Traditional Values and National Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Traditional values have enormous role to play in national development. No nation can develop in a sustainable manner if it is uprooted from her authentic past values. In Africa, traditional values are those indigenous values that existed in Africa from pre-colonial times. Some of those values are still prevalent in many places in Africa. The landmark African Charter of Human and People's Rights endorses the promotion of traditional values by the state and other social agents. This endorsement should not be seen as a blanket promotion of traditional values, even those that are hostile to human right and dignity. This paper used a critical analytic method to argue that only positive values that enhance human flourishing and environmental wellbeing should be promoted. It also argues that beliefs and practices that destroy human rights and degrades the environment should be considered as non-values and rejected. The paper found and concluded that the promotion of positive healthy traditional values will enhance rapid national development in Nigeria.

Key Words

Tradition, values, national, development, and Nigeria

Introduction

One of the crucial issues in the question of national development is the place of traditional values. This issue is an important one for very often there is tension between some traditional values and modern values informed by capitalist and western systems of thought. While it is true that there is a place for transformation of traditional values, there are also some traditional values that need to be conserved for the society is to be a sane place. The Organisation of African Unity (1981) in the *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights* endorses the fact that traditional values should be promoted by the state. It is also the duty of everyone and social agent to promote the cultivation of traditional values especially moral values. The central thesis of this work is that while we should not discountenance all traditional values, there are traditional values that are hostile to the development process. This value needs to be totally transformed or eradicated. In order to examine this thesis, some conceptual clarifications are made. The importance of traditional values

is thereafter examined. This is followed by the challenges pose by some traditional values that are anti-human or against human right. How to transform this value to enhance national development is then discussed. The piece ends with a concluding reflection.

Conceptual Clarifications

The word "development" is a word that has many layers of meaning. Depending on one's vantage point, it can be defined from a religious, political, cultural, social or economic sense. In many quarters, people often equate development with economic growth or progress. Development must bear on the life and wellbeing of the people and the country. Development is about people and it is for people. This point is captured by Efemini (1998) when he writes that development must be people centred if not it is simply abstract and meaningless. Citing Ake, he writes that "development is not a project but a process. Development is the process by which people create and recreate themselves and their lives' circumstances to realize higher levels of civilization in accordance with their own choices and values" (Efemini, 1998: 89). Efemini writes further that in discussing the issues of development, we must take into consideration the following: "the place and welfare of children, the place and welfare of women, the quality and access to education, the quality and access to health care, the quality and access to housing and the quality of leisure hours" (Efemini, 1998: 89-90). Besides this, it is important to realize that important ingredients of development include: peace, justice, equality, good governance, availability and access to social amenities, good neighbourliness among the people of a given country, harmony and tranquillity among neighbours, lack of war and violence and many others. With this in mind, it is important to state that no nation is yet fully developed. While some nations may be more developed than others, all are in the process of becoming more developed. It does not mean that once some of the factors mentioned above are missing there is no development. It only means that the development process is highly challenged and impeded. Since development should be seen as a process rather than as an accomplished product, it involves as Awolowo puts it, the overcoming of:

Poverty, ignorance, illiteracy and poor health, superstition, dependence on subsistence agriculture, excessive and widespread underemployment, unwholesome foreign dominated economy epitomized in unfavourable terms of trade, unstable export market, a persistent adverse balance of payments caused by dwindling foreign reserves, deficiency in

technological, capital, technical and manpower know-how and widening social gap and stratification between the rich and the poor in the society. (Ome, 2006: 144)

It will be difficult to expose every definition of development here but let us give one further definition of development and then try to surmise. Ome (2006) citing Goulet states that development is the :

Complex and multi-dimensional process involving major changes in social structure, popular attitudes, and national institutions as well as acceleration of economic growth, the reduction of inequality, and the eradication of absolute poverty. In its essence, it must represent the entire gamut of change by which an entire social system, turned to the diverse social needs, and desires of individuals and social groups within that system, moves away from condition of life regarded as materially and spiritually "bitter" (Ome, 2006: 144)

What is national development? National development has to do with the overall and total development of every aspect of life and every region in a country. This is total national development which every nation is trying to achieve. Until a nation arrives at what could be called total development, there will be some areas in the country that are more developed than others or sectors of national lives that are more developed than others. National development involves a nation being able to fulfil the purpose of governance and providing the people with welfare and wellbeing. Efemini (1998) is right when he argues that :

At the level of a nation, development has something to do with self reliance. In other words, genuine development must be pursued on the basis of principle of self reliance which is based on the people's creative energy. The point is that a nation can only be truly described as developed if it takes charge or is responsible for mobilizing its people in terms of the decisions and the resources needed to realize their conception of development. It is the responsibility of a nation striving for development to create and recreate the conditions that will lead to better life for the people, especially the ordinary people who are the victims of bad politics. (Efemini, 1998: 90)

In discussing the question of national development, it should be realized that real development must be endogenous. This means that it must be home grown and must be led by the people themselves and not imposed from outside (Efemini, 1998). Another important aspect of national development is that the question of development should not be separated from moral development of the people of the given state. For if

there is development of social and material infrastructures such as road, educational facilities, airports but the people to use and manage these facilities are morally bankrupt and corrupt, they will destroy the very facility that has been created. This is why Omoregbe (2005) is right when he says that moral development is the most essential form of development for if the citizens are not development ethically there will be moral laxity, selfishness, corruption, and embezzlement of public fund. Citing Albert Schweitzer he writes that: "the prosperity of a society depends on the moral disposition of its members" (Omoregbe, 2005: 198).

Another important ingredient of national development today is that in the light of environmental crisis, development must be sustainable. The World Commission on Environment and Development defines sustainable development as that which "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987: 198). Development that does not take environmental wellbeing into consideration but pollutes and degrades the environment cannot be true development. The question before us is: do traditional values have a place in the question of national development?

It is important to understand what values are. A value is what is worthwhile and considered good by a community. And so it is possible for the values of a particular community in some aspects of life to differ from that of another community. The debate of universal and particular values will not be entered into here. The concern here is to state that in the light of human progress and civilization, whatever is considered a value today should be in consonance with universal human rights standard encapsulated in various human rights documents and should promote environmental wellbeing. Value refers to what a community cherishes as noble, pleasant, and lawful and is used to guide human morality and conduct. By traditional values, this paper implies the common values held by our African ancestors especially in pre-colonial times. Some of these values which have to do with every aspect of life in the lifecycle are still cherished and practiced in many communities in post-colonial Africa. Some of the values which were considered values then but have been found to be hostile to human flourishing have either been abrogated or transformed.

The question before us is, in the process of a country like Nigeria, overcoming the indices of development, can traditional values play a role? This is what now pre-occupies this paper.

The Significance of Traditional Values

Values are important for the growth and sustenance of any society. Value becomes the basis, a compass and a guiding principle by which a society moves ahead in life. Without value, a society will lack morality. Without values that guide morality, immorality will become moral. Nwabueze (2006) citing Calhoun et. al. contends that, "Values are deeply held criteria for judging what is good or bad, desirable or undesirable, acceptable or unacceptable, beauty or ugly" (Nwabueze 2006: 251). Values are informed by people's beliefs and inform cultural practices.

Traditional values in Africa dealt with almost every issue in life raging from marriage to family, human life, property, communal living, etc. For instance, one traditional value was fidelity in marriage, adultery and other sexual sins were prohibited. Imagine a society in which marriage lacks sanctity? There will be breakdown of peace and harmony in marriages. Another value is the extended family system which provided social support and welfare. This has been a great help even today especially in the midst of lack of basic infrastructures in the nation. Despise the weakness of the extended family system; it has helped people to overcome hunger, starvation and other trying times. The value of respect for life has also greatly helped to keep African communities together. If there was no respect for life, the society will become like Hobbes' state of nature where life was short, brutish and nasty. Mijah (2011) is right to state that "Africans have a high values for life and have strong belief that everybody deserves a right to life from the period of conception till death. This is found in the rites of passage in most of the ethnic groups found in traditional societies" (Mijah 2011: 38). Another area in which Africans have a high value is with regard to property. African respect for property inspired honesty and discipline. You are not permitted to steal another person's property. Stealing was punishable by public disgrace and humiliation of the thief. Imagine a society without respect of the value of property. It will be chaotic and life will be unsecured. Hospitality is also a cardinal value in Africa. Hospitality involves a lot of things including generosity, kindness, care for strangers, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and coming to the aid of the needy.

The importance of value is highlighted by Nwabueze (2006) when he argues that a people's values colour the way they live their lives, it affects their behaviour. He writes for instance thus:

Similarly, it is the value, which our society places on hard-earned skills, and expert knowledge that encourages parents,

old and young candidates to labour to acquire such skills. The negative attitude towards divorce in most societies derives from societies' preference for enduring, stable family life. On the other hand, those who rig elections share with the rest of society high value on political power to the extent that riggers regrettably go to illegitimate extent to acquire power. (Nwabueze 2006: 251)

Traditional Values and National Development

Because of the significance of traditional values, it is difficult for any meaningful development to take place without the presence of noble traditional values. It is values that make human beings to be morally developed. As previously noted, without moral development, every other form of development will count for nothing. But as important as values are to the developmental process, some values also can be obstacles to development. Some of these values include issues regarding widowhood practices, traditional inheritance laws, the rights of children, child labour, etc. It is debatable whether many of the beliefs and practices with regard to the issues just mentioned should be called values. For a value should be ultimately understood as what is right, moral and conducive to human and environmental flourishing. Practices that violate fundamental human rights should not be named as values. The fact is that in traditional African societies and even today, some practices that violated human dignity were seen as values and used as a standard of morality. This is why it is important to challenges these beliefs and practices. They should actually be named as non-values.

The point that needs to be made is that not all that are called values are really values. When what is considered to be a value has been found to be contrary to the good of humanity, it should be considered as a non-value. Long time ago in Africa, the killing of twins was an acceptable way of life rooted in superstition and myth; it was believed that the coming of twins is an evil omen. With the efforts of Mary Sellesor and other Africans, that so-called value has been abolished. It could be said that the killing of twins was not actually an authentic human value; it was a misunderstanding based on superstitions. That one society considers something to be noble then and valuable does not make it generally valuable. In many societies in African today, there is gender inequality. Women are still highly discriminated against. And in some communities, this is actually held as a value; it is cherished and practiced. It is practiced by the elders and the men in the community and you dare not speak against it. Today in the light of our progress in human civilization, we radically know that men and women are equal. Many and

women have the same human dignity. None should be discriminated against. Every society has a duty then to work out its policies that enhance the equal flourishing of men and women. Some communities even in Nigeria still practice female genital mutilation. They cherish it as a value and a noble practice. It is superstitiously believed that without it, a woman will be promiscuous. Medically, the dangers of female genital mutilation are well known. The campaign needs to be intensified and authentic value reorientation spearheaded by agents like the Ministry of Information, National Orientation Agency, etc.

In many communities in Nigeria, barbaric widowhood practices are still prevalent. The problem is that these practices are highly accepted by members of those communities and if you object to them you are persecuted. They are seen as the traditional values that have come from time immemorial and sanctioned by the gods. But the reality is that these are no values at all; they are non-values. Widowhood practices in which women are made to drink the water used to bath the corpses of their late husbands, in which women are ostracized from the community and made to live in a tent in the forest for seven days, practices in which women are made to swear while walking round the corpses of their late husbands and many other related practices, are all violation of the rights and dignity of women. To show that it is discrimination against women, widowers are never allowed going through such practices. These barbaric widowhood practices are based on religious superstitions and they are anti-rational and non-critical. There are places in Nigeria in which some people are considered to be freeborn and others are considered to be slaves like the Osu caste system in some part of the country. If you are a freeborn you are not allowed to marry a slave. You are not even allowed to mingle and interact with those who are considered to be slaves. This is a violation of the person's right to freedom of association and marriage. It is also a violation of the right to equality of human persons. It denies you of your humanity. It segregates against you. There is also the practice in some communities in which children who are not even up to the age of reasoning are considered to be witches. In some cases as reported in the Nigeria dailies, some so-called child witches have been burnt to death. Even in some religious houses, children are accused of witchcraft. They have to undergo all kinds of deliverance processes some of which involves corporal punishment such as flogging and starvation.

There is need for Nigerians and indeed other Africans to completely move above so-called values that are simply built

on superstitions and myth. We cannot truly develop when we keep hanging to values that are not rationally founded. The tradition of critical questioning and of seeking scientific explanations to issues in the African universe should be embraced for it is only then that Africans can rapidly overcome the dilemma of underdevelopment (Nduka, 2006). There is need for a radical transformation of the African mindset to reality. There are many good traditional values such as hospitality, communalism, respect for life, respect for the sacred earth, the extended family system, marital fidelity that has enabled Africans to navigate through the challenges of colonialism to the present day. What needs to be done is for those values that do not enhance human rights and environmental health to be critically examined for them to be transformed.

Many nations especially in western societies that have experienced rapid and sustainable development have been at the forefront of promoting women and children's right, promoting environmental health, ending social discrimination and segregation, promoting gender equality. Nigeria and other Africa countries cannot be a different case. If Nigeria and other African countries remains bedevilled by traditional values that denies humans of their fundamental human rights, then the development process will continue to be vitiated. It should be understood that every value originated within a specific socio-historic cultural context. This context must always be taken into consideration in the discussion of the relationship between values and development. Because of the historicity of many values, they are not timeless. There are cultural beliefs and practices that existed among our ancestors. They may have been useful for them within their own context and history. They are no longer viable or useful for our present generation. It makes no sense then to insist on such so called values that they are from the gods or from our ancestors and so they must be celebrated. The irony is that many of the so called values were not even accepted by every member of those communities. There is no doubt that there were dissenters, they disagreed with the conventional norms of their societies. In Nigeria's quest for development, it is the positive values that are conducive to human flourishing that must be promoted and cherished.

Africa have a great deal of traditional cultural values that are helpful for navigating through the challenges of a world inundated with global capitalist values, and through her own underdevelopment challenges. Maathai (2010) has narrated how growing up in her native Kenya, they live in tune with nature and respected the mountains and plants, and even when

they collected from nature they did it in thanksgivings to the creator. That type of traditional attitude has been weakened by multinational forces ravaging African forests for wood and mineral resources. Respect for the earth was part of African culture. Environmental sustainability is a vital issued that should be encouraged. One of the United Nations Millennium Goals is environmental sustainability. The same United Nations (2013) has recognized that traditional cultural heritage, values, knowledge, technology, and science are valuable. Bujo (1998) indicated that African solidarity with nature is a great value that it can bring to the North-South dialogue.

Nigeria and indeed other African nations are not bereft of values that they can use in national development. It has been noted that without positive values a nation cannot hold together. Nigeria is troubled by a lot of social ills and vices that impede rapid national development. For instance, the many militants that caused kidnapping and hostage taking of construction workers in the Niger Delta impeded the construction of roads. There are many roads that are left undone because of insecurity. This in turn affects the movements of goods and services. Instead of development, underdevelopment is perpetuated. Boko Haram group lack a respect for human lives and properties. Respect for human life and dignity is a great African value. This group lack this value. They have killed hundreds of innocent civilians and destroyed families. There should be no doubt that lack of respect for such a high value as respect for life impedes national development in Nigeria. Most of the North East in Nigeria is being grossly underdeveloped as a result of the carnage and hardship caused by Boko Haram. In the North East schools have been closed and many markets locked up because of Boko Haram. Many farmers and herdsmen cannot go to their farms and grazing sites. All these affect the supply of agricultural products from the North East and thus the prices of those goods skyrocket.

In traditional African culture, of which Nigeria is a part, ill-gotten wealth was shunned and frowned out. Honesty, diligence and commitment to work and community development was cherished and celebrated. You see how Okonkwo's diligence and handwork is celebrated in the novel, Things Fall Apart. What you have today in Nigeria is a far cry from that great value of honesty and industriousness. There are politicians who have found themselves in public offices who have embezzled public funds. Instead of being denounced by their townsmen, they are celebrated and given chieftaincy titles. What the cancer worms called

embezzlement and corruption have done to Nigeria's national life cannot be fully enumerated. Many projects that would have brought development to the people are left undone and thus the sufferings of the people continued. No wonder the highest form of development is moral human development for without it, authentic social and technological development will be vitiated. There is a vital link between values and development. Without positive values, there is no development. Look at the great African value of what Nyerere (1968) calls *Ujamaa* (familyhood). It would seem it was easier in time past for well-to-do Africans to come to the aid of those in great need. Today, Nigeria is filled with unemployed youths, homeless peoples, beggars, and victims of injustice; yet, the land is filled with abundant wealth from oil and gas resources. It is suffering in the midst of plenty. Values such as *Ujamaa* need to be encouraged more than ever before. After enumerating some of the ethical problems wrong with the Nigerian society such as murder, theft, adultery, supernatural crimes, warfare, slavery, social discrimination, sexual discrimination, *Awuf* (bribery and corruption*)*, and leadership troubles; Amadi (1984) argues that there are traditional concepts of goodness peculiar to Nigeria such as "automatic invitation to strangers to share a a meal, the respect for alders, the long greetings in the street..." should all be retained (Amadi 1984:109). He argues that extreme individualism and other social vices should be rejected while our traditional social graces of living should be retained (Amadi 1984).

Traditional values that have helped and continue to be helpful in creating authentic social and communal life in Nigeria need to be cherished and cultivated. This is the point that Idolor (2014) makes rightly citing J. Petkovic that tradition has to be reconstructed in "the process of intergenerational transmission," while retaining traditional cultural values (Idolor 2014: 108).

Concluding Reflections

There is no doubt that not all traditional values enhance national development. Some traditional beliefs and practices are hostile to human wellbeing, national development and environmental health. The negative values considered above if allowed to grow without eradication will impede the developmental process. Remember the heart of development is the health and wellbeing of humans, the environmental factor not neglected. If humans and the environment are to flourish then, only values that promote human wellbeing, foster environmental health and enhances national progress should be promoted. Article 17 of the African Charter on

Human and People's Rights should not be seen as a blanket endorsement of traditional African values. Bamikole (2007) citing Karl Popper argues that there are two types of attitude to tradition. One is to accept it critically without thinking about it while the other is to think about it critically with the result of accepting, rejecting or reaching a compromise. The critical attitude is what has been proposed here. There is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria, including others African countries is still grossly underdeveloped. As there is still the prevalence of poverty, hunger, diseases arising from superstitions, ecological problems, low level of food production and overpopulation (Onuwa, 2005). The perpetuation of anti-human values will continue to impede the process of development. This is why the time is now to work and eradicate anti-human policies in Africa.

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