



Examining the Place of Values in Traditional African Festivals

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Abstract

Through mixed designs which intersected between desktop and archival studies, this article investigated the place of cultural values in traditional African festivals. According to Longman Dictionary (2005), value is defined as the degree of usefulness of something or quality in something which makes it helpful, useful or desirable, a standard or idea which most people have about the worth of good qualities. In African context, values are significant to Traditional festivals, they go a long way to build cultural beliefs, although there are some of its demerits that need refinement. Africans in general have some sense of belonging to God hence traditional festivals are believed to be basically religious. These values are either moral or social, embedded in African Traditional festivals to guide and shape the society in order to live righteously. In addition to that, they are also proverbs, maxims used to inculcate social and moral values in order to regulate their interpersonal relationships, Falade et al (2009). This article further looked at some of the traditional African values that bring about the sustainable development in modern Africa.

Keywords: African traditional values, community, modern Africa, values

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1.0 Introduction

In their own perspective, Falade, Akinde, & Adejube (2009) explicates the term value as a coherent set of attitude, behaviour and action adopted and, or evolved by a person, organization, or society as a standard to guide its behaviour and preferences in all situations (Falade, et al, 2009: 482). The concept is hereby used and utilized as a coherent set of African attitude, behaviour and action adopted and or evolved by African community as a standard to guide their behaviours and preferences. Also, the word value is used as an enduring belief that specific mode of conduct of African existence is socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct. Through mixed designs which intersected between desktop and archival studies, this article investigated the place of cultural values in traditional African festivals.

2.0 Discussion

2.1 The Place of Values in Traditional African festivals

The interpretive exposition and presentation of values generated by festivals in traditional African societies covers many aspects of the African cultural life. Although, it is important to note that talking about values in Traditional African festivals does not imply that by any means there are no cultural disvalues or negative features of festivals. This is because some cultural beliefs, practices and institutions that are regarded as cultural values of festivals may be regarded as cultural disvalues by others. Or even some aspects of what one regards as cultural values, Traditional African festivals may require some refinement of it. Nevertheless, traditions need to be evaluated. The main reason for focusing on cultural values here is that some of these cultural values require appropriate and necessary amendment and refinement in order to be relevant to African modernity (Gyekye, 2002, p. 171). There is no community or nation in existence to which festival celebrations has not formed the basis of her life. There has always been a sense of belonging to God in Africa, as well as the basic belief that this world is God's world. In Africa, the belief is that God created the world and the whole affairs of the world are under his unitary control. African belief is that society is thus an ordinance of God, and every festival celebrations within the society is, therefore, basically religious.

When it comes to traditional festivals, they are part of traditional culture, and help honour cultural values and immunise unhealthy culture penetration from outside (Falade, et al, 2009). First, it creates an association and honours community strength at the village, region and country level, when the whole community is moving forward at the same time. Also, as traditional festivals usually go with a religion or belief, it helps people maintain balance between material life and spiritual life, especially with the stresses of modern life, where people are seemingly programmed to live and work

(Ajayi and Ojo, 2009). This indicates that festivals are an environment for people to go back to their roots, to learn about their origins through word of mouth, performance and their own experiences in the festival. It is a way to learn about history, which is much better than reading a textbook at school. They are living and breathing culture museums, ensuring the longevity of the country's culture. Traditional festivals are environments to nurture traditional culture (Oloruntimilehin, 2010).

2.2 Social and moral values embedded in African traditional festivals

Falade et. al., (2009) posit that festivals have various moral and societal values meant to regulate interpersonal relationship and to perpetuate the entire community and have certain standards or norms to be observed. These standards or norms are meant for social cohesion and smooth running of the community. They are to prevent members of the community from becoming rebellious and thereby endanger the welfare of the society. In consonance with Falade et. al., (2009), Olupona (2008) opines that in festival celebrations, there are a set of values such as hospitality, truth, respect for old age, covenant keeping, hard work and good character that guide the behavior of every member of the community. In Traditional African festivals, there are proverbs, maxims used to inculcate social and moral values in order to regulate their interpersonal relationships (Falade, et. al., 2009). The following are illuminating examples from the Yoruba of Nigeria.

S/N	Values fostered	Examples of Proverbs/ Maxims
1	Respect and honour for elders	A i fi agba fun enikan ko je ki aye o gun (Failure to give regards to other is the fundamental cause of societal abnormality)
2	Regard and appreciation for one's family and benefactors	A ki i fi owo osi juwe ile baba eni (we should not point at our father's home with the left hand)
3	Self-control and courtesy	Falana gbo tire, tara eni la gbo (Falana-a generic name, mind your business)
4	Virtues of forgiveness, harmony and peaceful co-existence	Bi a ko ba gbagbe oro ana, a ko ni ri enikan abasere (Unless we overlook the past misdeeds, we will not be able to relate)
5	Diligence and industry	Ise ni oogun ise (Hard work is the cure for poverty)
6	Truth and honesty	Otito ki i sina iro nii fi ori gbogbe (Truth does not make mistake, falsehood lead astray).
7	Unity and cooperation	Ajeji owo kan ko gberu de ori (One hand cannot lift a heavy load to the head)

Sources: Falade, D.E et. al., (2009). Proverbs as Traditional Means of Moral and Social Learning among the Yoruba of Nigeria. Ajayi, A. and Fabarebo, S.I (Eds.) Oral Traditions in Black and African Culture (CBAAC), 485-489.

The cultural traditions of Ghana are effective tools for national development. Culture expressed in the form of festivals possesses rich economic values worth promoting national development. Gadzekpo (1978) admits that, festivals are seasons of gainful economic activities for local craftsmen and food sellers. He further states that, festivals promote tourism; as foreigners come to catch a glimpse of the artistic development and the rich culture of the society. According to him, they purchase some of these things, giving the dual advantage of income for the society and the boosting of the African's image abroad. His explanation points out the economic benefits that a society stands to derive from the celebration of festivals. Chachah (1990) also talks about the religious and social aspects of festivals as he states that, festivals provide occasions for social re-union among Ghanaians. He further states that relatives and friends see each other again during festivals, also, gifts and drinks are exchanged, disputes settled and an atmosphere of mutual co-operation established. Again, Attah-Fosu (2001) describes festivals as ceremonies which bring most of the citizens of a society together. This, according to his submission helps them to initiate development projects and to contribute financially towards these projects. Visitors who also come to witness the festival contribute economically to the locality. It is evident from the above submissions that festivals are not mere joyous occasions but they are occasions for social re-union and economic advancement.

Ajayi and Ojo (2009) observe that festivals promote cultural education in which children and young individuals are educated according to the native custom, practices, beliefs and general life pattern of the society. Its main concerns are character, morals, physical and vocational development of the individual, as well as the inculcation in the children of the society right type of values as they learn to identify, understand and appreciate the cultures, norms and values of the society (Ajayi and Ojo 2009, p. 40). In more specific terms Yoruba cultural education is concerned with the manner of greetings, dressing, house cleaning, taking one's job seriously, good behavior, and respect for elders among others. As the epitome for traditional body of knowledge embracing history, philosophy, medicine and folktale, festivals serve as the basic means through which individuals comprehend their environment and historical experiences (Abimbola, 1975, p. 32 cited by Ajayi and Ojo 2009, p. 41). The shrine is the base of traditional education rendered in a coded form and the meaning is only decoded by a veteran Priest. This is to show another illuminating traditional African cultural values in the socio-cultural setting. The reserved ability of the Priest to interpret the messages is a proof of their knowledge, ability and confirmation of their

importance since there is hardly any problem about which the African will not consult the shrine.

2.3 Traditional African cultural values in modern Africa culture

Many of the cultural values and practices of traditional Africa discussed, however, can be considered positive features of the culture and can be accommodated in the scheme of African modernity, even if they must undergo some refinement and pruning in order to become fully harmonious with the spirit of modern culture and to function most satisfactorily within that culture (Gyekye, 2002:174). That is to say that many of the traditional festival values are still adhered to and form part and parcel of modern African way of life. These are some of the traditional African values that are fully harmonious with the spirit of modern cultures and as well function most satisfactorily and bring about sustainable development in modern Africa.

Humanity and Brotherhood: Traditional African cultures recognize the dignity and integrity of the human being as a creature of God. Our common brotherhood is intrinsically linked with our common humanity (Ritchie & Lyons, 1990). There is only one universal family, to which all human beings belong. This family is fragmented, however, into a multiplicity of peoples and cultures. The recognition of all human beings as brothers in the light of our common membership in one human species is a lofty ideal, that is, of great importance to the modern African people.

Communalism and Individualism: The value that traditional African societies place on communalism is expressed in the sharing of a common social life, commitment to the social or common good of the community, appreciation of mutual obligations, caring for others, interdependence, and solidarity (Dorson, 1983). At the same time, the claims of individuality are recognized. African ethic, however, urges the avoidance of extreme individualism, which is seen as potentially destructive of human values and of the whole meaning and essence of a human society. Attempts are, therefore, made to balance communalism and individualism so that they can co-exist. This idea is still part and parcel of the modern African

Morality: According to Boamah (1972) the morality espoused in both traditional and modern cultures, and societies of Africa is a social, non-individualistic morality. This kind of morality is held as enjoined by social life itself. There is a preoccupation with human well-being in the African moral thought and practice. The African moral system puts the ethic of responsibility above the ethic of individual right, even though the latter are also given due recognition. The importance of character as the engine of moral life in practice is stressed.

The Family: Marriage is considered as a valuable institution, for without it there would be no family, that is, the basic unit of social life. Without the family there would

be none of the kinship ties that are essential to a comprehension social life, with an intricate network of social relationships. Values associated with the family include recognizing the responsibility to share life with a wife or husband and children in the nuclear family and with members from an entire lineage in the extended family, recognizing the need to have and to care for children, respecting parents, taking care of our parents in their old age and so on.

Economic Ethic: The submissions of [Gadzekpo \(1978\)](#), and [Ayisi \(1970\)](#) Africans seek and put high values on wealth, both private and family (clan). The right to, and the importance of private property are recognized in the traditional African economic system, where private ownership exists side by side with public (command, state) ownership. Families (i.e. lineage, clans) operate independently of the chiefs, who, thus, do not control all the dynamics of the traditional economy ([Burns, Hatch & Mules, 1986](#)). According to [Mihalik, \(2000\)](#) the traditional African society is a welfare state, functioning on the ethic of fair distribution. This implies that everyone has access to the resources and goods of the community or state, but this system is not socialist in any Marxist sense ([Dimmock, Tiyce, & Derrett, 1999](#)).

Chieftaincy and Politics: In the political thoughts and practice of the traditional African society consultation and consensus are highly valued, for they are outstanding features of political decision-making ([Ritchie & Lyons, 1990](#)). This practice allows for the involvement of all the people in the political process. The chief who is the highest political authority, rules with the consent of and in accordance with the will of the people. In the actual exercise of power, the people in effect, are the sources of authority, directly or indirectly through their representatives on the chief's council. The political authority of the Chief is based on a trusteeship principle that ensures his accountability of the people. Freedom of expression, of political opinion is appreciated and practiced. Misrule by a chief is not tolerated and can lead to his being destooled.

Human Rights: The most important values in which human rights are rooted are put into practices in the traditional African festivals ([Ulrich, 1998](#)). These include individuality, personal responsibility, the dignity and integrity of every person, the intrinsic values of every person, consideration of every persons as an end in himself or herself and worthy of respect and equity of the moral worth of all people. Other rights that are acknowledged and protected include: the right to the use of lineage land, right to food and protection from hunger, the right to a fair trial and the right to own private property ([Meethan, 1995](#)). These rights are fundamental to the social structure, customs and ethic of the traditional African society and do not need to be vociferously demanded and belligerently fought for.

Knowledge and Wisdom: [Lawrence & Wynn-Moylan \(2002\)](#) argue that in the traditional African culture, knowledge is highly valued especially practical or empirical

knowledge. This type of knowledge is based on observation and experience. Practical wisdom is most relevant in the reconstruction of the African society and the promotion of human well-being.

Aesthetics: Dime (1993) is of the claim that Art in traditional African cultures has both functional and aesthetical dimension. Beauty is seen not only in works of art and in the human figure but also in human conduct, in humanity itself and in a person's character (Trotter, 1999). Among the criteria of aesthetic value and judgment are appropriateness and fittingness. For instance, music, dancing and even clothing must be appropriate to the occasion. (Gyekye 2002). Dime (1993) asserts that traditional African cultural values are now gathering momentum and sweeping aside any obstacle such as intolerance and mistreatment on its ways.

3.0 Conclusion

In order to reclaim the humanity of African communities and assume the rightful heirs of our founding fathers, there must be a conscious effort to assert African historical traditions and consciousness. We must explore African oral traditions and its prospects for economic liberty, natural integration, and stability. Africans need a psychological and physiological liberation. The challenge before Africans as individuals, institutions, government at local, state, national and trans-national is to rededicate to the appreciation, development and patronage of African cultural resources and values (Chachah, 1999). It is high time, Africans identified with one another with good knowledge of relics of the endowment and versed in the history of various cultural sites. Africans can only make gains rather losses by investing resources in individuals with powers of management of the cultural resources. African pride as continent lies in the values placed on her cultural endowment, the inherent system of ideas as well as those values that define peculiar personal and group perceptions and ways of life. Placing premium on African cultural endowment would earn the people respect, global recognition, international cooperation, development, and aid effective dissemination of African culture by projecting the best of her history. It would naturally encourage the preservation of African heritage for future generations and for the development of knowledge and cultural understanding as being experienced in other areas (Babawale, 2011:5-8).

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