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SOCIOLOGICAL OBSERVATION OF AFRICAN CULTURAL VALUES IN THE LIGHT OF MODERNITY: THE EXPERIENCE OF YORUBA IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Traditional Africans are grossly endowed with rich and unprecedented cultural values with which harmony, solidarity, orderliness, sanctity and sanity are ensured within their community. Despite the fact that there were no trained and armed security officers in the olden days as we have today, yet their communities were void of chaos. In view of this, this paper is set to examine some of these African cultural values and how the force of modernity has influenced its observance with a particular reference to the Yoruba of Nigeria. An attempt also will be made to discuss the concept of modernity and equally on how African cultural values were enforced in the traditional societies. In conclusion, recommendations will be made on the need to revive the African cultural values as a panacea to the high level of moral decadence in the modern African societies.

Keywords

Sociological, Observation, Cultural, Values, Modernity

1. Introduction

What distinguishes human beings from all the other animals is their capacity to create cultural institutions that are designed to serve their social needs. According to Benson (2000), a culture is born when human beings acquire social and religious ideas for better possibilities of life. As in all societies of the World, African peoples recognize social order and peace as essential and sacred, since this can only call for harmony and oneness of this community. Also, it is a fact that all human beings have individual differences, needs and values; some of which may not be necessarily accepted by everybody in the community. And in order to shun disintegration and destruction of society, it is a matter of necessity that solidarity of the community should be maintained. In African traditional societies, it is generally believed that a person's character or behavior does not affect him alone. it also affect the cooperate society either positively or negatively. In order, therefore, to ensure harmonious co-existence and for smooth running of every community, the elders and leaders of African societies designed codes of conduct, laws, set forms of behavior, regulation and rules, which everybody within the given community must adhere to. Anybody who cannot abide to the prescribed norms of the society would be regarded as a person of defiant behavior. The totalities of the set codes of conduct of each community make up the cultural values that community.

However, it is an established fact that the African cultural values have been greatly affectedly the modern trends. Great change have taken place in strict observance of the traditional cultural values Asah (2004) is of the view that some of the taboos in urhobo land have been greatly affected by modern trends, urbanization, drift from rural ,to urban areas and mostly by the introduction of new and modern religions Thus, in this work, effort will be made to examine the position of the position of the African traditional cultural values in the light of modernity with particular reference to the Yoruba of Nigeria, although references may be made to other tribes in Africa.

It is not our task in this essay to articulate all the cultural values of the African peoples but only the dominant ones as we attempt to assess their status against the current tide of modernization sweeping across the continent generally

1.1 The Concept of Modernity

Modernity is the state or quantity or being modern. Therefore, modern according to Webster's Dictionary (1978) is coined from the Latin 'Modus' which means to 'measure'. It is a state of or characteristic of the present or recent times; not ancient: often used to designate

certain contemporary tendencies and schools of art, music, literature, e.t.c. it connotes up to-date; not old fashioned, anti-quoted or obsolete.

Blankenship (2005) defined the concept of modernity as the idea of a modern world brought into existence by science leading to an ideology of materialistic beliefs. The two major concept of modernity, according to, Blankenship, are humanity and progress. Humanity by itself is not sufficient; with it comes the need of progress. In order for people to see the meaning of humanity they need a sense of progression towards a better life on this world. This becomes the ideology of modernity. In his own view Aylward (1978) opined that change in modern African is both structural and organizational. By organizational we mean a change in the scale of social relationships.

1.2 Derivation of African Cultural Values

The scholars of African Traditional Religion have divergence views on the sources of African cultural values. On the final analysis, common grand is established. In his own view, Oloruntele (2002) asserted that morality is both naturally acquired and developed in mankind. He further stressed that morality in a particular locality may be immorality in another one. Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), however opined that, fundamentally, Cultural values are the fruits or offspring of religion and not just human inventions. To them, from the beginning, God has put His law in man's heart, and has endowed man with the sense of right and wrong. Such things which are forbidden and must be done are taboos (tabu). Nabofa (2000) pointed out that the Elders and leaders of African societies came about the code of conducts through life's experience. This was borne out of meticulous studies and observations of family members from which they know what should be done and what should be done and what should be avoided by the family members. These taboos became registered permanently into their sub-consciousness, which are later transmitted from one generation to the. Idowu (1962), equally and strongly postulated that morality is basically the fruit of religion and that, to begin with, it was dependent on it. He did not welcome the views of the school of thoughts which hold that morality is of sociological origin. He also opposed those who opined that what we call morality is little more than a product of common sense. These two schools of thoughts did not see any connection at bottom between religion and morality.

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that African values is religiously based. With the Yoruba, what have been named 'tabu' took their origin from the fact that people discerned that that there were certain things which were culturally approved or disapproved by the Deity.

1.3 Religion as part of Culture

In this chapter, our concern is to discuss the relationship between religion and culture. Religion and culture exist side by side in any given society. While culture is the whole social way of life, 'religion is a product of culture, an outgrowth of man's activity, as a culture-bearing creature (Onyeidu, 2001).

Religious beliefs and practices are possible because human beings have been able to develop the artifacts of culture through which individuals interact and internalize social values. Among the institutions or artifacts of culture, religion stands out as a way of acquiring and transmitting social values from one generation to the other. Yinger (1990) says that 'seen culturally, religion is part of the complex of prescriptions and proscriptions that guides the interactions of men in all societies. It furnishes major definitions of the meaning of ultimate things and interpretations of experience '.

Religion derives its customs, taboos, rituals, cult-objects, myths, language of worship and symbols from the surrounding culture. Traditionally, the gods of religion and the items used for sacrifice to them are the products of culture. That is to say that the community which produces cultures stipulates the gods to be worshipped and the sacrificial system to be adopted (Ugwu, 2002).

Naturally, it is what you can produce or acquire from the immediate culture (environment) that you give to the gods of religion. Indeed, the influence of culture on religion is so far-reaching that Michael Banton (1966) defines religion as an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings'. Thus, there is no known religion without a culture that sustains it .Culture contains not only the 'raw materials' and the 'guidelines' on which the existing religion can be practiced, but also the primary principles by which a new can be interpreted, reconciled and accepted with a traditional world-view.

In a nutshell, religion is a part of culture, while culture is the total way of life. To understand religion, therefore, it is important to know something of its cultural background. Furthermore, culture can introduce some changes in a given religion, whereas religion on its part can refine and leaven a crude culture. It is through this healthy interaction that society is kept as an ongoing concern. To quote Christopher Dawson (2002) : 'The whole history of culture shows that man has a natural tendency to seek a religious foundation for his social way of life and that when culture loses its spiritual basis, it becomes unstable.

1.4 Enforcement of Cultural Values in Yoruba Traditional Societies

In order to be able to make meaningful suggestions for the enforcement of cultural values in the modern society, it is important that we should have some idea about how cultural values were enforced in traditional society.

Williamson (1995) writing about the Akan of Ghana, records that abstinent of his once remarked that "in the olden time, there was no policemen and no need of them; the gods were the policemen". In the light of the above, and from my discoveries out of interactions with some Yoruba elders purposely for this work, the enforcement of ethical values is enshrined on two major classifications, the religious factor and the social factor.

1.4.1 Religious Factor

As pointed earlier, Williamson has emphasized that "the customs and traditional ways of live sanctioned by the spirit-ancestors and the gods provided the frame work of the Akan cultural code". Similar statements were echoed again and again by many Yoruba elders recently interviewed. In African traditional society, promise and expectation, fulfillment, blessing, protections and security, warding-off of natural disasters are benefits enjoyed from Olodumare (Supreme Being) the deities, spirits and ancestors are for those who keep the cultural values. whereas violators attracts the wraths and punishment by the spirit-powers. This kept people doing what was right and avoiding what was wrong. Thus, God is thought by the Yoruba to be closely connected morality. So, rewards and punishments are believed to come from the Supreme Being in reaction to human behavior. The Yoruba will say of a person: "Iwa re laye yi ni yoo da o lejo" -Your character here on earth will pass judgments on you" . In other words, according to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) ,it is the character of man that Deity judges.

The Yoruba among other African tribes walk in the consciousness of the fact that, nothing is hidden before the All-seeing eyes of Olodumare. One of His attitudes is: 'A bi eti lu kara bi ajere' , that is, God is having eyes full all over His body. That is why they , " A-mookun jale , bioba aye ko ri o, oba oke n wo o" -"You who steal in the cover of night , know for sure that if the earthly king does not see you ,the heavenly king (God) does". In traditional African societies, this enhances the people compliances to the cultural values whether in the open or secret.

Equally, the peoples' beliefs about the various deities were invoked to enforce cultural values in traditional society. In Yoruba traditional ethnics, it is futile to wish to commit a crime in secret, for no violation of cultural values (whether publicly or in secret) can escape the divine

justice. As pointed earlier, Dopamu (1993) stressed that in the African traditional society, cultural values are not the creation or the invention of the society, rather, the expressions of the transcendental moral order which is beyond man and to which both man and the society must conform. According to my informant there are some anti-wickedness divinities who punish cultural offenders on behalf of the supreme Deity among the Yoruba in particular and other tribes across Africa in general.

A good example is the divinity of thunder and lightning-Sango and Soboba among the Yoruba and Nupe respectively. If there is any case of theft, the wrath of the deity can be invoked on the unknown criminal. Also Esu divinity can be invoked to punish criminals who refuse to confess his/her bad deeds. These constantly show man the need to be culturally upright and be of good conduct to avoid the wrath of deities.

It is apposite to add that in African traditional society, there are socio-religious groups and societies which enforce the compliance of cultural values. Among the Yoruba for example, the Ogboni society and Oro cult are principally socio-political organizations established for the purpose of maintaining law and order in the society. According to Nabofa (1999), Ogboni is a council of Elders; whose duty among others is to meet time to time to settle civil disputes, to deal with criminal charges and to discuss general matters concerning the well-being of the community. The Oro group is said to be militant arm of Ogboni Aborigin. They punish offenders declared guilty by the Ogboni. They would Say "Oro gbe e", that is "Oro has carried him away into the spirit world". The cultural connotation of this is that any family where the victim of Oro came from was regarded and treated with contempt in the society, no lady or young man would even want to marry from the family. This in fact instilled fear into the heart of the people and it therefore checked misbehavior in the community.

The discussion in this section will not be complete if the factor of social sanction as an agent of ensuring compliance to cultural values among the traditional Africans is not discussed. Among the Yoruba like other tribes in Africa, there are numerous social sanctions which are both positive and negative. The positive sanctions are set to encourage and give incentive to good life while the negative ones set to discourage immoral.

1.4.2 Honoring Chastity

Among the traditional Yoruba people, chastity (virginity) is highly valued and appreciated. Gifts and social prestige are accorded the lady and her family for keeping her virginity till the time of marriage. A lady who kept herself intact till the first night in her husband

house brought great honour to herself and her entire family. The family of the husband would present gift items like a gourd filled with palm-wine and a full match's box. This implied that their daughter was met full. What a great joy and honour! But reverse is the case for any lady who has broken her virginity before marriage. Such lady would not only be ashamed, but also be despised, and her family becomes object of ridicule and reproach in the community. In the light of this, the ladies in traditional society were extra-careful to avoid pre-marital sex.

1.4.3 Family / Clan Renunciation

The consequences of bad character are not only on the individual who committed the offence, but the entire family share out of it. The same applies to good character. The penalties are in degrees depending on the offences committed. E.g. family or individual can be disinherited, ostracized, publicly disgraced. It could go as far as execution. These help greatly to curb un-ethical deeds among the Yoruba traditional society.

It must be pointed out also that there are proverbs and wise-saying which serve as warning to defiant behaviours. For example, the Yoruba people do say "opining so iwa nu, o ni oun ko ni ori oko" which means "A married woman who has lost good character, now complaining of not enjoying her husband. This implied that for a married woman to enjoy her matrimonial home, she must be of good character. Also, they said, "Iwa ni oba aware". That is, It is the good character that determine man's fortune, not any medicine. These are the ingredients employed in traditional African society to ensure compliance to cultural values.

1.5 Sociological Observation of Yoruba Cultural Values versus Modernity

So far, we have attempted to assess the fact that the Yoruba man in his traditional life holds certain things to be of great value ; these include : Chastity before marriage, hospitality, respect for elders, unselfishness, kindness, truthfulness, keeping of covenant, condemning stealing, falsehood and hypocrisy, avoidance of incest and taking away of another man's wife. However, it is observed that great changes have taken place in the observance of these cultural values. The cause is not farfetched; it is as a result of the modern trends and its attendant evils. This has brought about the reversal of traditional values and few obvious ones are examined in this work.

1.5.1 Impact of Urbanization on African Families

Gut kind rightly asserted that among all the problems which are alleged to have their etiology in urbanization and urbanism, frequent reference is made to the breakdown of African Kingship and family life in towns. The obvious consequence is a gradual , but inevitable damage

to Yoruba traditional cultural values. For the African, that is a tragic reversal of values since African families are close-knit. Since African traditional religion has no written literature; beliefs, practices and formulations are taught orally to their descendants who also pass them on to posterity. As pointed out by Awolabu and Dopamu (1979), town life has brought great moral laxity and neglect of cultural morality. People are far removed from security of village, and such traditional values are being eroded. The few elders who are custodians of the cultural values are left in remote villages; hence, African traditional cultural values are dwindled into limbo of dead memories.

1.5.2 Impact of Western Culture

In his own view, Olalere (2006) opined that, we become cultureless in African as a result of acculturation. He said "every mistake in London is a style in Nigeria". Abioye (1998) buttressing this view remarked that people are fast losing faith in the old sanctions today. Many of the old customs are disappearing. Although, the old beliefs and practices served useful purposes, they can in no way stand the strain of modern life. He further stressed that one can notice surprise the falling standard of morality among the youths of today. Alien cultures have forced changes upon African traditional values. As a result of modernity through contact with the external world via modern technology-Computer Internet, Television, Radio and written materials; traditional regulations and taboos are no longer highly prized. The response of the modern days youngsters interacted with in course of this work on chastity revealed that it is no more a popular pursuit. They all termed it-"old school saga".

1.5.3 Impact of Modernity on Language

It is disheartening today that most of our youngsters can no more express themselves in their mother's tongue. The foreign languages have taken over, hence, rich Yoruba medium of greeting at different occasions and periods of the day are disappearing. Pithy saying, proverbs, adages, epigrams, riddles, and otherwise saying which are vehicles through which Yoruba cultural values are conveyed have been submerged in the ocean of modernity. For example, proverbs are used to settle quarrels, to teach people, to warn implicitly or to explicitly against evil conduct or an impending doom, or to encourage people, e.t.c. This can no longer be found among the Yoruba.

From the above explanation it can be said with some degree of authenticity that modernity has done much harm than good on African cultural values.

1.6 Recommendations and Conclusion

Africa's success in her struggle for self-realization and self-identity will depend on her ability to subject foreign values to the traditional ones due to the Yoruba hence the following recommendations:

- There is urgent need for African leaders, the Yoruba in particular to embark on the revival of our traditional values vis-a viz the educational institutions.
- Yoruba culture and value should be made compulsory at all levels of education.
- The parents should assist this dying traditional heritage from total extinction.
- The mass-media should be encouraged to herald the good news of traditional cultural values.
- v. Finally, proper scrutinization of both home and foreign films should be carried out before selling into the market.

Thus, the relevance of religion could be seen in cultural development. Religion helps in transforming the society by introducing new cultural elements. Religious doctrines, laws, organizations, modes of dressing, dogma, buildings, patterns of marriages, training of children, burying the dead and many other items of culture are influence through religion. Morality is used to give meaning and purpose to the cultural behaviour. When in the culture deviates from the real religious meaning, then it has to be checked, so that there is balanced relationship between the cultural elements and religious ideology. There is no doubt that Yoruba cultural values are unique inspite of the influence of modernity.

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