Africa

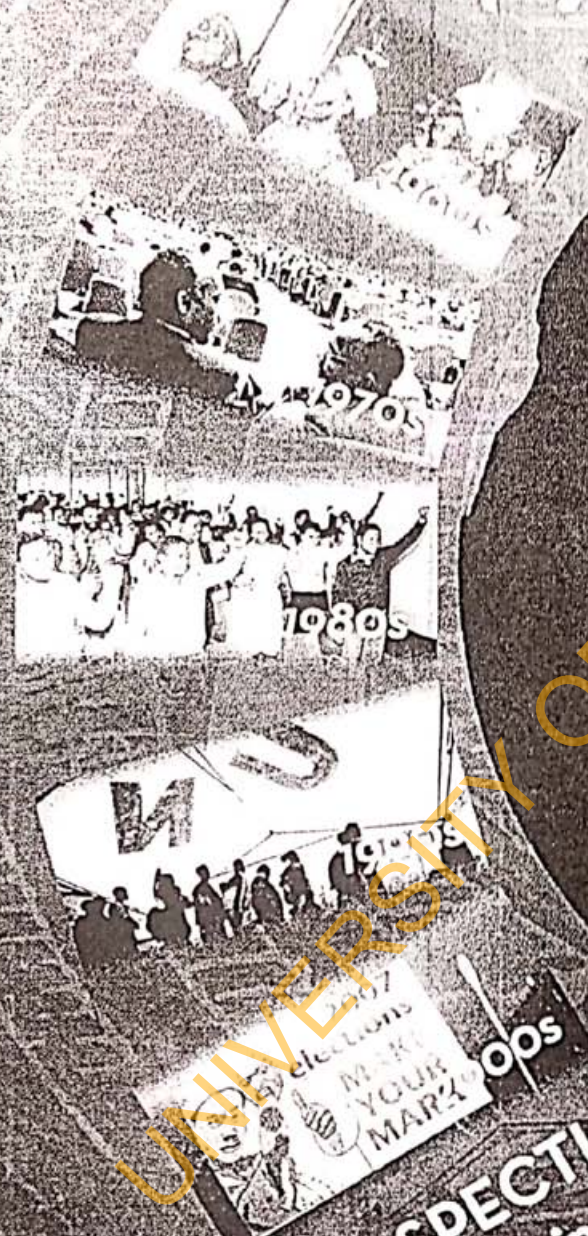## AFTER FIFTY

RETROSPECTIONS AND REFLECTIONS

edited by Toyin Falola,
Maurice Amutabi,
and Sylvester Gundona

AFRICA AFTER FIFTY YEARS

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CHAPTER SIX

LOST OPPORTUNITIES AND CHANGING DEMANDS: REVISITING AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY AND TRADITIONAL VALUES FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE

Idowu Johnson

Introduction

Every society in all parts of the world recognizes the important role which culture, tradition, religion, and value system has played in economic and political development. For Africa, culture, traditions, and value systems in the pre-colonial era sustained development and promote good governance. This is because the African idea of good governance was rooted in the sprit of communalism. Even more pertinent is that with the absence of centralized power, religion plays a greater role in the maintenance of social order among the segmentary societies of Africa. Essentially, it has been argued that Africa is the originator of ideas. This is evident in ancient African history of civilization before the arrival of Islam and the spread of colonialism by the Western power.

Put differently, before the arrival of foreigners on the African soil in the 8th century, the black African had the knowledge, the ability and skills to develop on his own soil, in his own way, and indeed, laid the foundations for today's development through his influence on ancient Greece. However, the contact with the outside world in form of invasion, whether for religious reasons or economic reasons, truncated the development of Africa by Africans and charted a retrogressive path for the African. Africa has since disconnected from the civilization that built the pyramids, the philosophy that the Greeks borrowed and the mathematics and sciences that would later shape what is called Western civilization (Kukah, 2007: 19). In the same vein, Cheikh Anta Diop (1981) did not only demonstrate beyond serious doubt that the Pharaohs who built the Ancient Egyptian civilization were black African peoples, but that Ancient Egyptians have direct relations who today are to be found in a population belt ranging from the Wolof in the Senegal River Valley to the Hausa, the Jukun, the Igala and the Igbira in Northern Nigeria and the so-called Nilotic and cattle peoples in Eastern Southern Africa.

Today, colonialism has destroyed African spirituality, relegated African cultures and values and imposed western governance. These denigrations battered the psyche of an average African; to the extent of believing that his cultural heritage and civilizations are not worth the name (Onwuchekwa, 2009:65). In this context, colonial administration deliberately destroyed and discredited traditional forms of self-governance in Africa. By the end of the process of colonization, de-culturalization and de-spiritualization had become perfected. The consequences are bad governance and underdevelopment of African states.

This chapter focuses on ways by which African spirituality and values address the problems of governance and development in Africa. It specifically makes a case for a home-grown and people friendly system of governance. While it appreciates contribution of western values, it critiques its limitation to the aspiration of average Africans. It posits that, there is a mismatch between Western value of individualism and African values of communalism. Central to this discourse are: African traditional political thoughts, values, religion and philosophy and how these variables were key to Africans on either side of the divide. It employs historical evidence drawn from countries in Africa; highlighting the importance of each and all of these variables as having not only guided traditional African leaders in governance but also facilitated relatively stable political order prior to colonialism. The embracement of Western culture and values through modernization

not only stultified African growth and development, but also debased African traditional value system to the detriment of the continent and at a huge cost to its people and their kits and kin abroad. A shift is therefore proposed towards an African spirituality and traditional values, for which in addition to its unique heritage, is the necessity for attaining good governance on the continent. This presentation hopes to make it clear that Africa being origin of, and Africans, the originator of ideas, Africans home and abroad need to collectively shoulder the responsibility of promoting the continent's potentialities especially in the face of current global realities.

In essence, the chapter examines the influence of African spirituality and traditional values on good governance before the advent of colonialism. With neo-colonial exploitation, African people were persuaded to accept the development and governance of the West. Marginalizing and ignoring African spirituality and traditional values affected Africa in terms of human development. Thus, home grown alternatives that would serve African people within the context of good governance is imperative for Africa in this century.

Conceptual Framework

Three concepts are germane for our understanding. These are spirituality, traditional values, and development. Spirituality has been used together with religion. The two concepts may be similar, they are however different in usage. Wamue-Ngare (2008) acknowledges that religion is a belief in an ultimate being which encompassed faiths, beliefs, creed and conviction. On the other hand, spirituality refers to the belief that there exists a variety of "spiritual paths"; hence there is no "objective truth" about the path to follow. However, Banhegyi and Banhegyi (2003:13) sees spirituality as a view of the world, belief in dreams, spirits, gods and reality and understanding of a person's place and worth in the world. Okoli (2008) observed that spirituality can be obtained at the individual and the social levels. At the individual level, it is represented by the deep spiritual significance and commitment, which characterize the life of man as an individual member of a society. At the social level, spirituality refers to the spiritual quality and characteristics that permeate the entirety of social realm, finding expression principally in the non-material facets of a culture, namely; world views, religion, ideology, values, morality, and mental or intellectual attributes (Okoli, 2008:4).

Specifically, African spirituality shares the same characteristics as identified above. The only difference is that African spirituality laid more emphasis on communalism as against individualism. We need to reconstruct Africa to exploit all talents in an individual within the context of development. Thus, African dimension of spirituality focuses more on collectivism; which means nature, happiness, and acceptance of the self in relation to others (Wamue–Ngare, 2008:62).

The concept of tradition encompasses customs of a given society, which can be passed down from the past generation to the present and for the future generation. Tradition can be linked to culture and values. Values are ideas about what we can see as important to life. UNESCO 2002 defined culture as:

> he set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emo-
> tional features of a society or social group and that it encom-
> passes, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of
> living together, value systems, tradition and belief.

From the above, it can be said that African culture embraces spirituality, values, and tradition. Thus the concept of African traditional values is represented in relationships, selflessness, hospitality, and a spirit of inclusiveness (Emiola, 2005).

On the other hand, development as pointed out by Sen (1999) can be seen from the prism of growth in the gross net product (GNP) of a country and broadly codified if overviewed from the side of encompassing the totality of human beings, the enhancement of the freedom and well-being of the people. Roger (1969) sees development as a type of social change in which new ideas are introduced into a social system in order to produce higher per capital incomes through more modern production methods and improved social organizations. However, development involves all facets of human life:- economics, social, cultural, and technological advancement. Linking development to economic, socio-cultural and technological facets of man has greatly influenced the connection between spirituality, traditional values and development. As Fust argued:

> The religious and spiritual values that promote development
> are expressed at the level of individual and collective behav
> iour. Where religion and spirituality are rooted in the every
> day life of people and society they can make an important

contribution to sustainable development. They can also strengthen the culture of dialogue (Fust, 2005:4).

Consequently, good governance and sustainable development can only be derived from the spiritual and traditional values of a given society. In the analysis of Olaniyan (2008:11), development interventions can only be successful only when they are rooted in the history and cultural belief of the people and or tailored towards meeting their natural, cultural and spiritual peculiarities of the people they are intended.

Themes in African Spirituality, Traditional Values, and Governance: The Pre-Colonial Experience

The search for good governance in pre-colonial Africa can be understood within the context of communalism. This search which reflects political, economic and cultural dimension was built up by traditional values and spirituality. To be sure, at the emergence of African political societies, the clan represented the unit of organizations and in terms of social production the family was the basic unit. The right to rule is almost always located in the commonly accepted myth of descent. In other words, rulers derive their mandate from the same divine source from which society has emerged. Due to the absence of centralized power, religion plays a greater role in the maintenance of social order among the segmentary societies of Africa. For instance, the Ifa religious divination played prominent role in the ordering of Yoruba traditional society. Succession to leadership positions may not necessarily follow divine dictations, particularly in segmentary societies, but the right to exercise the powers of the office always derives from the shared ancestry and religious orthodoxy of the society (Otubanjo, 1989:9).

The core element of governance in pre-colonial Africa is that authority is derived from God or from the forces which each group identifies to be the source of its origin. Traditional African leadership is closely tied to the cosmology that provides the context through which individuals understand what is expected of him/her and what they in turn, can expect from others (Banhiegyi, 2003:84). In the same vein, the power of those who govern was limited by the customs and usages of their kingdoms as well as by the structure of governments within which they had to operate. A King's divinity was expected to manifest itself in just actions and considerate exercise of authority. Thus, in pre-colonial

Africa, custom and common good constituted neutralizing agents for the corrupting tendencies of absolute power. There is evidence in traditional Africa of the omnipresent sanctions of religion and the fear of them in men's relationship to each other and their rulers, but there is also the existence of a potent feeling of shared antecedents and values which is the springboard of a willingness to obey (Otubanjo, 1989:14). However, political power was derived from two major sources. First, the ruler's authority lay in his being the representative of the ancestors, as well as the spiritual unity of the people living, dead, and unborn (Osaghae, 1989:57). Second are, the people, though less mystical, but they promote democratic culture of governance. In this period, governance in Africa rested on spiritual solidarity as well as human solidarity. It can be summed up that leadership in pre-colonial Africa was established in terms of probity, transparency, compassion, honesty, integrity and accountability; with deep sense of spirituality. In Africa, leadership was not detached from the spiritual life; the leader was regarded as the representative of the gods on earth. They in turn saw their posts as a huge responsibility. It is therefore the norm that leaders were made to swear before the oracle before assuming office. Any deviation from the expected function was met with serious sanctions.

In economic relations, the mode of production, distribution and consumption was communally based. The major means of production in most of traditional Africa was land and this was communally owned. The use of land was regulated and managed by the chief and individual families. It is important to note that at this stage of production there was equal access to land, the regulation of which was conditioned by egalitarian principles and proven need. As Nyerere rightly puts it:

> To us in Africa, land was always recognized as belonging to the community. Each individual had a right to the use of land because, otherwise, he could not earn his living and one cannot have the right to life without also having the right to some means of maintaining life. But the African's right to land was simply the right to use it; he had no right to it (nor) did it occur to him to try and claim one (Nyerere, cited in Osaghae, 1989:13).

There was co-operation in its form of pooling of labor and material resources, mutual assistance and deep sense of responsibility to the community in all economic matters. Even more pertinent is that pre-colonial Africa paid attention to culture. In fact, surpluses were

allocated to the promotion of culture as evidenced in arts and artifacts in African societies. The various arts served as indigenous technology (gold-smith, sculpture, textiles, blacksmith, and pottery) that well served the needs of the people.

Colonialism in Africa

Colonialism as Rodney (1991) observed took Africa off its own home-grown development path and underdeveloped the continent. By colonialism or colonial restructuring is meant:

- the act of colonization, that is the physical take-over of ultimate control of the economy, polity and society of extant social formations on the continent;
- the systematic, often violent transformation of extant values and preferences, and their replacement with new, albeit alien, alternatives, and;
- the institutionalization of new modes of social and productive existence, through the nurturing and sustenance of an indigenous class of *notables evolves* who share similar objective interests with the colonizer in the maintenance of *status quo* (Akinola, 1989:261).

It is a general consensus that before colonialism, Africa was not a continent bereft of development and technological innovations. However, colonialism bequeathed to Africa numerous weak states, different language, legal systems and foreign terms, undermining African values and culture. Colonialism was essentially a spiritual attack on African soil and it operated on the principle of down grading, denial and replacement of African culture and its entire attendant component. This is evident in the disintegration of traditional African societies, the loss of their pristine equilibrium and cohesion; and the degradation of African ethic (Mafeje, 1971:255).

Essentially, the colonialist painted African religion, culture and values as inferior, barbaric, and primitive. As clearly observed by Ekechi (1989) colonial rule drastically transformed Igbo Society with the infiltration of foreign ideology into Igbo Society and culture, sometimes shunning parts of the culture. Thus, much of Africa's rich traditional cultural history and the elaborate framework of beliefs, morality were

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destroyed during colonialism. Africans were given little in exchange for the destruction of their cultures apart from being taught to believe that their beliefs in traditional medicines, ancestors, healing and the old ways were simply primitive mumbo jumbo (Banyeghi, 2003:20).

Consequences of Colonialism

The first consequence of colonialism in Africa is the transformation of indigenous political and economic systems into western capitalist model. However, the superimposition of alien values, perspectives, beliefs, and idiosyncrasies to the neglect of indigenous ones did not help cultural advancement of the colonies. Odora-Hoppers (2002) opined that anyone providing help to promote self-determination must do so by coupling practical aid with an understanding of the need to shape political change in the language and experience of indigenous cultures and not simply within the conceptualization of foreign patrons no matter how generous, well-meaning and altruistic. Consequently, Odora-Hoppers and other contributors to her anthology focus on the essential role of "indigenous knowledge systems" (IKS) in the process of the creative and transformative change. With colonialism came new and mostly artificial state structures which encompassed diverse and sometimes incompatible groups. Furthermore, colonialism integrated Africa into the world capitalist system dominated, as it were, by the metropolitan capitals and this resulted both in the shunting of African development and African underdevelopment (Ake, 2001, Amin, 1982, Rodney, 1991). Africa was reduced from the originator of ideas to a rabid consumer of other people's ideas. However, Kizerbo (1972) refuted the common belief of Africa as a black continent without culture and history. He proved the contrary in saying that Africa had reached an upper level of political, social and cultural development before slavery and colonization. The ease with which Africans abandoned their values to embrace new ones in contacts with foreigners is a telling symptom of the loss of confidence in himself and ability.

In addition, colonialism caused Africans to abandon their time tested heritage of political ideals upon which they had built an egalitarian society. Today, African leaders rule with authoritarianism and ruthlessness, which is quite at variance with traditional African political values. In the African past, power was shared vertically and in real terms virtually everyone had a say in the ordering of the society. What exists in most of Africa today is a departure from the ideals of African

political thought (Otubanjo, 1989:16). It is obvious that African rulers have been disconnected from their traditional roots, and by implication from the spiritual ethos that hitherto underpinned leadership in traditional Africa. The order of probity, transparency, compassion, honesty, and selflessness (encapsulated in deep spirituality), established by the African ancestors, have been abandoned by the contemporary leaders in Africa and this has resulted in the preponderance of leaders without vision on how to transform Africa (Olaniyan, 2008: 12)

More importantly, the system of governance, the judiciary and the parliament were fashioned after one colonial form or the other. The colonial administrative system was created by the colonialists to facilitate the oppression of the colonized peoples and to repress any form of challenge to their pillage and enslavement. In the same vein, the system of governance and public administration structures in present day Africa gradually evolved from a colonial tool into a powerful field of play for the IMF and the World Bank. The alien nature of these structures and the legacy of plunder which they represent make it impossible to expect any useful output from them. Quite obviously, the post-colonial African elite tended to suffer from inferiority complex and did not believe that Africans had much to offer the world beyond collecting aid. Thus, foreign aid has done more harm to Africa than we care to admit. It has led to a situation where Africa has failed to set his own pace and direction of development free of external interference (Ayittey, 2010). Since the first generations of the African elite were the creation of the colonial state, they believed that an affirmation of African values which the West and the universal religions had already denigrated was retrogressive (Kukah, 2007: 29)

The introduction of colonial education through missionary schools was perhaps the most decisive weapons in the destruction of African spirituality. This has manifested with the adoption of imperial languages as the means of communication in schools. The school curriculum minimizes local language and culture and African children are very proud of foreign languages and mimicking foreign cultures and values. As the African gained formal education, which culminated to formal employment, he had to forfeit his culture, his religion, and his essence of "living being in the community" (Wamae-Ngare, 2008:63). To be sure, the use of foreign languages as means of communication further marginalized the majority of the indigenous population and greatly reduces their potentials to participate in the development Agenda. Even more pertinent is the fact that cultural texts and their meanings in post colonial

Africa has been destabilized with the forces of globalization through the powerful instrumentality of variegated electronic communication systems. As Willett rightly put it:

> Today, with all kinds of communication in operation, no part of Africa is entirely out of touch with the rest of the world, and the materialistic values of Western Society which are its easiest to export, are almost everywhere replacing the traditional spiritual ones. African societies are changing and so their arts, which are reflecting increasingly, even though often unconsciously, the new values (Willet, 1975: 10)

The emergence of globalization has been described as colonialism reloaded. Although, not all aspects of globalization are bad especially its potential for economic prosperity and technologist advancement among nations, the fact remains that globalization has annexed African culture for the projection of Western ones. Thus, the cultural annexation and domination of Africa on the margins by the dominant Western world, has been neatly executed through political and economy hegemony (Tsaaior, 2009). The effect is the propagation of Western democracy as a form of governance which does not have an appropriate response to the aspirations of the common African man because of its alien nature. Consequently, the present corrupt practices, economic backwardness, political instability, technological underdevelopment, failure of Western-type democracy and leadership failures are reflection of disconnection of Africans from their spiritual and traditional values of governance.

Revisiting African Spirituality and Traditional Values for Good Governance

It is totally wrong for Africa to fully accept its subservient role in the world. If development initiatives are to be successful in Africa, the cultural and spiritual aspects of its people must be taken into consideration. It is a natural human instinct that when confronted with immense odds, one puts all his resources to use to overcome these odds. As a result, appropriate mature political philosophy, whether as a religion or traditional values is curial in this regard. Thus, African cultural and institutional transformation shaped by its spirituality has to be re-emphasized.

Specifically, there is an African religion and philosophy which must be recognized as the foundation of our way of life including learning our history and building our educational system (Williams, 2007). It is important to note that, our strength as Africans is based on human social capital—labor providers that would be built on moral and ethical standards based on African spirituality. By so doing, Africa needs to rekindle the spirituality that shifts from outright harmony with nature to mastery over oppression. Spirituality involves the controlling of destructive and negative human nature that is apathy, corruption, exploitation, and tribalism. Notably, these have been strong forces against social capital development. This demonstration of control and sacrifice of a response to higher calling has been exemplified through countless events in African history (Wamue–Ngare, 2008: 69). Although, Africa alone cannot develop itself out of her own initiatives, all that is needed is wisdom to decipher what is paramount in her cultural heritage.

Drawing on inspiration from Nyerere's conception of traditional African society, it is quite remarkable that African society is disciplined in nature. In this respect, politics, religion and the economy overlap. For Nyerere, African society is humane, socialists, and democratic. It is characterized by equality, mutual respect, sharing, and an acceptance of obligation to work. The fundamental, cardinal unit is the family, within which there is unity, freedom, and equality (Nyerere, 1960).

Furthermore, African leaders should undergo spiritual rebirth once elected or selected into offices. Spiritual rebirth in this context entails a belief in African values and ideals. As Asante succinctly put it

> Until an African leader publicly acknowledges honour and prays to an African God, we Africans will continue to be viewed as pathetic imitators of others, never having believed in ourselves (Asante, cited in Olaniyan, 2008; 18).

Conclusion

In the light of the above, it is an absurdity of our helplessness that Westerners who are alien to African culture, traditions, spirituality, and philosophy of life come with different tools and theory to decipher African problems. The introduction of Western values within the context of individualism to African society affected governance and developmenta prospect in post-colonial Africa The overrated assumption that all problems disappear under the blanket solution of

Western-style development is not only a gross misunderstanding of the underlying fundamental problem but it also highlights the unwillingness and probably intellectual laziness of African actors and their foreign development technical advisors to address the issue. Therefore, revisiting African spirituality and traditional values in the area of governance is to invoke the essence of humanity that distinguishes Africans from the rest of the world.

The total neglect of spirituality and traditional values in African governance negated the spirit of communalism. The effect of this is the continued loss of confidence of Africa in the global economic arena. This later undermines Africa's development. In order to attain our status as originator of ideas, Africans both at home and in diaspora should engage in a massive campaign on a viable Africa alternative to governance.

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