The African Mind and Globalization: Rethinking the Causes of Africa's Underdevelopment

Bassey Oben
Department of Modern Languages and Translation Studies, University of Calabar, Nigeria
E-mail: basseyoben1@gmail.com
+234(0) 803 09 46 701

ABSTRACT

Sustainable development is an enduring old concept, which has become "the new bride" in building socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-political paradigms of development by modern social practitioners and theorists the world over. The concept is often a co-traveler with "globalisation", a concept that views the whole world as "a global village" and which seeks to break hitherto incompatible frontiers between nations of the world in favour of mutuality and complementarity for the sake of humanity. Africa, the once touted "cradle of civilisation", and indeed, the fore-runner of science and technology has not fared well in all of this, as she lags behind in almost all indices of human development, which measure the socio-economic advancements and wellbeing of nations. This paper identifies the root causes of Africa's underdevelopment to include the intellectual and moral categories inherited from the traditional system, which seem to be at loggerheads with the modern idea of development. The paper also suggests the way forward, if the continent must break away from this self-inflicted dilemma and away from the cycle of underdevelopment.

Keywords: The African mind, globalization, development dilemma, Africa's underdevelopment, intellectual and moral categories, sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

A major cause of Africa's present underdevelopment is her people's quite understandable failure to adapt to the exigencies of the modern world as a

result of intellectual and moral categories inherited from the traditional system. We further hold that mischievous sociological theories have tended to hide from the people the necessity of such an adaptation.

The African worldview is a human universe under the control of spiritual powers. A man's primary task is to win over these powers to himself in the struggle for health, success, wealth, fertility, etc. The "spiritual powers" are above all, dead ancestors who are believed to be permanently on the watch to ensure that their living offspring observe the customs of the society. Any breach will attract reprisals or punishment from the ancestors. Besides, there is present in the universe a more generalized spiritual power which may be harnessed to supplement human efforts to achieve prosperity. This "power" may also be used by men to inflict injury on each other. A man has therefore, the double task of enlisting spiritual powers for his own benefit, but also of protecting himself from powers that may be used by his enemies to endanger him. "Spirits and magic" therefore constitute the principal intellectual categories of Africa.

Implications of the beliefs

Such a belief, that the world of humans is under the control of non-human powers naturally tends to deprive a man of confidence in himself. Man's attempts to improve himself or his world are powerless if the ultimate arbiters of fortune are non-humans or supra-human spirits. One would expect a belief in spirits to generate an inertia which might look like "fatalism" or laziness. It is unreasonable for people to work hard or to see life's problems in terms of personal challenges, when they feel that in the end all will be determined by spirits, far beyond their control. The paradox of the modern world is that men are responsible for their fate and are themselves the efficient cause of change. Man is thus the architect of his fortune or misfortune. This same world with heavy emphasis on "development" is further constructed on a dynamic model. It assumes that the past cannot be regarded as an adequate model for the future, and that men should be creative agents for an improvement on the old. An ancestor-oriented world, on the other hand, is essentially a conservative world, a world in which the past is canonized and where customs are sacrosanct. It is a world which cannot tolerate innovation; a world in which creativity is taboo or at best, suspicious and non-conformity sin.

Inefficiency is a leading characteristic of modern Africa and it does not seem fanciful to explain it as the result of a belief that man is really helpless

and his work essentially unproductive and unnecessary since it is not man but spirits who determine how things turn out.

Not all African peoples are fatalists. Man is the centre of the cosmos and sees himself as a microcosm or miniature of the original source. He knows that he can manipulate even the divinities and spirits to achieve a desired goal. Yet he needs a positive nod from some favourable spirits and can at all times appease the unfriendly ones that could constitute a clog in the wheel of his progress. This is not necessarily to state that all inefficient managers or workers in Africa are ardent believers in spirits. The old belief system has been seriously undermined by the dispersal of most traditional communities. Yet the cosmology remains the same, even the beliefs by which they were originally underlined have withered away. By cosmology here we mean "a mental perception of the things of life by a people. This perception governs their actions and inactions; it determines, to a large extent, their daily living" (Oben, 2009). A relaxed attitude to work may linger on when a man no longer believes that his fate is under the control of some metaphysical power. In much the same way as if we accept Max Weber's theory, Americans are still working hard even when they no longer believe that prosperity is a sign of transcendental predestination.

Ancestors prefer maintenance of the status quo. They dislike innovation, especially men with new ideas that may disrupt tradition. Traditional Africa was not static. However, the system ensured that dynamic changes do not uproot traditional landmarks. Conservatism seems to be no less a key feature of the new as of the old Africa. It is true that the African mind has been flooded with new ideas and institutions in the last century or so, most of which have no roots in the African traditional world. One would therefore imagine such institutions to operate with freshness and freedom. Inspite of the fast new changes and the iconoclastic agents like urbanization and western education, tradition has equally entered the new era of African life in the form of a stubborn adherence to the original formulae devised by the foreign founders of the new institutions.

For instance, fierce conservatism of African tradition is reflected in the fact that some African leaders still slavishly retain manners, costumes, liturgies, hymn books of the founders, whose success in Europe and America has for long dropped. Schools and universities in Africa still operate with systems, curriculums and syllabuses devised by colonial administrators, irrespective of the fact that most of them no longer serve the existential needs of modern Africa. No one has the imagination or even the energy to devise something different or else he would face the wrath of the authorities.

The point we are trying to underscore here is that innovation was taboo in traditional Africa and it is this mindset that still drives leaders of modern Africa. The old formulae and procedures, all the original trappings of the new institutions imparted to Africa in the days of colonialism are meticulously preserved and no one questions their meaning or relevance. The Islamic conservative hold on women, the use of Arabic as the language of instruction and worship, the irresistible desire to visit Mecca, etc, are all problems of lack of African traditional contribution to the improvement of an imported faith that Africans swallow hook, line and sinker.

African students manifest the same fear of risk taking which is the rule in traditional African societies. Fearful of thinking for themselves, they repeat (memorise) half understood theories taken from books and texts, but rarely venturing on original thoughts of their own. Probably, this might in fairness to the African, be as a result of the harm which colonial experience inflicted on Africa's glorified past. Students demand notes for ready-made answers which can be learned by heart, in much the same way probably as the old oral fables were passed on by words, of mouth, from generation to generation.

The problem of instant success and solution

If we examine the belief that the key to life is to be found in the impersonal power of magic and charms, there is a possibility of finding similar incompatibility in traditional African categories and the exigencies of the contemporary world. Belief in instant solution is central to the African magical conception of reality. People expect instant healing, instant success, instant wealth, instant death of enemies, instant answers from the deities for queries posed, etc. The marabout tries to offer all these. There is obviously no room for patience in such conception. The marabout's clients want it and they want it immediately.

The modern world, especially the so-called developing modern world demands from its adherents not only efficiency and creativity but also patience and a willingness to accept short-term drudgery and perhaps, unpopularity, for the sake of long term gains, which the individual concerned may not personally be a beneficiary. Men can build enduring legacies and come to the knowledge of the truth only by patient labour. The demand for immediate results is fatal. It has long been discovered, that for authentic human achievement in any field, instant work or result is always a shody work. A house must always be built on solid foundation if it is to stand firm and this is nothing short of a long and herculian task that takes a long process.

The instant mentality of African magical systems does not fit into a world which demands long, patient and rational endeavour. Africans seem to be in a hurry to copy Europe that has stood for several centuries. Democracy in America and in some European countries was established over centuries of painstaking political engineering. Independent African states are just celebrating fifty years of freedom from colonial rule. Yet many African nations are copying contemporary Europe in a speed that is self-destruct. The mentality of instant success and prosperity makes it extremely difficult for man to persevere long and arduous challenges. It breeds frustration and discouragement. If we want it all and want it now, there is the tendency for one to be tempted. For instance, the notion live now, pay later is a formular which fits the improvidence and recklessness plaguing modern Africa. Her leaders are incurring huge debts which they will never be able to repay in their life time. They generally refuse to observe present restraints for the sake of a greater satisfaction in the future. European leaders have noticed this "instant syndrome" in Africans and therefore have exploited it by encouraging them to borrow, thus exploiting the continent in a neo-imperialistic way. Borrowing from the World Bank, IMF or Paris club owned by greedy and exploitative western industrialised bourgeois nations, without a thought for the future, is a serious threat to Africa's quest for sustainable development. The pace of development should be slow and steady for enduring success and prosperity for Africa to be created.

It is perhaps this perception of the "instant", without serious regards to the future implications of actions that led John Mbiti (1969) to propound his famous theory of "African time". According to him, the distant future does not exist in Africa; what exists, he says, is the past and the present, because according to him, "among Africans, time does not exist outside of human activity". It is logical to believe, that since the future has not seen any activity, it does not exist and can therefore not be budgeted for. This explains why leaders of modern Africa still find it very difficult to project effectively for the future. It is a weakness inherited from the traditional conceptualization of time, especially as it affects instant prosperity. There is therefore a correlation between the inefficiency, lack of enterprise and time wasting, which many African leaders exhibit in the course of their duties as a function of the inherited traditional African intellectual modus.

Moral Categories

Having discussed the intellectual problem of adjustment of Africans coping with new world views, it is pertinent to also evaluate the moral problems that arise as a result of the intellectual encounter with external change agents.

Often, it is said that humanity is the same everywhere. In spite of some surprising facts in certain societies, like the killing of twins or sharing of wives between brothers, it can be taken for granted that vices like murder, stealing, adultery and telling lies, have moral implications. In determining each case, there is a natural law "do unto others what you would like others to do unto you", which the Christian bible emphasizes in the synoptic gospels and which could be traced back to the Hammurabic code. Christianity summed up the ideal in human society that men should love God and their neighbours (Mt 22:34-40). The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1948) upholds the same view in a subtle way.

The concept of "neighbour" is ideally accepted in principle by all societies, the scope however varies. The lawyer who asked Jesus "who is my neighbour"? got a shocking answer. His view of neighbor may not differ so much from that of an African. To the same question, an African will give a precise answer. His neighbours are in descending order of importance the members of his family, his village and clansmen, then his ethnic group. The micro world in which an African lives does not only exclude people from other ethnic groups, countries or races, it also does not make him have any obligation towards them. Western writers at times exaggerate the communal lives and virtues of traditional Africa. But the scope and motive of such "communalism" have often been glossed over. The scope is still limited to the immediate clan or ethnic group and it is a way to avoid reprisals from the ancestors if one fails to help a relative in need.

More often than not, traditional African morality is built on the fear of the ancestors. Some scholars have argued that African morality is shame-oriented, not sin-oriented. One avoids doing something that would bring shame to the family, kindred or clan if caught. He is often not touched by the enormity of the wrongdoing or act. If he could not be found out he could go ahead and do it without a pricking of conscience.

Yes, Africans are hospitable to strangers in their midst. This is a very unique feature that should be seen against the conception of the attitude to non-relatives. A stranger's peculiar situation determines the hospitality he receives in African communities. Otherwise, strangers are generally regarded as enemies and this idea seems to be the principal source of the corruption and nepotism, which Africans condemn as an infiltration of foreign values into the African value system. No doubt, the use of public office for private gain is a feature of human society the world over. In less family-centered societies, it may be regarded as an aberration and punishment when exposed. Professionals in the West, in spite of some occasional lapses, recognize that they owe obligation to everyone in the society. A doctor, nurse, teacher,

government official, all have a duty to render service to people whether they know them or not.

There is no corruption in modern Africa in the sense of a decline from an established moral standard. There is nepotism – the attempts to favour or not. No matter the amount of condemnation the world might have against Africans, it is no "vice" to help one's kinsmen in African society. To favour kinsmen at the expense of other people is a fundamental duty and a changing social situation cannot turn it into sin overnight. The President, Governor or Minister who offers a job to his kinsmen instead of a better qualified candidate from a different ethnic group has done what he was taught to be the right thing in his traditional society. A government official who steals public funds (not belonging to his kinsmen) and returns to his village would be applauded and honoured by his people. An industry sited in the village of the minister (against feasibility surveys of experts) is within the traditional concept of moral obligation. To kill a non-relative (who is regarded as an enemy) is never a crime. It is only a crime when the victim is a blood relation. To vote for a kinsman in an election, whether he is capable or not for the office sought is a normal act of responsibility. To do otherwise, by probably voting for a more capable candidate from another ethnic group, means going contrary to the norms of kinship. Consequently, no one wins elections in Africa primarily on the basis of the people's assessment of his capability. His place of birth is usually the determining factor. This psychology is what Innocent Asouzu (2011) tries to explain in "Ibuanyindanda and the Philosophy of Essence", when he talks about the principle of "the nearer, the better and the safer" (30). This is a near perfect recapitulation of the African mindset which, unfortunately, is a root cause of Africa's underdevelopment.

CONCLUSION

We may sound alarmist in this paper. The facts may look exaggerated, but the fact remains that the development dilemma in modern Africa is to some large extent due to attempts by people to perform tasks which cannot be accommodated within their traditional intellectual and moral categories. It is the intellectual inadequacy to what is often termed corruption. Why should a politician or high court judge or police officer bother himself with the rights of hated foreigners, who are not his kinsmen? Back home in his village, a politician sees a man from another ethnic group as an enemy who probably did not vote for him. Now that he is controlling the National Agency for

Employment after his successful election, why should he offer jobs to people from other places; which implies the disempowerment of his own kinsmen?

Depriving his less qualified son or nephew a job in the nation's civil services, is counted as a crime in his traditional system. People whose world view built this sort of moral categories are at the helm of affairs in many African countries and it is increasingly difficult for them to come out of this original thought pattern and belief system. If Africa must come out of the present dilemma of moral confusion, she has to break the walls of traditionalism and crawl out of her traditional cocoons of self-preservation engulfing her life and thought line. It is the safest prescription if African leaders must buy into the new world order to ensure rapid socio-economic transformation of their countries for the betterment of their people.

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