From Interreligious Conflicts to Harmony: Diversity Management and Improving Interreligious Relations in Africa

"I'm hearing only bad News from Radio Africa," a song from the 1980's by Latin Quarters succinctly stated and resonated with the conditions on ground in Africa at the time. Intra-state and inter-state wars, apartheid, neo-colonialism, deadly epidemics, poverty, poor governance, intractable religious conflicts, all affected the same continent with no end in sight. Almost nothing positive was coming out from the African continent especially South of the Sahara.

I will rather deviate from the norm of reporting only sad news and highlight at least one remarkable thing that has been taking place in Africa over the past few decades; the increasing inter-religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

A time when more people elsewhere especially in the West are getting more intolerant to members of other faiths, it warms my heart to note that a substantial number of Africans are not following suit. This is even more remarkable and surprising because it is happening at a time when one would expect the problem to have been exacerbated by terror attacks on the USA and other Western countries which prompted a rise of Islamophobia. One would expect the influence of Western media on the continent to promote news that sows further hatred among the already vulnerable African people.

However, what is interestingly striking is that in many African countries which normally follow the West, instead of deteriorating relations, there seem to have developed better and mutual relationships among the diverse religions. This has been exemplified by the increasing indigenous interreligious initiatives which have made peaceful coexistence and co-operation possible.

One of the most notable of these initiatives was the establishment in various African countries of Inter-religious Councils that are now credited with promoting interfaith dialogue, peace and even ventures to augment common benefit. In Uganda, for instance, when in 2001 the Inter-religious Council of Uganda was established, there was a tense environment which threatened to spill over into further Muslim-Christian violence. The Muslim-dominated ADF Rebels were at their peak causing havoc in the West of the country, the Pentecostal churches were at the zenith of their hostility towards Muslims while the Salafist youths were similarly unrelenting, ready to fight for the protection of their monopoly of the meat industry and to isolate pork in all public spaces.

Managing this situation required ingenuity. This was realized when religious leaders teamed up to form an association under which they would discuss and solve issues amicably. Consequently, the situation was ameliorated to an extent that the council is now influential enough to venture into solving other problems which are loosely related to religion.

Indeed, the model of the Interreligious councils has now spread to other countries in Africa such as Kenya, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast and in almost all these countries the situation has improved for the better.

This should give us hope and optimism that there is capacity locally to baffle similar challenges on the continent. These indigenous initiatives should be promoted and celebrated. Most importantly, other parts of the World should also borrow a leaf and replicate similar initiatives where there is a need in order to guarantee a peaceful and tolerant universe for us all.
How were the Interreligious Councils able to improve the relations of these diverse religions on the continent?

The answer to this question is that this phenomenon can be best explained using what sociologist R. Senturk termed as Diversity Management. It is about managing interests at the level of ideas, in the process forestalling tensions and preventing them from escalating into violence. It is a new field of study that should be given priority over conflict resolution studies because it seeks to prevent conflicts from occurring in the first place contrary to the now popular Conflict Resolution Studies which come in to resolve conflicts that have already occurred.

The main pre-condition for successful diversity management initiatives is the triumph of universality over particularity. Universalism is "a conviction that all human beings are inviolable by virtue of being humans, they share a common destiny.

This phenomenon was clearly discussed by Muslim scholars before, a revisit is necessary in order for us to alleviate our present conditions. According to the Muslim Universalists, Ismah (inviolability) is accorded to a person by virtue of their being human.That means that even the non-Muslims are protected and accorded their full rights as humans, *adamiyyah* . However, the Communalists disagreed with this. According to them, non-Muslims have no inviolability, or *ismah,* and they only get it if they pay tax - *jizya-* for their protection.

I take the position of the Universalists because there should be as much choice to the human as possible in order for him to claim full responsibility for their actions. As scholar Sarakshi noted succinctly "the purpose of God in calling humanity is to try them (*ibtila*)". The key condition in regard to the fulfilment of this requirement is according to humanity with all necessary information and tools that can enable them to make choices, and this is the role the prophets and their successors are doing. Without freedom and free will, then actions would not be based on the intention of the heart as is required in Islam but by fear of the man's law contrary to the spirit of God's command.

In multi-religious societies, history has proved that universalism is the ideal approach for better diversity management. The universalist mind is in practice the Higher mind. It sees human rights as necessary for every human without pre-conditions. Therefore, we expect that societies which adopt Universalism can easily become more tolerant and be embracing of others.
It is our responsibility to encourage improvement in relations among people. Being a highly religion-conscious continent as Africa is, it is relieving that limited conflicts are rooted in the differences engendered by religion. Efforts should thus be made to commend and to further promote this phenomenon.