TRADITIONAL BELIEF AND DEVELOPMENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIGENOUS SOCIAL WORK PRACTICES

Owie Ukponahiusi[1]* & Endurance Nogiomwan Aigbe

Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria

Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria

*owie.ukponahiusi@uniben.edu

ABSTRACT: This study examines the role of the traditional belief system in development: implications for indigenous social work practices. It adopted an exploratory research method and reviewed secondary data. The study holds that cculture is essential for sustainable development and that development must align with local culture to be effective. Development can assume different forms and patterns but the success of any societal development is linked to how well it is people-centred. That is if the development is participatory in nature. It was discovered that any developments that run contrary to the culture of the people will most likely fail because the people are not carried along in the developmental process. It is therefore recommended that development should consider the practical reality of some people by making the process participatory. Social workers should incorporate measures that are culture-bound and seek to discover uniqueness in local Indigenous ways within specific communities.

Keywords: Culture; Development; Belief system; Colonialism; Social work; African society

INTRODUCTION

Globally, culture is essential for sustainable development (UNESCO, 2021). And for development to be effective, it must align with local culture. Thus, culture matters for the effective implementation of any developmental drive. According to Olasukanmi (2011), there are sets of unseen social goods that flow from a vibrant culture, particularly when it is protected and supported progressively by the people, and should any development effort run contrary to such social goods, the society will indirectly counter developmental efforts.

Development is a multidimensional process involving changes in structures, altitudes, and institutions, as well as the acceleration of economic growth, reduction of inequality, and eradication of absolute poverty. The bane of development programmes in most developing countries of the world, particularly Africa, is the lack of understanding of people's needs; ignorance of the historical, environmental, and sociocultural experiences of the people; and the failure to integrate these experiences into development programmes (Akpomuvie, 2010). Thus, development in Africa appears to be knitted to the deep weaknesses of the institutional structures concerned with development (World Bank, 1989). These weaknesses are the result of static and discriminatory views of African societies and cultures, which have imposed various negative ascriptions to an average African society combined with theorists that claim

that African culture is inherently destructive and inimical to development and that it is an irrational force that generates inertia and culminates in economic backwardness (Douglas 2004: 87). It is also held in some quarters, e.g., that "societies steeped in traditional cultures are unsuitable to market-oriented development and are fundamentally hampered in their pursuit of growth" (Rao & Walton, 2004: 10).

For example, African culture has been characterized as regressive and tribal-based over the years despite attempts at modernization. These viewpoints fail to acknowledge the importance and relevance of culture to growth and development. Their claims are derived from the unholy fraternization of Africans and Europeans characterized by exploitative tendencies that subverted hitherto existing traditional structures in the African continent at the infamous Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, where the former was partitioned among the world's capitalist powers. This innocuous and 'stigma-like' perception of the African continent is still highly present in the concept of development today; hence, Western culture has been adopted in the implementation of development. This paper therefore examines the role of culture in development in Nigeria. Studies have shown that no meaningful sustainable development can occur without the inclusion of culture. However, none has been linked to the Nigerian narrative.

The importance of participatory approaches and of integrating local knowledge into development interventions has been broadly recognized. However, many of these approaches experience difficulties in overcoming an implicit materialistic bias. This study therefore examines the role of traditional belief systems in economic development in Edo State, Nigeria, and their implications for indigenous social work practices.

Aim and Objective of the study

This paper examines the impact of traditional belief systems on development in Nigeria and its implications for indigenous social work practice.

Conceptual Framework

Culture is a key factor of human existence in any known society. It is a core attribute of the behaviour and thought of a man in society. Culture and society are interrelated concepts with different meanings but exist side by side, as one cannot exist outside the other. Culture influences man's behaviour and thought patterns, whereas man, on the other hand, expresses his thought patterns in a society, hence the indestructible interrelationship between the duo. According to UNESCO (1982), culture is the complex whole of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only arts and letters but also a mode of life, fundamental rights, traditions, and beliefs. It is the springboard from which virtually all development policies in almost all societal systems emerge. According to Mechanics (2006), culture comprises values, beliefs, behaviour, and material objects that together form people's way of life. It has also been referred to as the foundation or springboard of all development policies, whether educational, social, political, or economic (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1988). Although studies have shown that some cultural attributes could be inherent to societal development, a number of findings have established that culture, more than any other factor, is germane to the transformation and development of societies across the globe (Akav & Avanger, 2010). Culture comprises two components: material and nonmaterial culture. Material culture includes tangible human

creations of a society, whereas intangible human creations such as beliefs, norms, and values, among others, can be regarded as nonmaterial cultures. Thus, society and culture go hand in hand. According to Akav and Avanger (2010), culture has a natural tendency to generate a substantial "intangible" or nonpecuniary economic effect that has a soft function of animating and enhancing quality of life and fundamentally stimulates human creativity and the capacity to innovate. New symbolic meanings and values become inputs to innovative production concepts and processes (Akav & Avanger, 2010). Lavanga (2002; Ross, 2010) noted that culture has assumed two major fields of conceptualization over time. First, culture is seen as a product, which raises relevant questions regarding the production, consumption, and economic value of culture, as well as the instrumental use of culture as a tool for urban regeneration and place marketing; culture is also viewed as a process, which hints at creative thinking leading to distinctive patterns of social organization and economic growth. The first category involves more closely the tangible elements of culture, and the second is its intangible aspects (Van Der Borg & Russo, 2005). They further reported that culture has three linkages to the local economic environment. They further reported that culture has three linkages with the local economic environment. These linkages are as follows:

- direct economic impacts from employment and value generation in cultural industries and indirect expenditure effects, which are much greater when the cultural professions are more "embedded" locally;
- induced effects of cultural activities on the quality of a place, including tourist attractiveness, which leverages additional visitor expenditures, location amenities for companies, and

- "Creative inputs" accruing to the local networks of production (both to products and processes of production, or organisational models). These are "cultivated" in a lively and stimulating cultural environment where a creative class develops, attracted by tolerance, openness, and educational and social opportunities.

Olasunkanmi (2011) defines development as a more inclusive concept with social, political and economic facets. The qualitative and quantitative positive transformation of the lives of people not only enhances their material well-being but also ensures their social well-being, including the restoration of human dignity. Ifeyinwa (2004) also viewed development as "a warm, gradual and considerate process in its attempt to alleviate man's economic and technological standard or conditions without disregarding or disrespecting any aspect of man's existing social, cultural and political values. This implies that for development in Africa to be sustainable, it needs to be free from the existing wrongful perceptions held against the African continent. Little wonder, Olasunkanmi (2011) averted that development cannot be separated from peoples' culture because culture and development exist side by side. To be successful, any reasonable development efforts must have roots in people's culture. In line with this, Gbotokuma opined that

'If Africa has been weighed down by 400 years of exploitation, alienation, cultural and economic dismantlement, then the white man's recent deliberate political absolution of his conquests by renouncing colonialism, does not change anything' (p. 23).

Studies have shown that the existing cultural patterns in any society determine the level of acceptance or rebuff change. According to Baah (2003, p. 13), there are two types of development initiatives in post-independence Africa. These include initiatives by Africa and initiatives for Africa. The former refers to country-owned initiatives that were designed and implemented by African countries after independence. The latter refers to initiatives that are designed for Africa and implemented through international financial institutions. The two initiatives have different characteristics: Africa-owned initiatives are people-centred and participatory; hence, they succeeded to some extent in terms of human development (Baah, 2003), whereas the latter failed woefully. It failed because it was alien to the people, and it never incorporated the people into the system.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted an exploratory research method and reviewed secondary data. The secondary data were reviewed in line with the aim.

Colonialism and Failed Local Industries

Cultural artefacts or materials of a society not only reflect cultural patterns but also indicate the kind of knowledge that people apply to the general task of living in their surroundings. Humans embark a unique line of development because they can make and use tools (Rodney, 1972). Africa and Asia, for example, were developing before they were abruptly taken over by capitalist powers. Thus, there was increased exploitation and export that deprived African societies of the benefit of their natural resources and labor (Rodney, 1972). Africa's global perception today is derived from her encounter with Western powers many years ago. This led to the disintegration of African culture and economy. Cultural disintegration is the destabilization instituted by extreme cultural changes experienced beyond the control of the people in the affected society. These were both internal and external factors, which included wars, conquests, and the slave trade (Mbakogu, 2004). Myriad historical instances point to such cultural disintegration in the Ancient Benin kingdom, Mali, Songhai, and Egyptian empires. It is evident from history that dominant cultural systems in Africa were irreparably torn apart to create room for exploitative Western rule. The exploitative relationship created by the White changed and colored the entire worldview of the African continent and how it is seen (Toyin, 2005). Colonialism dragged the African continent far away from local industries, as the economy was no longer based on indigenous manufacturing industries. This may explain why Okolocha (2012) linked Africa's underdevelopment to the negative and dubious role of new cities created by colonial masters. He noted that the nature of colonialism in Africa was largely an urban affair. It disconnected most of the precolonial cities and isolated them from the colonial modern economy through a new network of roads and railway transportation running from the coast to the hinterland. Although a number of the old cities were fortunate to fall within the ambit of the new transport routes and were incorporated and transformed into the modern new settlement network and hence into the emergence of the world capitalist economy system, all other cities and motor roads, especially those dependent on caravan routes, withered away with the old and dying economy. Okolocha (2014) also reasoned that the new emergence growth spelled doom for most of the extant pre-colonial cities. As the old cities floundered, the sociocultural and economic foundation and structures that hitherto were sustained also wobbled and disintegrated (Toyin, 2005) because they could not thrive with the competition and conflict between ethnic groups colonialism created from self-development engaged in before the

advent of the West. Colonialism created new frontiers and developed new political and economic objectives. Although colonialists view themselves as agents of change, they develop a modern export system, lopsided infrastructure, and educational facilities that furthered their exploitative interests, making colonialism ventures more profitable (Toyin, 2005). Toyin further opined that great artisans stood no chance in competition with modernity. These great artisans lost their jobs in the process, as there was a drastic fall in demand for their products and goods in the face of the new mass production of the European Industrial Revolution. This led to the sudden dismemberment of the erstwhile artisans from their profession to pursue another career. Like those in the mining and craft industries. They reverted to full-time farmers and suffered their new fate as residual social actors, while some also joined the migratory stream of unskilled Africans into new cities, which led to the increase in and perceived irrelevance of traditional structures and stratifications, as the new economy did not leverage extant local heritage.

Local industries in Ancient Benin

Colonialism, according to Agbaje (1989: 46–47), was a disruptive force that attempted to replace long-tested traditional cultural practices with sociopolitical and economic policies that had been developed and tested in Europe. This move to replace existing cultural patterns was properly examined before the stretch in Africa. The introduction of these traditional beliefs and cultural practices in Africa was blind to the general knowledge that held that culture is one basic assessment of whether a society is developing slowly or rapidly. In the precolonial era, the traditional Benin economy and Nigerian society boomed very well in the mining industry. For example, history has shown that the piece of iron around Eyeanugie in Okedo and some of these were transported to Igodomigodø by trading. Studies have shown that working and smelting iron was known to humans as early as the first millennium B.C., although Nok had been working on iron by 500 B.C. and spread to another part of present-day Nigeria. In the era of Ogiso Ere, Edo land advanced in iron production, which aided in growth in the agricultural sector and inversely increased population size, further enhancing the economy and the subsequent digging of the Benin moat (Iya) around Benin city.

Role of culture in development

According to UNESCO (2012), cultural industries are powerful global economic engines that generated jobs and income, with a value of 1.3 trillion in 2005. Notably, cultural industries account for more than 7% of the global GDP. In OECD countries, culture accounts for a higher national rate than do service industries, with culture accounting for twice that of service industries and four times that of manufacturing industries (UNESCO, 2012a). Furthermore, cultural industries such as the tourism sector play a dominant role in the entire economic sector. Globally, cultural tourism accounts for approximately 40% of total global tourism revenue (UNESCO, 2007). Several industries have recorded fast growth in a short run over the years. Industries such as the cultural and creative industries represent one of the most rapidly expanding sectors in the global economy. The growth rate was 17.6% in the Middle East and 13.9% in Africa. Thus, promoting this industry, which requires limited capital investment, involves low entry barriers, and can have a direct effect on vulnerable populations, including women, is beneficial (Dobrosława, 2018).

In Africa, culture is highly critical to economic advancement. This is because it tends to generate employment opportunities and provide valuable resources when harnessed. For

example, tourism is a natural heritage that is fortunately distributed throughout Africa, and it has a critical and direct role in alleviating poverty for many developing nations (Ashlay et al. 2001: Olasunkanmi, 2011). In Nigeria, the case is not different, as there is the development of tourist centres such as OSUN, the Osogbo Argungun fishing festival, and many others, most of which have been accepted by UNESCO. Tourism is an economic sector in its own right; it raises awareness about the cultural heritage of people. Olasunkanmi (2012) Social-cultural heritage not only generates income but also builds social cohesion, binding communities around its care management. Unsurprisingly, cultural festivals largely foster and encourage dialogue. 'Since wars begin in the mind of men, it is in the mind of men that defense or peace must be constructed' (UNESCO, 1945).

Culture and Development: the Nexus

Culture is the springboard from which virtually all development policies in societal systems emerge. It is the foundation of all development policies, whether educational, social, political, or economic (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1988). Although some cultural traits are inherent to societal development, scholars have recognized culture, rather than any other factor, as germane to the transformation and/or development of societies across the world (Akav & Avanger, 2010), and Nigeria is not an exception. For example, participatory development has been proven over time to be more beneficial and long-lasting. Studies have shown that development interventions that are responsive to the cultural context and the particularities of a place/community, as well as advances in a human-centred approach to development, are most effective and likely to yield sustainable, inclusive, and equitable outcomes. Therefore, promoting respect for cultural diversity within a human rights-based approach can facilitate intercultural dialogue, prevent conflicts, and protect the rights of marginalized groups within and between nations, thus creating optimal conditions for achieving development goals. Culture, understood in this way, makes development more sustainable (UNESCO, 2012).

According to Taboroff (1992), technology has cultural implications, and when new technology is introduced, due consideration should be given to the cultural values inherent in a particular society. The failure of most developmental projects is linked to poor adherence to participatory methods and hence failure. This type of development was superimposed on a cultural environment that was not conducive and therefore could not enlist the support of the people concerned (Taboroff, 1992). When development is inclined toward the local culture of the people, it promotes sustainability, inclusiveness, equity, and diversity. This, in turn, will result in economic growth with other nonmonetized benefits. According to Ijarve and Zemite (2016), culture is part and parcel of urban revitalization projects in degraded urban areas throughout the developed world. It provides a formidable opportunity for personal development and social interaction among weaker groups and gives "excluded" individuals a chance to start businesses on their own or to catch up socially.

Endogenous Approach to Development

Participatory development is a meaningful and holistic approach to development. Endogenous development is a type of development that is based on local people's criteria for development. Their belief in what constitutes development takes into account their material, social, and spiritual well-being (Hiemstra, 2010). That is, the endogenous approach to development requires that the sociocultural context in which development takes place be

taken into account, as well as the specific conditions that relate to the particular culture, in the anthropological sense of the term: concepts, modes and styles of life, national value systems, modes of social organization, etc. These are peculiar to every culture. Endogenous development might be considered to have several distinguishing characteristics. These include local determination of development options, local control over the development process, and retention of the benefits of development within the locale. However, rather than constituting a model of development with clearly identified theoretical roots, endogenous development is more readily characterized as an idealized descriptive contrast to frequently observed patterns and processes of development. All cultures comprise static and dynamic elements, both of which are necessary for their stability and development. The endogenous approach takes into account both types of elements, deriving its authenticity from the one and utilizing the other as a vector of change while ensuring at the same time that such change is not too abrupt or too traumatic to encourage rejection by society. Any development implies change, and development aimed at modernizing society is impossible without the profound changes taking place in its sociocultural structures. For such change to be successful, however, it must come from forces within the society, even though it may be stimulated and influenced by forces external to the society itself. What is essential is that change in the structure of a society may be part of a natural internal process or at least be seen as such by the society concerned.

Challenges of Indigenous Knowledge in Social Work Practice

The application and introduction of indigenous knowledge into social work practices is daunting and widespread in Africa. Just as development that is void of indigenous knowledge is not sustainable, the same is true of the practice of social work free of local ideas or knowledge that is counterproductive. The social environment where social work practices thrive needs to employ local methods and beliefs to sustain and maintain social functioning. This is well acknowledged in the harmonized or central definition of social work by the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW), which views social work as a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities, and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being (p. 19). When indigenous knowledge is displaced from the practice setting, it becomes a challenge because the core purpose of social work might not be achieved in that regard. For example, because social work practices are new in Africa, there is an over dominance of Western theories and philosophies in social work curricula in Africa and the exclusion of social workers in social policy and development programmes in Africa (Nnama-Okechukwu et al., 2022; Amadasun, 2020; Kreitzer, 2014). Hence, the lingering problems of conducting social research in Africa and the poor utilization of research findings in problem-solving issues related to sustainable development in Africa. It is a clarion call for social work to look into and integrate local knowledge in the promotion of social functioning, which is well acknowledged at the IFSW conference for sustainable development.

FINDINGS

According to our Findings, traditional beliefs, especially those pertaining to communal decision-making, have a significant influence on development by encouraging participatory

methods that support the objectives of sustainable development. As a measure of enhancing social functioning, a good understanding of indigenous knowledge is a vital instrument with which social workers operate. For example, Shokane and Masoga (2018) noted that African Indigenous knowledge is essential for social work intervention regimes. Hence, they must be acquainted with indigenous knowledge when providing social work services. A good understanding of what informs behaviour will expose workers to different behavioural patterns. This corroborates with Thabede (2008), who averred that African professionals should know African socio-cultural beliefs to appreciate what informs the behaviours of African people for efficient and effective results in practice settings. This was corroborated by Thabede (2008) and Ross (2010), who said that by focusing on respectful behaviours and learning about African world views, one will try to incorporate indigenous knowledge in social work. This is in line with Dominelli's (2012) assertion that social workers should reject neo-colonial thinking and endeavour to create novel theories, cutting-edge research methods, and creative practice models that will impact local, national, and international policymakers. Our findings also suggest that social workers should incorporate measures that are culturally inclined processes and seek to discover uniqueness in local Indigenous ways within specific communities.

Conclusion

The success of any development is linked to well such development is people-centered. That is if the development is participatory in nature. Any developments that run contrary to the culture of the people are likely to fail because the people are not carried along in the developmental process. It will be alien to the people in all ramifications. For development to be effective, it must be endogenous and align to people's thinking patterns. The people have to have the belief and see the development as part of what should be. Social work practices in Nigeria should be culturally relevant in engaging people and structures to address challenges. This is because the mechanism for enhancing social function, which is anti-culture, might be counterproductive. It is a clarion call for social work to look into and integrate local knowledge in the promotion of social functions that is well acknowledged at the IFSW conference for sustainable development.

REFERENCES

Akav, B.T. & Avanger, M.Y. (2010). Culture and National Development in Nigeria. Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies. 1(1), 70-83.

Amilcar, C. (1970), culture "enables us to know what dynamic syntheses have been formed and set by social awareness in order to resolve these conflicts at each stage of evolution of that society in search of survival and progress.

Baah, A. (2003). *History of African Development Initiatives*, Ghana Trades Union Congress Africa Labour Research Network Workshop Johannesburg 22 -23 May. 1-9

Banyan, F. F, & Magda, S. (2024). Balancing Social and Cultural Priorities in the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for UNESCO World Heritage Cities. *Sustainability* 2024, *16*(14), 5833; https://doi.org/10.3390/su16145833.

Cross, T., B. Bazron, K. Dennis, & M. Isaacs. (1989). Towards a Culturally Competent System of Care, 1. Washington D.C: Center for Child Health and Mental Health Policy, Georgetown University Child Development Center

Dobrosława, W. (2018). What role for culture in the age of sustainable development? UNESCO's advocacy in the 2030 Agenda negotiations. International Journal of Cultural Policy, 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2018.153484

Dominelli, L. (2012). Green Social Work. Cambridge: Polity Press. Group. http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/667381468339905228/W rlddevelopment-report-1989

Hiemstra, R. (2010). Bio-cultural Community Protocols enforce Biodiversity Benefits A selection of cases and experiences. *Encompass Endogenous Development*. Raik pastoralist from Rajasthan, India.

Masoga, M.A., & Shokane, A. L. (2016). "Women in Polygynous Marriages and African Initiated Churches: Selected Narratives in Greater Tzaneen, South Africa."Agenda 30 (2), 1–11

Mbakogu, I. A. (2004). Is There Really a Relationship Between Culture and Development? *Kamla-Raj 2004 Anthropologist, 6(1),37-43*

NASW (National Association of Social Workers). 2015. "Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice." http://naswil.org/news/chapter news/featured/theimportance-of-culturalcompetence-in-social-work-practice/ (accessed 2 February 2022)

Okolocha, C. (2011). Some non-physical constraints in urban planning and development *Habitat International,* 11(2), 33-42.

Olasunkanmi, A. O. (2011). Development in Africa: The Need for a Culture-Sensitive Approach. *J Sociology Soc Anth*, 2(2): 97-101 (2011)

Rao, Vand Walton, M. (2004). Culture and public action. California. Stanford Social Sciences an imprint of Stanford University Press

Rodney, W. (1972). *How Europe underdeveloped Africa.* London, Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications.

Ross, E. 92010). "Inaugural Lecture: African Spirituality, Ethics and Traditional Healing:Implications for Indigenous African Social Work Education and Practice." *South African Journal of Bioethics and Law, 3*(1), 44–51.

Taboroff, I. S. (1992). *Culture and development in Africa. World bank conference Environmental and sustainable development*, World bank, Washington DC, 1992.

Thabede, D. G. (2008). "The African Worldview as the Basis of Practice in the Helping Professions." Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk 44:233–245.

UNESCO (2023). Cutting Edge | Culture: the bedrock of sustainable development, April, 2023

UNESCO. (2005). "Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions."Accessed 15 May, 2023.

Van Der Borg, J. & Russo, A.P. (2005). *The Impacts of Culture on the Economic Development of Cities*. European Institute for Comparative Urban Research, Erasmus University Rotterdam.

World Development Report (1989). World development indicators,World development report Washington, D.C.: World Bank