and narration of African experiences in abstract form. On the one hand, the exotic figurines and shapes that graced the museums and galleries blew ordinary art enthusiasts in European cities such as Paris, Munich, and elsewhere away. On the other hand, “Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and their School of Paris friends blended the highly stylized treatment of the human figure in African sculptures with painting styles derived from the post-Impressionist works of Cézanne and Gauguin” (The Metropolitan Museum). In the end, modernist art was born, drawing its roots and spiritual symbolisms from Africa.

Commenting on this aesthetic and somewhat spiritual exchange, the Senegalese poet-President, Léopold Sédar Senghor, himself a Westernized West African whose poetry pendulated between a longing for pure Africanness and his strong connection to Europe remarked: “Black Africa has once again taken up ‘the torch of civilization.’ This began with what I call ‘the revolution of 1889,’ in the realms of literature and the arts, as demonstrated by the painting and sculpture of the School of Paris” (xii). While Senghor’s statement reflects the sentimentalities of Negritude, it is, however, a reminder that culture is dynamic and cyclical, and that our cultural present, as gestalt, is a sum of historical

transactions with others. Senghor himself embodied this idea, as Melvin Dixon noted: “[Senghor’s] intellectual development ranged from reading influential poets such as Baudelaire, Paul Claudel and Saint-John Perse to studying ethnographers such as the German scholar Leo Frobenius, whose early work recognized the existence and importance of African cultures”(xxviii)

These cultural dispersals are not limited to the realms of literature and the arts, as Senghor would say. Also, they are not limited to the interaction between the West and Africa. Similar cross-fertilizations occurred in the Americas, where the encounter between the Spanish and Native Americans resulted in a whole new racial and cultural mix that remains to this day.

Considering this vast cultural exchange that preceded today’s manifestations of globalization, it is rather curious and a bit unsettling for the interrogation of global dynamics to be somewhat reduce to gadgets and seamless business transactions across borders. The colonial and postcolonial intermingling of African cultures with cultures from elsewhere, for instance, was an interaction that has – in many ways – resulted in a global cultural expression that is both hybrid and universal. Unfortunately, that aspect of globalization is lost to today’s transience and superstructures, or is rather dislocated and studied in isolation, making it almost impossible for today’s generation to see how the past informed and gave impetus to the present.

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