

**Essentials of Indigenous Knowledge towards Sustainability and
Development: A Nigerian Experience**

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Abstract

That African states confront multi-dimensional challenges is obvious. In recent times, so much has been said about Sustainable development. However, no serious attention has been paid to the issue of solving the problems by tapping from our indigenous knowledge in the schemes of ensuring sustainability and development. This paper, therefore, investigates certain aspects of indigenous knowledge for the purpose of reducing poverty, corrupt practices, crimes and other related social vices. The paper aims at exposing us to native African conceptual skills/knowledge, building good moral, promoting and preserving our cultural heritage and core values, not only for entertainment but also for economic values using indigenous knowledge as a platform. We adopt field study as our methodology and sociological literary theory as our theoretical framework. This theory is applied because it considers the relationship between arts in general and the society, which produced such arts. The study reveals that there is the need to revisit and reinvest in the indigenous knowledge, as foreign cultures cannot guarantee our sustainability as Africans. This paper concludes that individuals, scholars, institutions, corporate organizations and government at various levels have roles to play in making indigenous knowledge a veritable tool for a happy living.

Key words: Indigenous Knowledge, the panacea, African multi-dimensional challenges, Sustainable Development

Introduction

Indigenous knowledge is the technical “know-how” acquired by an individual from his/her community, which pertains to culture, traditional concepts and native world view. This knowledge guarantees adequate peaceful human co-existence and sustainable development.

Sustainability implies something which has the capacity to remain or exist for a long time or forever while we see development as advancement in the way a thing is better than what it used to be. When something has attained a higher quality, it is believed that development has taken place. Simply put, development means growth not only in size but also in standard.

Indigenous knowledge relates to native conceptual skills, wisdom, philosophy and vision. It is a cultural heritage. The relevance of cultural heritage to individuals, communities and nations, around the globe, makes it worthwhile at all times. Cultural diversity is one of the roots of development, understood not simply in terms of its economic growth but also as a means to achieving a more satisfactory, intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence (UNESCO, 3).

The sophistication of the modern world, particularly globalization, has directly or indirectly affected the efficacy of traditions in most African states, if not all. To some extent, globalization has caused the destruction of cultural values and cultural identities because of the overbearing tendencies of the western culture over other cultures and civilizations. Gladdens (64) says globalization is:

The intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occupying many miles away and vice versa.

This explains the concept of the world being painted as a *global village*. The use of internet, mobile communication devices and other electronic gadgets are examples of what make globalization effective. That notwithstanding, people cannot entirely do away with their

culture. Everywhere in the world, the relationship between any form of literature, history and culture is affirmed when Atanda (443) remarks that:

The 'rejuvenation' of society suggests the continuous interactions of history, literature and cultures in the 'creative processes'. The interactions will come in form of dialectic relationship. And that is why Berger and Luckmann say that sociology itself should be concerned with society as human product, viewing society as an objective truth. Literature is also an integral aspect of this objective reality.

As practitioners in literary studies, our discussion is guided by what reflectionists perceived literature to be. The *reflectionist s'* view of literature does not favor the idea of art being for art sake. The literary sociologists hold that literature is not an isolated entity on its own. It is a careful reflection of something; past or present; dead or alive and it (literature) even probes into the unknown future, all in an attempt to positively shape the human society. Citing Arthur Efland, Adegbeye (160) reaffirms thus:

A work of art is ...a representation of the world outside of art – often the everyday social world ...within general education, the purpose of art education is not to induct individuals into the world of the professional fine arts community...it is to enable individuals to find meaning in the world of art for life in the everyday world.

Connecting oneself to the above statements, one can simply put it that literature, a facet of the arts, is a means by which human societies and their world views can be interpreted, understood and assimilated for the purpose of a happy living and sustainable development. Language, farming, fishing and hunting, crafts, traditional food items and their preparation, and traditional beliefs are some aspects of indigenous knowledge that will be considered in this essay.

Language

Language is the communicative tool through which man expresses his thoughts and his emotions; likes and dislikes in a given community, large or small. Language is primarily in speech form. One of the major aspects of indigenous knowledge is the ability to acquire, speak or use one's native language. Proverbs, chants, folklores/story-telling and music are channels by which language can be displayed as an indigenous knowledge, in the very first place, among other functions it can perform.

Art is a means of upholding cultural norms, values and civilizations from one generation to another, oral tradition is not found wanting in this regard. Through folkloric elements of African culture, people can seek and discover their origin as well as promote their identity. Epochi-Olise (111) notes thus:

African oral tradition, though tied to the cultures, experiences and values of its people, becomes an avenue of transmitting knowledge, wisdom, feelings and attitudes in the society, especially as it helps in shaping the literary world and works of African writers.

Undoubtedly, most proverbs lay emphasis on socio-cultural, economic, political and philosophical norms of a given people and thereby enhance socialization and mobilization apart from its basic aesthetic potentials. Oral tradition is not just for its own sake in African context. It is an embodiment of many factors and several functions. Omotosho (55 - 56) opines that:

Proverbs normally results from dialogue or conversation. It is used to indicate attachment to the community and its linguistic climate. Its primary value is in its ability to bring out the beauty and flavour of an expression, in the process of driving home an important message. With proverb; an idea is passed across in a concise form that needs no further explanation for the listener(s) to understand. The importance of this is that proverbs draw people closer to their

roots; it has a way of connecting the speakers and listeners to their origin. If taken up and understood, knowledge in proverbs will help people to make quality and captivating speeches in the public.

Many performances in oral traditions are satirical in nature. Hence, they seek to inject certain social changes in a particular society. To do just that, they expose practices and conducts which are adjudged unacceptable in the society for the purpose of correcting such aspects of individual's or group's life style. Through oral traditions, natives and settlers of a given community are warned of certain bad behaviors and their consequences. It is good enough to say that oral traditions preach some useful moral lessons to their audience(s). This can be described as revolutionary function.

The following Yoruba proverbs can be used to promote hard work, encouragement, co-operation, good behavior and more than any other thing; sustainable development, not only in the Yoruba communities but also everywhere in Africa and the whole world by extension.

- (a) Ìjekúje ni kíí jé kí enu àgbà to'lè = Unguided behavior prevents the elder from speaking authoritatively. Anyone who remembers this proverb will not get him/herself involved in bribery and corruption.
- (b) Ìwà loba àwúre = Good behavior brings good luck. It means people should watch their character.
- (c) Ìkòkò tí yóo je ata, ìdí rẹ́ á gbóná = The earthen pot that enjoys the taste of soup, should be ready to sit on the fire. It is used to encourage an individual to know that nothing good comes easy.
- (d) Obinrin so iwà nù, ó ní òun kò lórí oko = A woman lacks good conduct and complains she does not have luck for a good husband.
- (e) Ìjàkùn mò kíí rìn de òsán, eni a bí ire kíí rìn de òru = Jackal does not walk in the day time, no good person walk in the dead of the night.

- (f) Eni tó forí tì dópín la ó gbàlà/ Ayé kùí kí alásetì kú isé = He who endures to the end shall be praised.
- (g) Òkòò kan la ma ñyo'sè ní bàtà/ Òkòò kan la maá ñyo'sè nínú èkú = It is little by little that birds make their nests.
- (h) Omo tó bá sípá ni ìyá rè á gbé = Heaven helps those who help themselves.
- (i) Apé kó tó jeun kùí je ìbàjé = All things come to him who waits.

There are other strong assertions that raise people's consciousness and re-shape behaviors positively. They are traditional mechanism to control misconducts like greed, over ambition and self-centeredness. In other words, they are proverbs that warn citizens against bad habits and practices. Examples are:

- (a) Ilé làà ti ñ kèsó ròde = Charity begins at home.
- (b) Kí ojú má rí'bi, gbogbo ara l'ògùn un rè = Discretion is a better part of wisdom. Hence, it is not advised to take unnecessary risks.
- (c) Ìwòn eku ni ìwòn ité/ Bówó eku bá ti se mo ló fi ñ bójú = Cut your coat according to your cloth. Do not live above your income.
- (d) Ìgbà kò tó lo bíi òréré, ayé kò tó lo bíi òpá ìbon = There is no permanent condition
- (e) A kùí gbé òkèrè mo dídùn obè = The proof of the pudding is in the eating/taste. One can also say that one should not form an opinion about somebody from mere appearance or that a book should not be judged by its cover.
- (f) Ààlà ni yóò f'oko òle hàn = Boundary would expose the farm of a lazy person.
- (g) Inú ìgbé l'owó wà = Where there is muck, there is brass. That is, no good thing comes easy.
- (h) Bí èniyàn kò bá sá igi lógbé, tàbí tí kò ta ògùrò lófà; kò le rí emu ìdí òpe mu = You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs.

These words of wisdom make people to be committed, diligent and be more focused at all times.

By and large, some proverbs preach co-operation among the various segments of a community. Such proverbs enhance mutual understanding among citizens for desired relationship, friendship and peaceful co-habitation. For instance;

- (a) Ìròrùn igi ni ìròrùn eye = The peace of the tree brings that of the bird.
- (b) Igi kan kò lè dá'gbó se = A tree cannot make a forest. This proverb encourages the spirit of team work or that of the sportsmanship.
- (c) Àgbájo owó la fi ñ sò 'yà; àjèjé owó kan kò gbé'rù dórí = Two (good) heads are better than one.
- (d) Ààrò méta kíi d'obè nù = United we stand, divided we fall.
- (e) Irú wá, ògìrì wá, l'obè fi ñ dùn = The present of locust beans and melon makes a soup tasty.

More so, there are some proverbs that warn. Proverbs in this category enable people to have patience and know how to handle situations, particularly when things are hard. Such proverbs are:

- (a) Àdá nìkàn je, làdá nìkàn kú = He who eats alone dies alone. This proverb warns against selfishness.
- (b) Àfòpiná tó ní òun fé pa fitílà, ara rẹ̀ ni yóò pa = A moth that confronts a lamp will kill itself. The proverb discourages anybody from carrying out a dangerous plan against a superior authority.
- (c) Àgùntàn tó bá bájá rìn, á je ìgbé = Bad company corrupts good moral. When a sheep associates with a dog, it is believed that the sheep will eat faeces. It warns that if a well-behaved person mingles with a bad gang, he will be influenced and become one of them.
- (d) Àgbà tó rò'fó ikà, omo rẹ̀ yóò je nìbè = He who sows evil will reap it. Literally, if an elder prepares a vegetable soup of evil, his/her children will eat from it. The proverb warns us not to do evil at all times.

- (e) Àgbàlagbà tó wèwù àsejù, ètè ni yóò fi rí = An elder who over stepped his limits shall be ridiculed. This proverb discourages excesses from leaders in communities, states or countries.
- (f) Agbójúlógún fi ara rẹ̀ fún òsì ta = He who depends on inheritance surrenders himself to wretchedness. It means that everyone should work hard to make fortune and not rely on another person's wealth.
- (g) Àif'agbà fénìkan ni kò jé kí ayé ógún = Lack of respect makes peace to elude the world. This proverb is often used to warn the youths to have respect for the elders so that they can be successful in life.
- (h) Àifèlè ké'bòòsí ni ìlú fi ñ tú = Lack of dexterity breaks up a community. The proverb warns people not to over react over any issue. It demonstrates that when a volatile issue is handled with care, the result shall be positive.
- (i) Ajá tó fé sonù, kò ní gbó fèrè ode = A dog destined to perish shall not heed the hunter's whistle. This proverb warns children that if they wished to succeed in life, they should heed elders' advice.
- (j) A kii fi ikánjú lá'bè gbígbóná = Hot pepper-soup is not taken in a hurry. This proverb warns people not to rush at taking delicate decisions.

As one can see, in African context, certain proverbs can be used to promote moral uprightness and excellent characters. Ojajuni, (6) observes thus:

It is difficult for anyone brought up in the African culture to go into crime, stealing or killing people because you will know that it is morally and ethically wrong for you to kill people or steal another person's property.

As the pivot of indigenous knowledge, African languages should be made as the medium of instruction in schools particularly at the primary and the secondary levels. According to Babawale (18), "our youths should be trained to be able to think in their indigenous

languages. This is an investment that will go a long way to advance indigenous knowledge and accelerate technological progress”.

Agriculture

Agriculture is a traditional vocation which concerns crop and livestock farming. Farming, fishing, animal rearing and poultry keeping as well as hunting provide sustainable means of livelihood for many people in the traditional African setting. They are the best known vocations everywhere in Africa before the new civilisation. In Yoruba communities, there is a popular song that goes thus: *“Isé àgbè ni sé ilè wa / Eni kò sisé yóó mà jalè / Ìwé kíkó láè sí okó àti àdà / Kò èpé o/ Kò èpé o!”* Agriculture is our occupation / whoever is lazy will steal / Schooling without the hoe and the cutlass / is not complete.

This short song is instructive enough. Before the discovery of crude oil in Nigeria, agriculture is the main source of the country’s revenue and the largest provider of foreign exchange as well as employment. Apart from providing food for human continue existence, agriculture provides jobs, self reliance and money. The economic slowdown that most African states are facing is as a result of neglect the agriculture sector has witnessed. No one wants to farm. Everybody is looking for white collar jobs. It is unfortunate that at present, many African countries can no longer provide enough food for their citizenry. They depend on importation of food items from foreign countries such as China and United States of America. Nigeria, for instance, does not need to import food from any country considering her favorable weather and blessed fertile land but, oil money has made everybody lazy.

Crafts

Crafts are indigenous forms of technical education, which appears to be missing in most African educational system. African systems of education are photocopies of American, British France or other foreign systems. African crafts such as cloth weaving,, drum making, wood and calabash carving, pottery, tie and dye, beads making, plating of hair

and so on and so forth have been neglected for so long. Without causing any harm, these native vocational skills can co-exist with the modern technologies.

If Africans are trained in these vocations, there will be jobs for more people and there could also be an opportunity for foreign exchange earnings from artifacts like cloth weaving and wood carving. Sometimes in the past, Iseyin in Oyo State was very popular for her large production and supply of “*aso òkè*” and Abeokuta was famous for the tie and dye clothes. Unfortunately, all these arts have been abandoned.

Traditional beliefs

The art and science of divination, which are associated with “*ifá*” and that of the traditional medicine, are essentials of indigenous knowledge. These facets of native intelligence are importantly required for sustainable development. In recent times, experiences have shown that traditional medicines have potency to cure and prevent many diseases. Before the influx of foreign religions, traditional African priests such as *Babalawo* or *dibia* took charge of praying and performing certain rite for people to be delivered of calamities and live a fulfilled life. But civilization has robbed Africans of this great advantage. Instead of the simple way of finding solutions to our health and spiritual challenges in a typical African setting, we now have deceitful pastors and imams who ask people to come for miracles, which often end in disappointment. Rather than solving people’s problems, they add to their misfortune. The pastors and the imams eat flesh and leave bones for their followers. They move about in expensive cars, or sometimes, in private jets while their emaciated adherents are going about in naked soles.

The imported religions, especially Christianity, have made people to know books without love. For example, Christianity preaches tolerant but does not accommodate equity among various peoples of the world, looking back at the experiences of the colonial era. On the other hand, African religions underscore love for peaceful living and co-existence: “*Má rorò o! (2 x) / Òkú rorò kii kóniyàn jo / Má rorò o! (2 x)*” (Do not be wicked, , a wicked

person cannot bring people together). African religions urge people to be loving and accommodating.

Traditional food items and their preparation

Another aspect of indigenous knowledge which needs to be taken seriously is the issue of native food and how to prepare them. It is evident that most youths do not know how to prepare the local delicacy. This has contributed to the high rate of failed marriages in recent times. Ensuring food security begins with learning and knowing how to prepare certain food items by oneself. Junk foods are dangerous to human health. Our food is also part of our cultural heritage. We must promote and preserve whatever makes us stand out as a people.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to engage some salient facets of indigenous knowledge, which have capacity to ensure sustainability and development in African countries. Using Nigerian experience as a template, we explore an aspect of native language, agriculture, crafts, traditional beliefs and local foods to illustrate our take on the subject-matter. Babawale (5 – 6) echoes that:

One of the first signs of a nation that is going under is that her people will begin to jettison core values that make them stand out as a people. The whole world is a market place where different peoples and nations come to display, sell and profit from those things in which they have comparative advantage of uniqueness over others.

We argue that modernity promotes lack of employment, which has aggravated the level of crimes and other corrupt practices. However, indigenous knowledge can enhance core values to prevent social ills and that the development of African indigenous knowledge can solve many of the challenges, which bedeviled Africa and its peoples. We, therefore, make the following recommendations:

- There is the need for sound leadership with political will to restructure education in such a way that it will accommodate and promote the inculcation of indigenous knowledge.
- There is the need for policy consistency in the education sector.
- There is the need for constant review of curriculum for each subject/discipline to be abreast the fast growing societal needs and expectations.
- There is the need for adequate financing of education more than ever before.

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