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Can Africa Tame Globalization?: Moral Lessons from Cultural Experience

Ali A. Mazrui

Africa in the twenty first century is likely to be one of the final battlegrounds of the forces of globalization – for better or for worse. This phenomenon called GLOBALIZATION has its winners and losers. In the initial phases, Africa has been among the losers as it has been increasingly marginalized. There are universities in the United States which have more computers than the computers available in an African country of twenty million people. This has been the great digital divide. The distinction between the Haves and Have-nots has now coincided with the distinction between Digitized and the “Digi-prived”.

Let us begin with the challenge of a definition. What is globalization? It consists of processes that lead toward global interdependence and the increasing rapidity of exchange across vast distances. The word globalization is itself quite new, but the actual processes toward global interdependence and exchange started centuries ago.

Five forces have been major engines of globalization across time: religion, technology, warfare, economy, and empire. These have not necessarily acted separately, but often have reinforced each other. For example, the globalization of Christianity started with the conversion of Emperor Constantine I of Rome in 313. The religious conversion of an emperor started the process under which Christianity became the dominant religion not only of Europe but also of many other societies later ruled or settled by Europeans. The globalization of Islam began not with converting a ready-made empire, but with building an empire almost from scratch. The Umayyads and Abbasids put together bits of other people’s empires (e.g., former Byzantine Egypt and former Zoroastrian Persia) and created a whole new civilization. The forces of Christianity and Islam sometimes clashed. In Africa the two religions have competed for the soul of a continent.

In Africa today both Christianity and Islam have over 300 million followers each. There are more Muslims in Nigeria than there are in any Arab

country – including Egypt.

In North Africa Christianity arrived in the first century C.E. In Black Africa it arrived in the fourth century – earlier than in many parts of Europe.

Islam arrived in Ethiopia before it arrived in Egypt or Syria or Iraq or Iran. It arrived in Ethiopia with Muslim refugees on the run from anti-Muslim Arabs in the Peninsula. The Prophet Muhammad was still trying to preach in pre-Islamic Mecca.

Today Africa is so much part of the Muslim world that it has sometimes chaired the 50 member Organization of the Islamic Conference. Today Africa is so much part of the Christian world that when Pope John Paul II died there was open speculation as to whether the next Pope, or the next Pope but one, would be an African. This would be the miracle of having a Black African at the top of one billion Roman Catholics in the world. Cardinal Francis Arinzi of Nigeria did not become Pope in 2005. But some other African Catholic may make it before the 21st century comes to an end.

The second and third major engines of globalization are technology and the economy, often in alliance. In recent decades globalization has been envisaged in three different ways:

- I. Forces transforming the global market and creating new economic interdependencies. This is economic globalization. Africa is caught up in these forces, for better or for worse.
- II. Forces which have exploded into the information superhighway – expanding access to data and mobilizing the computer and the internet into global service. This is the informational side of globalization.

Africa is way behind in this informational globalization. My two universities in the U.S.A. (State University of New York and Cornell) may have more computers than my country, Kenya, with a population of over 30 million people.

In addition to economic and informational globalization, there is comprehensive globalization. The comprehensive scale consists of the following:

- III. All forces which are turning the world into a global village compressing distance, homogenizing culture, accelerating mobility, and reducing the relevance of political borders. Under this comprehensive definition, globalization is the gradual villagization

of the world. These forces have been at work in Africa long before the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

One of these comprehensive globalizing forces is warfare itself. The twentieth century was the only century which had world wars - 1914 to 1918, and 1939 to 1945. This was the only century which created world diplomatic institutions - the League of Nations and the United Nations. World War II helped Africa's decolonization by weakening the European imperial powers.

This was also the only century which created a World Bank - the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) with the International Development Association. The twentieth century also issued a Universal Declaration of Human Rights - adopted by the United Nations in 1948. Globalization was getting institutionalized. This was the only century which established a global university - the United Nations University in Tokyo, Japan. Some of these have affected Africa more deeply than others.

This was also the only century which had a world health institution - the World Health Organization (WHO). The twentieth century also created a global mechanism to moderate trade relations - the World Trade Organization (WTO). The Seattle meeting of WTO at the end of the millennium illustrated the depth of feelings about the organization.

This was the only century which had a part-time global policeman - the United States of America. And, of course, this was the only century which developed a genuine world economy - or at least a close approximation to it.

But this conference is not merely about globalization. It is about globalization for the common good in the context of the African condition. And where does religion fit into this equation?

I see Africa's religious experience as a product of three religious traditions – indigenous, Islamic and Western. If I have any criticism of the agenda of this Kericho conference, it is the apparent neglect of Africa's indigenous religions as an explicit item in the global agenda.

Nor is this omission unique to this Kericho conference. Neglecting African indigenous religions is a sin committed by many conferences organized by African intellectuals themselves.

In my own humble attempt to correct this omission, I have characterized Africa's religious experience as a Triple Heritage. I have not only written a book entitled The Africans: A Triple Heritage. I have also done a nine-

part television series of the same title for the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Public Broadcasting Service, in association with the Nigerian Television Authority (1986).

But in this presentation today I am addressing not only how Africa has been affected by globalization, but in what ways globalization should learn from Africa if globalization is to be for the common good.

What are the positive elements in Africa's triple heritage which should inform globalization if it is to be for the good?

Globalization and Ecumenical Africa

Each of the three African legacies – indigenous, Islamic and Western – has something to teach globalization. When indigenous African culture join hands with Islam, it can produce a level of ecumenical tolerance unequalled anywhere else in the world. One of the most striking examples is Senegal in West Africa. The population of Senegal is 94% Muslim – a higher percentage than the Muslim population of Egypt. And yet this overwhelmingly Muslim West African society had a Roman Catholic President -- not briefly as a happy accident but for 20 years without cries in the streets of Dakar demanding “Jihad fi sabili'Llah”! President Leopold Senghor maintained a relatively transparent Senegal. His critics denounced him as a lackey of the French, a cultural hypocrite and worse. But they almost never denounced him as infidel (kaffir).

Senghor was succeeded as President by Diouf, who was indeed a Muslim. But Diouf's First Lady was a Roman Catholic. Imagine a Presidential candidate in the United States suddenly confessing on Larry King Live that his wife is a Shia Muslim! His candidacy is likely to collapse.

Indeed, the U.S. has been a secular state for two hundred years – and yet the United States has only once strayed from the Protestant fraternity. The Jews have never captured the White House, although they have captured almost every other arena of American excellence outside the sporting experience.

African indigenous culture in Senegal has reinforced Islam in the direction of greater political ecumenicalism. I say “reinforced” because Islam has an independent record of allowing non-Muslims to rise high in status or power.

Boutros Boutros-Ghali would never have become Secretary-General of the United Nations had Egypt not permitted him to rise as high as Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. Boutros-Ghali was a Coptic Christian married

to a Jew.

Even Saddam Hussein was ecumenical enough to let Tariq Aziz, a Christian, rise to become Foreign Minister, and then Deputy Prime Minister. No Christian country in the Western world has ever permitted a Muslim to rise to a comparable political rank. The percentage of Christians in Iraq is no greater than of Muslims in France or Britain. Perhaps globalization should learn and improve upon the ecumenical spirit of Senegal and of political Islam.

When African culture interacts with Christianity, it helps produce Africa's short memory of hate. Cultures differ in degrees of hate-retention. For example, Armenians have a long memory of grievance. The Armenian massacres perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire from 1915 to 1917 have been so vividly remembered by generations of Armenians that Turkish diplomats have been assassinated long after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

The Irish have retained a basic resentment of the English again generation after generation. The Jews have a profound distrust of the Germans more than half a century after the Nazi Holocaust. A Jewish sense of having been violated by the Nazis may last for hundreds of years.

But African culture combined with a Christian background has produced Nelson Mandela who lost 27 of the best years of his life – and emerged ready to have afternoon tea with the racists who had stolen his youth. Post-apartheid South Africa is a remarkable illustration of a short memory of hate – a lesson for the forces of globalization. South Africans have won four Nobel Prizes for Peace.

Jomo Kenyatta was condemned by the British as a “leader unto darkness and death” and was imprisoned in a desolate part of Kenya. He emerged from jail and turned Kenya's diplomatic orientation in the direction of friendship with Britain and the Western world. He even published a book about what he called Suffering Without Bitterness. Here is another lesson for globalization if it is to become for the common good.

When Africans are fighting each other, they can be as ferocious and unremitting as any combatants anywhere else in the world. The real difference is what happens after the peace accords have been signed. African culture, especially when reinforced by a Christian spirit, has repeatedly demonstrated a short memory of hate.

After their brutal civil war of 1967 to 1970, Nigerians were expected to be cruelly triumphalist against the losers in Igboland. Rivers of blood were

expected in the wake of Biafra's defeat. But the Nigerian leader, General Yakubu Gowon, who led the Federal side, managed to combine Christian compassion with Africa's own short memory of hate. There were no reprisals against the losers; there were no triumphalist trials like Nuremberg.

The Gender of Globalization

On the issue of gender, the story is more complicated within the three strands of the Triple Heritage. All the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) have been slow in accepting women as equals in church leadership. All the fifteen Cardinals who elected the new Pope Benedict XVI in April 2005 were, of course, men. Nor is it conceivable that there will be a female Pope for at least two centuries, if not longer. The whole vocabulary and nomenclature of Pope, Papa, Papacy would have to change. The vocabulary of the Papacy is largely patriarchal.

The Church of England has at last resigned itself to the ordination of women – but a female Archbishop of Canterbury is unlikely to inhabit Lambeth Palace in the foreseeable future.

In Christian doctrine as a whole, the Trinity consists of two males and one neuter – the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

In both Christianity and Islam it is almost a sin to characterize the Almighty as a "Queen" instead of "King of Kings". Islam had caliphs [khulafaa] from the seventh century of our common era to the 1923-24 abolition of the Caliphate under Mustapha Kemal Ataturk. Not a single Caliph from 1632 to 1923-24 was a woman.

This tradition of male religious leadership in Islam is now being challenged by the Black world. Especially noteworthy is an activist from the African Diaspora, SisterAmina Wadud from the United States.

In the 1990s she tried to give the Friday sermon at a mosque in South Africa. Liberal Muslims in South Africa were on her side. After all, she was highly educated in Islamic studies, with a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and a book already published entitled The Qur'an and Woman. But the Muslim conservatives in Cape Town were against her being admitted to the mosque at all. In the end a compromise was reached – Professor Amina Wadud gave a pre-sermon sermon at the mosque in Cape Town.

In March 2005 Amina Wadud took the challenge further. She wanted to set a precedent not only of a Friday sermon by a woman, but a woman Imam leading a gender-mixed congregation, shoulder to shoulder. No

mosque in New York City would let her violate those historically sanctioned male traditions.

In the end, she led the Friday prayers in a Protestant church in New York – with a gender-mixed congregation and a Friday sermon by herself. Of course, they faced Mecca (the Qibla) in the church, rather than the altar and the cross.

Does Sister Amina Wadud embody globalization for the good? Does she also manifest the old indigenous African traditions of female religious leadership? In this domain of gender in religion, Africa's indigenous traditions have empowered women centuries before Christianity started debating the ordination of women or Sister Amina Wadud attempted to shake the principles of the Imamate.

Africa has had female warrior priests right into our own era. President Yoweri Museveni had to fight Alice Lakwena in Uganda – a warrior priestess leading an army of tough male Acholis in the 1990s. The Acholi had been regarded by both the British and the first postcolonial governments in Uganda as a “martial tribe”. Yet Acholi macho warriors were ready to follow a woman religio-martial leader into battle against Museveni.

In Zambia in the 1960s President Kenneth Kaunda had to fight another sacred Alice – Alice Lakwena of the Lumpa Church. Tough Zambian males followed a woman priestess in challenging a postcolonial African government. African traditional practices were far ahead of mainstream Abrahamic religions in recognizing women as religious leaders.

While indigenous African culture leads the way in empowering women as religious leaders, Islam has been struggling to accept women as political leaders. A particularly interesting phenomenon is what might be called female succession to male martyrdom. This is a situation in which a woman relative rises to political power upon the martyrdom or death of a male hero.

It started with the Prophet Muhammad's favorite wife – Ayesha. The Prophet Muhammad himself died a natural death, but three out of four immediate political successors [Caliphs] were assassinated.

In the middle of the tensions of this early Islam, Ayesha rose as a political arbiter and a wheeler and dealer. She almost became a warrior priestess when she participated as a combatant in the Battle of the Camel. She was trying to be a king-maker rather than a queen herself.

The principle of female succession to male martyrdom reemerged in Asian

Islam in the twentieth century. Benazir Bhutto became Prime Minister of Pakistan, partly under the credentials of her martyred father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was executed in 1979.

In Bangladesh Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated in 1975. Eventually one of his surviving daughters became the leader of the Awami League and rose to be Prime Minister. Also in Bangladesh, President Ziaur Haq was killed in May 1981. Ten years later his widow became Prime Minister. Since then Sheikh Hasina Wajed and Begum Khaleda Zia have alternated in political power for a couple of decades. The Ayesha tradition of female succession to male heroism has reasserted itself in South Asia.

In South-East Asia the largest Muslim country in population had a female President in this new millennium. Megawati Sukarno Putri, daughter of Founder-President Sukarno, rose to supreme power in Indonesia long after her Dad's martyrdom. She left office in 2004.

All these Muslim women were heads of government or state long before the United States has had a female President, or France had a woman President, or Italy a female Prime Minister, or Germany a woman Chancellor or Russia a female President.

On the other hand, the Ayesha tradition has not triumphed in Africa either. The assassination of Anwar Sadat did not result in his wife rising to political supremacy. Neither did female relatives of Murtala Muhammad rise to power in Nigeria after he was assassinated in 1976.

Diversity as a Global Ethic

One of the most memorable verses of the Qur'an, the Muslim Holy Book, is a celebration of human diversity. Through the Qur'an God addresses the human species as a whole. He says:

O humankind! We have created you from a single pair of male and female, And made you into Nations and tribes, that you may know each other [respectfully]. Verily the most honoured among you in the sight of God is the most righteous among you. God is the most knowledgeable, the best informed.

[Sura Hujurat, 49 verse 13]

Yaa ayuha Nasu! Innaa khalaqnakum min dhakarín wa unthaa wa jaalnaa kum shu’uban wa qabaila li-taarafu. Inna akramakum i’nda ‘Ilahi atqaakum. Inna ‘Allaha alimun khabir.

At the core of this Qur’anic verse is a celebration of human differentiation.

We have created you from a male and female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other.

[Qur’an: Chapter 49, Verse 13]

Note the plurality of “nations and tribes” and the singularity of purpose – that “you may get to know each other.” The idea is for human beings to seek to know each other across tribal and national divides. What about across the religious divide?

The Qur’an is explicit on that also. It says emphatically that coercion and confession do not go together. The Qur’an says, “There is no compulsion in religion” [*Laa ikrahu fi’din*]. The God of diversity approves of diversity of the religious experience also.

We created...you nations and tribes that you may know one another.

But as the population of the human race grew and grew, it seemed unlikely that people would get to know each other as God planned. This is when history set in motion the process of human amalgamation. The number of individuals continued to grow almost endlessly (population growth)...but over time the number of tribes and nations decreased. Through conquest, spread of languages, expansion of religions, and empire-building, human clans amalgamated into larger tribes, and small societies merged with bigger nations.

The history of human kind is, on the whole, a history of changing boundaries and expanding societal scale.

He had created us...nations and tribes that we may know each other.

Then God created America and permitted the United States to become

the first universal nation in history. No country on earth encompasses as many races, religious faiths, national and tribal origins, as the United States of America does.

Within its own boundaries, the United States has been a human laboratory. It has been experimenting with God's imperative of diversity – *“we have created you...nations and tribes that you may know each other.”*

Today the population of the United States is descended from a thousand tribes and many dozens of nations. Within its own borders the United States has begun to facilitate God's imperative of diversity. Progress in America's political and social history has consisted of two steps forward, one step backward, advance and retreat. But the total American balance-sheet is a record of human achievement, however imperfect and sometimes painful.

In 2004 the United States celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Brown versus the Board of Education* which came down way back in May 1954. The decision struck down any constitutional basis of racial segregation. It was a major step forward towards rapid integration in God's laboratory of diversity.

The United States is indeed a democracy at home, but is now also an empire abroad. As a democracy at home, the United States has done more than any other nation in history to create a political system increasingly respectful of racial, ethnic and religious diversity. *“We have created you...nations and tribes that you may know each other.”*

But abroad the United States and Israel in recent years have generated more rage, hate and hostility than almost any other country in the last fifty years. Within America the United States is fulfilling God's purpose of promoting the ideal of creative diversity. In its actions abroad, the United States is making it harder for nations and tribes to love each other. The African Diaspora has gained from America as a democracy – two Black Secretaries of State consecutively (Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice). Africa is beginning to suffer from America as Empire. Even earlier than that the U.S. Supreme Court has had two successive Black Justices – Thurgood Marshall and Clarence Thomas. These great African Americans have differed greatly in values, but they were all descended from enslaved Africans.

If the United States wants to be the ultimate architect of democratic diversity, it should focus less on exporting democracy abroad and more on making its own democracy in America work better. Upward political

mobility for disadvantaged groups is an aspect of democratization.

The United States is more pluralistic demographically than any other in the world, but that does not mean it is adequately pluralistic democratically. The population demographically consists of almost every group in the world; but the political system does not democratically represent those groups equitably.

Why is it so rare to have a Black person elected to the Senate of the United States? Why have we never had a woman of any race for Vice President, let alone President? How many Muslim Ambassadors are there representing the United States abroad? On the other hand, a Kenyan American – Barack Obama of Illinois – has become only the fifth Black Senator of the United States for over 200 years.

Africa's sons and daughters are beginning to influence new trends of globalization. And Africa's three legacies of the indigenous, the Islamic and Christian may have further lessons to help globalization respond to the common good.

“O human kind! We have created you from a single pair of male and female,

And made you into Nations and tribes that you may know each other.

Verily in the eyes of God the best among you are the most virtuous and righteous.”

Inna Akramakun Inda Llah atqaakum.

Listen, Globalization!

Listen and learn, Globalization.

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