



## Review

# Culture of tolerance in Africa: A moral imperative

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*Hostility, violence and intolerance are commonplace in Africa today. Africa is synonymous to violence and hostility. But political strife and social upheaval is not limited to Africa alone, as a matter of fact, we now live in a world under constant fear of racial, cultural, religious, tribal, political and economic hostility. The world's record of intolerance related violence for this century surpasses all centuries on the magnitude of violence, social unrest, hate, intolerance, insecurity, hostility kidnapping and terrorism. The whole universe groans for the revival of culture of peace and tolerance, else, this century may be the last in human history. Against this backdrop, this paper argues for a positive conception of toleration as a panacea to promoting global culture of tolerance in Africa, and the world at large.*

**Keywords:** Tolerance, culture, hostility, mutual respect, morality.

## INTRODUCTION

Tolerance is an important ideal that is indispensable for the working of a genuinely free and democratic society. Yet it is an ideal we take for granted and do not take very seriously. Increasingly, we are in danger of forgetting what tolerance as an intimate companion of liberty and freedom actually means. It is important to recall that tolerance is a very recent ideal in historical terms. Until the seventeenth century, the toleration of different religions, opinions and beliefs was interpreted as a form of moral cowardice if not a symptom of heresy (Frank, 2012).

This article pursues the thesis that 'tolerance' is an integral part of African communal living, a pristine culture dislodged by colonialism. Thus, the paper explores historical evolution of culture of hostilities in Africa foisted on African through colonialism, globalization, Christianization and Westernization. This, it achieved in three moments: The first moment considers the concept of tolerance from global perspective. The second moment considers the emergence of hostilities and intolerance in Africa. And the last moment explores African communal living supported by African traditional religion. Thus, the paper advocates a moral imperative to accept and respect the right of others to exercise religious and cultural rights as legislative members of our universal kingdom of end not as means but ends in themselves. By this, we will maintain global and regional peace while preserving cultural and religious diversities in Africa and the world at large.

Paul Hazard noted in his pioneering studies that, in European Mind, until the seventeenth century, tolerance 'had not been a virtue at all, but, on the contrary, a sign of weakness, not to say cowardice.' He added that 'duty and charity' forbade people to be tolerant (Paul, 1935). Religious toleration is seen as an act of compromise or heresy. The aim of seventeenth-century advocates of tolerance such as John Locke was to protect religious belief from state coercion. Locke's advocacy of tolerance represented a call for restraining political authorities from interfering with the workings of individual conscience. Over the centuries, this affirmation of religious tolerance was expanded to allow the free expression of opinions, beliefs and behavior associated with the exercise of the individual conscience. Tolerance does not invite us to accept or celebrate other people's sentiments. It demands that we live with them and desist from interfering or forcing others to fall in line with our own views.

### What is tolerance?

Tolerance pertains to the domain of the political/philosophical parlance through its avowal of the principle of non-interference towards the way people develop and hold beliefs and opinions. Tolerance affirms the freedom of conscience and individual autonomy. As long as an act does not violate a person's moral

autonomy and harm others, tolerance also calls for the absence of constraint on behavior linked to the exercise of individual autonomy.

From this perspective, tolerance can be measured in relation to the extent to which people's belief and behavior is not subject to institutional and political interference and restraint. Second, tolerance is also a social/cultural accomplishment. A tolerant society is one where tolerance as a cultural orientation discourages and restrains social intolerance. This was a concern eloquently pursued by the philosopher John Stuart Mill, who warned about the 'tyranny of public opinion' and its tendency to stigmatize and silence minority and dissident beliefs.

### **The ideal of tolerance and toleration**

Generally, everyone appears to celebrate tolerance, and it is difficult to encounter any significant acclaim for intolerance. However, a closer inspection, it becomes evident that the meaning of this term has radically altered. It has mutated into a superficial signifier of acceptance and affirmation of anyone and everyone. Toleration in its classical used as reiterated by John Lock in his letter, is a way of managing conflicting beliefs and behavior (John, 1689). Moreover, tolerance is an act of not interfering or attempting to suppress beliefs that contradict one's own sentiments. A debased form of toleration therefore is ignoring or not taking peoples' beliefs and ways of life seriously. Therefore, the ideal of tolerance demands that we accept the right of people to live according to beliefs and opinions that are different, sometimes antithetical to ours.

One reason why tolerance was interpreted as a virtue historically was because it implied a willingness to tolerate disagreeable beliefs and opinions instead of attempting to suppress them. Indeed, the recognition of the primacy of the virtue of freedom imposed on the truly tolerant implies the responsibility to refrain from attempting to coerce religious and political opponents into silence (Frank, 2012). In words of Voltaire, the ideal of toleration is reflected in this dictum, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it" (Frank, 2012).

### **Tolerance from global perspective**

It was in the seventeenth century that attitudes towards tolerating competing ideas and religions began to change. In part, the rise of secularism and rationality encouraged a more sceptical orientation towards religious dogmatism and intolerance. This was also a period when Europe was overwhelmed by bitter religious conflicts that frequently resulted in bloody civil wars. In such circumstances, calls for tolerance were influenced by the pragmatic calculation that without a measure of religious toleration, endemic violence and bloodshed could not be avoided. This was the moment when a significant minority of Europeans recognized that tolerance was a pre-requisite for their society's survival. According to Michael Walzer, an American philosopher, "said toleration 'sustains life itself Time and again, we have needed to

remind ourselves that 'toleration makes difference possible; difference makes toleration necessary (Michael, 1997). This is in line with UNESCO's Declaration on the Principles of Tolerance: Tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human' and it is 'harmony in difference (UNESCO, 1995). It is in the light of the forgoing, Frank Furedi reiterated, "the act of tolerance demands reflection, restraint and a respect for the right of other people to find their way to their own truth" (Frank, 2012). Once tolerance signifies a form of automatic acceptance, it becomes a performance in expected behavior.

The UNESCO Declaration on Tolerance is paradigmatic in this respect. Its call for tolerance is presented as a response to its alarm:... by the current rise in acts of intolerance, violence, terrorism, xenophobia, aggressive nationalism, racism, anti-Semitism, exclusion, marginalization and discrimination directed against national, ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, refugees, migrant workers, immigrants and vulnerable groups within societies, as well as acts of violence and intimidation committed against individuals exercising their freedom of opinion and expression, all of which threaten the consolidation of peace and democracy, both nationally and internationally, and are obstacles to development (UNESCO, 1999).

The understanding of toleration bequeathed on Africa by western culture is a negative kind of conception. Toleration is negative when emphasis of tolerance is expressed not on mutual respect for individual as autonomous moral agent but rather, bearing other people ways of life as long as one can afford to do so. A negative kind of tolerance echoes mere exhortation to be polite and sensitive to the beliefs, cultures and an exhortation to bear others. This is a kind of toleration Africa received from colonial masters; tolerance that was not predicated on mutual respect and acceptance of people way of life as autonomous moral agents. But rather, a forceful acceptance of colonialism and Christianity foisted on Africa. To this end, Apel argues that, negative tolerance is not sufficient to deal with the challenges faced by a multicultural society. He advocated the need to embrace 'positive or affirmative tolerance' that respects and 'even' supports a 'variety of value traditions (Karl-Otto, 1997).

Given the negative connotations of tolerance, it is frequently rejected as a political principle in favor of loftier ideas of equality, liberty, or respect. The idea that 'mere tolerance' is not enough or is even disrespectful is fuelled by a cultural sensibility that is deeply uncomfortable with the act of making value judgments and of questioning and criticizing other people's version of the truth. However, this paper looks beyond political principle and consideration. It advocates moral autonomy and imperativeness of positive conception of toleration that is motivated by the impulse of upholding the freedom of belief, conscience and speech because liberals took the view that it was preferable for people to find their own path to the truth than that truth should be imposed from above (Susan, 1999).

The notion of toleration that existed in pre-colonial African

society which was founded on communalism and brotherhood arguably was a kind of tolerance that embraces the virtue of mutual respect and human moral autonomy.

### **Traditional African society and the culture of toleration**

Arguably, Africa is naturally endowed with the best nature could ever give (Adeniyi and Ayedero, 2018). Consider the landscape, beautiful and astounding species of plant and animal, weather condition, natural resources, human resources and rich cultural value system. African is naturally endowed beyond compare. According to Walter Williams, “Africa is the world’s richest continent. It has 50% of the world’s gold, most of the world’s diamonds and chromium, 90% of the cobalt, 40% of the world’s potential hydro-electric power, 65% of the manganese, millions of acres of untilled farmland and other natural resources (Walter William, 1997). Unfortunately, despite all the aforementioned endowments Africa is referred to as the most backward continent in the world. Today, Africa is synonymous to ethnic crisis, religious intolerance, inter-tribal war, unemployment and underdevelopment. Consequently, Africa is seen as grossly lacking in the knowledge and ideal of toleration. But a cursory look at African history speaks otherwise. This warrants a brief exposition into African culture and how Africans demonstrate toleration in their daily endeavor in the pre-colonial era.

Just as every culture has its own peculiarity so also African culture has certain peculiarities. The peculiarities that define African culture among other things include: respect for elders, communalism as expressed in love for brotherhood, tolerance, discipline in children upbringing, love for ancestral etc. Africans, before the incursion of westernization via colonialism and globalization see themselves as community of brotherhood rather than a capitalistic individual foisted in endless struggle and competition for survival. They see themselves as deliberate act of God, communities of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life. Hence, all efforts are geared toward achieving common goals and aspirations. Usually, individual goals are community oriented. Individualistic living is foreign and alien to African society. It is a condition impressed upon Africa in the name of Civilization, Modernization, Liberalization, Christianization, Islamization and Westernization respectively by European and Arabian bigotry.

From our discussion so far, it is crystal clear that Africa has unique and rich cultures which among other things include culture of peace and tolerance. Violence, intolerance came from culture that promotes unhealthy competition inherent in capitalistic tendency and share arrogant of racial, tribal and religious superiority. In African Traditional Religion (ART), there is no conversion of adherents. Religious conversion, jealousy and hatred are invention from Christianity and Islam. This trend is the root of suspicion, hate, biases, marginalization, religious intolerance, ethnic cleansing, genocide, mass killing, assassination, terrorism, use of chemical weapon and other forms of hostilities that are inimical to human survival and wellbeing.

Given the decline in Africa’s most cherished value system over decades, it behooves a heuristic research not only to identify factors that are responsible for such decline and decay but to posit a holistic approach to addressing the issues hitherto identified. To this end, this piece advocates ‘Moral Imperative’, a robust ethical consideration. This idea of moral imperative will not only help in salvaging the falling African culture but help us to build a new culture of tolerance that will help to shape the future of our cultural value at the same time provide rare opportunities to bequeath the future generation a cultural legacy. The importance of bequeathing on posterity the culture of peace and tolerance is further reiterated by UNESCO declaration which states that: “The present generation should ensure that both the present and the future generations learn to live together in peace, security, respect for international law, human rights and fundamental freedom... the present generation should spare the future generations the scourge of war” (UNESCO, 1999). In other words, the burden of onus rests on our generation to do everything possible to discourage hostility and intolerance among men and to avoid passing over the scourge and pain of war, conflict and other forms of aggression that are inimical to human wellness and Africa’s survival. To this end, African need not plunge herself into the endless ocean of new arm race and hostility that has engulfed Middle-East, Southern and Northern America, Korean Peninsula, Europe, Asia and Australia. Africa must do everything in her capacity to avoid this trend that has today created global hostility; a watershed for new Cold War era.

A cursory look at the history of human civilization shows that most, if not all multicultural and intercultural communities are products of globalization. The challenge of multicultural and intercultural societies is culture intermingling among nations of the world. This is the root of cultural comparison and the tendency of imposition of one cultural value over others with the mind of suppressing them. The argument often advanced for this is that, some nations’ culture is better than the others. The preservation of cultural diversity in the modern world becomes an existential issue for Africa. It is no coincidence that many international organizations proclaimed the preservation of cultural diversity as one of its most cherished goals. For Nyeyere... “of all the crime of colonialism, there is none worse than the attempt to make us (Africans) believe that we had no indigenous culture of our own or that what we did have was worthless or something we should be ashamed of instead of being a source of pride” (See Nyeyere in Aborisade, 2015).

The gradual decline and erosion of African culture and value system caused by the cluster-wave of colonialism and globalization (*modern colonialism*) with huge storm of cultural disorientation has led to the fast-fading away if not total extinction of African most cherished and invaluable cultural values among which includes the focus of this paper; “The Culture of Tolerance”.

### **Tolerance and collective wellness**

Prior to the emergence of colonialism and subsequent

emergency of globalization, African traditional societies were known to be peaceful societies. As a matter of fact, African culture of peace was intricately entrenched in African belief in peace through patience or forbearance. This is evident in a Yoruba adage which says “*Suruu la fi nsoko obirin*” meaning “to be a responsible family man one needs to be patient”. Again, Yoruba people are fond of saying (Suruu le se okuta-jina) meaning “patience or tolerance can cook stone”. Africans believe in the prosperity of every member of the community. This point is corroborated by popular Yoruba adage which says; “*Olowo kan laarin egbegberun talaka, otosi nise*” meaning, a poor man in the midst of thousand is a poor man. This reflects the communitarian lifestyle of traditional Africa man. African man is not an individual atomic unit unlike Western-liberal conception of man. His joy, wealth, pain, loss, gains are other people’s joy, wealth, pain, loss, as well as gains. Pre-colonial Africa societies gave communal living a pride of place. Communal living (*communitarianism*) was predicated upon the principle of tolerance and the idea of collective wellness.

However, it is logical to argue that, since *individualism, capitalism, winner take all mentality and unhealthy competitions* which are root-cause of intolerance emanated from Western culture and imported through colonialism and globalization into Africa; it thus follow logically that culture of intolerance came to African through Westernization or Americanization of Africa. Again, let us consider the culture of tolerance and communal wellness in Africans’ daily living. A typical African man is a professional farmer and readily availability of communal labour which the Yorubas refer to as “*Oya*” makes farming easy. During plowing, planting and harvesting, the whole communities gathered together to help one another thereby taking care of financial burden of hiring labour that could limit or hinder production. Consequently, intolerance, unhealthy competition, jealousy, hate, terrorism and violence are non-existence.

The culture of toleration in traditional Africa society hitherto explored is not a privation of tribal and ethnic crisis as some may want to argue. Since, as long as there are men in word of Albert Einstein, there shall be war. However, our position here is that, the trend of hostility, violence, religious crises, terrorism that characterized African cultural, religious and political atmosphere today are alien to African indigenous culture.

Again, the spirit of shared love and collective wellbeing is demonstrated in African family life. It is not out of place in African for parents to sponsor their children’s education, sponsor their children’s wedding and marriage. And, whenever any of the children secure employment or became successful in choice of carrier, the family responsibility automatically becomes his or her responsibility. There was no such thing like my farm, my house or my money but rather our farm, our house and our money. Arguably, the pre-colonial African communities entrenched egalitarian principle. This is reflected in Yoruba’s adage which says “*ori o jori, aparokan o gajokan lo*” meaning; “we are all the same or we are all equal” (Ayedero and Owoyemi, 2018).

Everyone is mindful that each person has something to contribute to his welfare. Thus, it is obligatory to team up to assist those who are in need of help. Helping the needy is not only a moral act of good gesture but rather, an obligation toward others. Africa way of life is centred upon human interest and value; a mode of living evidently characterized by common wellbeing.

### **Tolerance: A sense of community**

In *Aristotle’s Politics* one read “human are by nature political animals”, and social instinct in all humans by nature. He who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is self-sufficient need not to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god. Hardly is there any race in the world that enjoys living together (communal living) in society more than Africans. Community is quintessential to human development in Africa. To this end, Daly emphasizes the imperativeness of community to individual’s survival and development as follows: As an individual, each person has unique identity defined by a subjective consciousness forms and carries out projects that unfold in personal history, holds an inalienable right to pursue this life span, and follows universal principles of morality in relationship with others. But at practical level of very day life, a communitarian conception can be felt. As a member of a community, each person belongs to a network of family and social relationship, and each person seeks personal fulfillment through participation in the evolving social structure of this community; find personal liberty in the expanded self-development cultivated through these activities and honour a traditional complex of agree commitment (Daly 1994). Daly’s view as highlighted above reiterates the need for individual within the community to cultivate universal principles of morality in relationship with others. This call reflects the globalization trend of building globally homogeneous culture through universal principle of morality. But such universality of moral principle must not undermine cultural diversity because in diversity and variety we achieve human completeness.

Given the reality of globalization and digitalization that has today render communalism partially impracticable, this piece argue for a positive conception of tolerance that is predicated in universal moral imperativeness of the autonomous of individuals to make for themselves socio-political, religious, moral and cultural choices to define their ways of life, design their future and chart their destinies in composite to acknowledging and recognizing the rights of others too. This is the imperativeness Immanuel advocated when he declared that “an individual must be treated as a legislative member of our universal kingdom of ends. This positive conception of tolerance; toleration of the right of others, not mere exhortation to be polite and sensitive to the beliefs, cultures and predicament of other will not only help in restoring fast-fading African culture of peace and tolerance but at the same make the world a better place where everyone be it Muslim, Christian, European, African, American or Arab will live together in peace and harmony.

It is important to reiterate at this juncture therefore that, the call for tolerance does not simply mean an exhortation to be polite and sensitive to the beliefs, cultures and predicament of other people but rather, an expression of disenchantment with people's capacity to exercise their inner dispositions as moral agents (Frank 2012). In other words, tolerance seen from progressive perspective presupposes that, in as much as I know as an individual, that I have certain rights under the law to express by religious, cultural and social beliefs, my knowledge is a license for the acceptance of others' rights to express their religious, political and socio-cultural beliefs and inclinations as moral agents provided they do not pose an infringement on my right to exercise mine. This will go a long way in dealing with the tension and conflict associated with multicultural society.

### Conflict of interest

The author has none to declare

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