

ASPECTS OF ASIAN CULTURES AND THOUGHT SYSTEMS IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

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Abstract

In the enlightenment period, there was the erroneous claim by some Western thinkers that there exists but one philosophy and with it, only one civilization and valid cultural values based upon the Euro-West. This claim humbles and degrades the status of Africans, Asians and other colonized peoples to the level of the nonhumans or the animals who shift from the arena of irascible concupiscence against a good rational ground. It is against this backdrop, it is this paper's aim to demonstrate that Asians are not only human beings but have advanced philosophies and culture. It is thus in need of a study of some aspects of the Asians worldviews and systems of thought with the aim of determining the implications and the relevance there in order to apply them to the contemporary globalized world. Employing the philosophical analysis method, this essay holds that Asians are not only human beings but rich in philosophy and cultural values applicable to this globalization age. Their system of worldviews and thinking are indeed rich with the values of solidarity, oneness, interconnectedness and holistic harmony based on rich philosophical systems.

Keywords: Interculturality, Philosophy, Asian Thought Systems, African Thought Systems, Globalization.

INTRODUCTION

We are living in a globalized and pluralized multicultural society. Globalization is a rise in social, cultural, economic, and political elements of the society caused by technology. Globalization has made trade, human mobility, and communication throughout the world easier. Ruud Lubbers (1999) in his book "Globalization and Sustainable Development" has described globalization as the phenomenon that the level of global human interaction increases to such an extent that both its original consequences and the responses it provokes, cause a number of new developments. Globalization is the connection between economies, technologies and politics. It creates an environment that reduces state dominance of the market promoting the more significant role of giant multinational corporations. Globalization has already made our world dramatically different: CNN is with us 24 hours a day, the internet and E-mail are world-wide immediate means of information acquisition and communication (Sacks, 2002). For all this, globalization has negative implications. For instance, the Asian currency crisis that occurred recently affected not just Asia, but all financial markets in the world. Restlessness in one place quickly finds its way to others. Another result of globalization is that more countries are adopting the political system of democracy as well as the free market approach to economics (Alli, et al, 2007). Along with all such deals there has been a plea and efforts made for formal intercultural study of other race and folk's cultures and philosophies in an attempt to help towards easier communication and cohabitation of human beings. It is this which forms the foundation for the whole idea of intercultural philosophy.

Wherever the subject of intercultural philosophy comes up it is with an eye to the fact that there has been contact or, at the least, acquaintance between cultures – particularly the cultures of Europe, Asia, and Africa – for many thousands of years, and the contact since the early modern period has increased in geometrical progression. With this contact have come encounters with diverse practices, cultures, religions, and particularly, of wisdom or philosophic traditions. The boundaries of their dissimilarities have too frequently, but not necessarily, been obvious, and there have been various responses to these encounters: sometimes incomprehension, occasionally rejection and downgrading, but occasionally engagement (Sweet, 2014). In intercultural philosophy, there is a striving by philosophers from diverse cultural and traditional backgrounds in an active dialogue with each other with respect, but also with the

understanding that one's own philosophical perspectives are not complete, that there are other, legitimate philosophical perspectives, and that one's own perspectives may require a re-expression or even rewriting (Sweet, 2014).

It is based on such significance of intercultural philosophy upon which lies the rationale for critical assessment Asian life patterns and Asian thought systems in order to establish that Asians are not merely human beings but are blessed with rich philosophy and culture values that have and continue to remain relevant to this world which is globalized. In reality, their systems of thought and philosophies are rich with values of holistic harmony, unity, solidarity, interconnectedness based on elaborate philosophical systems. Against this backdrop, this paper is divided into three sections: the first section on the conceptualization of culture, the second section on Asian way of life and thought systems, the third section critically examines the applicability of the values one can identify there to our contemporary world.

The Conceptualization of Culture

Edward B. Taylor informs us that culture is that which embodies knowledge, belief, art, morals, rules of conduct, customs, and any other acquired habits and capacities of man as a member of society. And regarding Bello (1991), culture is "the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenge of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours".

On the other hand, Aziza defines culture as the totality of the patterns of behaviour of a specific group of people. It includes everything that makes them different from any other group of people for instance, their greeting patterns, dressing, social mores and taboos, food, songs and dance patterns, rites of passage from birth, through marriage to death, traditional occupations, religious as well as philosophical beliefs (2001).

Culture as a way of life of a people is transgenerational in nature through a means of socialization by a people. Fafunwa supports this view when he asserts that:

The child just grows into and within the cultural heritage of his people. He imbibes it. Culture, in traditional society, is not taught; it is caught. The child observes, imbibes and mimics the action of his elders and siblings. He watches the naming ceremonies, religious services, marriage rituals, funeral obsequies. He witnesses the coronation of a king or chief, the annual yam festival, the annual dance and acrobatic displays of guilds and age groups or his relations in the activities. The child in a traditional society cannot escape his cultural and physical environments (1974).

This means culture as a system of exchange and acquisition of values by a group of people from one to the next generation. For Njoku (2015), culture is a system of learning and exchange between group members. He stressed that the human being learns a culture through belonging to the group, i.e., in a world of ideas. In addition, culture has three applications: (1) Elitarian refers to the acquiring of vast amount of knowledge, be it general or in certain fields of studies. A well cultured individual then is one who possesses vast knowledge in science, philosophy, etc. (2) Pedagogical refers to the education, formation and cultivation of man towards the realization of his personality. (3) Anthropological refers to the traits of behaviour of a group of human beings. Therefore, culture in philosophical anthropology is that one cannot realize one's social fulfillment without projecting one's legitimate life. One projects oneself by language, arts and other ways which one internalizes and passes through means of one's ideas in the socio-cultural world; on this background then the person is conceptualized as *homo culturalis* a culture-producing being (Njoku, 2015). Culture also may be defined as material and non-material.

The material aspect of culture is the physical tangible material such as artefacts and crafts that man can produce in a bid to stay alive while the non-material aspect of culture is about the human beings' norms and mores. From this, we have beliefs about what is good and evil morally, inasmuch as culture is not only material and non-material but also dynamic (Idang, 2015). This indicates that culture continues to evolve. Antia asserts that culture is not fixed and permanent. It is always changes and modified by man through contacts with and absorption of other peoples' cultures, a process known as assimilation (2005). According to Etuk cultures are not static, they change. Indeed culture needs to change; which wants to remain static and resistant to change would not be a living culture (2002). One thing that is very obvious in relation to the issue of culture is the fact that no society exists without a culture.

It is quite safe to say that culture is a social activity that is common to all social groups. It suffices that culture being human's way of living includes that all groupings in society have their way of living and by this also their world outlook, thought systems, political, and economic structures. That is why it is ridiculous when Western scholars claim that Africans are "primitive", they do not have history, religion and even philosophy. What then is Asian culture all about since Asian cultures are numerous?

Asian Culture and Thought Systems

Asian continent is the world largest continent in terms of population. It is known for its rich cultures, religions and philosophical beliefs. These go to show that they are not less human or incapable of thinking. The eastern metaphysics focuses on the monistic conception of being. The Asians see everything as one. For instance, in Hinduism, Brahman is the great unchanging reality that makes up everything. Brahman is the highest reality which everything is part of. This goes to show why there an interconnection between their religious beliefs, culture and philosophy. This can be seen in terms of the following dominant religions and philosophical beliefs: Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism. The paper will explore these concepts briefly so as to demonstrate the philosophies and culture of the Asians inherent in them.

Confucianism

Confucianism is based on the thoughts and discourses of Confucius who was born in 551 BC and of his supporters (Kimba and Carew, 1990). It emphasizes harmonious social relationships and the integration of individuals into these social relationships, which can further establish and maintain a stable social order (D Ho, 1995). Specifically, moral discourse such as The Five Constants, that is, benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, trustworthiness; (Li, 2009; F Wang, 2004) is used by Confucianism to achieve this goal. This moral discussion provides ethical guidelines for Chinese people, further becomes the prerequisite for the harmonious social order, as individuals are indispensable parts of social relations, and their behaviors also affect these relations (Yu, 2005). Mou Zousan, the late contemporary Neo-Confucian, further suggested that the moral discourse in Confucianism accentuates the role of the subject in social relations, and further explains the ultimate question of being, a moral metaphysics perspective that guides individuals' life and China's social structure (Mou, 2015). His emphasis on analyzing Confucianism as a whole throughout its development shows integrative and consistent stances to better understand epistemological influences of Confucianism (Mou, 2015). Based on the above analyses, classical Confucian epistemologies were based on a structurally ordered holistic worldview and deeply rooted in axiological premises. Knowledge of what is real is intimately tied to the ontological nature of things. The primary methods include introspection and intuitive perception of reality (Rošker, 2021b). Confucian scholars tend to limit themselves to what is observable in the natural as well as the social and moral order, but will not speculate on what is unobservable like the afterlife and the spiritual order (Confucius, 1999). Knowledge gained through sensory perception or observation can then be elevated to a higher order of knowing, which is closer to the Western ideas of wisdom and insight, through reflection and forward thinking (Mi, 2017). Furthermore, knowledge is often expected to serve pragmatic social and moral functions (Rošker, 2021b), and learning is a highly valued pathway to knowledge and wisdom (Mi,

2017). The emphasis on ongoing learning, ultimately acquiring knowledge with a moral purpose (public good) can therefore be seen as a culturally facilitated position among Chinese social workers.

Taoism

Taoism, or Daoism, originated in the Warring States Period that started from 403 BC (Oldstone-Moore, 2003). Through yin-yang theory, Taoism suggests that there are no static and perpetual relations existing among things, and all relations consist of contradictory components but can achieve temporary balances (Chun, 2012; Fang, 2014). Taoism also holds that individuals need to know their inner self first by integrating different senses they have before truly knowing the outside world (Shien, 1953; J Wang and Stringer, 2000). However, individuals from different backgrounds may perceive things differently, and they need to think from different perspectives to better get to know the truth (Shien, 1953). Taoism also emphasizes integration and proposes that only by putting yourself into nature and becoming one with nature can individuals have a chance to achieve ultimate philosophical Tao (J Wang and Stringer, 2000). The Taoist epistemological position is characterized by its explicit contingent stance, asserting that the constant truth (Tao) can never be fully comprehended and articulated (Wu et al., 1961). Knowledge is always contingent upon references and frames. Any idea, like goodness or any measure of size or time, only makes sense when it is considered vis-à-vis something else. In this sense, it can be understood as compatible with a constructivist position (Hua et al., 1999). This epistemological orientation affords flexible interpretations of Taoist concepts, and Chinese social workers have found it easy to apply them to direct practice (e.g. Chan et al., 2014). Guided by Taoism, an integrated epistemology can help social workers understand and balance contradictory components (e.g. different social relations) in society to understand social problems, put forward solutions, and boost social development, a dialectics process that requires social workers to handle interconnectedness and contradiction dynamically in practice (Tsang, 2000). As for individuals' intervention, this philosophy enlightens social workers to think from clients' perspectives, and help clients know more about themselves by analyzing their needs, capacities, characteristics, and circumstances to better locate clients' problems (Tsang, 2013). Moreover, social workers should integrate clients in the surrounding environment and further ascertain how individual problems are caused between them and their surroundings (P Leung et al., 2009). Particularly, a fusion of perspectives between social workers and clients can strengthen the hermeneutic understanding of clients' situations, as it breaks problematic positivist knowledge frameworks that overlook the value relativism in human interactions and emphasizes social workers' positive value involvement in client intervention (Y Ho and Yuen, 2010). Based on the abovementioned discussion, Taoism provides relation-oriented, integrative, and human-centered epistemological perspectives to understand social problems in China, which can further become important epistemological roots in China's social work.

Buddhism

In Buddhism, karma theory is an important component. Karma derives from human consciousness, is expressed through actions and words, and further generates effects on the larger context (Xia, 2011). All relations in the universe rely on and interconnect through karma, a perspective that helps us infer how the consequences result from the causality among different things (Xia, 2011). Buddhism also holds a view that only consciousness remains eternal and only constant reflection can help individuals get to know the true reality (Chapple, 2017). Individuals who convert to Buddhism also need to constantly help ordinary people to build up their karma for the afterlife (Chapple, 2017; Thomas and Kumari, 2010), a process that further shows the causality between individuals' behaviors, their destiny, and social relations (Xia, 2011). In fact, Buddhist epistemology is massive and tied to various intellectual traditions in India (Arnold, 2005). After reaching China, it flourished and subsequently became a shaping force in Confucian theory development (Wen, 2011). Given the purpose and scope of this article, as well as our above analyses of Buddhist precepts, we can only select two key means of knowledge (pramāṇa) that are commonly found among most Buddhist epistemologies: perception and inference (Rošker, 2021a). For our purpose here, perception includes observation and sensory processing of phenomena consisting of particular objects; and inference is a more cognitive process that allows us to come to recognize more general objects of knowledge, such as categories, concepts, and ideas (Stoltz, 2009). Chan (Zen), a prominent school of

Chinese Buddhism, proposed an approach more in line with traditional Chinese philosophical sensibility, probably with Taoist overtones. For instance, its last patriarch Hui Neng (638–713 CE) explored the idea of spiritual inquiry without the use of words, which resonated with the Taoist claim that ‘the word that can be spoken is not the constant word’ (Wu et al., 1961).

The intuitive grasp of spiritual essence often privileged in Chan Buddhist narratives can be seen as a sample of inferential knowing as characterized by Stoltz (2009). These epistemological thoughts can guide China’s social work. Explicitly, a reflexive and meditative perspective, informed by karma, can be used to infer how social issues are generated based on social workers’ perceptions of complicated and unstable interrelations, and further help them put forward intervention based on constant reflection (K Lee et al., 2017a). For instance, individuals’ mental health problems may result from interrelated social and individual factors, and social workers need to delve into and reflect on these relations to reveal the karma of clients’ life events, a process that further facilitates social work intervention (K Lee et al., 2017a, 2017b). A human-centered perspective is also needed for social workers to genuinely understand individuals’ experiences, interact with, and help them. This perspective is in line with the expectation for Buddhism believers to help ordinary people (Thomas and Kumari, 2010).

Hinduism

The word ‘Hindu’ did not occur in the Vedas but when Alexander the Great invaded India, the inhabitants of the country to the East of the Sindhu, which is known by the English-speaking Indians as the Indus, were described as Hindus. The letter ‘S’ had become ‘H’ in Greek. The religion of these inhabitants became Hinduism and as they knew it, it was a most tolerant religion. It gave shelter to the early Christians who had fled from persecution, also to the Jews known as Beni-Israil as also to the Parsis. He was proud to belong to that Hinduism which was all-inclusive, and which stood for tolerance (Gandhi, 1996).

There are two aspects of Hinduism. There is on the one hand the historical Hinduism with its untouchability, superstitious worship of stocks and stones, animal sacrifice and so on. On the other, we have the Hinduism of the Gita, the Upanishads and Patanjali’s Yogasutras which is the acme of Ahimsa and oneness of all creation, pure worship of one immanent, formless, imperishable God. Ahimsa which to me is the chief glory of Hinduism has been sought to be explained away by our people as being meant for Sannyasis only. For Gandhi, it is the way of life and India has to show it to the world (Gandhi, 1996).

There are several areas of similarities in Asian cultures taking into consideration their conception of the idea of harmony and balance. These aspects emphasize the idea of interconnectedness and unity that exist in nature, and balance of life. On the contrary, how the Asians interpret and apply some of their concepts that are common to them is different. It is understood that the Indians in their culture interpret balance as the balance of different forms of energies while the Chinese understand balance as harmony or united of natural forces.

As regards, Asian understanding of individualism and community, it is noticed that Asian take seriously the issue of family, and the general well-being of the community over individualism. Anything that promotes collective agreement, consensus, and respect for those who are elders in the society is encouraged. On the contrary, different countries in Asia practice these ideas differently. As a demonstration, the Indians rate highly hierarchies and family ties while the Japanese accentuate unity of group (wa). With regard to their religious practices as shown above, they have different types of religions and the way the way they practice them is different too. The various religions of the Asians have serious impact in their culture and knowledge production system.

Relevance of Asian Lifestyles and Thought Systems to the Globalized World

Globalization is facilitated by technology that dislocates human beings from time and space and remaps them to a world in which the past and future meet. Such technology comes from just a single source – education. As we experience globalization and its consequences we realize that the sole way of embracing it (or opposing it) is through knowledge. Greater inter-dependence by technology is bringing people together. People are increasingly talking with, understanding, and learning from each other with technology as a shared context. We are looking beyond sectarian religionism nationalities, genders, and cultures to the global village. There, all are citizens of the planet Earth, where even diversity is being tolerated at least in the spirit of peace and profit. A world is being constructed where people unite and cooperate to tackle universal problems. This increased interdependence can be seen in such areas as the military campaign against Kosovo, the collaborative space program of the United States and Russia, and global influence of organizations such as the World Bank and the IMF (Alli, et al., 2007).

In spite of all these perceived good things that globalization and modernization can do for the world it has other baggies that can be referred to as discontents of globalization. Stiglitz in his book globalization and its discontents communicates his discontent with the manner in which global regulatory institutions like the IMF function. He points out that, theoretically, globalization is a good thing and has helped millions of developing countries to emerge, but also that it is the cause of economic catastrophes. Stiglitz explains that there is a discrepancy between theory and reality and that absence of proper regulation by the IMF has made globalization a destructive force rather than a constructive one. He compares the conduct of the World Bank with that of the IMF to bring out the shortcomings of the latter. It mostly argues that the Fund gives too much attention towards insisting on some economic theory being applied to the countries it is attempting to support, at the expense of not considering local indications which may mislead its modelled expectations (Stiglitz, 2002). Stiglitz (2002). In Chapter 3 of his book examines how relentless pursuit of privatization, liberalization, and stabilization as ends in themselves have led IMF policies to collapse in nations in need of structural assistance. Stiglitz ultimately contends that, if the IMF is more transparent and pragmatic, it can still be a stable institution that shields global economic stability.

Jonathan Sacks maintains that globalization has extremely destabilizing consequences. Its benefits are not equally distributed. There are victors and vanquished, between and among nations. The digital gadget has heightened disparities. There are 1.3 billion individuals – 22 percent of the global citizens – below the poverty line; 841 million suffer from malnutrition; 880 million are not eligible for medical coverage. One billion lack adequate shelter; 1.3 billion lack access to safe water; 2.6 billion lack access to sanitation. From world children, 113 million – two-thirds of whom are girls – have no education; 150 million are malnourished; 30,000 die daily from preventable diseases (Sacks, 2002).

There are various threats from global climate change, global poverty, cultural exclusion and repression challenges, existential threats like war, conflicts, human identity crises because of colonial experiences in the past and the rest. There is the issue of human alienation in quest for capitalist wealth creation, world health crises and pandemics that necessitate interventions on all sides by sundry to tackle them appropriately. There is, too, the issue of moral bankruptcy. Against such a background, the values inherent in Asian cultures and thought systems can be useful towards enhancing how things are managed.

Asian philosophies are more concerned with communal values, harmony in society, and interdependence, and these principles have appeal to contemporary discussions of sustainability, global cooperation, and right living. Buddhist and Ayurveda-like many Asian philosophies- emphasize holistic health by considering physical, mental, and spiritual aspects. Modern society is becoming very interested in holistic health and alternative medicine. Asian philosophies are most likely to be closely connected with nature and the environment. These worldviews give one insights into sustainable living and ecological balance, which are critical in addressing the environmental challenges of today. These philosophies give different perspectives of knowledge, epistemology, and reality. Embracing different ways of understanding truth and wisdom can enrich conversations today and encourage open-mindedness. In a globalized world,

understanding and appreciating other cultures is critical. Asian philosophies are significant contributors to global cultural diversity, promoting respect and appreciation for other cultures. Social justice, equality, and human rights are promoted by the majority of these philosophies. Their ethics can be applied to contemporary discussion around social justice movements, inclusivity, and equity.

Conclusion

At the start of this book, the paper attempts to make a comparison of some facets of Asian lifestyles and philosophies with a view to creating a premise that both continents have rich cultures and philosophies that have been of monumental importance to the world and continue to be important in today's globalized world. The paper shows that Asian philosophies are inclined to emphasize communal values, social harmony, and interrelatedness. These principles resonate in current discussions on sustainability, global cooperation, and ethical living. Most philosophies in Asia, like Buddhism and Ayurveda, place a significant focus on integrated health, considering physical, mental, and spiritual aspects. Holistic well-being and classical medicine are gaining popularity in the contemporary era. Asian philosophies are generally close to nature and the environment. These schools of thought shed light on sustainable living and harmony with the environment, which are crucial in addressing the environmental issues of today. These schools of thought offer different perspectives regarding how one comes to understand, epistemology, and what constitutes reality. The embracing of multiple ways of understanding truth and wisdom may contribute to contemporary discourse and openness. In an increasingly globalized world, acceptance of diverse cultures and knowledge is needed. The Asian philosophies contribute immensely to adding to the world's cultural diversity, promoting respect and understanding between societies. The majority of them advocate for social justice, equality, and human rights. Their ideologies can be applied to today's dialogue on social justice movements, inclusivity, and equity.

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