The aesthetics of cultural diversity

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Abstract

This paper seeks to demonstrate that since beauty can only enhance beauty and not diminish it, the beauties of different cultures, when properly harnessed and integrated, should only result in a *mega* beauty. Mutual cultural intolerance seems to be on the increase in some culturally diverse societies of the modern world, consequently posing enormous threat to intercultural unity which is a prerequisite for peace and development within and between societies. The major questions that come to mind here are; is this problem of mutual cultural intolerance originating from the deficiencies of the different cultures or from the perception and disposition of individuals towards other cultures? Does each culture have a beauty particular to its people and practices? If yes, can these individual beauties of cultures be made to integrate and enhance one another for a *mega* beauty? In response to these questions, this paper, using the critical and analytic methods, argues that each culture has its relative beauty and that the beauty of one culture can be made to enhance the beauty of the other and vice versa following the principle of Aesthetic Mutual Enhancement and the philosophy of interculturality. This can be achieved by members of a culture mentally opening up to, and appreciating the beauties of other cultures enhancing the beauty of their own culture. This paper also makes a case for review of various customs and traditions within cultures which are abhorrent to positive intercultural exchange for greater mutual acceptability and integration.

Keywords: Aesthetics; Culture; Diversity; Mutual Enhancement; Unity; Development

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1. Introduction

Cultural diversity has attracted considerable concern at the dawn of a new century. Some forecast that globalization and market liberalization will result in cultural standardization, strengthening existing disparities between cultures. Some others argue that the end of the bipolar world of the Cold War and the oblivion of political ideologies will bring about new religious, cultural and even ethnic hostilities, leading to a potential 'clash of civilizations'. Scientists warn of environmental threats posed by human activity to the earth, drawing parallels between the loss of biodiversity and the vanishing of traditional modes of life resulting from scarcity of resources and the spread of modern regimes. 'Diversity' is becoming a reconvening call among those who condemn obstinate socio-economic disparities in advanced societies. Cultural diversity is also posing a challenge to the values of international cooperation: it is invoked by some to contest universally recognized human rights, while others — like UNESCO — hold firmly to the view that full and unqualified recognition of cultural diversity reinforces the universality of human rights and ensures their effective exercise (UNESCO, 2009:1). Among these highlighted interpretations of modern cultural diversity and its inevitability, I will align more with the position of UNECSO (and others with similar conviction and expectation) though with some modifications and reinforcements to it.

On 14th May 2017, we were privileged to witness the 2017 edition of the Annual Cultural Festival of Madonna University, Nigeria, Okija campus and as we sat in the University auditorium analysing and savouring the sweetness of the various cultural displays and the overall beauty of the event and day, the inspiration to write this paper came to us. We had witnessed cultural festivals in the past but none seem to have made an impression as deep as this one of 14th May 2017 at Madonna University. Most of the cultural groups in Nigeria were fully represented by staff and students in their respective beautiful and unique cultural attires. The choir sang various songs in various languages like Igala, Hausa, Idoma, Igbo etc. and each was so sweet. When the Yorubas came with their cultural display, it was so unique and beautiful that we were not expecting another display to be more beautiful but when the Igbos, the Tivs, the Ibibios, and other cultural groups started displaying theirs, we became confused and gave up our project of trying to identify the best. We were rather forced to reflect on the extraordinarily beautiful outlook the festival acquired from the beautiful displays of the diverse cultural groups within the festival.

We were becoming fulfilled with the beauty of that festival but our fulfilment was cut short when we started reflecting on some bitter intercultural experiences and realities of the modern world in relation to the beauty we were enjoying of the festival. It became difficult to understand why cultural groups can become so intolerant of one another to the extent of lingering hatred and even genocide if each culture could possess such beauty, which can integrate to make societies even more beautiful. The questions that come to mind here, therefore, are; is this problem of mutual cultural intolerance originating from the deficiencies of the different cultures or from the perception and disposition of individuals towards other cultures? Does each culture have a beauty particular to its people and practices? If yes, can these individual beauties of cultures be made to integrate and enhance one another for a *mega* beauty? In response to these questions, this paper, using the critical and analytic methods, argues that each culture has its relative beauty and that the beauty of one culture can be made to enhance the beauty of the other and vice versa following the principle of Aesthetic Mutual

Enhancement and the philosophy of interculturality. This can be achieved by members of a culture mentally opening up to, and appreciating the beauties of other cultures enhancing the beauty of their own culture. This paper also makes a case for review of various customs and traditions within cultures which are abhorrent to intercultural integration for greater mutual acceptability and integration. Before going any further, it is pertinent to redefine cultural diversity by clearly distinguishing between 'diversity' and 'difference'.

2. Between diversity and difference: Redefining cultural diversity

Common understanding seem to project diversity and difference as synonyms. But this is wrong since they have different meanings fundamentally. A clear understanding of the difference(s) between diversity and difference is necessary for a more objective perception of the concept of cultural diversity in order to make a clearer case for aesthetic mutual enhancement.

According to Bhabha (2006: 155), "Cultural diversity is an epistemological object—culture as an object of empirical knowledge—whereas cultural difference is the process of the *enunciation* of culture as "knowledg*eable*," authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification. If cultural diversity is a category of comparative ethics, aesthetics, or ethnology, cultural difference is a process of signification through which statements *of* culture or *on* culture differentiate, discriminate, and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability, and capacity. Cultural diversity is the recognition of pre-given cultural "contents" and customs, held in a time frame of relativism; it gives rise to anodyne liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange, or the culture of humanity. Cultural diversity is also the representation of a radical rhetoric of the separation of totalized cultures that live untarnished by the intertextuality of their historical locations, safe in the utopianism of a mythic memory of a unique collective identity. Cultural diversity may even emerge as a system of the articulation and exchange of cultural signs in certain … imperialist accounts of anthropology".

A report by UNESCO (2009:4-5) indicated that cultural diversity has developed into a major social concern, connected to the growing multiplicity of social codes within and between societies. In line with this, the report further stated:

> "*it is increasingly clear that lifestyles, social representations, value systems, codes of conduct, social relations (inter-generational, between men and women, etc.), the linguistic forms and registers within a particular language, cognitive processes, artistic expressions, notions of public and private space (with particular reference to urban planning and the living environment), forms of learning and expression, modes of communication and even systems of thought, can no longer be reduced to a single model or conceived in terms of fixed representations*" (UNESCO, 2009:5).

New systems of diversity have been discovered within societies as a result of the advent on the political stage of indigenous communities, local peoples, deprived or vulnerable groups and those excluded due to ethnic origin, social affiliation, age or gender. Consequently, the political establishment is been challenged, and cultural diversity has taken its place on the political itinerary in most countries of the world.

Confronted by this multiplicity of codes and outlooks, states occasionally find themselves at a loss to know how to respond, often as a matter of immediacy, or how to address cultural diversity for the common good. According to the report, to contribute to the devising of specific responses to this situation, it is imperative to highlight some of the challenges characteristic of cultural diversity.

A first difficulty according to this report, concerns the specifically *cultural* nature of this form of diversity. Societies resort to various alternatives, particularly ethnic or linguistic characterizations, to take account of their cultural heterogeneity. For example, examination of the population classification systems used in national censuses in different countries exposes wide discrepancies of approach to cultural categorization (ethnic origin, religious connection, skin colour, etc.). The first challenge will, therefore be to examine the different policies pursued without misplacing our topic, which is cultural diversity and not the proxies to which it is sometimes reduced. One way out would be to embrace the broadest possible definition of culture, along the streaks of the consensus exemplified in UNESCO's 1982 Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies, which has the merit of not limiting the definition of culture or concentrating on a particular aspect (e.g. religion) in order to define a culture.

Another difficulty lies with the identification of the *elements* of cultural diversity. "In this connection, the terms 'culture', 'civilization' and 'peoples' have different connotations depending on context, for example scientific or political. Whereas 'cultures' refer to entities that tend to define themselves in relation to one another, the term 'civilization' refers to cultures that affirm their values or world views as universal and adopt an expansionist approach towards those who do not (or do not yet) share them" (Descola, 2005). It is therefore a very real task to attempt to persuade the different forces of civilization to coexist peaceably. As considered by UNESCO — a conception distant from those ideological constructions that predict a 'clash of civilizations' — civilization is to be understood as 'work in progress', as the acceptance of each of the world's cultures, on the foundation of equality, in a continuing universal task.

A third difficulty that needs to be temporarily identified bothers on the relationship of cultures to change. For, as noted by Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, almost seven decades of the 20th century were to pass before cultures started to be understood as shifting entities. Previously, there was a tendency to view them as essentially fixed, their content being 'transmitted' between generations through a variety of channels, such as education or initiatory practices of various kinds. Today culture is increasingly understood as a process whereby societies evolve along pathways that are specific to them. 'What is truly specific in a society is not so much people's values, beliefs, feelings, habits, languages, knowledge, lifestyles etc. as the way in which all these characteristics change'.

These considerations argue in favour of a new attitude to cultural diversity — one that takes its dynamic nature into consideration and the challenges of identity connected with the perpetuity of cultural change. This necessarily requires changes to UNESCO's starring role in this context. For, whereas the Organization's age-old concern has been with the preservation and safeguarding of vanishing cultural sites, practices and expressions, it must now also learn to sustain cultural change in order to assist individuals and groups to manage diversity more successfully — for this eventually is the major task: *managing cultural diversity*.

The challenge integral to cultural diversity is not posed simply at the international level (between nation-states) or at the infra-national level (within increasingly multicultural societies); it also concerns us as individuals through those manifold identities whereby we learn to be open to difference while remaining and retaining ourselves. Thus cultural diversity has significant political consequences: it recommends the aim of acquitting ourselves of stereotypes and preconceptions in order to accept others with their differences and intricacies. In this way, it becomes likely to rediscover our common humanity through our very diversity. Cultural diversity thereby becomes a resource, benefitting cultural intellectual and scientific collaboration for development and the philosophy of peace. This is the basis for the aesthetics of mutual enhancement of cultures and the philosophy of interculturality.

3. The aesthetics of mutual enhancement

Experience has shown that in most cases, when things of like nature combine or come together, the union results in a substantial mutual appreciation or depreciation of their independent identities as the case may be. In other words, since the different identities have fundamental similarities in terms of their nature and composition, they tend to enhance and consolidate each other's identity thereby producing an enhanced version of what their individual identities could independently produce. For instance, when you light two match – sticks, you tend to have more fire when the fire on the two match – sticks are combined than when each of them produce their fire independently. Again, when there are two light bulbs in a room, there tend to be more brightness in the room when both of the bulbs produce light at the same time than when one is working at a time. In a similar manner, when two or more people of decent character interact and work together, their individual decencies can only be mutually enhanced by the mutual influence of their individual decencies. In other words, you are likely to have individuals of higher decency than they would have been independently when decent people combine, dwell and work together. From the negative perspective, when individuals of evil character combine, dwell and work together, the outcome can only be a consolidated form of evil because of the mutual evil influences.

In a similar manner, beautiful persons, things or practices can enhance each other or one another, as the case may be, to produce a consolidated beautiful whole. It is only ontological and logical that when beauty encounters beauty, the result can only be more beauty - an enhanced beauty. Beauty reinforces beauty and not diminish it. When beauty diminishes its kind, it is conditioned to be so. In other words, there must be a conscious effort to make it so against its ontological framework. When beautiful things and practices as found in various cultures tend to diminish when they encounter others of their kind, the human agent is responsible for such aberrations resulting from prejudices, mind-sets and other negative dispositions of holders of one culture against the other. Therefore, a philosophy of interculturality is required to correct these negative dispositions of one culture against the other in order to enhance objective encounters between the beauties of different cultures for a consolidated beauty of cultural diversity. To achieve this, the process of Philosophical Hermeneutics of Hans Georg Gadamar could be of importance. According to him, "hermeneutics is a process which helps interpretation and understanding of things from someone else's perspective" (Gadamar, 1967). The reversibility thesis of Merleau – Ponty (1968) in which the world of the self opens upon the world of the

other in an encounter, thereby closing the mental gap between the self and the other is also relevant here when applied to cultures. All these point to a philosophy of interculturality.

4. Cultural diversity and the aesthetics of mutual enhancement: Projecting the philosophy of interculturality

The task here is to project how the aesthetics of mutual enhancement and the philosophy of interculturality can offer a healthier intercultural disposition in our culturally diverse societies. In view of this task, Verena opines:

> *A recurrent concept to explain beauty is that of unity in diversity. The concept of unity in diversity implies that in the course of viewing a chaotic, disorderly subject, structures are recognizable. The discovery of an order is seen as the cause of the beauty. This still represented theory can be attributed to the Pythagoreans in ancient Greece and is represented over the centuries by theorists such as Aristotle, Leibniz, Baumgarten, Kant, Fechner, Berlyne and Birkhoff. Despite many differences all these approaches have in common that they see the interplay of order and complexity as the cause for the origin of beauty* (Verena, 2010).

Furthermore, in agreement with Cramer & Kaempfer, Verena states that "in all theories, as well as the factor 'order', the importance of deviation is emphasized". According to Anz as referred to by Verena, this implies that uniformity, regularity or order taken independently are not perceived as beautiful, but only in mixture with deviations or variety (Verena, 2010).

From a similar perspective, when we find parts of our own lives and thoughts or subjects concerning ourselves represented in an aesthetic object, the pleasure and interest in dealing with this object is important. Already Plotinus has spoken about the compatibility of a pleasurable thing and the viewer. The kinship from the soul with the beautiful object constitutes the attraction for the beholder (Verena, 2010). In line with Halcour, Verena argues that "by comparing one's own thoughts with the content of the artwork, the viewer perceives that they are not alone with their problems and feelings. They thus experience a satisfaction of their need for affiliation" (Verena, 2010). There are other people who feel like us — this implies that we feel part of a community. Not only affiliation and certainty, but also the need for proficiency are increased by self-recognition in the aesthetic object. Discovering one's own feelings in a work of art makes them appearently important, and this strengthens the confidence in one's own sensations. Let us look at the issue from a broader perspective of the philosophy of interculturality.

The views of Komel (2004) in his article "Philosophy and the Constitution of the Intercultural Sense" will be largely utilized and made reference to here. According to him, "within the philosophy of the 20th century, the foundational notion of European humanity, as well as the need for its redefinition, was given particular fame by Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenological philosophy; among his followers are Hans-Georg Gadamer, and more recently Klaus Held, *Merleau-Ponty* and Bernhard Waldenfels. Since Husserl's cautious consideration on the *worldliness of world* has been recognised by critics as diverse as Habermas, Luhmann,

Levinas or Derrida, it can serve as an archetypal hermeneutic problem of contemporary philosophy in general, which can be encountered in all its areas; it is related to the question of whether, and how philosophy should occasion a unified understanding of the world without ignoring the differences which govern it, and the exteriority it borders on" (Komel, 2004).

For Komel, "the question is focussed interculturally in a particular way, in a manner that it makes culture an agent of *mediation,* insofar as it opens its centre, *Middle* and mediates itself interculturally. And it is here, according to Komel, that the philosophical question of the constitution of this mediating centre *middle* of the interdimension of inter-culturality appears. This mid-dimension is not given *per se,* but demands our participation. We are justified in claiming that such philosophical participation, already sketched by Edmund Husserl, contributes to the acknowledgement and recognition of shared world experience, in that it does not set up a culture as "ours" or "yours", but rather in the mediation between "one's own" and the "alien". It does not possess the alien in order to attain its own acknowledgement; neither does it disregard the alien in order to defend its own essence. The "essence", in the sense of "identity" as a mode of existence, preserves itself only in anticipation of its own mediation; otherwise it becomes isolated and is seized by a fear of obliteration. The annihilation of the *life-world* is intensely related to the question of the foundational redefinition of European humanity, as is pointed out by Nietzsche's notion of "European nihilism", Husserl's "crisis of European humanity" Scheler's "age of reconciliation", and Heidegger's "oblivion of being", without reference to literary examples" (Komel, 2004).

The philosophy of culture nowadays cannot depend, for example, on a critical theory of society which would be transmuted into a revolutionary exercise, or on any "pure theory" which indicates no interest in the world and its alienation. Global development separates "us" and "them", but in an exceptional manner, such that both "we" and "they" remain intolerable in what is genuinely our own. The other cannot be accepted if we do not first accept and even change ourselves; and here a clear philosophical question comes up: *who are we?*

How can we assert that philosophy, from its very beginnings, has been interculturally effective, and that, on this basis, it historically affected the foundational understanding of humanity? Philosophy is a product of speculation on what *is,* on questions of *being* as such and in its entirety. Thus we make rough reference to Aristotle's definition of philosophy. It is evident that such questions cannot persevere in the confined milieu of one's own culture, but have to be opened for themselves in - and towards - a world in which various cultures coincide, surpassing themselves as familiar environments (Komel, 2004).

The world means the *opening up of one's own culture.* In this trans-cultural compass, philosophy exhibits itself in the opening up of the world's limits, in which different cultures find themselves as though within a certain whole or even a universe of sense. It begins to raise questions regarding the meaning of this and that, and the sense of it all. This cannot stop one culture from outpacing another, nor can it directly allow one culture to move into another. "The primary effect of this slackening of global horizons is that culture as such *becomes a question,* that there arises the need for its definition, and that on the basis of this, a culture *itself* transforms into its constitutionality, which is the central condition for its acceptability" (Komel, 2004).

Precisely in the way it is defined in its foundational sense, the world *cultura* from the starting points to the crisis of its own definition, which in the late circumstance of European culture, in the work of Georg Simmel,

eventually becomes a "tragedy of culture". This crisis of culture is also linked with philosophy within the context of mutual definitions. Culture does not presuppose just one, binding and all- embracing philosophy in the form of a world-view, and philosophy itself never takes into account only one, but by tenet, numerous cultures. No doubt certain conditions had to be achieved to be able to articulate the definition of culture in philosophical lexicon; first and foremost, philosophy at its very foundation, had to understand itself as an elucidation of mind.

Komel asks; what is the philosophical elucidation of mind? He continues, for the Greeks, the soul denotes not only human life, but living beings generally. However, only the human soul can be elucidated. It is specifically because of this "fact" that the elucidation of mind inclines towards the education of the spirit, as is presented in Plato's allegory of the cave. The elucidation of mind and the education of the spirit refer to the search for the *unity* of *different* facets of life. This search for *Unity in Diversity* is a challenge for that which is, in so far as it is becoming and transient, staying and departing, growing and diminishing. That the world manifests itself in its diversity is a proclamation of the freedom in which life realises itself as *praxis* and at the same time, this life experiences the disclosure of a world. Life and the world are not the same, but nonetheless unified. Human beings develop at the locus of this unity in diversity by simultaneously longing for it.

A brilliant pointer to this longing according to Komel is Greek art, which makes sense - and not without reason - of our culture in general. This is why culture is till today, a substitute for life with a higher, excellent, and distinguishing sense. Since philosophy defines being as such and in totality, which opens up a kind of global perspective, it is of necessity that there arise the question of the affiliation between diversity and unity, between the One and the Many. Philosophy is thus in search of "unity in difference", in which differentiation itself is understood as soaring to something higher, which perfects the very human essence. In his novel *Hyperion,* as cited by Komel, Friedrich Holderlin, writes:

> *The great Heraclites' saying hen diapheron heauto (the One differentiated within itself) could only be discovered by a Greek, because it is the essence of beauty, and before it had been discovered, there was no philosophy … The Egyptian was incapable of doing it. He who doesn't live with the sky and the earth in the same love and counter-love, he who doesn't live in harmony with this element, in which he moves, is by nature in himself disharmonious and doesn't experience eternal beauty, at least not as easily as the Greek* (Holderlin, 1998: 91).

This "One differentiated within itself', *hen diapheron heauto,* if we follow Holderlin's notes, according to Komel, therefore proves a lot harder nut to crack than it might at first appear. Where do the difference and the differentiated stem from? What is the sense of the One and Unity in this diversity? This question culminates in the *disclosure of being as such,* the understanding of *the world within Unity in Diversity,* which exposes a special type of the good, true and beautiful.

"Unity in Diversity", Komel continues, magnificently epitomized in Greek *logos,* is the founding event of European and Western humanity; it is not intra-cultural *(i.e.* an ancient Greek and then Latin event), it is unequivocally intercultural, provided that it forms the ground for the development of European history and Western civilization. It enables exchange and infusion among cultures, as is clearly the case in early Christianity,

which would later ground its sense only in *logos,* comprehended in the unity of the universal, individual and particular. (Komel, 2004).

It is however, no longer conceivable to cling exclusively to the opinion of our own culture, not even the European one. Every cultural self-representation is manifested in intercultural openness.

Even in the most hostile situations, intercultural openness can be made to combine into a beautiful experience. This is exemplified in the following emotional story from World War I.

> *In the First World War, trench warfare gave examples of unspeakable horror and suffering. This was a hell of human making. But even then a reconciliation of unity and diversity was possible. The higher potentiality of life could make use even of these abominable circumstances. On Christmas Eve the shelling and the fighting stopped along parts of the front. A quiet descended over the barbed, muddy, bloody battlefield. In the quiet, English soldiers could hear their German counterparts singing "Stille Nacht." And the English responded by singing "Silent Night." In some places enemies got out of their trenches and met in no-man's-land* (Ryn, 2003: 25).

At this point, the actuality of a common human ground downed on both the English and German soldiers and there was reciprocal openness and reversal of perspectives across both groups, consequently resulting in an encounter, which saw them re-uniting under a common human umbrella even within the hostilities and horrors of the war.

"Encountering" is thus the key word of the philosophy of interculturality, which has not only a methodological, but also an interactive sense.

5. A clarion call to universal cultural review

From the foregoing discussion on the philosophy of interculturality and its beauty, it becomes clear that just as man is by nature a social being, so also cultures are meant to integrate. In other words, no culture, especially in modern times, can successfully operate an independent or self – contained existence without recourse to mutual interaction with other cultures. This means that cultures will need to review their customs, traditions and practices in order to fortify those that are conducive to interculturality and amend or jettison those that may be abhorrent to smooth intercultural integration.

Even though the culture of a people is often a product of their collective history, experiences, orientation and world view, some customs and traditions have their founding principle deeply rooted in some fundamental error. For instance, a tradition which requires that a number of persons be buried alive with a dead king is totally not acceptable and should as a matter of urgency, be removed from the culture of such a people. Again, a culture, for instance which demands the sacrifice of strangers or people from other cultures to appease the gods of their land is also unacceptable and should be eradicated. Any principle within any culture that gives members of such culture the feeling or impression that their culture is the best and all other cultures have nothing good to offer is also not conducive to intercultural integration. There are many other customs,

traditions and cultural practices that hinder the smooth integration of cultures and need to be reviewed or removed. The argument most times is that "this is how it has been handed down to us and as it was in the beginning, so shall it be" no! Customs, traditions and practices that have not improved our individual cultures and the integration of our culture into the community of cultures calls for a review even if they have been there from the very beginning of that culture. Within this call for review however, care should be taken so that modernity does not erode the core cultural human values of the people in the name of cultural review. It is those areas that neither add value to the lives of members of that culture or to people outside of that culture that should be reconsidered.

6. Conclusion

Almost every culture has got a beauty peculiar to it which when properly integrated will result in a very beautiful world. But lack of intercultural openness and mutual suspicion and feeling of superiority has often stalled the desired intercultural reciprocity which is supposed to fully bring out the beauty in our diversity. In line with this, Bhikhu Parekh states:

> *Cultural diversity is not only an ineradicable fact of modern life but also a value worth cherishing. It adds to the variety of life and has an aesthetic significance. It increases our range of choices and widens the ambit of our freedom. In so far as it alerts us to the fact that the good life can be lived in several different ways, cultural diversity highlights the contingency and mutability of our beliefs and practices, since no culture is perfect, and since each represents only a limited vision of the good life, it needs others to compliment and enrich it* (Parekh, 2005).

Cultures tend to develop their potentials more in healthy readiness and openness to integrate positive values from other cultures and be integrated into other cultures in view of the common good and global flourishing. Self – contained and closed cultures are likely to stagnate and even retard in their quest for the good life. People should be quicker to identify the positive and beautiful aspects of other cultures than the negative aspects. It is a matter of mental dispositions and undoing prejudices and biases. In this way, cultural diversity, instead of becoming a threat to our unity, becomes the very reason for our unity and mutual strength.

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