

Beyond Westernization: Culture and the Question of Development in Africa

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INTRODUCTION

The question of development is not yet settled in Africa. Though there are numerous approaches and theories on this issue yet the cultural dimension is not properly explored. Explicitly, globalization and modernization contain a lot, but not the final answer to the question of development. Modernization does not mean total neglect of indigenous knowledge. Besides, westernization is not modernization but one of the key factors to facilitate it. This paper examines the necessity of culture in the development of Africa. In line with this, the views of some Japanese scholars and Africans are carefully evaluated.

DEFINING THE CONCEPTS OF CULTURE AND PHILOSOPHY

Culture is a common term in daily communication and learned discourse. But as common as it is, it has diverse meanings based on intellectual orientations, context and ideological persuasions. From a sociological viewpoint, it is seen in terms of the moves and norms that guide social relation. The historian conceives culture in terms of civilization. A philosopher can portray it as “the growth of the mind or intellect to accommodate a broad range of ideas, values, beliefs and so on” (Babalola, 1997:2). Cognizant of these diverse views, culture is simply represented as the totality of a people’s way of life. It refers to the idea that governs the lives of a people in a particular community at a specified period. In line with this, Richard porter defined culture in the following words:

Culture is the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, meaning, beliefs, values, religion, concept of self, the universe and self-universe relationship, hierarchy of status, roles expectations, spatial relations and time concepts acquired by a large group of people in the course of generation through individual and group striving (Porter 1972:3).

This definition shows that culture encapsulate the whole gamut of experience as seen in economic agriculture, health, religion, finance, art, technology, science etc. Culture emanates as a result of the diverse challenges and experience people have in various aspects of life.

“Culture is a product of experience and it comes as a solution to the problem of survival” (Evans 1975:15). “It is the knowledge of doing things which people have acquired in their attempts to solve some socio-historical problems” (Uroh 1996:11). Moreso, human experience varied across spatio-temporal locale, hence there are bound to be multiplicity of cultures based on experience and the solution rendered. The dynamism of social life put a constant pressure upon culture. “It is in the very nature of tradition to be vulnerable, to be under constant barrage of forces of change, and a modification in one department will affect the totality” (Irele, 1982:17). It is only by adaptations and adjustment of its culture is a society able to satisfy its changing need within the context of its physical human environment” (Thompson, 1991:23).

One crucial point about culture is that it regulates changes and reinforces the pattern of development. Cultural experience go a long way to shape the trend of development. Development in this sense is “the dialectical transformation of man and the society” (Nnoli, 1981). It refers to the ability and the desire to use available resources in transforming human life and liberate man from the influence of natural geophysical human historical environment” (Ogundowole, 1981). This implies that the essence of development is human development. There must be transformation of quantitative factors to quantitative human development. It is not all about acquisition of artifact and maximization of economic returns without commensurate advancement in human life. It marks “the combination of mental and social change of a people which enable them to increase cumulatively and permanently their total real production” (Perroux 1964:155-171).

Primarily, development cannot be defined in absolute terms. It is a combination of the quantitative and the qualitative, the technical and ethical etc. Thus, a focus on an aspect alone, can bring about serious setback for other aspects. It must be considered as a whole and revolves round the material and spiritual wellness of man. In line with this Udoidem emphasizes that:

Development can be defined as a process leading to the realization of full human and environmental potentials. If therefore, in our thrust towards community development, the full human and environmental potentials are not realized, then the community is yet to be developed (Udoidem 1992:25).

This obviously suggests that the improvement on the quality of life must be the central focus of

development.

Philosophy as the intellectual progenitor of other academic disciplines is difficult to be univocally defined. Nevertheless, within the contextual reference of this paper, philosophy is rational thinking into human existence with a view to preferring answers to puzzles and existential challenges. It marks a critical intellectual adventure to interpret human experience, make life meaningful and generate theoretical foundation for the good life. It is reflective and critical thinking about the concepts and principles which we use to organize our experience in morals, religion, in social and political life, in law, in history and the natural sciences” (Sodipo, 2004:16).

NECESSITY OF A PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE

Culture is an expression of a people’s intellectual exploit through institutionalized means of tackling the problem posed by experience and other challenges of life. Culture as we know it, is only human culture and has reference to concrete human beings who experience and express it. In return, experience is determined by the place in which group and individual live and it is for this reason that groups and individuals belonging to different cultures will differ mentally from one another”. (Montagu 1961:20) Men have different experience and this manifest in different cultures. Furthermore, all cultures are relative to their different assumptions about the nature of reality and people have certain emotional attachment to their cultural values. It is equally valid that man must adjust their intellectual positions, in order to grasp the values of other cultures” (Anyanwu 1981: 22-23).

The issue at stake is that the cultural experience of a people is vital to the understanding of their philosophy of life and life. Thus, the application of a foreign epistemological model may be damaging to the corpus of a foreign cultural model. It is nothing but the super-imposition of a foreign category of understanding. Thus, understanding culture entails understanding the philosophy of experience of a group of people. In other words, without a sound philosophy of culture, the development of ‘a people’ in a given locale may be distorted and models that are adopted may be incongruent with their existential challenges. E.A. Anyanwu further emphasizes the imperative of this cultural philosophy. He writes:

Cultural philosophy demands that we should know the basic assumptions about reality in every culture as well as the standards in terms of which cultures interpret the fact of experience. Furthermore, the need for understanding man as a product of culture as well as meaning maker is so important today that philosophers cannot afford to dissipate their energy on methodology... (Anyanwu, 1981:40)

Philosophy does not possess, the one – truth and a cultural approach to the study of development and philosophy may enable us to understand that the principle of autonomy of inquiry cannot be compromised without a distortion of cultural life and experience. “To by-pass experience in the pursuit of truth is to make oneself a God for only he can say ‘let there be and there is” (Kaplan, 1961:4).

Modernization must not be interpreted as westernization. It must not be considered to exclusively rule out indigenous knowledge or technology. Writing on this from the Japanese experience, Nishida Kitaro observes:

obviously, there is much to admire and much to learn from the dazzling developments in western cultures where form belongs to being and taking form is seen as a good. But is there not something fundamental in the culture of the east and have nurtured our ancestors for thousand of years... something beneath the surface that can see the form of the formless... (Kitaro, 1927: 255)

Kitaro is not against the sophistication of western technology, but this must be done in synergy with the traditional wisdom and strong ethos of indigenous Japanese life.

One lesson from Japanese current in development philosophy is the quest to look within. Adaptation of development does not mean whole sale adoption without the possibility of adjustment and indigenous duplication. Globalization is good but it must not be done in the form of uncritical opening up of border and policy to allow anything to come in. The ideology of an alleged superior culture and what it has to gain must be properly considered. Nishida Keyi (1943) supports this view for the Europeans. The problems of Asia were not something that Keiny affected them personally. Not in the way, the problem of Asia affected us while to Europe Asian was seen as no more than raw materials for their own activities, for us the problem was how to cope effectively with Europe’s activeness. This implies a radical scrutiny of western policy on globalization and development.

Really, some modernization theorists identify development with westernization and globalization. They are of the view that the culture of the West possess universality in there thinking irrespective of the peculiarities of a people’s cultural life. “Obviously, the kind of scientific knowledge and technology that arose in the West in recent times is easily understood and absorbed virtually just as it is without any change in form. But when it

comes to other cultural domain, can one really sustain the claim that the cultural products of the West can all be seen as universal while none of the cultural products of other people enjoy such universality”(Hajime 1998:275-274).

The above position is obviously erroneous. Pane Whiss argued that it is wrong to treat science as an exclusive preserve of a given culture. It is an integral part of every culture. He further reinforces this thesis:

Either we have a culture or we have no culture if we have a culture, then it is indivisible- one culture, in which scientific attitude, motivations and contributions are as much integral component of our civilization as are the literary and historic facets, the introduction of cleavage between them is purely artificial (Weiss 1965:16)

In Weiss analysis, science is the culmination of a people’s attempt to solve human problem within specific environment. Science is a result of man’s pursuit to understand the workings of the universe. It is a universal heritage, not the exclusive preserve of a given culture.

Definitely, to assert that African culture or any culture for that matter is unscientific is to imply that the activities of rational thinking are alien to Africa. But “if science is a process of problem solving, it almost follows that only a society that has never had any problems could possibly not have science “ (Uroh, 1996:14). There is no society without any science and technology and in every society there is interplay between forms of life; between for example religious and scientific forms of life” (Oladipo, 1992:23). The thrust of this argument is that science is an integral part of any culture. Regardless of the level of primitivity that may be adduced to it, no culture is totally benefits of science. As such Africa needs an intensification of the idea of philosophy of culture. A critical philosophy that does not pander to regressive orthodoxy. Really, the technical and scientific knowledge systems that were in vogue on the dawn of European colonization could not match the sophistication of European science and technology. The way forward is for Africans to destruct western knowledge, wean indigenous knowledge the two systems for Africa’s development. “A synthesis that should give equal recognition to both knowledge systems” (Osei, 2010 : 119).

Development must start from within. It must not be totally imposed from outside if the pattern, the policy and the artifacts are super-imposed, then loss of policy autonomy cannot be averted. Again, indebtedness to advanced nation cannot be done away with. But, in pursuit of a well-entrenched philosophy of culture for Africa development, the following points as stated by Osei are important:

- The content of colonial education was Euro-centered in spite of its pretensions to universal values.
- The mode in which western knowledge was transmitted to Africa by the colonists was alienating.
- Post-colonial formal education systems in Africa have not been adequately shown of the western garb and orientation. African scholars and public figures have been low starters in integrating African indigenous knowledge into the curricula of their schools and universities.

The above exposition by Osei points our attention to the fact that the pedagogic structure of education foe development in Africa must be Africanized. Relevant indigenous science must be co-opted into the curriculum, lest Africans are viewed as robots that must take-in whatever comes from the West.

Part of the outcome of colonialism and the ‘science’ that sustain it is “that non-western societies and the knowledge that sustain them are taken as obsolete. In the rush towards modernity, we the modernized have not wanted to give those on whom we have imposed the signified of obsolescence a voice. Infact, as a group, victims are never part of scientific history or discourse” (Hoppers 2002:6). The denigration of African indigenous knowledge and the super-imposition of a foreign model, really inhibit African development to a great extent. The destruction of the fledgling technology of the colonized people was not only deliberately done, but was in fact carried out at all, levels of the people’s collective achievements. “local production of some goods were either outright lawed or made unprofitable through the process of dumping, thereby discouraging indigenous manufacturer. Having destroyed this technology, it would be wrong to now assert that Africans had no science or technology” (Uroh 1996: 16).

One point that cannot be gain said is that African culture is not essentially superstitious. In the same vein European culture is not totally scientific. Every culture is an amalgam of both the scientific and the unscientific. Meanwhile, the possibility of diffusion of ideas from the two cannot be ruled out.

Development must start from within. “It is the conscious, articulate and beneficial unveiling of the inner potentials of the resources of a given society.”(Iroegbu 2005: 302)

CONCLUSION

Contemporary development in Africa will be difficult without proper integration of cultures and indigenous knowledge. Granted that the slave trade and colonialism hindered the transformation of Africa’s indigenous science and technology, yet total reliance (instead of adaptation, adjustment and integration) on the West will not bring about the desired dawn for Africa. Development must be directly connected with culture and a people’s experience. The people must actively participate in it. If it pushes them out, if it does not originate from within,

if it is not pragmatically adoptable, then it is not development.

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