

# The Place of Yorùbá Ethical Elements in the Development of Africa: A Rational Analysis

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## Abstract

Without resilience, one is tempted to despair of any further discourse on the development of Africa. Contemplating the great number of scholarly works on development which have emerged from African academia since the independence of many African countries – Somalia, Uganda, Libya and Nigeria – and what obtains in their political, social, economic and religious terrain, and the somersault of development policies in these areas, one is tempted to submit that development is an anathema to Africa. A critique of the failure of developmental policies in many Africa states has been attached to the neglect of traditional values at the point of policy making and implementation. Therefore, this paper critically examines how an exploration of Yorùbá moral values, expressed through some pertinent moral concepts could aid developmental strides in Africa, with particular reference to Nigeria. It specifically examines proverbs and taboos, among other Yorùbá genres, as tools of analysis in the Yorùbá moral system with the aim of extrapolating some values germane to improving the existential situation of many African countries.

**Keywords:** Africa, Development, Proverbs, Taboos. Values

## Introduction

One of the Holy Scriptures asks “If the foundation be destroyed; what can the righteous do? (Psalms 11:3) And a Christian preacher succinctly responds, “The righteous can pray”. In the same manner, the question can be asked, in view of the developmental crisis rocking many African nations, what can we do to achieve sustainable development? The developmental crisis rocking African nations has been attached to their colonial and neo-colonial foundations. It has been opined that many ideologies and policies on which African nations built their edifice of development are found wanting. To this end Tolen submits:

For us in Africa, this world as it is organised, governed and managed (through the instrumentalism of globalisation) is not for us. If communism has failed in the Eastern and Central Europe, in Africa it is communism and capitalism that has failed. The Ivory Coast, Senegal, Nigeria, the Gabon ... and Kenya, presented as ‘show cases’ of the liberal and capitalist success stories, are today on their knees. Algeria, Guinea, the Congo, Ethiopia, Angola and Tanzania, which advocated the socialist approach, are also on their knees. Africa is the only continent which clearly shows that to solve the problem of the popular masses neither Western nor communist ideology is adequate.

In consequence of the shaky Western foundation of development of African nations, there is a need to look for other solid base on which to set the superstructure of development in Africa, with specific relevance to Nigeria. And we cannot but agree with the view that the only way we can make rational enquire relevant in our contemporary society is to use ethics as a tool of revitalisation of virtues that promote human wellbeing. To this end, this paper seeks to critically avail us with Yoruba traditional ethical elements which can aid our developmental strides in the contemporary African society. This aim is not inappropriate considering the fact that these ethical elements are offshoot of culture, and as it has been said, since culture is not just the ‘theatre and springboard’ from which almost all developmental policies ensues. In almost all societal system, and as opined by UNESCO’s (United Nations Educational and Scientific and Cultural Organisation) Director-General in 2013, culture is the ‘driver and enabler’ of development. This being the case, then there is the need to observe how elements of Africa culture ethics can translate into authentic developmental policies which can assit to combat and overcome the developmental quagmire that African states are wallowing in, and cumulate into national and individual wellbeing, for internalised culture is believed to permit people to act in proper ways to the norms of the society or community they live.

In view of the observations above, the paper seeks to achieve the following objectives: one; discuss in brief the foundation of the African moral system, through a review of some literatures on Yoruba ethics (Religious-Mbiti, Humanistic-Wiredu, Religio-Secular-Oyeshile, and Rational-Oluwole); two, engage conceptual analysis of the relevant operational concepts, three, identify the essential ethical elements in African traditional parlance, specifically Yoruba, and four, establish how these traditional Yoruba ethical elements can aid in the nation’s quest for sustainable developmental feat. The ethical elements which shall explore in this paper are proverbs and

taboos. Conceptual analysis is used to clarify the key terms and critical method is used to examine the ethical elements involved in the work.

### **Foundation of Africa Moral System**

In the search for a theoretical foundation of African moral system, there is diversity of opinion and postulations as there are different African scholars. Some argue that the basis of African moral system is religion; a forerunner of this view is John Mbiti, who opines:

Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. ... For Africans the whole of existence is a religious phenomenon; man is a deeply religious being living in a religious universe.

His submission has been variously interpreted as the religious foundation of African moral system; supporters of this view are J. O. Awolalu and P. A. Dopamu (1979), Makinde (1988), Idowu (1962).

In reaction to the interpretation of Mbiti's submission on Africa and religiosity, as forming the religious foundation of African moral system, Wiredu points out that religion and morality in traditional African ethics are independent of each other. He believes that:

What is morally good is what (benefits) a human being; it is what is decent for a – what brings dignity, respect, contentment, prosperity, joy to man and his community. And what is morally bad is what brings misery, misfortune, and disgrace. ...immoral conduct is held to be hateful to God, the Supreme Being.

Again, Wiredu's position has been interpreted as giving the humanistic foundation of African moral system. For Oluwole (1980) the foundation of traditional Yoruba moral system is rational, while Oyeshile (2002) believes that the foundation of traditional Yoruba moral system is religious cum secular.

The foundation of African moral system notwithstanding, the important thing is that traditional ethics should work for the development of the nation as it worked in the pre-colonial days. Although it may be argued that the population in the pre-colonial society was microscopic compared to what obtains in the contemporary society, ideals of the past which made living in the society meaningful can still be adapted to the present society, such that we can curtail the pace retrogression into the state of nature, that is being gradually witnessed in African nations.

### **On Development**

The concept development is concerned with progress or change apparent in the wellbeing of nations and peoples. Development can be viewed from the narrow and broad perspectives. In the narrow perspective, which is the most popular angle, development is projected as change in economic wellbeing of nations. It accesses the gross domestic product (GPD) per capital to compare relative progress among nations. The modernisation theory is one of such conceptions. According to Olutayo (1985) the modernisation theory traces the base of Nigeria underdevelopment to the 'absences of technology and incomplete disentanglement from primitive modes of life.' The way to correct this, as far as the modernisation theory is concerned, that is, for a state of development to be reached in Nigeria, there must be a transfer of technological ideas, institutions, attitudes, values and cultures to the underdeveloped nations. From Olutayo's explanation what this implies is the Europeanisation of African countries, because Europe is pictured as having the 'higher culture', which the 'lower culture' of the developing or underdeveloped countries need to imbibe, in their search for development. But without any special lenses, one can appreciate imbibing the paradigm of the higher cultures in the past decades, have not translated into development for African countries.

However, the broad perspective of development in addition to the GPD takes into cognisance complementary issues that can affect individual and national wellbeing; issues such as governance, human rights, culture, inequality, and so on. This conception of development Abdi (2010: 14) denotes as social development, it include all types of development, economic, technological, political, educational and cultural and psychological wellbeing. The broad view of development was articulated by A. L. Mabogunje too. He projects an idea of development that concentrates on the human being as an individual in the society as a key player in social institutions. His conceptualisation of development harnesses the triad of the community, social institutions and the individual. The essence of development is thus perceived:

Defining and finding a direction that a particular society wants to tread. Radically improving the performance and output of the populace not the least, the most backward segments of the society. Thus, development is not simply about raising agricultural productivity ... but must involve a spatial re-organisation of the rural areas on the basis of new reformulated rules,

regulations and value systems that can guarantee a true and permanent escape of the rural majority from the shackles of poverty, ignorance and disease.

In the same vein, Osagie (1985:129) defined development as:

A more inconclusive concept with its social political, economic facets. It is the qualitative and quantitative positive transformation of the lives of a people that does not only enhance their material wellbeing, but also ensures their social wellbeing, including the restoration of human dignity.

Taking a cue from definition above, Mbakogu (2004:39) asserts that: development is a warm, gradual and considerate process in its attempt to alleviate man's economic and technological standard or conditions without disregarding or disrespecting any aspects of man's existing social, cultural and political values.

In other words, in the search for development, African people need not subsume everything African under the imperial powers as suggested by the modernisation theory of development, which focuses on development from a parochial angle. Considering the wholesome conceptualisation of development and the reality of the fact that modern state evolved from man's survival instinct, and the desire for a certain world, one is bewildered at the sense of frippery African governments display at making cogent arrangements for the promotion of the liberty, welfare and security of their citizens, such that poverty, ignorance and disease are apparent battles which an average citizen is entangled with.

### **Yoruba ethical elements: Proverbs and Taboos**

There are many ethical elements in Yoruba culture, but for the purpose of this work we shall focus attention on proverbs and taboos and how these can have meaningful impact on the development of Africa generally, and specifically Nigeria. The Yoruba language is rich with ample supply of proverbs and taboos, a good understanding of which leads one into the richness of reality that has, throughout all the ages, served as the foundation of the Yoruba culture and general conceptual framework.

### **Proverbs**

Proverb is one of the concepts that is widely used by human beings, yet is void of a univocally accepted definition. This assertion notwithstanding, this work shall adopt and improve on the conceptualisation given by scholars who have worked on the concept; we shall also give its understanding in Yorùbá culture. Proverbs have been described as the embodiment of the observations, knowledge and wisdom of the (elders) who reduced what they would have put down in writing into short droll idioms. For Osoba, proverbs by nature involves some elements of language (figurative) such as metaphors, similes, personification and symbols.

In Yorùbá culture a person is only considered as matured, and able to take part in communal discussions only if s/he is able to fittingly use the appropriate proverbs for any discussion. That is why they say *òwe le 'sin òrò, bí òrò ba sònù, òwe ní a fí nwa*, literally meaning that 'a proverb is the horse of words, if words are lost, proverbs are used to find it.' That is, proverbs are the means of searching out the truth, when the truth is hidden; proverbs are the tools of probe and the truth is finally brought to the fore. Achebe corroborates this when he asserts that "proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten". Proverbs are vocabulary of a culture's stance on a variety of important topics and problems, they are intimately connected to the culture of a people, they serve as bond of social and ethical norms in human interactions, laud what the society considers to be virtues and condemn harmful patterns of behaviour.

### **Proverbs and inherent lessons for Development**

*Orí adé ní iyonu* (many troubles awaits the person who wears the crown) meaning that great responsibilities come with the position of leadership.

**Lesson:** Position of leadership comes with lots of troubles and responsibilities; the implication therefore is for one to take a deep thought before accepting position of leadership. And when one is in the position of leadership, one should accept the troubles and responsibilities attached to the position and not make excuses for non-performance.

*Ogbón ju àgbàrà* (wisdom is more profitable than power)

*Alágbàrà má mèrò baba òlẹ* (he that has power but lacks knowledge is the father to the lazy/ Power must be accompanied with knowledge, unless there will be a misuse of that power)

*L'òwe, l'òwe là nlú ilù àgídígbo, òlògbón níi jo òmòran ní o mo* (It is proverb by proverb that the 'àgídígbo' drum is beaten, only the wise can dance to it and only the knowledgeable can understand it)

**Lesson:** the proverbs above emphasise the importance and power of wisdom, knowledge and understanding in the desire for development. Law/policy makers and leaders at all spheres of the nation should embrace these

virtues in their attempt at development.

*Sùúrù baba iwà* (patience is the father of/ chief character)

*Sùúrù a ma se òkùta jiná* (patience can cook stone)

**Lesson:** the virtue of patience should be courted in resolving the many challenges which confront the quest for development.

*Ilè tí kò tí ojú eni sù, òkùnkùn rẹ̀ sòro rìn.* (It is difficult to walk safely in a strange place when it is dark)

**Lesson:** it is better for us to look inward for solution to developmental challenges, that is, within the culture sphere.

*Omo áráye kò fèni fòrò àf' orí eni* (Nobody wishes us well, but our head)

**Lesson:** this proverb cautions man to be careful in his dealings with others because many people may not wish one well, but only pretend to do so. This is akin to the tenet of egoism that concealed behind man's action or inaction is self-interest.

## Taboos

Taboo is a vehicle of social order, organisation, progress and development. It is an important part of traditional education in the Yoruba society. It is a major element of the Yoruba culture, it is one way through which the Yoruba society articulate its disapproval of certain kinds of actions believed to be detrimental to its members either for supernatural reasons or because such behaviour violates an ethical code. Reiterating this, Osei writes, "taboos represent the main source of guiding principles regulating and directing the behaviour of individuals and the community towards the gods and ancestors in African societies"

The Yoruba word for taboo is *èèwọ* forbidden, that which is not worthwhile, not worth doing, saying or eating. It is opined that the action/inaction or conduct of a person in the community can affect other members of the community for good or bad. Therefore, in order to prevent individuals in the society from becoming rebellious and endangering the wellbeing of others and the society, there are set patterns of behaviour for individuals and for the community at large. Taboo was a tool of social restriction and obligation in Yoruba culture.

## Types of Taboos in Yoruba society

There was an ample supply of taboos among the traditional Yoruba people of Southwest Nigeria. These taboos were put in place in order to promote peace, harmony and tranquillity, which are germane for friction-free co-existence between the 'seen' and 'unseen' worlds, between individuals in the society and for individual wellbeing, which culminate into development in every sphere of human life. Some of these taboos are as follow;

- i. **Abuse of office:** in traditional Yoruba society taboo served as a veritable tool of combating corruption and indecency in office. It was a taboo for any title/office holder to do contrary to the oath s/he took during coronation or installation in office. Any one taking up an office must take an oath before a god(dess) or higher authority, that s/he will speak the truth and be loyal to the community and the keep the promise made to the people. It was a taboo for anyone to breach the oath of office, for oath taking was done with emblems like iron, which signifies wrath of iron, wrath of Olodumare (the Supreme Being) and the wrath of Ogun, the god of thunder.
- ii. **Sanctity of human life:** *Ènà kò gbòdò gba èmí ara rẹ̀* (you must not take your own life, commit suicide). Anyone who committed suicide was not given a proper burial, the remains of such was laid in the forest. *Èèwọ ni kí o pa eléran ara bí tírẹ̀* (it is a taboo to take the life of a fellow human being).
- iii. **Economic life:** This relates to actions such as cutting down of economic trees arbitrarily, farming and stealing in the sacred grove.
- iv. **Religious taboos:** there are many religious taboos among Yoruba, ranging from taboos concerning birth, death, burial, marriage, and festivals. In short, every passage of life is connected with a taboo or more. For instance, for many Yoruba communities it is a taboo for the king to sight or eat *isu ègbodò* (new yam) before the annual new yam festival is conducted. Again, it is a taboo for one to say that the king is dead, instead the demise of the king is announced with the phrase *Obá w'ájà* (the king has entered the roof) meaning that the king has joined his ancestors. This is because the king is not perceived has an ordinary being, he is seen as the *igbá 'keji orisa* (second in command to the divinity). Therefore, it is sacrilegious to announce his death like that of a mere man.
- v. **Cautionary taboos:** *A kò gbòdò fí okùn ògèdè gun igi òpẹ* (one must not climb the palm tree with the rope from plantain plant) the rope of the plantain plant is not strong, using it to climb a tree can result in bodily harm or even death. A similar one is that; *èèwọ ni kí a gun igi ibépe* (one must not climb a pawpaw tree)
- vi. **Respect for elders:** in traditional Yorubá society it was a taboo to disrespect the elderly; the elder must be honoured, respected and celebrated. William asserts: "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.” The Yorùbá will say: *omòdé kò gbòdò wo àgbà lójú* (a child must not look at an elder in the eye) it is a sign of disrespect to stare at an elder.

vii. **Hygiene:** there are many taboos addressing hygiene, some are which are: *a kò gbòdò wẹ ọwó sínú àwo ijeun* (one must not wash hands in a plate), *a kò gbòdò só sínú odó iyán* (one must not fart on the mortal for pounding yam). The point they are trying to drive home is that these vessels are used for preparing/serving meals, and should not be used unworthily

viii. **Moral sanctity:** *Òbinrin kò gbòdò kí ọwó bọ àpò ọkọ rẹ* (a woman must not dip her hands into the pocket of her husband) the moral implication of this is that her action can encourage the children to steal.

*A kò gbòdò rọ àlá ni ọsán* (dreams must not be narrated in the afternoon). This is to discourage laziness. The people believe that the afternoon is a time to work, not to laze about to tell dreams.

There are many more taboos in Yoruba land and others societies whose analysis cannot be exhausted in just a write up, and considering these numerous taboos which are available the human society, Thorpe (1967) articulates reasons for the emanation of taboos. He identified seven reasons as follows:

1. To avoid accident
2. To have respect for religion
3. To respect elders
4. To obey rules of cleanliness
5. To teach moral values
6. Guide against being wasteful
7. Explain things that are difficult to understand

## Conclusion

Harnessing the ethical elements of our traditional culture in formulation and implementation of policies, by our policy makers and other stake holders will go a long way to stem the tide of underdevelopment in the nation as a result of the blatant display of the virtue of corruption that has over the nascent years been prevalent in the nations, which have also reproduced the nefarious activities such as kidnapping, terrorism, vandalisation of oil pipes and other government properties, and other such vices which are tearing up the very fabric of social cohesion, sanity and traditional wisdom that makes for growth and development of a nation. The starting point should be that the representatives of the different peoples of Nigeria should be knowledgeable in the traditional language of the people and traditional wisdom which make the society to thrive. For policies to enhance sustainable development rooted in contemporary Africa’s social space there must be critical and analytic ethical orientation of policy makers on traditional cultural values this would be a precursor to development.

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