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**ETHNOCENTRISM IN EDUCATION:
THE CASE OF COLONIAL AFRICA**

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The Concept and Context

Ethnocentrism can be viewed simply as "race-centredness", although, on a wider plane and in the sense W.G. Sumner coined the term at the beginning of the twentieth century, it can be seen also as a "view of things in which one's own group is the centre of everything and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it" (Sumner, 1906:13; see also Adorno, et al 1950). Ethnocentrism is an outlook that is accompanied by an almost institutionalized emotional attitude which holds one's own group, race, community or nationality to be superior and to be the standard in the judgement of the behaviour, actions and reactions of others. Thus, the others - as outsiders, or members of the outgroup - are held in an inferior position and treated to a lower rating in reference to the "accepted" ways of feeling and acting.

Such a racial-cultural projection is based on, and is a reflection of socio-political inequality and power play, with those wielding physical and material power dominating the others not only in the cultural-linguistic sphere but also in the educational and intellectual domain as well.

In a context of imperialism and colonialism, which for Africa form an unbroken theme of history of five centuries from the 1400s to the 1960s, the open play of political and racial inequality and the consequent social distance between ruler and ruled were bound to buttress misunderstandings and prejudices that often arise from inability to study situations surrounding the "outgroup" more closely and with objectivity. It is not surprising therefore that in Africa, ethnocentrism, as an expression and projection of racial superiority and politico-cultural egoism by wielders of political power, was at its highest in the five hundred years of its history before independence.

Like all items of culture and belief systems, ethnocentrism was perpetuated and facilitated by the prevailing education system which, before independence, was financed and administered by the ruling colonial state. The significance of an education system for the intensity and persistence of ethnocentrism lies in the fact that the curriculum formulated, the textbooks written and selected for school use and the supporting follow-up readers and examination system all combine to determine what will be learned and the value system that will emerge and will be further propagated by the generations that pass through the formal educational pipeline. This is particularly true when one considers the fact that all these instruments of formal school and college education were determined, formulated or else constructed

in the "mother country" for use in the colonial dependencies.

A few instances will be shown in this paper to demonstrate the nature and extent of ethnocentrism that prevailed in colonial Africa and the value systems that had emerged even among the Africans themselves as a result of domination by the colonial system and by the Eurocentric viewpoint.

A Dark Continent and its Origins.

A dominant view that comes out of the literature by authors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is that Africa, "a dark continent", did not come to light until some exogenous forces or agents had acted upon it. It "had no culture of its own" and, if what the natives prided themselves in is to be called a culture, then it was merely a complexus of "animalistic practices". This view had it strongly that any aspects of culture that seemed to have some order or pattern must have diffused from higher civilizations in Europe and Asia into the continent south of the Sahara via Egypt in North Africa, and that this was effected by a grand civilizing mission of a superior race known as the "Hamites" (presumably the descendants of Ham of the Bible) (see, for instance, Murdock, 1959:271-313).

To support the idea of a passive Africa south of the Sahara and an active outside re-agent, the "Hamitic" formulation was adva-

enced which asserted that the civilization of the Hamites was the great civilizing forces of black Africa. Where was this argument based? Nineteenth century travellers came across wandering cattle herders such as the Hima of Ankole, Buzinza and Buhaya, or the Tutsi of Rwanda and Burundi, who had features distinct from those of the 'sewile', Bantu-speaking majority. Unlike them, the herders were generally tall, slender, brownish and aquiline-nosed, and owned long-horned cattle. By 1872 Sir Samuel Baker had instinctively come to an observation that such a type 'were direct descendants of the Galla (Baker, 1872:149). James Cunningham,ⁱⁿ his book Uganda and its Peoples, likened their cattle to those of 'ancient Egypt and those found today in Somalia' (Cunningham, 1905:2).

Pushing the argument further, John Hanning Speke, a British explorer in search of the source of the river Nile and marvelling at the wonderful, well-organized kingdoms of Buganda, Bunyoro, Ankole and Karagwe and noting the similarities between them in ritual ceremonies and in social stratification, with a small aristocracy at the apex of the social pyramid, did not hesitate to conclude that the kingdoms "were formed by conquest of indigenous peoples by invaders from north or north-east of Africa described as Hamitic pastoralists" (Richards, 1960:28). In fact, he confidently suggested to Kabaka Mutesa that his ancestors came from Abyssinia, intimating that they were of caucasoid origin. Henry Hamilton (later Sir Harry) Johnston, too, purported this formulation. Even where no distinctions existed

between the Bantu and the so-called Hamites as in Busoga and Buganda, it was nevertheless contended that "the people had been once divided into a dominant Hamitic pastoral group and servile negro peasant group, but such distinctions had since been obliterated", as was maintained by Roscoe (Richards, *ibid*). The argument for a superior influence upon black Africa is rounded off by the view of Charles Seligman, a medical doctor and anthropologist in the 1930s in Southern Africa that the history of Africa is the history of Hamites. To him Hamitic and Semitic speaking peoples of Africa north of the Sahara were caucasoid and the peoples of Sub-Sahara were negroid, who could not have achieved the cultural civilization as was everywhere seen. Assuming from the similarity in rituals in Bantu Africa, in the language and in the customs, he maintained that by 3000 B.C. divine kingship had diffused into sub-Sahara from Egypt (Seligman, 1930).

However, Seligman, like others of similar thoughts, failed to explain why Egyptian civilization did not spring all at the same time and extend to all over the continent at the same rate. He could not explain why such traits could be found, say, in the interlacustrine region when they could not be found among the Nyakyusa of the South or the Shilluk of the north or indeed among the Nuer who are nearer to Egypt than the interlacustrine further in the south. Even Diop, in exalting African culture, that it was basic in Egypt as its source, faces the same question. The need was to discover a date connecting

the kingdom of Meroe with the fusion of iron-working into black Africa.¹ The date suggested was 500 B.C. It was assumed that around this date the negroes arrived in West Africa from Egypt presumably at the same time of the diffusion of iron and of population movements. ^{by} 600 B.C. iron working had been known at Meroe. Looking at the distribution of sickling among negroes in West Africa and taking into account that agricultural use of iron ushered in changes resulting into population movements, Livingstone tries to show us how negroes reached West Africa. But this is by no means enough to prove that such people were the first to appear in West Africa.

In his analytical study of the peopling of East Africa, for instance, John Sutton notes the misuse of the words "Hamitic", "Semitic", "Nilo-Hamite", et cetera, in their application to racial groupings. In the first place he convincingly maintains that "Hamites", who are generally pastoralists, cannot be said to have possessed an advanced culture and political system as has often been supposed because this type of environmental existence (pastoralism) is not conducive to settled cultural development (Sutton, 1968:16). North-eastern Africa, pastoralist as it still is today, has not shown distinguished development. As regards the physical description of the people of these areas, they fall into the "caucasoid" group which Sutton sees as not embracing "the East African pastoralists such as Masai, Karamajong, Turkana, Hima, Tutsi" hitherto classified elsewhere as semi-Hamites" (ibid). Yet the linguistic use of the word Hamitic, he observes, is unsatisfactory for it capitulates to "a large family of languages stretching from

the Moroccan to the Somali coasts and a subdivision within this family covering much of Ethiopia and the Horn with scattered outposts in Kenya and Tanzania" (ibid).

Following the varying arguments and points of view, students of African history and culture remain divided. The diffusionists hold the view that human civilization emanates originally from Europe and Asia through Egypt as an immediate entry point and hence that it has an organic link, however distant and indirect, with Ham and Sem. The evolutionists, skeptical of an unchallenged civilizing mission, assert that all people are capable of developing civilization out of their own unique material and psychological resources. The point is that the diffusionists imbue their argument with racial prejudice. Basil Davidson (1959:31) cites an illustrious example of a "serious" student of anthropology who, in trying to describe the remains of earlier occupants of Kenya, supposed that the inhabitants might have been Hamitic except that he failed "to see why a civilized people such as Hamites should have lived at this altitude" where, by extrapolation, the negroes or non-hamitic peoples were now to be found!

While, true, in a number of states diffusion of ideas and skill cannot altogether be denied (northern trade contacts with the south-east and south-west and population migrations have always been there), the internal process of evolution of ideas and skills has gone on from time immemorial, arising from unique circumstances and human

confrontation with nature. In his detailed study^{of} the kingdoms of the Congo, Jan Vansina comes out with an utter rejection of the thesis of a single generic centre as held by Oliver, Fage, Arkell and others and concludes his observation that "A hypothesis involving multiple invention, stimulated by contact diffusions and internal evolutions, seems to be the most appropriate one" (Vansina, 1966:36). A similar argument has been advanced by Isaria Kimambo in his study of the Pare political system. He observes at least four stages in the evolution of Pare political set-up when they immigrated to the mountains. These were not mass movements all at one go but rather small, individual shifts with kingship ties in the first place, later to become a centralized political unit. In the course of time political authority was strengthened and special needs for defence and worship made it essential to mobilize the use of priest and shrines which unified the tribe until they gradually developed into a more complex form. Similar evolutionary developments could be identified in the case of the Ntemi and interlacustrine regions. All these studies go to reject the idea of a great civilizing mission in Africa south of the Sahara by a great civilizing agent from the north and north-east, presumably Ham's and Sem's commissioner. On the strength of the research evidence by representatives of the two schools, particularly by Africanist scholars, the balance can be redressed that the two processes - of selective adoption of ideas from culture contact, and of independent evolution of ideas and skills in response to the demands of the local environment - went on together.

The Black Man and his Society

Another and perhaps more revealing projection of ethnocentrism was the blatant expressions and description given of the black inhabitants of the continent by representatives of the metropolitan states working or touring in the colonial territories overseas. Only few examples and cases will serve to illustrate this.

Sir Charles Eliot, High Commissioner of the British East Africa Protectorate (now Kenya) from 1901 to 1904, represented the general European impression when, in private correspondence, remarked: "His mind [i.e. the mind of the native] is far nearer to the animal world than that of the European or Asiatic, and exhibits something of the animal's placidity and want of desire to rise beyond the state he has reached." The remark is evidently reflective of the complex of superiority as is further inferred from the account of a personal witness Colonel R. Meinertzhagen who had a personal encounter with him in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1902:

He is not my idea of a High Commissioner, he looks more like a university don or a priest. He is a scholar, a philosopher, and a very able man with great vision. He amazed me with his views on the future of East Africa. He envisaged a thriving colony of thousands of Europeans with their families, the whole of the country from the

Aberdares and Mount Kenya to the German border [i.e. of Tanganyika] divided up into farms; the whole of the Rift Valley cultivated or grazed, and the whole country of Lumbwa, Nandi to Elgon and almost to Baringo under white settlement. He intends to confine the natives to reserves and use them as cheap labour on farms. I suggested that the country belonged to Africans and that their interests must prevail over the interests of strangers. He would not have it; he kept on using the word 'paramount' with reference to the claims of Europeans ... (Meinertzhagen, 1957, quoted in Davidson, 1966: 359-360).

Self-assertion was itself intertwined with overt paternalism and a patronizing zeal, all resulting from a self-righteous ethnocentrism and at the same time further justifying continued domination of the subject peoples. The following statement by yet another colonial administrator demonstrates the point:

Such in brief are the peoples for whose welfare we are responsible in British Tropical Africa. They have a fascination of their own, for we are dealing with the child races of the world, and learning at first hand the habits and customs of primitive man; not of some decadent and derelict aborigines of Australia but of a race which illustrates every stage in the evolution of man, from the hardly human 'Bushman' and the lowest type of cannibal to the organised despo-

tism and barbaric display of a Negro Kingdom like that of Buganda, or to the educated native community, a few at least of whose members boast a training in the English Universities and Medical schools ... (Quoted in University Echo, Aug. 3, 1969, cited in Ishumi, 1981:9-10).

As more and more was discovered and better understood, the corrosive attitude towards the native and the dark continent gradually improved. Thus, one member of the colonial elite commented, although with a relapse into the old mentality and ignorance: "The Bantus and most of the Negroes are physically fine specimens of the human race. Powerfully built, they are capable of great feats of strength and endurance. Individuals will carry a load of 100 lbs on their heads from morning till night, uphill and through swamps, with but brief intervals for rest. In character and temperament the typical African of this race-type is a happy, thriftless, excitable person, lacking in self-control, discipline and foresight" (ibid.).

Certainly, despite an increasingly better understanding of the native, such officials - authorities or experts on African culture as their position and literary eloquence came to raise them - would not truly reflect the picture of the African they were encountering and professing to civilize. Coming from an altogether ^{foreign} culture and from a different level and context of economic development, the foreigners would not comprehend and would scarcely appreciate the inner meaning of the external manifestations and actions they observed.

For instance, the apparent "thriftlessness" lay in the context of traditional altruism reflected in gift-giving and ensuring shared communal security. And, in the absence of refrigeration and other effective means of preservation, perishable goods somehow dictated terms and frequency of social distribution and maintenance of social exchange relations.

As for the "excitable person, lacking in self-control", there was nothing extraordinary about being open, as opposed to being reserved, secretive or surreptitious and nothing extraordinary about being inquisitive and eager to converse and establish intimacy not only with the immediate knowns but also with strangers. Intimacy, as a general rule, could easily lead to complete agreement and identical interest, but could also lead to complete separation if and when the mutual identity is off-set by some disagreement. Both involve an amount of emotionalism and excitement.

Regarding foresight, it is a quality that is inborn as much in the African as in the European, American, Asian and all others, at least in so far as a person has the natural endowment to analyse and assess courses of action and to plan and act accordingly. Unfortunately, because the black man was associated with the misinterpreted thriftlessness and excitability, he was taken by foreign observers to be lacking in foresight as well.

Reasons for such highly subjective criticisms of African culture as has been seen above are not difficult to see. One of the most obvious reasons is that foreign visitors (missionaries, adventurers, administrators) evaluated what they saw in terms of their own experience back home. What apparently differed from their expectations or disagreed with their custom was taken to be primitive at best or totally unacceptable at worst.

Towards an Objective Perspective.

In recent times the need to put right the distorted picture of Africa and the Africans has been expressed by many emerging African systems. A growing community of African and Africanist historians have been busily engaged in reconstructing the continent's past, and cultural and social anthropologists of a new generation have provided a matching contribution. In his detailed studies of African kinship systems, for instance, John Beattie (1964:96) observes that "Attempts to translate the kinship terms of other cultures into English have sometimes led to serious misunderstanding" and warns accordingly that "the social anthropologist's task is to try to understand other people's kinship systems 'from the inside', to learn to think in their categories, not to impose his own".

Earlier on, that is, before the modern European times, a few observers who had tried to look at the African Society "from the inside"

did give a fairly balanced picture of it. In 1352-53, for instance, Muhammad ibn Abdullah ibn Battuta, the most travelled of all Muslim writers of the Middle Ages, described the West African Kingdom of Mali as follows:-

They are seldom unjust, and have a greater abhorrence of injustice than any other people. Their sultan shows no mercy to anyone who is guilty of the least act of it. There is complete security in their country. Neither traveller nor inhabitant in it has anything to fear from robbers or men of violence. They do not confiscate the property of any white man who dies in their country, even if it be uncounted wealth. On the contrary, they give it to the charge of some trustworthy person among the whites, until the rightful heir takes possession of it. They are careful to observe the hours of prayer, and assiduous in attending them in congregations and in bringing up their children to them ... (Gibb, 1929:329-330).

Two decades earlier he had had the same favourable impression of society on the east coast. On sailing to Kilwa in 1331, Ibn Battuta had observed that "... Kilwa is one of the most beautiful and well-constructed towns in the world. The whole of it is elegantly built. The roofs are built with mangrove poles. There is very much rain. The people are engaged in a holy war, for their country lies beside that of pagan Zanj. The chief qualities are devotion and piety: they follow the Shafi'i rite" (Quoted in Freeman-Grenville, 1962:31).

Ibn Battuta had a good sense of what he was observing and tried to give a fair picture of what he saw although he nevertheless was blinded by his own faith to the fact that African society had among other things an indigenous religion of its own.

After a deeper study, far back in the tenth century, a renowned Arab writer and traveller, Abdul Hassan ibn Hussein ibn Ali al Mas'udi had come out with an elaborate description of various religious and cultural aspects of the indigenous coastal peoples of East Africa:

... To come back to the Zanj and their kings, the name of the kings of the country is Waklimi which means supreme lord; they give this title to their sovereign because he has been chosen to govern them with equity. But once he becomes tyrannical and departs from the rules of justice, they cause him to die and exclude his posterity from succession to the throne, for they claim that in thus conducting himself he ceases to be the son of the Master, that is to say of the king of heaven and earth. They call God by the name of Maklandjalu, which means supreme Master ...

The Zanj speak elegantly, and they have orators in their own language. Often a devout man of the country, pausing in the midst of a numerous crowd, addresses to his listeners an exhortation in which he invites them to serve God and submit to His orders. He points out the punishments which disobedience must entail, and recalls the example of their ancestors and their ancient kings. These people

have no code of religion; their kings follow custom, and conform in their government to a few political rules ... Each worships what he pleases, a plant, an animal, a mineral ... (Quoted in Davidson, 1966:116).

As to the political and social behaviour of the people, there would be no doubt, to a sympathetic and objective observer, about the orderliness of the black man, given a genuine approach to him. Centuries after Al Mas'udi, the missionary-explorers Ludwig Krapf and Johannes Rebmann testified to this favourable atmosphere (although in an age of zealous European nationalism, they too could relapse to the prejudice that East Africans, and all Africans for that matter, were "profitable in nothing either to God or to the world"—Krapf, 1860:507, 512). Thus, on July 24 and 25 1848 Krapf, while in Usambara of King Kimweri, entered the following in his diary:

... The tranquility and respect with which the people accosted me, not one of them begging anything, soon showed me that in the territory of king *Kmeri* there must reign ... order ...

... As already indicated, I found no begging among them; but whether in the course of a longer residence this would have always remained the same, is another question; yet my belief is, that missionaries have less to suffer from that system in a despotic than in a republican country, it being presupposed that they have somewhat appeased at their first coming those greatest of beggars,

their kings and chiefs ... (ibid .: 575).

The truth about the discreet conduct and self-respect of the Black African is further evidenced in a documented self-confession by John Hanning Speke in 1862, upon arriving in Buganda together with his companion James Augustus Grant in their exploration of regions of the Nile:

I prepared for my first presentation at court, attired in my best, though in it I cut a poor figure in comparison with the display of the dressy Waganda. They wore neat bark cloaks resembling the best yellow corduroy cloth, crimp and well set, as if stiffened with starch, and over that, as upper-cloaks, a patchwork of small antelope skins, which I observed were sewn together as well as any English glovers could have pieced them; while their headdresses, generally, were ... turbans, set off with highly-polished boar-tusks, stick-charms, seeds, beads, or shells ... (Speke, 1863:285, quoted in Rotberg, 1965:205-206).

The presentation of African culture and African perspectives has steadily improved over the years, especially from the mid-1960s as most African countries began to enjoy the newly acquired status of national independence. John Beattie's warning (op.cit) was a timely

one and it was relevant not only to cultural anthropologists in relation to kinship terms alone but also to all students and observers of African indigenous systems. In this, he was joining hands with historians such as Basil Davidson, Jan Vansina, Terence Ranger, Gilbert Gwassa, John Iliffe, Arnold Temu and Peter Schmidt (to confine the list only to east Africa) and social anthropologists and sociologists such as John Mbiti, Stephen Lucas, Bengt Sundkler, Cuthbert Omari and William Anderson.

Each of these scholars and others in like disciplines has made a contribution in terms of research and at least a publication (see references) in an attempt at reviewing and revisiting indigenous African civilization and arriving at new and more objective interpretations that have consequences for relations with the wider world now and in the future. This effort in correcting the old biased view is Africanist, an effort of scholarship that is nevertheless cognizant of possible dangers of moving away from one extreme (Eurocentric ethnocentrism) to the other extreme (Afrocentric ethnocentrism) and has thus tried to guard against romanticization and obscurantism.

The importance of this generation of scholarship of the seventies lies in the fact that these products of research and the entailed new themes have proved useful tools and vehicles in dispelling some of the beliefs and ideas of the older times that had found strength in an unequal political power structure of the colonial system and in

an educational system and learning process dominated by western (colonial) literature. This point introduces the role and significance of curriculum reform and education for a new age of national independence and international understanding.

The Challenge of Curriculum Reform

The task of curriculum reform and the search for new approaches to teaching in schools and colleges have been two twin educational and pedagogical issues to be addressed alongside research efforts towards national reconstruction in the last two and a half decades. These in turn have implied specific and concerted efforts in syllabus reviews and coursebook writing so as to have the new curricular contents in line with the researched information and interpretations.

In Tanzania, for instance, a national curriculum development centre—the Institute of Education – had been set up in 1964 as part of the then University College Dar es Salaam. In 1975 it was made an autonomous parastatal institution and given an expanded mandate in order to meet the greater educational challenges of a developing independent nation.

The Institute had to set up panels of experts drawn from professional teachers, educationists, university lecturers and researchers and subject specialists and such subject panels concentrated efforts in

reviewing subject content and syllabi, recommending necessary changes and modifications. By using expert groups aware of the new research data and information generated by the growing number of African and Africanist researchers, the Institute of Education - since 1984 more appropriately renamed Institute of Curriculum Development - has facilitated a spread of new thinking among younger generations through newly published coursebooks and revised syllabi for primary and secondary schools.

Similar efforts have been made in other eastern African countries especially Kenya and Uganda, where their national institutes of education have since the 1970s made similar strides in educational research, curriculum reform and subject syllabus reconstruction as well as in sponsoring book writing for various college courses and school subjects.

It will suffice here to give two or three examples, from the History subject, of the kind of research-based reinterpretation that has helped in redressing overly western ethnocentric projections found in older social science literature.

An older point of view has had it on record that a number of key African features and landmarks were "discovered" by Europeans - Mount Kilimanjaro (by Johann Rebmann in 1848), Mount Kenya (by Ludwig Krapf in 1849), the source of the River Nile (by John Speke

in 1858), Lake Tanganyika (by Captain Richard Burton in 1858), Lakes Mweru and Bangweulu (by Dr. David Livingstone in 1867/68). The African point of view has corrected the expression. These were first among Europeans and outsiders who visited the continent to see such features and to put such observations on written record. They were surely not the first men to discover or see these geographical features, for within their vicinity African inhabitants had long seen (or discovered) them and publicized them among their folk!

The famous Maji Maji Revolt, in which Africans in the south-east of Tanganyika physically confronted (but were eventually subdued by) the German Empire in 1905-7, had for years until the late 1960s, been recorded and known as a "rebellion", taken to mean that the Africans had committed a crime of rising in arms against established authority. In the later years of Africanist research and review of local accounts, Maji Maji is seen not as a rebellion but as a war between the Africans who had had their rights to their own land and foreigners who had imposed their own will on them. It cannot have been a rebellion for the German authority had not been accepted or recognized by the Africans. Hence the change in record from a 'Maji Maji Rebellion' to 'Maji Maji Rising' and variously to 'uprising', 'revolt' or 'war'.

The same re-interpretation has been offered for the Mau Mau emergency in Kenya in the 1950s, which has similarly lately found

way into current literature.

A third example relates to the years of the late 1950s and 1960s which have frequently been recorded as a period in which African territories were given independence. A more correct perspective has been suggested as years in which these territories 'regained' or 'recovered' their independence which had been lost at the beginning of colonialism in the nineteenth century. The point is that at the very beginning (i.e. before Europeans), African societies were independent, autonomous or sovereign, with their own political systems, economic structure and culture.

Conclusion

The account given in this paper serves to show that ethnocentrism as a concept and as a practical expression of racial prejudice has been at play in Africa for a long time, from the very beginnings of the penetration of western culture bound up together with colonial overlordship. It is clear that the colonial education system did much to service already unequal socio-political relationships by further enhancing an educational curriculum determined and dominated by western values and literature.

The paper notes, however, that things have changed with times and it pays tribute to the growth and research interest of the genera-

tion of African and Africanist scholars who have assisted in redressing the lopsided view of African culture through active research, reinterpretation and coursebook writing, all which have had an effect on curriculum reform in African schools and institutions of higher learning. A more egalitarian relationship between African nations and the outside world, at least in ideology and scholarship, is now no longer a dream it used to be in the past decades.

Dissemination of research findings on vital aspects that affect national and community life and an increased rate of participation of representatives of African public opinion (political leaders, scholars, researchers, teachers, writers and artists) in regional and international forums together with others from other national and ethnic backgrounds would have an increased effect of inter-cultural exchange and respect. The eventual impact of this is the promotion of multicultural viewpoints, of socio-psychological tolerance, international understanding and peaceful co-existence within the context of global perspectives.

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