

A PHILOSOPHICAL APPRAISAL OF BASIC CULTURAL VALUES IN AFRICAN TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

This work examines the basic cultural values in African tradition. These are indispensable values that remained resilient despite all effort by the west to jettison African cultural values and replace with their own. This work attempts to interrogate those African values, and the reason why they were able to resist the onslaught for so long, despite the cross cultural interaction, and influence of westernization. We found out that these basic cultural values presuppose that Africa has value system that is in consonance with her environment and conditions, and any way to displace it renders the society backward. The paper then concludes that these basic cultural values are the guiding principles for genuine development which must remain indispensable to the Western values of colonialism, neo-colonialism and imperialism. If these basic cultural values are sustained the future of Africa will be of radical development.

Key words: Africa, Colonization, Culture, Indispensable, Interaction, Values, Westernization.

Introduction

The indispensability of African basic cultural values presuppose that Africa has value system that is in consonance with her environment and conditions, and any attempt to displace it will not be allowed by the society. According to Ogbonmwan (2008), every society has rules, principles and norms that regulate the conduct of its members. Despite the fact that we have different communities in Africa, and different people with distinct customs and values, the impact of colonisation has no effect on these values. “Value” ordinarily means “worth of something in terms of money or other goods it can be exchanged with” (Hornby1995: 1319). Values also mean

what the civilized and rational minds cherish, esteem, prize precious and have inclined attitude for. They are principles or standards of a person or society for the good or benefit of the person or the society concerned (Asogwa 2008:173). While Linton R. (1945) states that; “the culture of a society is the way of life of its members, the collection of ideas and habits which they learn share and transmit from generation to generation”. Indeed, “culture is a design for living held by members of a particular society” (Kluckhohn.C. 1951). According to Taylor (1891) as quoted by Okoro (2009: 188-189); culture is ‘that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs, and all other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society’. Culture is “the customary, social and religious structures and intellectual and artistic manifestations that characterize a particular society. It is, in effect, the civilization of a group of people at a given time such as their customs, attitude to arts, music, sports, crafts, recreation and to life generally” (Irukwu 1983:52).

It is however important to note that; Values are the basic foundation of any culture in any country. They are deep-rooted attitudes that have a significant influence on people’s behaviour and express people’s attitudes toward the most important topics in life, such as their roles in society, attitudes toward relationships, time, and nature. Values determine how we feel, think, behave, and reflect our cultural background. They are influenced by the history of a group or nation and learned as part of socialization. So in this case culture and values complement each other in African context. This research work explores the basic cultural value of African society. To this end, the fundamental question is; Does African society have cultural values that are worthy of preservation in the face of westernization? This work we discuss some of these values and examine the reason why they have remained resilient in the face of westernisation.

Cultural Values in African Tradition

It is a fact that the advent of colonialism and imperialism nearly caused a dethronement of our cultural pathway because, Africans have suffered self-esteem from the attempt by the colonizers to foist on them a different worldview and cultural mindset. That is why, over the years, it has become fashionable among social commentators to lament the decline, if not erosion, of traditional African values in modern society. Nyerere corroborated this when he said that: Of all

the crimes of colonialism there is none worse than the attempt to make us believe that we had no indigenous culture of our own or that what we did have was worthless or something of which we should be ashamed of, instead of being a source of pride (Quoted in Akinpelu, 1983). Despite the fact that the coming of the white man disoriented a glorious system of values embedded in rich tradition and custom of Africa, yet there is still some aspect of our great system that withstands the onslaught. We shall examine those aspects of our culture that stand firm despite the serious influence of westernization of Africa.

Good Human Relation

Good human relationship between two or more individuals in an African society show the worthiness of human person and this is not just based on what they possess or what they can do for each other but that is just how the society was built and this is being transmitted from one generation to the other. People help one another without demanding immediate or an exact equivalent remuneration. Everyone is mindful that each person has something to contribute to his welfare, some time and somehow. This has become part of an African to the extent that every man is obliged to assist those who need help. The needy and the helpless are taken care of and assisted. It is in this perspective that Chieka Ifemesia wrote; African way of life emphatically centered upon human interest and values; a mode of living evidently characterized by empathy, and by consideration and compassion for human beings (Ifemesia, C.1979). Good human relation between one another breeds good interactions among the individuals in Africa. The art of dialogue and conversation is a cherished value in African relations. People freely discuss and express their problems and look for suggestions together. It could happen at clubs meetings, society meetings and even by the road side. Onwubuiko (1991) stressed that “the unwillingness to talk to people about either private or public affairs can be interpreted as bad manners or sign of enmity”. No amount of westernization can prevent Africans from talking their mind; in fact it only made possible other advanced means of interaction between one another in both near and far distance. Biko Steve (1978) avers that: "Ours has always been a man-centered society. Westerners have in many occasions been surprised at the capacity we have for talking to each other not for the sake of arriving at a particular conclusion but merely to enjoy the communication for its own sake. Intimacy is a term not exclusive for particular friends but

applying to a whole group of people who find themselves together whether through work or residential requirements".

Sense of Community

Shlomo, A. and Avner, D. (1996) avers that; "the community is construed as a body with some common values, norms, and goals which are for the benefit of its individual members". As a member of community, members are expected to pursue their goal in a way that will lead to the overall development of the community. "In a community, therefore, it is presumed that there is the sharing of an overall way of life. In other words, there is a sense of commonness among members of a community" (Oyesile, A. O. 2006). The imperative of community was aptly stressed by Marx and Engels when they wrote that;

*Men's consciousness arises and develops only from
the need, the necessity of intercourse with other men.
Consciousness is therefore from the beginning a social
product and remains so as long as man exists at all
(Cornforth, M. 1971).*

Marx and Engels in their pursuit of their historical materialism, emphasise the fact that human consciousness cannot be outside the society or without the continuous influence of the society, because man is a social being. In the same way Talcott Parson says:

*the personalities of members of the societies are part
of their environment in the sense that the society must be
able to count on its members to contribute to societal
functioning (Talcott, P. 1977)*

A man cannot exist outside the society; in fact there are duties and responsibilities expected from an individual that is more paramount than any other thing in the community. Daly also talks about the imperative of the community to the individual sustenance, in his view:

*As an individual, each person has a unique identity defined
by a subjective consciousness forms and carries out projects
that unfold in a personal history, holds an inalienable right to*

pursue this life plan, and follows universal principles of morality in relationships with others. But at the practical level of everyday life, a communitarian conception can be felt. As a member of a community, each person belongs to a network of family and social relationships and is defined by this membership, and each person seeks personal fulfilment through participation in the evolving social structures of this community; find personal liberty in the expanded self-development cultivated through these activities, and honours a traditional complex of agreed- on commitments (Daly, M. 1994).

The authentic African is known and identified through his community. The community, according to Pantaleon (1994), therefore gives the individual his existence and education. That existence is not only meaningful, but also possible only in a community. Thus in Africa, no one can stand in isolation, all are member of a community; to be is to belong. The community gives each person belongingness and cultural identity for self-fulfillment and social security. "We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us but as a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life. Hence in all we do we always place man first and hence all our action is usually joint community oriented action rather than individualism" (Biko Steve 1978).

Sense of Hospitality

African hospitality can be defined as that extension of generosity, given freely without strings attached. There is always spontaneous welcome and accommodation to strangers and visitors. Africans easily incorporate strangers to the extent of giving them lands to build their own houses, to farm and not only that where stranger signifies their intention; they give their children in marriage to them. This explanation agrees with Echema (1995:35) who says that, 'it is an unconditional readiness to share' (give and take). It is, thus, the willingness to give, to help, to assist, to love and to carry one another's burden without necessarily profit or reward as the driving force.

Olikenyi (2001:102) explains that, African hospitality which he contends is a vital aspect of existence in Africa in general, is one of the few facets of Ancient African culture that is still intact and strongly practiced today by most Africans in spite of the forces of recent external influence or even internal pressure. He quotes Uzukwu (1998:158) who develops this view further when he says,

“Despite the destabilization of traditional life by colonialism, foreign world views, technology and modern living...African hospitality has held rather well to the extent that it could be described as a way of being an African.”

African hospitality is simply an African cultural and moral value, which are not theoretical, but a way of life (Moila 2002a:1). What we are saying is that hospitality has become an inheritance to an African, because it is in the blood, where ever an African is found all over the world they have the emblem in them. Moila (2002a:2) has this to say about African hospitality, according to him:—

Each member of the same family group is bound to offer food and shelter to any member of his or her group who needs it. However, it is also an African custom to offer hospitality even to strangers. Hospitality is perceived and practiced by Africans as open-handed, instinctive and the most natural thing in the world.

Respect for Elders

In Africa old age is honored, celebrated and respected. The respect given to the elders has its practical effect in the maintenance of custom and tradition. “Africans generally have deep and ingrained respect for old age, and even when we can find nothing to admire in an old man, we will not easily forget that his grey hair have earned him right to courtesy and politeness” (Conton William,1966). According to Onwubiko (1991), “... respect for elders also has a corresponding responsibility, on the part of the elders attached to it, and the reception of this respect is dependent on the execution of that responsibility; it is based on the reciprocal exercise of duties/rights, based on the old/young relationship”.

African regard for aged is rooted in the culture, a fundamental value dictating that one must respect one's parents. Younger members of the family have a duty to care for the aged members of the family. And even outside the family unit, Africans are socialized to respect and show deference to older individuals as well as authority figures. It's also customary in Africa to have a big celebration to mark an individual's 60th and 70th birthdays. The 60th birthday is a joyous time when children celebrate their parents' passage into old age. The age is thought to be reason for celebration in part because many of their ancestors would not have survived past the age of 60 since life span in some area in Africa is relatively short. A similar large family celebration is held for the 70th birthday. It is a thing of joy for someone to have lived to that age and the children as well as well wishers thought it worthy of celebration.

Although westernization has lessened the power of these values in some cities and communities in developed world but not in Africa where adult children are still generally expected to care for their parents in their old age. In Western cultures the elderly are commonly removed from the community and relegated to hospitals and nursing homes, aging thus become a shameful experience. Placing your parents in retirement homes in Africa will see you being labeled as uncaring or a bad son. To abandon one's aged parent is considered deeply dishonorable in Africa.

Extended Family

Gyekye (1996) emphasizes that Africans have a remarkable love of humanity and a deep respect for the human family as a whole. He puts it beautifully:

“Africans recognize the dignity of the human being and, in consequence, hold a deep and unrelenting concern for human welfare and happiness. ...Recognition of the value of humanity is intrinsically linked with recognition of the unity of all people, whether or not they are biologically related”
(Gyekye 1996. p. 23).

Pantaleon Iroegbu (1994) corroborated this view by saying “African languages generally have no words for uncles, aunts, cousins and nieces. All these are part of the one family. The family is

one, but extended”. There is nothing like *individualism* in Africa, a man in Africa is not alone, he belongs to a family and he represents that family where ever he or she goes. Mbiti (1970) has classically proverbialized the role of the individual in the family when he wrote, “I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am”.

In addition, there is what we called collective honor in African societies. This applies to social groups such as families, lineages and kin groups. Within such groups, an act of dishonor by a single member will affect all others just as a single member could bask in the honor of the group. Here honor is highly prized, people would be afraid of conducts that are dishonorable. As to the specific value placed on honor in particular societies, only empirical studies will bear this out. Thus, where status is ascribed by birth, ‘honor is derived not only from individual reputation but from antecedence’ (Rivers, 1973) and in heterogeneous societies where many groups prescribe criteria for attaining honor, honor thus becomes a contested category (John 2005). Moreover, as honor is emphasized in particular societies, the idea of equality in dignity for all men become more remote because some would certainly enjoy more honor than others. Those at disadvantage always have the opportunity of working hard to achieve dignity for themselves and their family. What these men sought to achieve through hard working is therefore not wealth but honor, called *ola* (in Yoruba Africa). They want to win public recognition and social esteem. This *ola*, in the words of Karin Barber (1991)

*was not wealth as such or power as such, but a total state of
sufficiency and command over their social environment ...
What underlies ola is the notion of recognition, of being
acknowledged as superior and of attracting admirers and
supporters as a result.*

In fact, it was (and still is) a general African desire to have *ola*. The luster and influence that is in *ola* made it so desirable that people called their children names such as Olawunmi (I desire *Ola*), Olaniyi (*Ola* is esteem able) Olaleye (*Ola* is lustrous), etc.

Sense of Religion

More so in religion; traditional African religion, Christianity, and Islam attach a unique and continuing moral and spiritual significance to the individual persons. Since the world is God's creation, all the elements that make it up have an appropriate value and attain a corresponding ethical status. African is highly religious; religion permeates every aspect of African society. Even before the advent of Christianity and Islam, the Africans held firmly the traditional African Religion to the extent that the devotee named their children after their deity. Everything they say or do is impregnated with the vision of the divine and all natural reality are explained as the function of supernatural. African social values rest on moral values which in turn rest on religious values. Moral values and religious values are inseparable, because religion promotes moral excellence. Religion naturally endowed man with respect for human life and human dignity.

According to Akinpelu(1983) “such a respect definitely lacks depth and authority if based simply on moral considerations or moral arrangements between men, except, of course, if the morality is conceived as one and the same with religion in the first instance”. The importance of religion to social relationship is emphasized when you compare Western European values with African values. The West treats the religious issues separately from the moral ones, while in Africa, religion and morality are inseparable that is the reason why the spiritual element runs deep in the personal and interpersonal value system in Africa.

Conclusion

Basic cultural values in traditional African society are manifestations of African humanism. These values have survived the onslaught of westernization, despite all the effort being made through colonization and foisting of derogatory world view on Africa. The European value systems are in Europe and they stay there. Africa values systems are in Africa and should remain in Africa. The contact that necessarily took place is the inevitable element of culture that came in to being through interaction and despite this contact these set of values remain undiminished. The interaction and the adoption of some element of culture by Africa have brought abnormality

in to the society. This manifested in the promotion of individualism instead of communitarianism. The introduction of individualism into African political and economic life has brought but backwardness. For the development of Africa, African basic cultural system must be promoted. Continues copying of western value systems will cause more damages to African humanism which is the basis of our cultural values.

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