

TRADITIONAL AFRICAN CULTURE: PROSPECT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

EMMANUEL C. IBOBOR

Faculty of General Studies, Federal University, Dutse, Jigawa State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

To say that development beckons on Africa is no longer an issue. But the way to go about it has remained a great challenge needed to be addressed. Although several attempts aimed at addressing the trend from a traditional African cultural perspective had been advocated. This has been criticized owing to the fact which most African and non-African scholars hold from a sociological cum anthropological perception of tradition with respect to traditional African culture in relation to their beliefs, worldviews and lived experiences are often considered as agrarian, pre-scientific, resistant to change and innovation and bounded by the perception of its past considered as ancient, antiquity or old-fashioned. And in contrast to this is 'modernism' or 'modernity' considered as scientific, innovative, culturally dynamic, futuristic and industrially urbanized. But while the former is predominantly African, the latter is Western according to Kwasi Wiredu who held strongly to the latter's view and opposed to the former which is besieged with 'three complaints (evils) that can affect a society', hence his call to 'modernize using Western science' as a paradigm shift. This paper therefore takes into cognizance the role which Traditional African culture plays in the quest for development particularly in Africa and the world in general with explication on 'De-Africanisation' and 'Re-Africanisation' approaches as measures aimed at addressing the developmental challenge facing Africa. It also highlights the drawbacks associated with 'De-Africanisation' and 'Re-Africanisation' approaches as well as Oladipo's 'cultural syncretism' with its essential features and the need for cultural transformation as a panacea to sustainable development in Africa.

Keywords: *Africa, Culture, Development, De-Africanisation' and Re-Africanisation.*

INTRODUCTION

The role of '*traditional African culture*' in relation to prospects of development in Africa cannot be over emphasized. It is imminent and worthy of bringing to the front burner of national and regional cum continental discourse given the level of '*underdevelopmental crisis*' that have and is currently besieging African continent. However, there is no doubt that '*traditional African culture*' has witnessed a level of debacle and imbroglio which has resulted to Africa and indeed Africans to lose grip with their ancestral origin and one way to link Africa up to the developmental strides is the call by some African cultural scholars for '*cultural renewal and transformation*' which has to do with a call to return back to base – the ancestral root. Little wonder the saying that: '*never forget your roots or be ashamed from where your family has come from, but to always remember that your root do not make you superior to anyone in the world for we are all made uniquely by a creator.*'

In discussing Africa in relation to its developmental challenges or challenges associated with development, some questions that come to mind include: where were Africans before the coming of the colonialists? In other words, what path of development were Africans in the pre-colonial days, colonial times and post-colonial era? That is, do Africans have track records of development agenda previously, now and future? Therefore, one needs to ponder on these questions reflectively to be able to address the developmental challenges plaguing Africa today; hence, development no doubt beckons on Africa as a continent. And the panacea for the attainment of this giant stride of development lies not in copying *Western standard* as a paradigm shift, but in the *traditional African culture*. Little wonder Martin Luther King opines that the prosperity of a nation depend not in the strength of its fortifications or in the beauty of its public buildings, but consists in the number of its cultivated citizens and men of character and enlightenment. (Madu, R: 1998) Thus, drawing inspiration from the above remark, one now begins to wonder and ask: do Africans still have citizens or men of character and enlightenment cultivated and deeply rooted in African culture and tradition?

Today, Africa's greatest challenge is underdevelopment. This is unconnected with the leadership somersault which Africa has witnessed in recent past especially after the so called exit of the colonial masters while the nationalists who fought for the independence of most African nations took over the helms of affairs upon the attainment of political independence which most of them hitherto got but still experience foreign dominance from their respective colonial masters who still dictates the socio-economic cum political policies to be adopted, thus, making most African countries dependent nations. But they (nationalists) were however shown the way of out of office by the '*military boys*' all over the African continent based on moral ground which most of them claim and them

unsatisfied with the high level of criminalities and total breakdown of societal norms and values and economically lured into government while abandoning their principal responsibility of protecting the territorial integrity of the continent arising out of the massive looting of the nation's treasury for self-gain and aggrandizement, thus leaving the general populace in abject poverty, penury and squalor who now resorts back to building beliefs in supreme deities, while in most cases some lost '*confidence and faith*' on such beliefs as a result of the breakdown in cherished societal norms and values embedded by way of customs, traditions and practices of the people, thus, resorting to self-help most of whom takes laws into their hands and leading to the collapse of laws and orders in the society. But a fundamental question begging for an answer remains: Who then is to be blamed?

Furthermore, this developmental prospect crumbled as Africans were made to forcefully abandon their traditional mode of worship and embrace new forms of religions such as 'Christianity and Islam' which were more fierce, aggressive and radical in the propagation of their religious ideals, but with the Asians adopting a more subtle and tolerant approach in the dissemination of their religious practices, while brandishing traditional African religions as idolatry and paganism.

Also, Africans were made to abandon their routine way of life by way of agriculture basically, commerce, health, arts, and even politics which were all aimed at developing the lot of Africans and the world in general. An encroachment into these aforementioned areas however brought about a disconnection of Africans from traditional African culture which was revered and cherished by Africans without any form of impunity and dexterity and ushered in untold hardship and utter plundering and exploitation of Africans. And to worsen the situation, African leaders were made to swear with the Holy books of these alien religions upon assumption of public office, while the constitution were fashioned along the realities and world views of their foreign collaborators and allies who help most African leaders to stock pile nations looted treasuries in foreign domiciliary accounts. And Africans became disillusioned the more as their individual and collective fate and destinies were left at the mercies of these foreign blunders who meant nothing well for African nations, but only to continue to determine, dictate and dominate the socio-political and economic frontiers at the detriment of the Africans. These further degenerated into several cases of genocide, civil unrest and militancy in most African nations most of which are still raging on till date.

Therefore, it is to this end that this paper argues against Wiredu's view and considers '*traditional African culture*' as a rationally inherited cultural practices which are considered sacred, patterned along the world-views and lived experiences of the African people and handed down by the forebears to the present generation. This is because,

traditional African culture stems from certain rational ideas, concepts, traditions, customs and practices based on the African orientation and lived experiences which are considered sacrosanct to the African people and passed from one generation to another by our ancestral progenitor in Africa.

How then can traditional African culture as being conceived help to fast track development in Africa without any form of superimposition of alien or Western culture? Hence, this paper sues for the case of '*Re-Africanisation*' orientation, as against the '*De-Africanisation*' approach; and Oladipo's '*cultural syncretism*'. These positions have never helped and will not suit the African current disposition which depicts the case of pouring old wine in new skin. For '*Re-Africanisation*' will restore and put Africans on the path of progress and advancement.

Thus, in order to attain the desired height Africans are yearning for through *traditional African culture*, Africans must therefore learn from their Asian counterparts who, despite world civilization by way of globalization and the likes continue to retain and sustain their self-identity culturally, technologically and even scientifically, without total abandonment of their language especially, religion and other treasured cultural practices and traditions like most African States did, hence they are still competing favorably well in global economy. Africans therefore must key-in into this success records and borrow from the Asian experience.

Madu, R. (1998) asserts that: apart from the increasing advocacy to Africanize whatever can possibly be so done as a mark of identity, no government seems to be willing to invest funds in studies whose relevance to the predicament of modern society appears doubtful. The African philosopher is thus called as it were, to establish the utility of his discipline in the African context. Undoubtedly, such a demand is legitimate and African philosophers have responded to it in varying degree. And this they have done according to Oladipo O. (1996) who alludes to the fact that: African philosophers have touched not only on issues concerning the practice of philosophy in Africa, but also questions of African identity and cultural renewal in the world. They have also considered issues relating to the intellectual conditions for the achievement of the goal of development in Africa.

However, in every cultural discourse, the relevance of language as an important aspect of any culture with no exception to African culture cannot be overemphasized. But today, what is the situation? Do Africans still communicate effectively in our indigenous languages? Have Africans not made Western language(s) their lingua franca in the name of globalization thus losing their identity irrespective of Wiredu's call for '*universal intercultural communication*'? (Wiredu, K: 1996)

Where then is the road map to the prospect of development in Africa? Does it lie in African traditional culture or elsewhere? Affirming these questions is the prospects of development in Africa via culture. Though, given the culture crisis in Africa, scholars have advanced several measures aimed at tackling these crises. And moves toward advancing a therapy for these ugly trends is the '*De-Africanisation and Re-Africanisation approaches*' as advocated by Oladipo O. (2009).

Re-Africanisation Approach

For those who claim Africa needs '*Re-Africanisation*' are of the opinion that Africa has some set(s) of values, beliefs and unique ways of perceiving, interpreting and reacting to reality; and until Africa returns to them, Africa will not but continue to experience cultural crisis. Africa will only generate the self-confidence needed in acquiring the self-directed change she desires, that is achieving social reconstruction in Africa. If Africa and indeed Africans truly desires to develop, there are some aspects of their heritage which should serve as foundation for the developmental process. This is likened to the traditionalist resolve and approach to resolving cultural crisis in Africa.

De-Africanisation Approach

De-Africanisation on the other hand proclaims a clean break up, that is, total disentanglement from African realities. Scholars of this strand clamors for a total rejection of African cultural values. It claims that Africa should break away from their cultural inheritance based on its inferiority to the present day global development. And since development in contemporary world is tied to science and technology, Africans should therefore embrace the Western culture which it is grounded in and jettison theirs for it cannot yield the desired developmental change which Africans desire. This is also likened to the modernist resolve and approach to resolving the challenges confronting African traditions and cultures.

Drawbacks on Re-Africanisation and De-Africanisation Approaches

Oladipo O. (2009) examines the drawbacks of both approaches to African cultural cum development problem. Most adherents of '*Re-africanisation*' often misconstrue culture as an inheritance. For culture is not a kind of inheritance, but rather, the inherited past is just a part of African culture with emphasis on the past, present and the future, as it is a '*complex whole*' of the reality of a people which consists of language, ideas, beliefs, customs, taboos, codes, institutions, tools, techniques and works of art, rituals, ceremonies, and other related components as Tylor E.B. (1871) will have us believe.

They relegate the fact that culture is dynamic, hence, human beings strive to improve the condition of their own existence.

More so, they do not also realize that not all traits of culture aid human flourishing. As a result, there is need to compare and contrast with other culture in order to abandon that which does not support developmental stride.

The replacement system of '*De-africanisation*' could also not solve the issue of cultural dislocation. Although a break away from the past is inevitable, and, science and technology are necessary ingredients for global development, but total break up would only deepen the cultural crisis in Africa thereby reinforcing the inferiority complex deeply rooted in colonialism, which is the cause of cultural dislocation that '*De-africanisation*' seeks to solve. This informs the advocacy for '*cultural syncretism or synthesis*' (Oladipo. O: 2009).

Cultural Syncretism Approach

Beyond '*Re-Africanisation*' and '*De-africanisation*' approaches, there is a synthesis which Oladipo, (2009) calls '*cultural syncretism*'. And since both '*Re-africanisation*' and '*De-africanisation*' fail in their attempt at solving the problem of cultural dislocation in cultural crisis aimed at solving developmental debacle in Africa, Oladipo's cultural synthesis maintains a middle point position from the polar arguments by cropping out that which is best from both sides of the divide. This can be found in the work of philosophers who see '*deliberative cultural syncretism*' as a viable solution. Therefore, what is required of Africa and Africans is to imbibe the essential part of her past culture that will support the developmental change it requires and complement it with useful parts of her multicultural influences – Islam, Christianity, colonialism and now globalization. This will aid the realization of *Africa's lost glory*, including the self-identification need for social reconstruction and desired developmental growth.

Essential Features of Cultural Syncretism

The essential feature of cultural synthesis is knowledge which is a necessary condition for achieving the cultural autonomy required to control cultural influence and to ensure that our cultural syncretism is not discriminated. This knowledge is conceived from two perspectives: *culture of belief* and *culture of inquiry*.

Today, it is believed that Africa possesses '*culture of belief*' - a culture of dogmatic acceptance of knowledge like a kind of inheritance or tradition, which is problematic. This explains why cultural confusion sets in most often, whereas knowledge as an inquiry is that which questions and scrutinizes. And part of Africa's inability to regain her identity after independence to date is because of the *culture of belief*.

Another cause of Africa's problem is over reliance on others for solution to their pressing needs. However, if the '*culture of inquiry*' is promoted by Africa, the rationalists will argue that the solution to their problem would be achieved. But the first distinctive feature of this orientation according to Oladipo O. (2009) is the refusal to grant special status to traditional African ideas about the nature of humanity, society and nature by the West. And closely related to this is an emphasis on '*science and technology*' as critical factors in social progress. He also laid emphasis on the role of education in inculcating a '*rationalist orientation*' on students and possibly the populace, as against an '*imitative and conservative*' kind of education that is predominant now.

Cultural Transformation for Sustainable Development in Africa

Therefore to achieve the needed *cultural transformation or renewal* for sustainable development in Africa, Oladipo O. (2009) advocates that:

- i. There must be the need to develop the capacity for self-conscious change.
- ii. There must also be the need to do away with the colonial legacy because the independency received is political, which is not even total, as African economies still remains under colonial leaders. African states service the '*advanced*' and '*civilized*' society by producing the primary commodities for example oil, but the reward they get is to become the dumping ground for finished goods.
- iii. There is the need to do away with the tendencies of unequal exchange which only ensures massive flow of wealth and labour from Africa to the Western countries.
- iv. There must also be emphasis on the importance of socio-economic and political need in bringing about cultural renewal in Africa. Africa of today, he says, is an intellectual colony of Western world – what Hountondji P. (1996) describes as '*displacement of knowledge*' due to economic disadvantage. African scholarship has been deprived the kind of virile cultural debate that can help to map out the direction of or at least provide an appropriate intellectual context needed for cultural development in Africa.
- v. Other factor identified by Oladipo O. (2009) as having great importance in cultural renewal and transformation process in Africa is *technology*. Africa, he believes is far behind in technological advancement. He views technology as a major factor in developing a cultural dependence, which has crippled the capacity of self-reliance in post-colonial Africa. To drive home his point, he explored the history of technological development in Europe and how this has become a vehicle for the propagation of Western culture.

Oladipo's submission therefore is a call for a sustained effort on the part of all stakeholders to engender a '*cultural revolution and rejuvenation*' that will result in the

desired development in Africa. Although it must be stated categorically that, Oladipo's thought on the culture question in philosophy and social reconstruction is well articulated. In fact, it is plausible to claim that the talk of development in its totality is not possible without leaning on cultural discourses. In fact, that is the sense in which the distinction between open and closed societies is made.

Also, this work agrees with Oladipo's plea for a '*cultural synthesis*' for this will purify the untenable elements of our culture and at the same time, not to allow for an wholly absorption of the Western ideology which in a way lead to what Wiredu K. (1996) calls '*colonial mentality*', among other problems associated with it.

Although, this does not mean that Oladipo's argument is not immune from criticisms for the shift of the burden of Africa's quagmire on the colonialists as distorting African culture is not totally true. And even though he (Oladipo) does not totally agree with those who trace the predicament of Africa to Western hegemony (colonialism), he seems to subscribe to the above argument to a great extent. Meanwhile, this canvas upon which Oladipo's argument is based (that African cultural diffusion or its problem of identity is largely traceable to the Western intervention- colonialism and religion) is faulty. This is because there was no visible organized cultural institution that could challenge the Western hegemony as at the time. That is, there was no reasonable socio-cultural system to resist the super-imposition of Western categories as at that time. Hence, the often acclaimed idea of communalism such as Nyerere's '*Ujama*' appears questionable if objectively appraised.

How then do one objectively justify the idea of '*brotherhood*' in Africa when most African leaders indulge in the sales of their fellow '*brother*' (*subjects*) to their Western collaborators as slaves in exchange of peanuts, pieces of mirror or even a bottle of gin? And the most disheartening part of such experience is that, the people's resistance against the brutality of the Whites was badly conceived by their own rulers as a way of obstructing their means of livelihood. Thus, they fought their 'brothers' unjustly and ruthlessly, even with their blood. In the light of this, it calls for a re-examination of Africa's celebrated history, to really know if some of those '*values*' we call '*African values*' were really so, as they lack sufficient critical evidence to substantiate in most cases.

Furthermore, on the conception of science and technology as the prerogative of the West cannot be accepted. Who says Africans do not have a science and technology? Africans do have science and technology, but have been relegated to the back ground and has not been allowed to flourish over time. For example, here in Nigeria, where is the '*Ogbunigwe*' and the '*Awka made*' African based technology in the South-East of Nigeria which was used to prosecute the thirty months of Civil war by the defunct Biafran

Republic against the Federal Troops? Has it simply gone into oblivion? What about the *Bini Bronze cast and sculpture technology*; and the *Yoruba and Hausa/Fulani tie and dye and weaving technology*? It attracted low patronage and cannot compete favourably well in the international market simply because it is coming from Africa a dark continent where nothing good can come out according to some Westerners. But prominent scholars have argued that Western science, civilization and even philosophy took its source from Egypt. Thus '*Greek civilization*' according to James, G. (1954) 'certainly was not as original and innovative as some would have us believe.'

Similarly, some traditional African practices show that Africans had been of scientific mindset and orientation even before colonialism. For example, Africans had and still have the idea of time (forget this derogatory outlook of '*African time*' which has been mostly criticized by the Westerners or African Western trained scholars due to ignorance), weather; season and so on, the role of rain moisture in plant germination, the construction of local bridges and making of hoes among numerous others. In fact, Omoregbe, J. (1998) argues that where there is smoke; there must be fire, even if the fire for some reasons is not seen, hence, the traditional African society was not devoid of scientific and technological orientation.

More so, we cannot totally achieve '*social reconstruction*' as popularized by Oladipo O. (2009) without a '*de-link*' from the West. This however does not mean that we should reject everything Western; but rather, we should begin to think inward on how to produce things locally and refuse to participate in all the International Organizations like the Commonwealth, United Nation Organization, International Monetary Fund, and so on for they are nothing but agents of Neo-colonialism. Because they do not project and reflect the interest and image of Africa, for truly, the West are no longer with us in person, but through these organizations they come up with humanitarian aids to Africa while they project and sell their ideologies which may even be more disastrous than being with us bodily because one may not be conscious of and be ready to prepare a defense against its negative effects on us as this will bring nothing but promote what Wiredu K. (1996) call '*colonial mentality*'. After all, ideas they say, rules the world. So, the idea of civilization, globalization, modernization, capitalism, liberalism and so on are nothing but mere nomenclatural change; for it depicts a old wine in new skin.

Therefore, Africans should not be afraid to detach themselves from these shackles by cutting off from global sphere, shot doors from all the importations from the West but should think inwardly on how to produce things locally by harnessing its rich natural resources and put them in effective and efficient use. Though, this may not be easy at the onset, but a trial will convince us and put Africa in the path of development among the comity of nations. Hence, rather than call for modernization using Western science as a

paradigm for Africa's development, we should learn and key-in to the Asian experience that had had similar encounter like Africa. But today, we hear of '*Asian Tigers*' like China, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia and the likes. Yes, it could be said that they equally copied from the West, but not to the extent of losing the essential element of their culture especially language, religion, dress code and the likes which gives them a sense of identity. For example, Japan did it for ten years and was successful. China also did this for over two hundred years to attain their current enviable status economically and technologically and is competing favourably well if not outpacing the so called world powers of the West today.

Therefore, Africa no doubt can replicate that still and even outpace others too especially given the rich abundant human and natural resources. Africa should develop home grown mechanism of confronting today's and future challenges. For a cursory look at an Asian product, say automobile leaves no one in doubt whatsoever that irrespective of Western tradition they tend to have borrowed from, they still retain, maintain and sustain their identity fashioned along their indigenous world-views, beliefs, thought systems and lived experience.

And amidst certain draw backs inhibiting Africa's developmental strides, Sogolo, G. (1993) says that there had been tremendous development in techniques and principles that are uniquely Africa and whose origins are not linked with Western forms. What used to be traditional medical practices and methods of healing in Africa have been undergoing modification and transformation from the traditional to the modern. And the same also applies in the areas of African arts and literature which expresses a philosophy of life falls within the purview of intellectual creativity in Africa where the earlier works were considered as traditional and the transformed ones called the modern has equally witnessed astronomical development in Africa. The same also may be said of in the areas of social and institutional transformation in Africa.

Also, in certain parts of Africa, where real independence from the West have gained ground, the traditional social and political institutions have given birth to new ones. Thus, it can be stated as untrue to continue to label and categorize the West as modern and Africans as traditional since the use of the tradition and modernity as classification are not necessary matters of wide acceptability, but a case of convenience with its use.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it is evident that the culture question is very important to the contemporary debate of development in Africa considering her predicaments. Hence, the question of what remains of the predominantly African culture and what should be done

to improve on her cultural identity need to be verified in the bid for social reconstruction in the continent.

Hence, it is important to note therefore that there is no culture in the world that is immune from certain negative tendencies of which traditional African culture is not an exception in contemporary times. These negative aspects in traditional African culture cut across areas which are not scientifically verifiable given the level of advancement, progress and wide acceptability striving in science and technology. For example, the African belief in witchcraft, destiny, ancestral worship etc which are considered more fatalistic than scientific because they cannot be subjected to scientific verification which is the method of science that is widely acceptable and universally tested for further researches.

Another negative aspect of traditional African culture is the area of knowledge claim where only sages and the elderly are considered to possess and advance knowledge or wisdom. This seems problematic as no one is an island of knowledge. Take for example; the knowledge of computer in contemporary times has spread so tremendously that even a little child of considerable age can outsmart an adult, the elderly or sages in computer related issues irrespective of the age difference between the child and the adult, elderly or sage involved in Africa. Thus, disputing the fact or belief in traditional African culture that age as it were has nothing to do with the advancement and possession of knowledge as the African will have us believe.

It is to this end that this work has been devoted to a need for the '*Re-africanisation*' approach – a view that emphasizes on the need for the Africans to return back to the roots of the African society amidst the drawbacks critics may associate with it. Rather than go with Wiredu's call for '*modernization*' which also implies '*Westernization*' an off-shoot of '*Neo-colonization*' or '*Neo-colonialism*' or Oladipo's call for '*cultural syncretism or synthesis*' even with caution so as not to lose the African values, traditions and cultures and identity if it results to the case of throwing the bath water and the baby away for the sacrifice is worth it. After all, colonialism came and adopted the indirect rule system in most African states which allowed for the integration of local chiefs in the daily discharge and administration of the colonies as against the direct rule system.

Thus, in order to attain the goal of '*Re-africanisation*' of Africa, Africans have to do away with the current '*following-the-West syndrome*' which in turn tend weaken Africa's capacity for self-determination. This will in turn help Africans to take their destinies in their own hands as a means of renewing the processes of liberation which had been truncated with achievement of nominal independence and in a considerable number of African States and the resurgence of Neo-colonialism. Africans therefore cannot meet the prospects of development through *traditional African culture* by borrowing '*finished ideas*' from Western socio-economic and political factories, but rather to engage the

traditional political ideas with a view to determining their relevance to contemporary African society. (Oladipo O: 2009)

There is therefore the need for a re-orientation in thinking among African scholars including those in search of an African philosophic tradition and those in search of a new social order. They should be more self-asserting and start their search from within an indigenous cultural base. This calls for conceptual decolonization: putting aside, as it were, some of their intellectual borrowing. They should aspire to ensure that their theoretical formulations are African contents, that being the only way in which their work can claim legitimacy to the prefix '*African*'. (Sogolo, G: 1993) Hence, Modern African philosophers should turn their philosophical gaze (searchlight) on the intellectual foundation of African culture and experiences ... for it is never too late in human history to start from where one should start or have started. (Gyekye K: 1987)

Therefore, '*emerging modern African philosophy*' or culture which Wiredu admit exists must be conceived and cultivated in terms of a re-awakening of the increasing displacement of traditional African thought system. And this has to be done through knowledge dissemination and acquisition of traditional African thought system and inculcating it in formal educational curriculum and resuscitation of initiation rites in among all age grades throughout in African societies. This is what Onyewuenyi I. C. (1993) refers to as '*Afrocentrism*' which means African centeredness.

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