Creative Cultural Synergy: Towards the Africa of the Future

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we discussed Creative Cultural Synergy: Towards the Africa of the Future in ensuring an enduring development in a competitive and globalized world. Africa today is far from being a viable continent – as most social institutions that should regulate socio-political life are weak and human instincts predominate individual conduct. As a result, the task of nation building has become a mirage. Rather than see these problems within their larger social and cultural context, people tend to place hope on reforms with narrow economic focus. The issue of the African future in African philosophy is that of how best to achieve freedom and development in Africa without compromising the African identity. Defining the African project today is situated in the cultural confusion generated by the assault on the consciousness of its people. Several narratives have been put forward to explain this malaise. This paper concludes that there is need for a cultural and reconstructive examination as a tool in African philosophy to set up the Africa of the future. A creative cultural synergy using some aspects of the African culture with that of others would guarantee its cultural autonomy without setting apart from others in their quest for development. Textual and content analysis approaches are adopted in this research.

Keywords: Africa; culture; cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

It is an obvious fact that Africa has witnessed a shell-burst from foreign cultures over the years. Much of her history is so imprisoned within European settings that some scholars have argued that Africa has no history, save that which is anchored on foreign influence and cultures (Idang 2008). Although some African scholars of various shades have pounced on the above remarks and took to the defense of Africa's cultural glorious heritage, issues about the African culture have continued to generate attention among intellectuals and stakeholders alike. It has however been argued that in the quest for development, culture could provide a vital anchor, preventing a changing and evolving society from drifting as it provides society with the inherited transmissible code of conduct as both part and function of the total system of ideas, values and belief systems which constitute the content of life of a society. However, culture is

not a static concept. It changes as man evolves new ways of existence and as the physical environment is also transformed by natural forces.

This work is therefore anchored on the recognition of the role of culture in the quest for African development and a push for a creative cultural synergy as a result of the historical consciousness of the evolution of African cultures as the world has now become a global village.

CULTURE: A CONCEPTUAL NARRATIVE

As the term culture is applied commonly in the social sciences and the humanities, it refers to a totality of peoples' ways of life. It is the distinctive way of life of a people, their complete design for living. But it is not as simple as that. As captured by Ibanga (1999, pp. 3), whenever the term culture is mentioned: "What readily comes to mind of the average African is the picture of his forbears dancing around some giant tree in sacrificial worship". This reaction which now seems to be natural could be traced back to the fostered condition by long period of colonial rule and religious indoctrination. However, culture continues to play an important role in the lives of individuals and groups, making the nexus of culture very important.

Tracking down a generally accepted definition of culture is not an easy task despite the claim by scholars to scientific precision in their approach. There are as many definitions of culture as there are commentators on it. This array of definitions rather than help in the understanding of the term, usually contribute to the confusion that is usually associated with the term. Maybe a little insight may bring a better and clearer understanding of what culture constitutes. Consider a situation or scenario that a child is born into a human family with an endowment which is genetic, showing many distinct features. This child begins immediately to portray some sort of behavior under the contingencies of reinforcement to which he is exposed as a distinct individual. It is not out of place to accept that most of the contingencies are brought about by other people within the given milieu. There are, what Skinner referred to as culture (1972, pp. 121).

As pointed out earlier, the term culture is usually defined in other ways, but to situate the term culture in Skinner's narrative, as shown above, the essential core of culture consists of tradition that is historically derived and selected ideas and their attached values. However, most of the time, those who observe cultures, do not by implication observe values attached to them. Usually they observe how people live, how their offsprings are raised, how they cultivate their lands for food, what they wear, how they govern themselves and the like. These constitute the customs and the general behaviours of the people. In order to provide adequate explanation to them, there is need for us to get back to the contingencies that generate them. Some of these contingencies are a part of the physical environment, yet they work in union with the social ambits. The social behaviours which they generate, form the ideas of a given culture, which the reinforcers that are the outcomes form its values. Culture thus, encompasses any behavior that is "learned and not innate in an individual. It is a culture that distinguishes a French man from a Spaniard, an Igbo from a Yoruba, an Italian from an American" (Chimakonam and Bisong 2013, pp. 21).

From the foregoing narrative, a child is not only open to the contingencies that constitute a culture, the child as he grows up, equally assist to maintain them and to the level in which the contingencies induces the individual to do so, that culture would be seen to be self-preserving. As again noted by Skinner,

> What a given group of people calls good is a fact; it is what members of the group find reinforcing as the result of their genetic endowment and the natural and social contingencies to which they have been exposed (Skinner, 1972, pp. 122).

The implication here is that every culture is said to have a set of what can be referred to as good or bad, hence what is bad in one culture may not necessarily be bad in another culture. If this position is taken further, it may result to 'relativism' in cultural approach.

To explain why a culture functions, for a long time without much notification and change, there is need to look at a given set of values within that culture. This is not to conclude that any given culture is permanent. As the physical environment modifies either internally or otherwise as natural resources are consumed and diverted to other uses and so on, the particular culture of a people is bound to equally change. In other words, the fact that a culture may survive or perish, portray a kind of evolution. In this regard a given culture is said to correspond to a species and like a specie, culture is selected by its adaptation or otherwise to a given environment; to the level that it assists members of that culture to get what they need and avoid the undesirable.

What can be deduced from the above is that culture is a set of practices, but these practices are not in isolation because of change which might be internal and external and are sometimes beyond the control of a given specie. The variety of understandings about culture is mainly a result of genuine complexity of cultural formations that exist in the world. It would be meaningful to develop an approach that would eliminate some of the myths that surround the term culture.

From its etymology, the word culture is derived from the Latin word 'cultura' and its initial usage, referred to the cultivation and the nurturing of animals or crops (Mannathukkaren: 2009, pp. 465).From the 16th century onward, the original connotation was extended to humans and the cultivation of the mind. With a progressive movement, the term took up the connotation of a process of human development towards refinement from savaging and barbarism. In this regard, culture was seen as a state of human perfection in terms of certain universal values (Edor 2005; Edor 2016). The import here is that culture is a property of a few people while people outside of that enclave lack culture. This approach took its form, during the encounter of the Europeans with the non-Europeans, especially the colonized people of the new world. The idea of inferiority of one culture to another only began to change with the emergence of anthropology towards the end of the 19th century. According to Benhabib:

> Rather than seeing culture as an evolutionary movement to a predestined state of perfection defined by Europeans, anthropology began to look at cultures, especially non-Western ones, without any preconceived notion of inferiority (2001, pp. 3).

With this new approach to the question of culture, Taylor described culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, arts, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man and society" (Taylor: 1871, pp. 15).

The above outlook is devoid of the evaluative judgment of what is bad or good, but can become rather too broad to embrace almost everything that human beings do. Every culture is a unique combination of traits even though some of the traits are widespread in human society. It is therefore, a distinctive and transmissible network of symbols that characterizes a designated aggregate of a people. As aptly put by Oladipo, "culture does not only provide a framework for thought and action in a society, it is also a veritable source of identity" (Oladipo 2009, pp. 13). This role of a veritable source of identity that could form the basis for decision making in a society that is desirous of development is the crux of the present crisis in Africa. The situation in post-colonial Africa has been on in which culture has not been able to perform the fundamental function so identified in culture narrative. Social and political problems have remained intractable since the colonial masters forced hitherto autonomous groups of people in the definition of new boundaries. What we have in place today are mostly borrowed cultural concepts that have rather disfigured the people's perception of events in their lives. In as much as cultural change cannot be denied a people, the scenario in Africa is that these changes are

neither self-initiated nor original in their replacement. The picture painted here is that whatever cultural change that has taken place in most parts of Africa has been by accidents and not by any conscious action. For Oladipo;

> It has not been possible for Africans to develop a sense of identity which is a condition for the development of the self-confidence and self-esteem which they require to tackle their myriad problems. Also, Africa has remained weak in her interactions with other cultures (2009, pp. 14).

One cannot agree less with the above narrative as the core values of brotherhood and compassion for instance known to represent African cultural heritage are almost extinct today due primarily to uncontrolled cultural acceptance. There is therefore a situation of cultural crisis which is rather disturbing. The crux of the matter is that for Africa to build a humane society that would be able to address the current crisis as identified above, there is need to create the right cultural apparatus to respond to this. The fundamental framework for a society to make appropriate decision in the face of the ever moving challenges is the crux of the crisis of development and social cohesion in Africa today.

CREATIVE CULTURAL SYNERGY: TOWARDS THE AFRICA OF THE FUTURE

Although this work is premised on creative cultural synergy and the Africa of the future, the aspiration to the social and national material progress which is development cannot be left out of this discourse. This is because in whatever dimension we want to discuss the African of the future, the matrix of the concept of development cannot be completely left out. As the 21st century opened, global human race came to be divided into two unequal parts; the rich countries of Western Europe, North America and Japan with high mean incomes and material welfare on one hand and the rest lived in essentially poor counties of Asia, Africa and Latin America with low average income, low average levels of welfare and large pools of poverty.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that even though income inequality has also grown within countries in recent times, nationality has remained a predicator of income and welfare than the class and group one belonged to. The world today revolves around the concept of development and Africa can be left out. As complex as the term development can be in relation to African culture, the crux of the matter is how to see a judicious adaptation of African culture to modern conditions, preserve the positive aspects and eliminate the negative ones in a globalized world. One of this positive aspects of the African culture is that it is humanistic in nature. The preoccupation with human values is particularly evident. According to Kwasi Wiredu,

> Not that one can find in traditional sources elaborate theories of humanism. But anyone who reflects on our traditional ways of speaking about morality is bound to be struck by the preoccupation with human welfare (1980, pp. 6).

The fact that the whole of Africa has no one homogenous traditional culture in the discussion of African culture should not be a problematic. There are in Africa multi-ethnic and cultural affinities however, there are deep underlying affinities equally running through these cultures to pave a way to justify the discussion of African culture. Among this is Africa's communalistic custom of land holding in common with relatives either distant or close. This sense of communal fellowship which runs from the extended family to the larger community combine to integrate the peoples social life with humanity and fullness of life which non-Africans have always commended. For Wiredu, "this quality of the peoples culture is obviously one which we must not only preserve but positively deepen and develop. It would profit us little to gain all the technology in the world and lose the human's essence of our culture" (Wiredu, 1980, pp. 21). It is difficult not to accept this narrative because a situation where industrial

development is propelled in which people live for the most parts as foreigners with relationships regulated by formal rules rather than the informal rules of communal living, can lead to situations where individual and groups solidarity withers and the sense of human security also suffers. The African culture today is suffering from this undesirable condition. Any form of development that does not consider the humane culture of the people is contrary to any meaningful and sustainable approach and should be jettisoned as it is specifically contrary to the African of the future. Industrial development must therefore be anchored and integrated with communal life and culture of the people for sustainability.

How can we at the moment meet the requirements of a creative cultural synergy which this work had earlier prescribed? To some scholars, the answer to the problem of self-definition in Africa lies in some form of cultural surrender. Here there is the recognition that technological advancement is key in the determination of the competitive strength of societies today and for Africa to transcend its present crisis of development, there is need for a total alienation from their traditional culture and embrace those culture supported by scientific advancement. To this, Towa located in the European ideals of the analytic tradition. This position is flawed because like the Japanese example has shown, it is possible to achieve development in science and technology without cultural surrender, as opined here. This view also failed to understand that it is not the application of science and technology which is conducive to the well-being of man, rather it is the humane use, which is best situated within the context of the aspirations a people have for themselves. As stated earlier, it has become rather impossible to rely on Africans traditional culture in a globalized world to address the developmental challenges. The challenge is how Africa can achieve progress in scientific and overall development without compromising her cultural identity. The East Asian perspective of cultural identity in the midst of globalization is apt in addressing the big question. According to Ito:

> There is no human culture on this earth which has never learned anything from another. Learning from other cultures is a natural phenomenon and there is nothing wrong with it. (1988, pp. 198).

What is however abnormal according to Ito, is a situation where a foreign influence becomes overwhelming beyond the control of the receiving country. Where this happens and it is not controlled by cultural norms, it might generate to a crisis level as has been in Africa today.

The high and rapid development of modern communication technology has accelerated the spread of culture transmission among people of the world. If there is increase of mutual influence in cultures, leading to creative cultural synergy, there will be little problem. However, if there is cultural dominance, there is bound to be cultural crisis on that of the dominated culture. For Ito:

> In discussions of cultural imperialism theory, the Japanese case has often been ignored by some as an embarrassing exception. Others maintain that Japan has become so Westernized that it is already a kind of Western Country (1988, pp. 198).

Ito drew a distinction between Easternization and Modernization and argued that Japan falls under a country that is modernized referring to the advancement of a culture in a competitive sector. There are many aspects of human culture where competition is not involved like value, language, religion, way of life, music etc. To therefore think of cultural influence, these concepts as mentioned above should be limited to the non-competitive idea of culture. In the same narrative, the Japanese technological advancement is an attempt to increase its competitiveness with international competitors.

The fact that a change in the competitive sector of cultures can affect the non-competitive ones and vice-versa is not in doubt. It is equally a truism that the economic development in a country like Japan, has affected its traditional ways of living and thinking. At the same time, the

Japanese traditional values have had a positive effect on Japan's industrial and scientific development. Many developing societies are still at odds with the struggle to bridge the gap between the competitive and non-competitive sectors, stressing that there are certain societies that will never meet up in the competitive sector because their basic values of life in the non-competitive sectors are not in congruence with scientific development. A fundamental issue of cultural identity relating to a society's sense of continuity arises here. The identity question here is predicated on the fact that when a people cannot properly relate what they want to achieve with what they have been used to doing. Some societies including Japan went through this crisis. However, at some point in time, the search for identity began. According to Ito:

> At the end of 1960' a new search for identity began in Japan and many books and articles were written on the subject. This phenomenon was called the *nihonjinron* (studies of Japanese people and culture boom (1988, pp. 198).

It took a long period of intellectual synthesis involving a large array of critical stakeholders to fashion out a way out of the crisis. The major function was to bring to bear the country's scientific strides with its traditional cultural legacies. These legacies were basically anchored on traditional Japanese views on human relations, groups and social organizations. Today, Japan has bridged the traditional and modern societies and has succeeded not only in the competitive sector, but has been able to find a common ground with the non-competitive sectors of its culture.

It is the narrative of the Japanese situation that the Africa of the future needs. Like the Japanese experience the answer to the identity issue in Africa today and the quest for industrial and scientific advancement lie within a critical synergy between the competitive and non-competitive sectors of their culture. Accepted that we are Africans, but the fact that we are equally humans must not be lost on us. This has become imperative because of the fact that the world is today a global space. A well-articulated, critical cultural synergy involving the blend of elements of African cultural heritage that is the non-competitive sector with aspects of the competitive ones from other climes that are beneficial is therefore recommended to guide and propel the Africa of the future. This approach should be existentially critical and reconstructive. The quest for a critical reconstruction towards a cultural synergy is essential because the African traditional cultures are deficient in some respects and the need to capture these shortfalls in order to transcend them becomes fundamental and necessary.

CONCLUSION

The world today revolves around the concept of development. This is so because the need for development occupies a primary place in the lives of individuals and societies. The desire for societies to move towards development is always at the front burner of intellectual discourse. Development is about a people and this takes place within a culture. As a result of many indices, Africa today is more in a crisis. The continent is classified as a developing continent with a whole lot of deficit in development indicators. To some, these deficit are a result of cultural crisis due primarily to cultural domination and subordination. To this regard, cultural surrender option has been suggested as an option by scholars as an answer to the problem of self-definition in Africa towards scientific and industrial development. The idea here is that it is no longer possible to rely on the traditional culture for solutions to the problems of development in Africa. This work saw this position as flawed, taking a look at the Japanese example.

Agreed that we live in a globalized world today, the fusion and influences of one culture on another cannot be denied. At the same time, there are many aspects of human culture like the

value systems, language etc. of a people where competition is not involved. The problem of cultural identity comes up when a people's sense of continuity is lost, that is when a people cannot relate what they seem to be doing with what they have done in the past. Many societies have experienced this problem in the past. However, the identity crisis was solved when Japan sought for a new identity, bridging the gap between the competitive and non-competitive sectors of their cultures in a form of synergy. Today, Japan is an example of a society whose industrial growth is not in identity crisis with its non-competitive sector of culture. Africa can conveniently address its myriad of challenges today by approaching the method of creative cultural synergy whereby a critical re-examination of the traditional culture is brought to bear with those of other cultures especially those of the competitive sectors.

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