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Globalization, Consumerism and the Challenge of Sustainable Development in Africa

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Abstract

Globalization is an uneven process, and Africa has benefitted from it marginally. It creates enormous wealth and advances research and technological development in countries that produce technologies while deepening poverty and underdevelopment in countries that do not produce but consume those technologies. Nowhere is this oxymoron of globalization more evident than in economic relations between Africa and the industrialized West and Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, China and India. One of the greatest inimical fallouts of globalization in Africa is the rising culture of consumerism. Globalization has exported mass consumption of goods and services to Africa without promoting mass production attitude which is necessary for Africa's development. Hence most Africans today crave for the latest cars, laptops, smart phones and other technological revolution, yet there is little or no effort to produce them in the continent. Globalization appears to be encouraging Africa not to think, but to allow the industrialized world to do the thinking and technological invention for her. In this way Africa is further exploited and dominated, and globalization seems to be energized by these exploitation and domination. This paper argues that the on-going globalization process has made Africa to be complacent with consuming and not

producing. It has created consumerist culture which is increasingly reinforcing dependency in Africa and hindering the continent's quest for sustainable development.

Key words: globalization, Consumerism, Albatross, Sustainable development, Africa

Introduction

This paper argues that globalization is an uneven process in which Africa has benefitted marginally. It contends that Africa is deep-stuck in consumerism in this process, without producing what she consumes. She cannot properly allocate resources she does not produce, hence, the dislocation in development programmes and priorities. The paper further interrogates the nature of this consumerism in Africa, and avers that it has become the culture of the African elites. Looking at the historical trajectory of the African elites and their attitudinal patterns, the paper strongly asserts that there is a culture of consumerism simmering among the African elites. Some of the elites became more European than the Europeans after they were handed over political power at independence. They lacked economic base as at the time they ascended to power, hence they started pilfering the wealth of their states in order to consolidate political power. In the process they introduced sit-tightism, corruption, nepotism, authoritarianism and oppression of their peoples, contradictions which stunted economic growth and development generally.

This is part of the reasons why one of the most obvious features of modern African history is poor economic performance. Part of the problem also is that the inheritors of political power at independence also faced the burden of weak and disarticulated economies. Africa is then left vulnerable and dependent. Although this position was not insurmountable, it was rather accentuated by the African elites, who mostly were placed in positions of power by imperialist rule that created its own executioners (Thomson, 2010). In essence these 'colonized consciousness' in power have over the years perpetuated the culture of consumerism, and this has become more worrisome than ever before, because a larger number of their successors are more vicious than predecessors in the consumerist attitudes and disposition. This is why today in most African countries, it is part of the culture of the elites to spend summer holidays abroad, instead of developing the tourist and hospitality industry at home, buy the latest choice cars only to drive in their countries' bad roads, purchase ranches and choice houses abroad, invest wastefully in latest computer lap-tops, androids and mobile phones etc. This elite encourage the denigration of African culture by allowing the production and promotion of films that portray some aspects of African traditional practices in bad light, instead of sponsoring research on how to make them better.

It is against this background that this paper asks some fundamental questions on the issues that have retarded Africa's development: Is Africa's level of development in the context of globalization a consequence of the elite consumption pattern? Can the

consumption pattern be changed relative to the force of globalization? Can the direct consequences of the lack of sustainable development in Africa be hinged on the issue of consumerism? In the present circumstances can the African situation be redeemed? These questions will enlighten the discussions that follow.

Consumerism as an African Elite Culture

When we talk about the African elites, in simple terms we mean the African peoples both in and out of power who directly or indirectly take or fail to take decisions on major issues concerning Africa. It may not be necessary here to be drawn into the labyrinths of theoretical positions on elitism. But, we do know and acknowledge that in every organization a few individuals actually take the major decisions for their own selfish interests. Very few organizations can escape this estimation. The nature of the African elite shows that they can be found in the military, the bureaucrats, the politicians and the big business people.

It has to be noted however that Africa from origin did not have the kind of elite structure it has today, as it was seen as a classless society. This was also the view of several African nationalists who led their countries to independence. The emphasis was on the communalism of traditional Africa, village life based on inalienable rights to land for all, community cooperation and leaders were both responsible and accountable to their people, with the necessary checks and balances. This was the typical form of social relationships in Africa. This was why the Kenyan nationalist and politician argued that "the sharp class divisions that once existed in Europe have no place in African socialism and no parallel in African society. No class problems arose in traditional African society and none exist today amongst Africans" (Mboya, 1965, cited in Katz, 1980, p.9). Those who corroborated Mboya's contention were Nyerere, Senghor, Sekou Toure, and Nkrumah, as all stressed that there was a common ownership of the means of production, while African leaders served rather than exploited their people (Thomson, 2011).

However, the transfer of power from the colonial task masters to the Africans has produced a different scenario. As Davidson (1969) states, when the French and the British were under pressure to decolonize, they were eager to hand over power to elites who would keep their African worlds safe for exploitation. The result was that the politicians and the bureaucrats were handy to be used as willing tools, and were well groomed for the job. The first generation of these elites were commonly referred to as 'Europeanized Africans'. Some of them even tried to be more European than the European, as Imoagene (1989) notes,

> They bore European names, preferred European food, dress, and style of life. They kept the links with the metropolitan centres and ensured a steady flow of imports to meet elite needs…. They derived their

> positions from the colonial social structure. That is, they were rulers by the grace of the colonial masters in the sense that they climbed into the latter's positions even when the salaries and allowances attached to them were out of tune with local resources and income distribution. To keep their inflated living standards, they have had to be 'tied' to the metropolitan overlords and capitalists and to indulge in payoffs which are now widely regarded as …. Way of life (p. 43).

This phenomenon has over the years translated into an African elite culture, and inexorably undermined production, encouraged consumerism and retarded development. It has also deepened with the unstoppable surge of globalization and its formidable forces. Therefore it could only be rhetorical to ask whether or not our elite consumption pattern will change relative to the force of globalization.

This is made difficult because this phenomenon which is an elite habit has become structured as a social and economic order that also encourages the purchase of goods and services in ever greater amounts. In other words, it emphasizes high levels of consumption, i.e. the phenomenon of people purchasing goods and consuming materials in excess of their basic needs. We shall elaborate more on this in the next section.

Globalization and the Tragedy of Consumerism in Africa

It will not be necessary in the context of this discussion to be involved in the complex debate on globalization, because extreme globalists claim that "the world is flat", or that we are entering a "borderless world", in which the Multinational National Corporations (MNCs) are losing their national identities and distinct national economies are being subsumed under the global marketplace (Friedman, 2006; Hirst and Thompson, 1996; Ohmae, 1990). According to Friedman, (2006),

> …what the flattening of the world means is that we are now connecting all the knowledge centers on the planet together into a single global network, which – if politics and terrorism do not get in the way – could usher in an amazing era of prosperity, innovation, and collaboration, by companies, communities and individuals (p. 8).

As ambitious and optimistic as Friedman sounds, he also expresses skepticism because it is not for instance, only the software writers and computer geeks that have access or "get empowered to collaborate on work in a flat world" (2006:8). The terrorists play the part of spoilers, with other "whole new group of angry, frustrated, and humiliated men and women" (p.8). This draws our attention to the African situation, which when placed in the global square exposes the vulnerability of the continent in an environment that is vicious, hostile, and unequal where Africans compete from a position of disempowerment.

Our perception of globalization is seen as involving

> …the broadening and deepening of interactions and interdependence among peoples and countries of the world. Broadening refers to the extension of geographic linkages to encompass virtually all major societies and states. Thus, events and policies adopted in one part of the world can have a significant impact on distant locations. Depending refers to an increase in the frequency and intensity of state and societal interactions (Cohn, 2005, p.10).

This working definition of globalization recognizes the state as the major actor in international relations. However, the developments linked to globalization such as modern telecommunications and rapid transportation increase interconnections among people with less regard to territorial boundaries, are also central to the claim of a borderless world.

One undeniable fact is that African countries do not have the same capacity as those other countries that drive globalization. In fact, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the retreat of socialism on world stage, a new landscape emerged and globalization brought new actors to Africa and opened up new markets, which could benefit the continent and possibly prevent a relapse into the past. The new competition has albeit started deepening of financial and trade integration associated with technological progress and multilateral liberalization, and which has also raised the demand for Africa's commodities (oil, metals and precious stones), resulting in improved terms of trade (Bonaglia et al, 2009). This encouraging signal indicates that Africa has significantly increased its openness to international merchandised trade, as a share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) rose from 43 to 50 per cent between 1980 - 1995 and 1996 – 2005. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows have surged, growing faster than in other developing regions and tripling their level between 2001 and 2005, reaching USD 30.6 billion, (Bonaglia et al, 2009: 284 – 5).

In spite of this positive scenario painted about Africa, in comparison to the core components of globalization and those who decide the direction and flow, Africa is still eons of light years away from the expected take off standards. In other words, there is a monopoly of global resources by the countries that drive globalization. The entrance of China in the race has not lifted Africa from its pitiable position. This is so because, it was discovered that,

> Africa's share in world trade remains minimal, 1.5 percent and exports are concentrated in a narrow range of primary commodities. Albeit increasing in absolute terms, FDI heading for Africa accounts for less than 4 percent of the world total and is distributed unequally, with northern Africa, South Africa, and the largest sub-Saharan oil

producers being the main recipients by far. This reflects dependence on natural resources. The private sector is marginally involved in international production networks, mainly assembly at the bottom end of the value chain (Bonaglia et al, 2009, p. 285).

This observation exposes Africa's vulnerability in the face of globalization. Even so, the situation is made worse by the consumerist attitude of the African elite. As the above research shows, Africa virtually producers nothing and "exports are concentrated on a narrow range of primary commodities". Under this precarious situation, the African elites who were expected to turn things around have joined the consumerist culture.

It is known that globalization and culture are like Siamese twins. They are in constant flux, - in lifestyles, cross-cultural encounters, migration, global-local relations, music, media, movies, marketing, fashion, cuisine, etc. and as the dynamics of globalization change, so too do the tides and shore lines of culture. For over two centuries, since 1800, globalization was determined and shaped by North – South relations with a clear and overwhelming dominance of the North in economic, political and cultural spheres. Eurocentrism, cultural imperialism and orientalism in knowledge, and cultural styles and the smorgasbord or western images and prejudices about the orient, and the global South have been familiar testimonies of this hegemony (Jan, 2009: vii)

Consumerism is not alien to other global competitors like the West and China, but they produce most of the goods they consume. As we noted earlier, Africa does not produce most of what she consumes. It is a dependent economy and most of the countries in Africa often look up to their erstwhile colonial masters for one form of assistance or another. In this regard, the economy is not internally integrated, thereby further dislocating the forces of development.

The tendency in consumerism is for people to identify strongly with products or services they consume, especially those with commercial brand names and perceived status-symbolism appeal, such as, luxury cars, designer clothing or expensive jewellery. Sometimes consumers sacrifice significant time and income not only to purchase, but also to actively support a certain firm or brand.

There is a certain trend that seems to be contagious in consumerist habit – emulation. This tiny minority of consumers, who also have deep pockets, create an atmosphere of competition, not only among themselves, but also among the classes below them. The poor strive to imitate the wealthy, and the wealthy imitate celebrities and other icons. This in the case of Africa involves the consumption of expensive goods and services that are generally not necessary and often not produced in Africa. The goods are ostentations in nature. Sometimes they consume not because they have

surpluses, and this also creates intra/inter class demonstration effect. This is the tendency for people to consume because others are consuming. And who are these people? They could be neighbours, classmates, business partners, political allies, etc. They emulate each other, for instance, in the kind of schools their children attend, cars they drive, where to spend holidays, which part of town they live or build houses, the type of cars bought for wives or girlfriends, choice of wines etc. this heightens the demonstration effect among the elites. However, because of the component of consumerism which is emulation, the multiplier effects cause a form of contagious behaviour on the lower class who look up to the elites. They either succeed by dint of hard-work or by fraud, hook or crook, in order to assume the new status and maintain that lifestyle.

This has inadvertently or otherwise created a structure in the polity, whereby since the economy is not producing, and therefore not viable, politics is seen as business to make money. In the process, a very high premium is placed on political power. The game becomes zero-sum and the pursuit of power in order to acquire wealth is maniacal. This in turn creates a cycle of underdevelopment, because those who succeed, often employ fraudulent tactics, encourage corruption and malpractices in various forms and these are replicated in government. The final outcome is that Africa has remained largely rich but poor. This is the tragedy of consumerism in Africa.

Consumerism and the Challenge of Sustainable Development in Africa

From our estimation, there is no way the kind of picture painted in the preceding section would guarantee development, nay sustainable development. For Africa to attain sustainable development, it entails that she has to produce food, goods and services and grow and develop without damaging the environment. Even when productive activities affect the environment (because the issue is not that the environment will not be affected at all), the environment so negatively affected in the process of production should be replenished, so that the incoming or future generations would have the capacity to enjoy what they inherit.

A UNDP convention has stated that sustainable development means securing a growth path where providing for the needs of the present generation does not mean compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. From the policy perspective, Sampson, (2005) states that, "The pursuit of sustainable development requires a careful balancing between progresses in each of its pillars: economic development, conservation of the environment and improving social conditions" (p. 2).

By all estimation, the above assertions cannot be said to approximate the aspirations of the African condition in the context of her consumerist profligacy. In fact, Africa's consumerist attitude has only succeeded in setting in motion a cycle of

unsustainable development because of the multiplier effects of the consumerist culture. It is even ironical that the luxury goods which African elites indulge in are "enjoyed" under conditions of unsustainable environment, unsustainable economic development and unsustainable social structures, all of which constitute the pillars of sustainable development.

A news item monitored by the researcher on the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) which is a conservative government media outlet, shows that there are over 500 bullet proof cars in Nigeria. This number is expected to double as Nigerians prepare for the 2015 general elections. In a country that has the bulk of her population surviving under less than USDI per day, and poverty walks on two legs in the streets, but where one also sees a tiny minority living in stupendous affluence, displayed with impurity. The mad competition to maintain this expensive lifestyle, the inordinate quest for get rich-quick, by the lower class to emulate them have heightened corruption with impunity, kidnapping and all manners of other economic crimes. This phenomenon has become a pathetic syndrome of which the cure is not foreseeable. The prognosis is made more difficult by the nature and problems of African politics which has weak institutions to fight these challenges, coupled with the problems of state and nation-building. This is hanging around the necks of majority of African governments. This is the Albatross syndrome in Africa's development.

Conclusion and Recommendations

We have tried to look at the challenges of sustainable development in Africa as a consequence of the consumerist lifestyles of the African elites. The elites are largely unproductive, and their lifestyles have engendered corruption, as well as looting of government treasury in order to continue to maintain pretentious lifestyles. This has consequently affected sustainable development in Africa. The continent consumes most of what she does not produce.

It is difficult to predict whether or not this consumerist culture can change any time soon, because there are no serious signs or indications that the economy of the African continent is in the verge of transformation. Africa is still bedeviled with widespread corruption, ethnic group and religious conflicts, the challenge of nationhood and continued exploitation by the neo-imperialists. The apparent timidity of African leaders to face these challenges squarely is worrisome. There is therefore no clear evidence that that the situation is redeemable, because the tendency is for the consumerist culture to deepen without reversal.

Recommendations

In the light of the above findings, we make the following recommendations

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- There should be serious emphasis on production driven policies to create a favourable balance between consumption and production aimed at maintaining macro-economic stability and improving the business environment,

- There should be a complete irrigation of the African consciousness to rescue it from the present condition where the West is looked up to as a standard to emulate, while our traditions and culture are relegated to the backwaters. This would assist us understand the aim of globalization, fully utilize the opportunities it brings, while adequately coping with the attendant risks;

- Corruption must be fought with vehemence and zero tolerance for corruption should be the buzz word for everybody,

- Africa's resources should be directed toward strategic development needs of Africa, instead of wasteful spending which does not bring and meaningful economic benefits to Africa,

- The African elites who are the opinion leaders should caution themselves, and try to be more responsible and disciplined. This would help them to institute a more enduring culture that is purpose directed,

- Any foreign goods and services to be consumed in Africa should be made to be more durable and according to our traditions and customs, to avoid Africa being seen as a dumping ground of all manners of substandard goods and services.

- The West and the other drivers of globalization should rethink on how they do business with Africa. This would start with stopping aiding and abetting African elites on consumerism. The unintended consequences of consumerism may snowball in crisis and war, and this could trigger off series of contagious effects, even on the West, especially in forms of trans-border crime, refugee crises, illegal immigration and terrorist tendencies.

- In addition, deliberate effort should be made to continually integrate the in Africa so that the elusive issue of hegemonic order can be empirically captured.

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