

# Towards Reconstruction of Traditional African Values for Scientific Development

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**Abstract:** This paper sought to address the negative impacts of traditional African values which tend to militate against the techno-scientific development. The principal factor of scientific and technological underdevelopment of Africa and other Third World could be attributed to many factors. But it is evident that African traditional world-view is conservative which reacts upon the mode of production furthering slowing up progress in that respect. This paper employs conceptual analysis and comparative philosophical criticism, using John Dewey's pragmatism as an evaluative framework to analyze the epistemic assumptions of traditional African thought systems. Thus, the paper conceives that the conservative world-view of Africa emanated from superstructure of the society which impedes human freedom to radical thinking and invention. The paper recommended that the life sustaining value of African ideology has to be complemented with pragmatic ideology for scientific development.

**Keywords:** Africa, Traditional, Scientific, Conservative and Pragmatic

## Introduction

Africa is the cradle of human evolution. Given the head-start of human evolution in Africa, it is expected that Africa would have advanced above others in all aspect of human development. Unfortunately, Africa is behind other continents in terms of human and scientific development. Africa is a consumer continent. Maduabuchi (2016) observed that most of the material goods used in African countries except South Africa, an extension of European and sciento-technological culture and the Mediterranean countries near to Europe are virtually made and imported from advanced economies.

Advanced economies of Europe and America are industrialized. Their system of agriculture is mechanized as a result of advanced technology and skills. Agriculture enhances economic growth and productivity. On the other hand, Africa and other Third World rely solely on agriculture with small or no industry. Hence, they depend mainly on material goods produced in advanced countries. As a result of wide gap in sciento technological and economic developments between the various nations of the world, Diamond (1997) carried out a historical analysis of the techno scientific gap existing between different races of the world and identified that the developmental history followed different courses for people as a result of differences in people and environment. Development is a fact of perception and the use of options and opportunities offered a people by their environment.

However, economic underdevelopment of Africa is attributed to tragic event of slavery, imperialism and colonialism in Africa. African contact with capitalist Europe has stagnated African development for four hundred years (Rodney, 2009). With the Christopher Columbus discovery of new world in 1492, Africans were sold into slavery to work in the Red indies' plantation of American South Latin America- the Caribbean islands until the industrial revolution of 18<sup>th</sup> century when manual labour became less productive. With the advent of industrialization and capitalism in Europe, "imperialism has ordered capitalists by the internal logic of their competitive system to seek abroad in less developed countries cheap labour opportunities to control raw material supplies, to find market and profitable fields of investment" (Rodney, 2009, p.160). Thus, the African continent was partitioned among the European capitalists for exploitation in the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885.

Another important aspect of African underdevelopment deals with the superstructure of the society. African traditional world-view seems to be somehow conservative and deterministic which impede human freedom to radical thinking and invention. 'The wide techno scientific gap is not a matter of

individual inventiveness but of receptivity of the whole societies to invention. On this note, it has been discovered that the underdeveloped or Third World countries of the world seem hopelessly conservative, inward looking and hostile” (Rodney, 2009, p.240). These anomalies have diverted human mind to inquire, explore and discover new things in nature. At this point, it is important to clarify the basic concepts that are associated with this work in order to enhance a better understanding of this study.

## **Conceptual Clarification of Basic Terms**

The basic terms that are associated with this work are: reconstruction, traditional African values and scientific development.

Reconstruction is an ambiguous concept. There is no universal or succinct definition of reconstruction. Within the terrain of African philosophy, Paulin Hountondji (2009) defines reconstruction as an attempt “to describe or reconstruct the worldview of their ancestors or the collective assumptions of their communities”. In this regard, reconstruction is not only describing the African worldview but also changing or improving them to reflect the changing circumstances in the world. In this modern world, science has transformed every sector of human life. Within the context of this work, reconstruction is a reaction against the conservative world-view of tradition. It is a process of changing the ideology of conservative world-view of tradition which militates against scientific development. Thus, the conservative world-view of tradition challenged philosophy in its otiose and speculative remoteness. In other words, it separates the ideal world beyond from the actual or factual world of human experience. “The dawn of modern science took effect in Galileo and Isaac Newton’s time which questioned attitude, values, and conception rooted in tradition” (Okafor, 2010, p.53).

On the other hand, traditional African values are the belief systems which give meaning to authentic human existence in Africa. In other words, traditional African value is synonymous with African traditional world-view. African traditional world-view is a metaphysical ideology which emanates from peoples’ belief system and attitude that form their way of thinking and understanding about life.

Another concept that is associated with this work is scientific development. Scientific development deals with growth and advancement in modern science. There are many definitions of science. In a nutshell, Hornby (2010) conceived that science is the intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behaviour of the natural and physical world through observation and experiment. Thus, experiment is geared to innovate, invent and discover new things in nature.

## **African Traditional Values**

African traditional values are traditions, laws, customs, etiquette and religion as embodied in African traditional thought. African traditional thought is a mythico-religious world-view which creates a non scientific and metaphysical way of viewing the world. Religion is a way of worship emanating from people’s belief system.

In African traditional religion, God, the spirit and the ancestors are the objects of religious belief and cult. The cult of God is elbowed into the background by the cult of spirit and ancestors because God is conceived as good and does harm to no man. Spirits and ancestors are the means through which human reach God. Hence, they are the mediator between God and man. Mbiti (1970) expressed that prayers are offered to ancestral spirits which are conceived as intermediaries who relay the prayer to God. The ancestors are regarded as nearest to man and as most interested in the family well-being. This explains why many family sacrifices of thanksgiving and good fellowship are directed to them.

Non human spirits are often personifications of natural phenomena like spirit of rivers, hills, farms and lightning, deities, malevolent or wicked spirits. These super human powers can help or hinder people’s progress. Africans recognize the impact of superior powers, invisible spirits and ancestors over one’s destiny. Sacrifices are offered to appease, propitiate and treat them with courtesy and deference. On the other hand, sacrifice is offered to expiate abomination and lesser offence. It is

also necessary to ward off molestation from unknown or evil spirit and attract the favour of benevolent spirits.

African traditional religion controls morality and social fabric of the society. Earth goddess “Ani” and ancestors are the custodians of morality. In Igbo land for instance, law and custom are in custody of earth goddess “Ani”. “Ani cult” is most patent for social unity. The greatest crimes are offences against “Ani” which are abominations or taboos. Such crimes include: “murder, incest, stealing of yam or sheep, bestiality, willful abortion, pregnancy within a year of husband’s death, suicide, and killing of sacred animals (totems)” (Arinze, 1970, p. 34). These anomalies are great crimes which defile the land. They require special expiatory sacrifices performed by special priests from Nri. The victim is a sheep or goat. The earth spirit and ancestors are invoked to forgive the culprit because earth goddess and the ancestors are regarded as the special custodians of morality and the safety of the community.

Religion and law are so closely interwoven that many of the most powerful legal sanctions are directly from the gods. But, when one look critically at African religious morality; one can easily see that traditional African morality is relative. For instance, one can observe that human life is sacred especially the life of a kinsman. In other words, one can perpetrate such atrocities that profane the land outside his kindred as a lesser evil. The relativity of traditional African morality impedes development of African countries. This type of mindset is a driving factor behind bad leadership and tribalism in some of the African countries. One goes into leadership to favour his people instead of serving the good interest of the nation. Thus, bad leadership is a stumbling block to unity and scientific and economic development of Africa.

When man thinks in religious terms, he starts from the ideal rather than with the material world which is beyond comprehension. The negative aspect usually arose out of the tendency of religion to persist unchanged for extreme long periods, especially when the technology of earning a living changes slowly. In this case, the religious beliefs react upon the mode of production, thereby slowing up progress in that respect. For instance, belief in prayer and in the intervention of ancestors and various gods could easily be a substitute for innovations designed to control the impacts of weather and environment.

For traditional Africans, Aja (2001) proposed that event and the self willed actions of men are determined by the wills of spiritual beings and the operation of automatic forces. Automatic forces are charms charged with power which man can exploit. Charms are considered to be powerful, hidden forces which wise men will discover and use. Such mysterious, immanent and unconscious power are believed to preserve one from evil, diseases, bullets, or motor accidents, or make one succeed in trade, in a love affair, in fishing, in catching thieves, and passing examination or enable one to overcome obscure and adverse conditions across one’s path to progress.

In African metaphysics, everything is force. There is interaction of forces. As forces interact, a stronger force can tap the vital force of an inferior force in order to enhance its own force. Conversely, an inferior force cannot alter or move the state of superior force. That is the principle of immunity in magic. African black magic and charms are believed to be acting from a distance without any apparent contact. The aggressive charms are consciously used in spite of, or against, the will of God.

From all indications, African traditional world-view is geared to serve metaphysical essence of spirits, gods, and ancestors which is not scientific. In some cases, scientific ideologies that militate against this essence are not welcomed development. Although contemporary African society is not the same as the traditional African society in the past, African metaphysics of forces are engrossed in the subconscious mind of Africans. One can see a Christian who patronizes native doctors to derive charms that will harm his enemy or to be successful in a given field of endeavour. In a situation where by one uses charm to brighten his fortunes in life, the ingenuity of human creativity which is essential for scientific development is lacking. Thus, the mythico-religious ideology of traditional and contemporary African society militates against sciento technical rationality which is a requisite feature for scientific development.

## **Pragmatic ideology and Scientific Development**

African traditional world-view has to be reconstructed with pragmatic ideology for scientific development. Pragmatism is “a 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophical movement, which originated from

America as the brain child of modern scientific revolution” (Okafor, 2010, p. 53). The prominent intellectual scholars of this tradition include: Charles Sanders Pierce, William James and John Dewey. It was John Dewey who promoted pragmatism widely due to his longevity.

John Dewey’s pragmatic naturalism emanated as a clash between science and religion. He highlighted the crisis of supernatural religion as thus:

The crisis of supernatural religion lies in the fact that it lost the religious quality of human experience, thereby reducing experience to something poorer and narrower than it may be. Hence, the emotional deposits connected with supernatural commitments of actual historical religion, from dogmas and doctrines may readily confer upon the experience such a peculiarly sacred preciousness that all inquiry into its causation is barred (blocked or forbidden) (Dewey, 1934, p.13).

Against this background, scientific method can accept nothing as sacrosanct beyond critical testing. By nature of scientific inquiry nothing is absolute. In the light of the above, the active interaction between man and the environment which breeds intelligence and generates more knowledge provided the scientific method that define intelligence in operation are pushed further into the mysteries of the world.

On the other hand, African traditional world promotes spectator theory of knowledge which conceives inquiry as fixed and immutable as gods and tradition destined it to be. In this case, knowledge is isolated from overt action. However, science views knowledge as the offshoot of inquiry through observation and experiment. In this regard, the knower is an intelligent agent that brings contingencies in nature. Thus, this cancels the isolation of knowledge from overt action. Dewey relates science to things of ordinary experience. His philosophy of experience contravenes against metaphysical idealism which expounds that truth, Beauty, Good have being beyond the temporal existence of the common sense world or the world of science (Dewey, 1929, p. 38-39).

## **The Impact of Environmental Factor in Techno-Scientific Development**

Environmental factor plays crucial role in scientific and technological development. Jared Diamond carried out an investigation on the techno scientific gap existing between different races of the world. In his own view, “the wide gap of technological and economic development existing between different races is assumed that the seasonally variable cold climate of Europe at high latitude poses more diverse challenges to be more technologically inventive to survive than inhibitory effects of hot, humid, tropical climate on human creativity and energy” (Diamond, 1997, p. 22). This view portrays that necessity is the mother of invention.

On the other hand, this ideology is criticized on the ground that the peoples of northern Europe contributed nothing of fundamental importance to Eurasian civilization until the last thousand years. In line with this view point, Jared Diamond explained that the peoples of northern Europe were lucky to live at a geographical location where they are likely to receive advances such as agriculture, writings and metallurgy developed in the warmer part of Eurasia. Hence, he went further to explain that history followed different courses for people because of differences among people’s environment. Fertile Crescent, according to him, appears to be the earliest site for a whole string of development and civilization. As a result of favourable climate, the people of fertile crescent (Southwest Asia) domesticated local plants much earlier, developed intensified food productions more rapidly, and as a result entered modern world with more advanced technology, more complex political organization than others (Diamond, 1997). The Mediterranean climate zone of the Fertile Crescent extends westward through much of Southern Europe and Northwestern Africa.

Environmental factor contributes to people’s development. Moreover, development is not only a matter of individual inventiveness but of the receptivity of whole society to innovation. The superstructure of society that is receptive to innovation acquires technology and political institutions from societies possessing it. For instance, Europe acquired its crop, livestock, technology and writing from Fertile Crescent and improved on what it received while the Fertile Crescent remained where it was and subsequently chose to borrow from Europe rather than improve on its autonomous stock of crop and goods, science and technology.

## **Evaluation**

African contact with capitalist Europe has declined African development for four hundred years. Unfortunately, African continents were partitioned among European capitalists for exploitation immediately after trans-Saharan slave trade. Even up till date, Africa remains the source of raw material supplies to European capitalists industries as well as market ground for European goods. This has exploited our local industry.

It is time for Africans to rise up to the underdevelopment and establish their own local industry. To achieve economic development, one essential condition is to make good use of their resources and labour. Colonialism is a system of foreign assets by the municipal powers. North Korea, India and China were colonized. Some of these countries were underdeveloped as late as the fifties. These countries registered stupendous progress when they opted out of the production for world market and divert their resources towards the development of material and technological base internally. But, when our production strategy is influenced by the demands of the world market which is determined almost exclusively by the pattern of production and consumption within capitalist Europe and America, it impedes development and growth of our economy. In distorting our economies to fit with the demands of the world market, we deprive our economies of the capacity for a self-sustaining growth which is a precondition to development (Rodney, 2009, p. 351-352).

One of the features associated with technological advance is a spirit of scientific enquiry closely associated to the process of production. This leads to inventiveness and innovation. Apart from innovativeness, there is the need to borrowing of technology. When a society for whatever reason finds itself technologically trailing behind others, it catches up not so much by independent invention but by borrowing. Indeed, very few of man's major scientific discoveries have been separately discovered in different places by different people. For instance, Taiwan, Japanese and Chinese borrowed effectively from Europe and became capitalists. For Africa to receive European technology, the demand would have to come from inside Africa and most probably from a class of elites who pilot the affairs of the state. On this note, good leadership is a prerequisite feature for African economic and techno-scientific development.

Again, there had to be both the willingness on the part of Europeans to transfer technology and African socio-economic structures capable of making use of that technology and internalizing it. But, it is not in the interest of capitalism to develop Africa. So, they may not be willing to transfer their technology to Africa. Thus, capitalism has always discouraged technological evolution in Africa and block African access to its own technology. On this note, our professional specialist abroad can work together with government to build our local industry.

## Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the epistemic assumptions of traditional African which militate scientific development through the evaluative framework of John Dewey's pragmatism. The African traditional world-view is meant to serve the metaphysical essence. It militates against sciento technical rationality which is a requisite feature for scientific development. There is the need to integrate African humanistic values with philosophical principles of John Dewey's pragmatism. Deweyan pragmatism promotes the active interaction between man and environment which creates a fertile mental landscape for scientific inquiry by generating knowledge through scientific method which direct human or intellectual inquiry further into the mysteries of the world.

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