



Revitalization of indigenous culture as instrument for attaining a virile multi-ethnic Africa

Gabriel Ema Idang *

Department of Philosophy, University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

Abstract

Pre-colonial or traditional African society was characterized by wholistic and overwhelming personal relations, the sacred and dignity of the African peoples in consideration of ultimate reality expressed in hospitality, love for children, family and community. These were based on the acceptance of, and respect for indigenous culture. The advent of Western culture which is technically based on science created several problems and changes in the lives of African peoples. Some of these problems include that of new cultural adaptations and incorporation of new (Western) traditional values and customs into African culture. In its development, Western culture, it would seem, had gradually attacked and dissolved to the core the very foundations of the various value systems which, from antiquity, had served as social and ethical framework for the African society. As no society can survive without certain moral codes based on indigenous values understood, accepted and respected by its members, there is need for cultural revival that is targeted at identifying and redefining our identity, finding out our origin and our rightful place. Resuscitation of indigenous culture as one of the means of attaining a virile multi-ethnic Africa is the main objective of this paper.

Keywords: Africa; Culture; Multi-ethnic; Revitalization; Unity; Values

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1. Introduction

In recent times, African indigenous culture together with its positive values has received renewed interests. It should strike the critical mind with a deep sense of wonder why the very beliefs, practices, and in fact cultures that were jettisoned, rejected and discarded are now earnestly sought after without embarrassment. There have been many calls for the revitalization and revaluation of African cultural values. Such calls for the revitalization of indigenous cultures and values can only be sustained when we realise that there are positive dimensions of the African cultural past that are still useful to the African people in the modern world.

The question that immediately arises is whether what we seek to revalue and revitalise is worthwhile. To put the question more straight-forwardly: of what value are such indigenous cultural practices as ancestor worship and the sacrifice of multiple birth babies in pristine Africa? Based on a consideration of the African past, some scholars have adopted the extreme position that there is little or nothing in Africa's past that can be useful to the present or the future of the continent. One may ask if the indigenous culture that we seek to revitalize was so worthless, then why was it found wanting and dismissed as primitive and prelogical by early colonialists, anthropologists and religious proselytizers who visited Africa?

Quite unfortunately, the denigration of Africa's indigenous culture is not only done by those external to Africa. The African natives who have been exposed to western civilisation through socialisation, education and indoctrination sometimes take a swipe at their indigenous culture without giving any care to its positive dimensions and its system of values. There is no doubt that there may have been dark moments in the African cultural past as well as moments of blind conformity with prevalent beliefs and practices that were not founded on rationally defensible grounds or proven facts but on myths. This notwithstanding, there were indigenous cultural values and practices that made the traditional societies rich. In this sense the blanket rejection of the indigenous culture has made the present day African to be Italian by dressing, English by speech, Chinese by eating habits, American by thought and African perhaps only by birth and geographical location. It is true that we are living in a globalised world which encourages cultural diffusion, and integration as individuals continue to seek higher forms of self – realisation by becoming global citizens, but even in this important respect, African indigenous culture can be Africa's unique contribution to the world. Let us begin by looking into the people of Africa and the nature of the ethnic diversity of its indigenous cultures.

2. The people of Africa: Ethnic diversity and underlying unity

In discussing about the people of Africa, we shall restrict ourselves to sub-Saharan Africa which is where we find the Negroids. In the whole world, it is only in this part of Africa that we can find the highest concentration of black peoples and this justifies our drawing the inference that Africa is the home and origin of the Negroids. Apart from the Negroids, historical circumstances and settlements made Africa to become home also for the Caucasoid, the Hermitic, the Pigmies and the Bushmanoids. Apart from this classification,

African people can be seen as belonging to ethnic groups which define their identity and distinguish them even within the context of the African continent.

Ethnicity can be seen as some form of group identity (Noyoo, 2000). This is why it can be viewed as a shared cultural identity involving similar practices, initiations, beliefs and linguistic features passed over from one generation to another (Chogugudza, 2008). Most African nation states are multi-ethnic owing to the historical circumstances that led to their birth. Nigeria, for instance, has over two hundred and fifty ethnic groups all captured in one geographical expression. Noyoo (2008) holds the opinion that "European countries created their African colonies without taking into account, the homogeneity of the African tribal terrain. By imposing artificial boundaries, these countries contradicted the concept of an African nation". However, concerted efforts should be directed at means and measures of managing Africa's ethnic diversity and turning it into a source of strength and unity just as the different colours of the mosaic contribute to the overall beauty of the mosaic itself. Blaming the colonialists for not taking ethnicity into consideration in the nation states they created over five decades ago amounts to crying over spilled milk.

The facts of the ethnic diversities notwithstanding, there are similar underlying beliefs, values, norms and practices that run across the various cultures of Africa. This is why even though we observe some diversities in the language, modes of dressing, tools of work, manners of greeting, tools of war, music and pattern of dance, various ethnic groups in Africa share some dominant traits which identify them as Africans. In the words of Etuk (2000),

it would be altogether misleading to give the impression that there is one thing that can be called 'the African culture'. The diversity of cultural practices in Africa is recognised even by the most casual observer. This notwithstanding, it appears that there are a number of values held in common by many ethnic groups in Africa that might be said to subtend and inform the basic norms of the societies.

What can be discerned from the above is that there is an underlying unity encased under the manifest diversity in the African indigenous cultures. It is this unity that captures the 'Africanness' which makes it such that in spite of the diversity of practices the African experience has the character of sameness running through all of it. In this sense, the African identity, personality, dignity and so on can be seen as products of social and environmental conditioning and long standing tradition. This is why the semblance in experience of reality that we see to exist between cultures in Africa may disappear when we compare an African with a non-African culture like the Western or Eastern cultures. Makogba (1997) holds that throughout the African Diaspora, people of African descent are linked by shared values that are fundamental features of African identity and culture. Hence, whether one is talking about the Ibibio of Nigeria, or the Akans of Ghana or the Xhosas of South-Africa, the diversity of cultural beliefs, myths and practices notwithstanding, communalism and synergetic existence for instance, run through all these cultures. Apart from synergy, there are other aspects of indigenous societies that are shared by many cultures in Africa. Some of them will be examined in due course but let us now pay attention to indigenous cultures in order for us to have a singular understanding of what we are dealing with.

3. African Indigenous Culture and the Threat of Cultural Diffusion

Culture has been defined by Frolov (1984) to be all the material and spiritual values created by society in the course of history and characterising the historical stage attained by society in its development. Here, culture can be seen as a development among a people in a society. We can also see it as a learned behaviour acquired by man as a member of a social group. In respect to this, I have noted elsewhere that:

each human society therefore has a body of norms governing behaviour and other knowledge to which an individual is socialized or acculturated, beginning at birth. Culture in this sense is different from the concept of culture used to describe a highly cultivated person who is versed in music, literature and other intellectual pursuits associated with civilised life (Idang, 2007).

Culture includes the totality of things both concrete and abstract that are peculiar to a social group. In this sense, indigenous culture refers to those beliefs, values and practices that have been handed down to the African from his forebears in the course of time. Culture is dynamic and evolutionary since it is not just stuck with those aspects of indigenous tradition of the past, but is also open to innovations that make human life more meaningful. This is why Antia (2005) maintains that culture is not fixed and permanent. It is always changed and modified by man through contacts with and absorption of other people's cultures. With respect to indigenous African cultures, the truth is that many present day Africans are not ready to identify with it owing to the erroneous denigration of it inaugurated by early colonialists, religious proselytisers, missionaries and so on who viewed African indigenous culture as primitive, backward, prelogical, superstitious and mythical.

In African families today, especially those that belong to the well to do circles, we realise that people even find it prestigious to scorn their own native languages and prefer foreign languages as language of communication even at home. Here children are encouraged to speak foreign languages only as a sign of modernity. In this regard, Asouzu (2004) remarks that these children often know neither the foreign languages well nor do they understand talk less of speaking their native languages. The centrality of language to the preservation and promotion of our indigenous cultural heritage cannot be overemphasised. With the seeds sown today in the lives of young African children of the elite class, the future is very bleak as indigenous language may become extinct instead of being promoted, developed and systematised. The kinsman, relative or friend who visits his kith and kin in the city or in his office, is often embarrassed and made to feel odd and uncivilised when on seeing his kinsman and on greeting him with the local dialect, the kinsman who is being greeted responds with a foreign language. Many have translated their names and wish to be called by their foreign language equivalents. Here we see that the African has resorted to self-rejection in a bid to produce his or her modernity. As Asouzu (2004) would say, "we witness these negative tendencies daily in the case of those Africans whose dwarfish minds give them most baffling ideas. Here they stride in their dwarfish ways to reject their Africanness and to seek refuge in a false ego".

In the indigenous culture, synergetic existence or communalism had a pride of place. The close kinship relationship that binds people together in the African indigenous culture makes some people to maintain that whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group; whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.

This is the cardinal point in understanding of the African view of man. For Gyekye (1996) communal life is held as natural to the human being. At the same time, the claims of individuality are recognised. This is why, in the indigenous culture, if a young man needed to cultivate a plot of land or build a house, the members of his age grade would join hands and work together, each individual working willingly and giving his best. Today we witness the commercialisation of services that were formerly carried out as social duties within the synergetic group (Etuk (2000)). In the present day African society, if one happens to engage the services of some youth in an unexpected accident where one unknowingly drives into an impassable section of the road, the youth see this as an opportunity to get some money or in worse cases even extort money from the unknown stranger.

In the indigenous culture, there was an attitude of cooperating with nature as opposed to the conquering of nature upon which western scientific culture revels. In line with the indigenous culture of respect for nature, there were prohibitions from farming on certain regions, fetching water from certain streams at certain times and so on. These prohibitions were believed to have come from deities that inhabit the farmlands, streams and so on. But with the encroachment of modernisation and urbanisation, some people, especially from the youth who had imbibed a new culture and religion, discovered that no one died after fetching water from the forbidden spring. So these myths that were invented by the forefathers as a means of survival and preservation of the ecosystem were violated. From here it was a short step to not getting drinking water readily available and not getting good harvest from the soil after back-breaking tasks and so on. Co-operation with nature appears to have been thrown overboard right from the period when Europe partitioned Africa due to their vested interest in Africa's resources. In the Niger Delta region of Nigeria there are constant conflicts between multi-national oil companies who explore oil and host communities from where the oil is explored without care for the environment. Destruction of terrestrial and aquatic life through oil spillage and other hazardous activities which upset the ecosystem and incapacitate the local economy founded on fishing and farming are all absurd to the African who believes in co-operating with and not in the conquering of nature.

In music, dance and other dimensions of African art, there were underlying tones of morality because the indigenous African mindset holds that the beautiful must be imbued with morality (Udiugwomen, 2008). Traditional music and dance in indigenous African culture was used to teach moral lessons. In recent times, African music, dance and art have become infected with alien cultures which glorify obscenity. A situation where the indigenous cultures are allowed to die or become extinct when there are very important dimensions that they can serve the African in the modern world ought to be discouraged. Let us now look into ways that the revitalisation of indigenous culture can serve as a panacea to the reconstruction of a virile multi-ethnic Africa.

4. Revitalisation of indigenous culture: A potent instrument for attaining a virile multi-ethnic in Africa

Revitalisation of indigenous culture presupposes its revaluation in an effort to strengthen and sustain the cultural values that are necessary for Africa's development. The wholesale rejection of indigenous culture in

Africa was inaugurated in the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and sustained throughout the colonial period and is vastly leading to the threshold of indigenous cultural pessimism on the part of Africans. The calumny against indigenous culture has been sustained on the erroneous thinking that pristine Africa was that of primitivity, superstition, uncivilisation and so on. From here we can understand why Levy-Bruhl (1967) for instance, described the African (who is still at home with his indigenous culture) as “a primitive being with a prelogical mind, at ease in mysticism and magic, and governed by the law of participation rather than by logical cannons”.

Etuk (2002) has observed that recent scholars of anthropology appear to be embarrassed by the application of such epithets as ‘primitive’ and ‘savage’ to any culture. Although they now try to convince the world that one culture is as good as another, such an assertion would never have pleased their professional forebears who saw themselves as coming to enlighten and civilize if not dominate and expropriate a benighted people. Such descriptive words as ‘primitive’ or ‘savage’ that were used to describe African indigenous culture have given way for less pejorative words like ‘less developed’ and ‘traditional’. Etuk further notes that “while it cannot be hastily generalized that every bit of thing about other people’s cultures and ways of life must be respected and valued, respect rather than disdain for other people appears to be a much better starting point from which to gain a better understanding of them and their ways. (Etuk, 2002).

As noted from the onset, the call for the transvaluation of African values has been many and what this points to is that there are certain deficiencies that indigenous culture can fill in the strive for Africa’s development. Asouzu (2004) is of the opinion that:

contemporary African societies can be modern and industrialized while retaining those positive values, found in traditional African societies, that have always characterized and made human societies noble and interesting.

The need for a cultural education aimed at a revitalization and revaluation of African indigenous cultures and values is compelling. As Gyekye (1996) has noted, the critical revaluation of a received cultural tradition will not only suggest refinement or appropriate amendment that ought to be made to it, but also direct attention to the aspects of it that ought to be expunged from the cultural life and thought of a people. One of those aspects of indigenous African culture that should be expunged, according to Gyekye (1996), is ancestor worship. For him, it is regrettable that ancestors continue to be of paramount importance in modern and traditional African life. He also believes that the lack of scientific development is due to the fact that causality which is an essential concept to the development of science is conceived in the indigenous culture in terms of mystical or supernatural power. This is what leads to his opinion that “science should be rescued from the morass of African religious and mystical beliefs” (Gyekye, 1996). We will add that masquerades together with other unnecessary traditional jamborees that often constitute a breach of peace to other law abiding African should be expunged or redefined and tailored to suit African modernity.

Such attempts to critically examine the past with the aim of sifting it of all negative aspects must be delineated from the wholesale rejection of everything in the indigenous cultural past.

Examining ethno-philosophy which is a school in African philosophy which approaches the subject of African philosophy through traditional beliefs and practices, Masolo writes that philosophers who are

seeking to revive and reinstate the traditional African philosophy as the appropriate philosophy for Africa today are doing disservice to Africa in trying to pretend that philosophy is still sufficient or useful or applicable to Africa's needs, that it is able to cope with the new modern problems and issues as facing Africa today as brought in with encroaching modernization. And because this encroachment requires new methods of investigation and analysis, which must be diversified, due to the complexity of the situation, ethno philosophy just has no place in it (Masolo, 1995). This, of course, is debatable.

Now, the fundamental question is: if indigenous African beliefs, practices and culture have no place in modern Africa, then how can we as Africans have a unique and true identity? Again, how can we explain the fact that the modern society is always hankering over those values and virtues that made the traditional societies rich? By arguing for a revitalization of African indigenous culture, we are not making a case for the wholesale adoption of African indigenous culture regardless of its negative aspects that are inimical to social progress. Rather by placing emphasis on such values as synergetic life and existence, morality, respect for elders and so on, the very values which helped to strengthen the indigenous societies can be useful for the reconstruction of Africa. Since culture is dynamic, human values are subject to changes and demands of circumstances. Asouzu (2004) opines that it is in such dialectical, complementary and symbiotic process of adaptation and change that the human culture grows, is vitalized and revitalized.

Even African proverbs which serve as a rich reservoir of knowledge and classical African wisdom can be systematized and taught in schools as part of cultural education. Wise people use them properly on every occasion and in many situations. African proverbs help teach new things to a person or group of persons, and can warn or advise people against evil conduct and corrupt practices. Proverbs, as a matter of fact, constitute a major source of African wisdom and a valuable part of African heritage which enhance a virile multi-ethnic co-existence of African peoples. As scholars and intellectuals, more often than not, we quote western authorities and mouth their slogans in order to substantiate or buttress whatever points we are trying to convey. How many times do we care to quote or use African proverbs? Already, interests in these proverbs are waning very vastly owing to loss of interest in them. Something urgent has to be done; efforts have to be directed at catching the remains of these traditional legacies. We should not allow African proverbs to become extinct. We should encourage the systematisation, development and use of African indigenous languages. The opinion of Masolo (1995) that there is nothing worthwhile in the indigenous African past is not rationally defensible. Overwhelming evidence abound with which we can confront and contradict all claims founded on the erroneous thinking that indigenous cultures were savage, primitive and hence, of no use to the African in the present and the future.

5. Conclusion

The continent of Africa is multiethnic. Even though there are diversities in cultural practices among ethnic groups, there is an underlying similarity of the traits, beliefs, practices that run across all these cultures. Africa has had an unenviable history of being a victim of slave trade, colonialism, discrimination, racial abuse and apartheid. All these historical misadventures perpetuated by either outsiders or insiders or the effective collaboration of both have thrived on the misconception that there is nothing in the indigenous African

cultures that can be of any meaningful use in the drive for Africa's development. Such was the mindset that notable Western philosophers like G. W. F. Hegel and F. Nietzsche invoked when they described the African person as sub-human. However, within the last four or five decades, Africans have realised their background more and this has rekindled interests in the values embedded in the indigenous African cultures. African indigenous cultures have significant roles to play if Africa is to wake up and assume its rightful place and global relevance. This can be realised with a systematic method of providing cultural education to the rising generation of African peoples. The success of such programme depends largely on the commitment on the part of government and teachers to deliberately, diligently and consciously execute cultural education in all its forms and ramifications. With tremendous and widespread efforts, the development of cultural education would mould our cultures into something articulate in a literate way to meet the challenges of the contemporary society.

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