Tolerance, Consensus, and Community: An African Perspective

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Since Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration*,[1] the concept of tolerance has gained considerable traction as a virtue that fosters peaceful coexistence, harmony, and justice in pluralistic communities. Contemporaneously this idea has been amplified in the UN's conception of tolerance as a moral, political, and legal requirement for peace[2] and in the dominant liberal formula of the 'respect conception of tolerance', which endorses toleration of disagreeable beliefs and practices as long as they conform with principles of equality and freedom that ground shared systems of norms in liberal society.[3] In the foregoing views tolerance is understood as a virtue that inheres in the tolerant person's capacity to assess and acknowledge the benefits of diversity, benefits grounded in respect for the equality and freedom of all participants in the political community. Recognizing this virtue is understood to be pivotal for sustaining societal peace.

I seek to defend two positions in this essay. First, I assert the instability of the notion of tolerance portrayed above. Tolerance is deemed an important instrument of community building, yet embedded in the notion is a quality that can work to subvert the very task of community building. Secondly, I judge tolerance to be hardly sustainable in a future of mankind marked by progressively converging cultures, and propose an African theory of consensus as a preferable instrument for community building in pluralistic societies.

It is difficult to deny the fact that humans have yet to devise a safer social habitat than community. This renders the proclaimed object of tolerance laudable. But it is doubtful whether the concept coheres well with its object. The word 'community' derives from the Latin phrase *cum munere*, which means the sharing of a mission or goal. So, to be in *communitas* is to be in a communion, in a relation with others to work toward a shared goal. Given this core meaning, I claim that tolerance provides a flawed basis of community for a number of reasons.

In pursuing this claim, let me begin by observing that tolerance implies disagreement and possible aversion. By tolerating you I admit to disagreeing with, and disapproving of, your set of beliefs and conduct.[4] The assumption of this attitude is that you bear values and beliefs about what constitutes the good life that are different from mine, and I am convinced that mine are correct, better, or more desirable than yours. So I disagree with your judgment, and may in fact agree with you that this disagreement affects the public life that we share. Thus the act of toleration implies a negative normative judgment which may render the other and her defining attributes as undesirable objects for me. But nonetheless, in spite of my conviction, I also admit that I should put up with this other out of some notion of respect for either their right to judgment or their personhood or both. Achieving this accommodation efficiently and avoiding infringement on each other's rights in a shared political society may require us to confine ourselves to our different corners and desist from interfering in each other's lives. For the sake of peaceful coexistence and social stability, we remain respectful of each other in our silos of conviction and conduct and endure our differences. Thus, the negative judgment cast at the onset of our encounter, and conduct to substantiate this judgment, has the effect of obstructing the creation of community.

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But there is another reason why it is doubtful that the defined conception of tolerance is good for community. For although the concept emphasizes recognition, acceptance, and respect for difference, it seems to disdain the value of engagement that demarcates the state of being in *communion* upon which building and maintaining community depends.

These considerations render the virtue of tolerance as an insufficient basis for fostering and governing community. Beyond an attitude of openness to diversity, community building requires two things: first, a *method*, in the form of constant engagement of the diverse constituents of people in pursuit, second, of a *common purpose*, an ideal toward which the method moves and the content of which varies as the quest progresses.

Asante adrinka symbol 'funtunfunefu denkyemfunefu' (Siamese crocodiles sharing one stomach), democracy and unity in spite of differences

My view is that Kwasi Wiredu's theory of consensus as a deliberative instrument for community building meets these requirements. Wiredu envisions a democratic system that institutes consensus seeking as the aim of, and methodological guide to, decision-making. Other authors have confirmed such consensus seeking as intrinsic to the ethics of communalism in the African cultural context, which considers reciprocal dependence as a characteristic human mode of being.[5] The infrastructure for decision-making in such a social setting is designed for the participatory control of a coalition of citizens rather than appropriation for the ends of those in control of it. It therefore encourages bargaining, negotiation, and compromise—all of which proceed from engagement—rather than conflict.

Substantive normative differences persist in Wiredu's consensual democratic setting. The system entails neither a complete concurrence on moral or cognitive opinions, nor unanimous agreement on issues under discussion.[6] Rather, it presupposes diverse prior positions and seeks to reconcile these such that any

decision reached, if at all, will be agreeable to all or, at least, would not be obnoxious to any. Such an outcome may obtain because this idea of consensus rests on the belief that ultimately the interests of all members of society are the same, although their immediate perceptions of those interests may be different.[7] So, consensus implies subscription to the higher value of a shared goal and belief in the possibility of collapsing differences toward this prospective destination of a shared goal. This possibility alone suffices to keep subjects of conflicting positions united in purpose.

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It is clear that the notions of tolerance and consensus converge and diverge. Both notions begin with polarized opinion and judgment. Likewise, they both presuppose adequate deliberative capacity of the bearers of these opinions, which enable them to make up their minds about something they care about. However, these points of their convergence also become fulcrums of their divergence.

As mentioned, tolerance involves a negative normative judgment and potential withdrawal into separate spheres of life. But consensus aims at something else. It prescribes an obligation to engage because, on its terms, multiple non-interactive monistic cultures are incompatible with the idea of a community.

The subscriber to the consensus approach reasons that withdrawal into relative indifference to each other signifies a hasty imposition of a mental barrier which prevents trying harder to understand the other person’s way of doing things, thereby missing an opportunity to discover dormant shared commonalities concealed beneath the surface of differences. He or she can believe, further, that assigning productive deliberative capacity to co-citizens is a step that opens the prospect of community building, which prescribes the additional step of activating constant dialogue. Admitting the non-fortuitous character of the other’s beliefs and conduct should not terminate my interest in her, but rather, inspire engagement with her. Openness to dialogue is preferable to withdrawal into peaceful coexistence in mutually opposing belief systems because at the very least the former can be a pathway to understanding between different groups, whereas the latter cannot.

Eid Al-Fitr parade welcomes chiefs from 18 tribes — Ghana, 2015 (Wikipedia)

As far as Wiredu's notion of consensus goes, engagement does not aim at a dash for actual arrival at some preconceived destination marked by a symmetrical synthesis, or worse still a hierarchical assimilation of disparate views. Community building does not require unanimity. What he does propose is constant endeavor toward a common goal, and participation in forging this common goal and each other's aspirations and lives. Consensus urges co-participants in community to trust in their capacity to bridge their differences, and to believe that doing so is better for them collectively than remaining indifferent and immobile in their thinking that we are justified in living socially isolated lives.

Notes

1. Locke, J. (1983) *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company

2. United Nations, *Declaration of Principles on Tolerance*, proclaimed and signed on 16 November 1995, Paragraph 1.1

3. Forst, R. (2017) '"Domination and Justice: The Concept of Toleration." *global-e* vol. 10, no. 81. See also Forst, R. (2013) *Toleration in Conflict*: *Past and Present*. Translated by C. Cronin. New York: Cambridge University Press

4. Admittedly, my strong disapproval of your conduct or beliefs doesn't have to mean that I disapprove of you as a person.

5. Bujo, B. (1998) *The Ethical Dimension of Community*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, p. 36; Ramose M. B. (2002) *African philosophy through Ubuntu*.

Harare: Mond Books, p. 113

6. Wiredu, K. (1997) “Democracy and Consensus in African Traditional Politics: Plea for a Non-party Polity.” In Eze, E.C. (ed.) *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, p. 304

7. Wiredu, K. ibid., p. 306

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