African culture and values

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to examine African culture and values. Since culture is often seen as the sum total of the peculiarities shared by a people, a people's values can be seen as part of their culture. In discussing African culture and values, we are not presupposing that all African societies have the same explanation(s) for events, the same language, and same mode of dressing and so on. Rather, there are underlying similarities shared by many African societies which, when contrasted with other cultures, reveal a wide gap of difference. In this paper, we try to show the relevance of African culture and values to the contemporary society but maintain that these values be critically assessed, and those found to be inimical to the well-being and holistic development of the society, be discarded. In this way, African culture and values can be revaluated, their relevance established and sustained in order to give credence to authentic African identity.

Key concepts: Aesthetic; African; change; culture; economic; moral; political; religious; social; values

INTRODUCTION

The culture of a people is what marks them out distinctively from other human societies in the family of humanity. The full study of culture in all its vastness and dimensions belongs to the discipline known as anthropology, which studies human beings and takes time to examine their characteristics and their relationship to their environments. Culture, as it is usually understood, entails a totality of traits and characters that are peculiar to a people to the extent that it marks them out from other peoples or societies. These peculiar traits go on to include the people's language, dressing, music, work, arts, religion, dancing and so on. It also goes on to include a people's social norms, taboos and values. Values here are to be understood as beliefs that are held about what is right and wrong and what is important in life. A fuller study of values rightly belongs to the discipline of philosophy. Axiology as a branch of philosophy deals with values embracing both ethics and aesthetics. This is why philosophical appraisal of African culture and values is not only apt and timely, but also appropriate. Moreover, the centrality of the place of values in African culture as a heritage that is passed down from one generation to another, will be highlighted. We shall try to illustrate that African culture and values can be appraised from many dimensions in addition to examining the method of change and the problem of adjustment in culture. Here we hope to show that while positive dimensions of our culture ought to be practised and passed on to succeeding generations, negative dimensions of our culture have to be dropped in order to promote a more progressive and dynamic society.

Before we can have an appraisal of African culture and values, it is necessary for us to have an understanding of the concept of culture and its meaning. This will help us grapple with the issues we will be dealing with in this paper. Let us now look at the concept and meaning of culture, as this is fundamental to our understanding of what African culture is.

THE CONCEPT AND MEANING OF CULTURE

Edward B. Taylor is reputed as the scholar who first coined and defined culture in his work *Primitive Culture* (1871) and reprinted in 1958. Taylor saw culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs or any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. This definition captures the exhaustive nature of culture. One would have expected that this definition would be a univocal one - but this is not so. In fact, there are as many definitions of culture as there are scholars who are interested in the phenomenon. Culture embraces a wide range of human phenomena, material achievements and norms, beliefs, feelings, manners, morals and so on. It is the patterned way of life shared by a particular group of people that claim to share a single origin or descent. In an attempt to capture the exhaustive nature of culture, Bello (1991: 189) sees it as "the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenge of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours". Culture serves to distinguish a people from others, and Aziza (2001: 31) asserts that:

> Culture...refers to the totality of the pattern of behaviour of a particular group of people. It includes everything that makes them distinct from any other group of people for instance, their greeting habits, dressing, social norms and taboos, food, songs and dance patterns, rites of passages from birth, through marriage to death, traditional occupations, religious as well as philosophical beliefs.

Culture is passed on from generation to generation. The acquisition of culture is a result of the socialisation process. Explaining how culture is passed on as a generational heritage, Fafunwa (1974: 48) writes that:

> The child just grows into and within the cultural heritage of his people. He imbibes it. Culture, in traditional society, is not taught; it is caught. The child observes, imbibes and mimics the action of his elders and siblings. He watches the naming ceremonies, religious services, marriage rituals, funeral obsequies. He witnesses the coronation of a king or chief, the annual yam festival, the annual dance and acrobatic displays of guilds and age groups or his relations in the activities. The child in a traditional society cannot escape his cultural and physical environments.

This shows that every human being who grows up in a particular society is likely to become infused with the culture of that society, whether knowingly or unknowingly during the process of social interaction. We do not need to have all the definitions of culture and its defining characteristics for us to understand the concept and meaning of culture. Even though there are as many definitions of culture as there are writers, there is an element of similarity that runs through them all. This singular underlying characteristic is the attempt to portray and capture culture as the entire or total way of life of a particular group of people. Etuk (2002: 13) is of the opinion that "an entire way of life would embody, among other things, what the people think of themselves and the universe in which they live - their world view - in other words, how they organise their lives in order to ensure their survival". It can be safely stated that there can be no culture without a society. It can also be said that culture is uniquely human and shared with other people in a society. Culture is selective in what it absorbs or accepts from other people who do not belong to a particular cultural group.

Culture is to be understood as the way of life of a people. This presupposes the fact that there can be no people without a culture. To claim that there is no society without a culture would, by implication, mean that such a society has continued to survive without any form of social organisation or institutions, norms, beliefs and taboos, and so on; and this kind of assertion is quite untrue. That is why even some Western scholars who may be tempted to use their cultural categories in judging other distinctively different people as "primitive", often deny that such people have history, religion and even philosophy; but cannot say that they have no culture.

In this paper, we shall be dealing with African culture and drawing examples from Nigerian culture. It is true that based on the consideration of culture as that which marks a people out from others, groups one can rightly say that there are many cultures in Africa. Africa is inhabited by various ethnic nationalities with their different languages, modes of dressing, eating, dancing and even greeting habits. But in spite of their various cultures, Africans do share some dominant traits in their belief systems and have similar values that mark them out from other peoples of the world. A Nigerian culture, for instance, would be closer to, say, a Ghanaian culture on certain cultural parameters than it would be to the Oriental culture of the Eastern world, or the Western culture of Europe. It is true that culture is universal and that each local or regional manifestation of it is unique. This element of uniqueness in every culture is often described as cultural variation. The cultures of traditional African societies, together with their value systems and beliefs are close, even though they vary slightly from one another. These slight variations only exist when we compare an African culture with others. Certainly African cultures differ vastly from the cultures of other regions or continents. And we believe there is no need to over-labour this point since there are sufficient similarities to justify our usage of the term "African culture". Here we would be sure to find a world of differences and diversity in beliefs, values and culture generally. Using Nigerian culture for instance, Antia (2005: 17) writes that "Nigerians always behave differently from the French, or Chinese, or Americans or

Hottentots, because Nigerian beliefs, values and total thinking are different from those of the French, Chinese, Americans or the Hottentots".

Culture has been classified into its material and non-material aspects. While material culture refers to the visible tactile objects which man is able to manufacture for the purposes of human survival; non-material culture comprises of the norms and mores of the people. While material culture is concrete and takes the form of artefacts and crafts, non-material culture is abstract but has a very pervasive influence on the lives of the people of a particular culture. Hence beliefs about what is good and what is bad, together with norms and taboos, are all good examples of non-material culture. From the foregoing, it is obvious that culture is shared since it consists of cherished values or beliefs that are shared by a group, lineage, and religious sect and so on. Apart from this, culture is dynamic in the sense that it is continually changing. Culture is not static. We are not alone in this observation as Antia (2005: 17) states that "culture is not fixed and permanent. It is always changed and modified by man through contacts with and absorption of other peoples' cultures, a process known as assimilation". Etuk (2002: 25) has also observed that "cultures are not static, they change. Indeed culture needs to change; which wants to remain static and resistant to change would not be a living culture". We can see that since culture is carried by people and people do change their social patterns and institutions, beliefs and values and even skills and tools of work, then culture cannot but be an adaptive system. Once an aspect of culture adjusts or shifts in response to changes from within or outside the environment, then other aspects of the culture are affected, whether directly or indirectly. It is necessary to know that each element of a culture (such as material procedures, food processing or greeting patterns) is related to the whole system. It is in this respect that we can see that even a people's technology is part of their culture.

Idiong (1994: 46) opines that "there are some misconceptions that are widely held about 'culture' as a word. Such misconceptions can and often lead some persons to have a negative perception of 'culture' and all that it stands for. Such persons raise their eyebrows and suddenly frown at the word 'culture' as they in their minds' eyes visualise masquerades, idol worshipping, traditional jamborees and other activities they consider bizarre that go with culture". This "misconception", we believe, does not appear to be widespread but the posture may have arisen from a partial understanding of the meaning of culture because as we shall see, culture generally, and African culture in particular, is like a two-sided coin. It has soullifting, glamorous and positive dimensions even though it is not completely immune from some negative outcomes. African culture, as Ezedike (2009: 455) writes:

> ...refers to the sum total of shared attitudinal inclinations and capabilities, art, beliefs, moral codes and practices that characterize Africans. It can be conceived as a continuous, cumulative reservoir containing both material and non-material elements that are socially transmitted from one generation to another. African culture, therefore, refers to the whole lot of African heritage.

We could see that African culture embraces the totality of the African way of life in all its forms and ramifications.

THE PLACE OF VALUES IN AFRICAN CULTURE

The value of a thing, be it an object or a belief, is normally defined as its worth. Just as an object is seen to be of a high value that is treasured, our beliefs about what is right or wrong that are worth being held are equally treasured. A value can be seen as some point of view or conviction which we can live with, live by and can even die for. This is why it seems that values actually permeate every aspect of human life. For instance, we can rightly speak of religious, political, social, aesthetic, moral, cultural and even personal values. We have observed elsewhere that there are many types and classifications of values. As people differ in their conception of reality, then the values of one individual may be different from those of another. Life seems to force people to make choices, or to rate things as better or worse as well as formulate some scale or standard of values. Depending on the way we perceive things we can praise and blame, declare actions right or wrong or even declare the scene or objects before us as either beautiful or ugly. Each person, as we could see, has some sense of values and there is no society without some value system (Idang 2007: 4).

Whether we are aware of it or not, the society we live in has ways of daily forcing its values on us about what is good, right and acceptable. We go on in our daily lives trying to conform to acceptable ways of behaviour and conduct. Persons who do not conform to their immediate society's values are somehow called to order by the members of that society. If a man, for instance, did not think it wise to make honesty a personal value, and it is widely held by his immediate society that truth telling is a non-negotiable virtue, it would not be long before such an individual gets into trouble with other members of his society. This shows that values occupy a central place in a people's culture. It forms the major bulwark that sustains a people's culture, making it more down-to-earth and real. Elsewhere, we have seen African culture as "all the material and spiritual values of the African people in the course of history and characterising the historical stage attained by Africa in her developments" (Idang 2009: 142). This simply means that there is a peculiar way of life, approach to issues, values and world views that are typically African.

Based on cultural considerations, some forms of behaviour, actions and conduct are approved while others are widely disapproved of. To show the extent of disapproval that followed the violation of values that should otherwise be held sacred, the penalty was sometimes very shameful, sometimes extreme. African culture, with particular reference to the Ibibio people in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, for instance, has zero tolerance for theft. The thief once caught in the act or convicted, would be stripped naked, his or her body rubbed with charcoal from head to toe and

the object he or she stole would be given to him or her to carry around the village in broad day light. The sense of personal shame and the disgrace the thief has brought on himself or herself, family, relations and friends would be enough to discourage even the most daring thief. Antia (2005: 17) writes that "what a people hold to be true, right or proper with regard to those things explains much of the cultural traits by which they become identified". What Antia calls "traits" here can as well be called values; and Etuk (2002: 22) writes that "no group of people can survive without a set of values which holds them together and guarantees their continued existence".

The concern with values, whether moral or aesthetic, occupies a very wide area in the discipline of philosophy. To show the fundamental importance of values, it is regarded as a core area in philosophy, together with knowledge and reality. When we are dealing with actions that a people see as good or bad, right or wrong, praiseworthy or blame-worthy, we are dealing with the aspect of value theory that rightly falls under ethics or moral philosophy. But when we are dealing with an appraisal of beauty in the arts and crafts of a people, we are dealing with the aspect of value theory called aesthetics. It does appear that while material culture can be studied and evaluated under the aesthetic aspect of value theory, non-material culture can equally be studied and evaluated under the ethical aspect of value theory. Just as ethics and aesthetics are twin sisters that form or constitute value theory, the non-material and material dimensions of a culture together constitute two related aspects that give a people their unique identity, hence the relationship that exists between ethics and aesthetics. Having seen the centrality of values to African culture and any culture for that matter, it can be stated that the values of culture are what give it uniqueness and identity. Let us now look at African culture and values.

AFRICAN CULTURE AND VALUES

Having looked at the concept and meaning of culture and having established the place of values in a culture, we want to bring this down to the African context. A culture is an embodiment of different values with all of them closely related to each other. That is why one can meaningfully talk about social, moral, religious, political, aesthetic and even economic values of a culture. Let us now look at these values piece-meal, as this would give us an understanding how they manifest in an African culture and the importance being attached to them.

SOCIAL VALUES

Social values can simply be seen as those beliefs and practices that are practised by any particular society. The society has a way of dictating the beliefs and practices that are performed either routinely by its members or performed whenever the occasion demands. Hence, we have festivals, games, sports and dances that are peculiar to different societies. These activities are carried out by the society because they are seen to be necessary. Some social values, especially in African society, cannot exactly be separated from religious, moral, political values and so on. This is why we can see that in a traditional African society like in Ibibio land (Nigeria), festivals which were celebrated often had religious undertones - they ended with sacrifices that were offered to certain deities on special days in order to attract their goodwill on the members of the society. Social values are backed by customary laws. They comprise of those traditional carnivals that a people see as necessary for their meaningful survival. Let us illustrate with an example: the new yam festival as practised in Ibibio land has a way of encouraging hard work and checking famine. It was a thing of shame for any man to buy yams for his family within the first two to three weeks after the festival. Doing so would expose a man as being too lazy. These festivals really discipline the society because nobody is to do anything when it is not time. For instance, new yam could not be eaten until the new yam festival has been celebrated.

MORAL VALUES

African culture is embedded in strong moral considerations. It has a system of various beliefs and customs which every individual ought to keep in order to live long and to avoid bringing curses on them and others. Adultery, stealing and other forms of immoral behaviour are strongly discouraged and whenever a suspected offender denies a charge brought against him, he would be taken to a soothsayer or made to take an oath for proof of innocence. In Ibibio land for instance, **ukang** (ordeal) is very popular as a method of crime detection. The soothsayer who specialises in it sets a pot of boiling oil, drops a stone into it and asks the suspects to attempt to retrieve the stone. The guiltless can reach to the bottom of the pot and retrieve the stone without the hair on his arms getting burnt. But when the culprit approaches the pot, it rages and boils over in a manner that even the most daring criminal would hesitate to make an attempt at retrieving the stone. The fear of being made to go through such ordeal or to be stripped naked and taken round the community as in the case of stealing, adequately checks crimes of some sort. African proverbs and wise sayings have a rich repository of wisdom. The proverbs warn the African against evil conduct and, according to Mbiti (1977: 8), are "therefore a major source of African wisdom and a valuable part of African heritage". African culture has a moral code that forbids doing harm to a relative, a kinsman, an in-law, a foreigner and a stranger, except when such a person is involved in an immoral act; and if that is the case, it is advisable to stay away from such an individual and even at death, their corpses would not be dignified with a noble burial in a coffin and grave. Mothers of twins were not welcome and were regarded as the harbinger of evil, hence unacceptable.

RELIGIOUS VALUES

Religion in African societies seems to be the fulcrum around which every activity revolves. Hence religious values are not toyed with. African traditional religion, wherever it is practised, has some defining characteristics. For instance, it possesses the concept of a Supreme Being which is invisible and indigenous. It holds a belief in the existence of the human soul and the soul does not die with the body. African traditional religion also has the belief that good and bad spirits do exist and that these spirits are what make communication with the Supreme Being possible. Above all, it holds a moral sense of justice and truth and the knowledge of the existence of good and evil (Umoh 2005: 68). African religious values seem to permeate every facet of the life of the African and the African believes that anything can be imbued with spiritual significance. The worship of different deities on different days goes on to show that the African people hold their religious values in high esteem. Sorcerers and diviners are seen to be mediating between God and man and interpreting God's wishes to the mortal. The diviners, sorcerers and soothsayers help to streamline human behaviour in the society and people are afraid to commit offences because of the fear of being exposed by the diviners and sorcerers.

POLITICAL VALUES

The African society definitely has political institutions with heads of such institutions as respected individuals. The most significant thing about the traditional society is that the political hierarchy begins with the family. Each family has a family head; each village has a village head. From these, we have clan head and above the clan head, is the paramount ruler. This kind of political arrangement is observable in the Southern part of Nigeria. Prior to the coming of Western colonisation and its subsequent subversion of the African traditional political arrangements, African societies had their council of chiefs, advisers, cult groups, and so on. It was believed that disloyalty to a leader was disloyalty to God and the position of leadership was either hereditary or by conquest. In Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, for instance, even though the traditional political institution was overwhelmingly totalitarian, there were still some checks and balances. Any ruler who attempted to usurp powers was beheaded by the Ekpo cult. Antia (2005: 145) writes that "such checks and balances were enforced by the existence of secret societies, cults, societal norms, traditional symbols and objects, various classes of chiefs who performed different functions on the different aspects of life". Hence, with respect to political values, we can see that it is inextricably linked with religious, social, moral values and so on. It is the political value that a people hold which makes them accord respect to their political institutions and leaders.

AESTHETIC VALUES

The African concept of aesthetics is predicated on the fundamental traditional belief system which gave vent to the production of the art. Now art is usually seen as human enterprise concerned with the production of aesthetic objects. Thus, when a people in their leisure time try to produce or create objects that they consider admirable, their sense of aesthetic value is brought to bear. If we see art as being concerned with the production of aesthetic objects, then we can truly say of African aesthetic value that it is immensely rich. Let us have an example: the sense of beauty of the Ibibio people is epitomised in their fattened maidens whom they call **mbopo.** These fattened maidens are confined to a room where they are fed with traditional cuisines. The idea behind it is to prepare the maiden and make her look as good, healthy and beautiful as possible for her husband. This is usually done before marriage and after child birth. The Western model of beauty is not like this. It is often pictured as slim-looking young ladies who move in staggered steps. This shows that the African aesthetic value and sense of what is beautiful is markedly different. Aesthetic value is what informs a people's arts and crafts as it affects their sense of what is beautiful as opposed to that which is ugly. The aesthetic value of a society influences the artist in his endeavour to produce aesthetic objects that are acceptable to the society in which he lives.

ECONOMIC VALUES

Economic values of the traditional African society are marked by cooperation. The traditional economy, which is mainly based on farming and fishing, was co-operative in nature. In Ibibio land, for instance, friends and relatives would come and assist in doing farm work not because they will be paid but so that if it happens that they need such assistance in the near future, they will be sure to find it. Children were seen to provide the main labour force. That is why a man took pride in having many of them, especially males. The synergetic nature of the African society is what made two or more individuals to pool their resources together and uplift each other economically through the system of contributions called **osusu.** Apart from this, they even cooperated in the building of houses and doing other things for their fellow members. When any of them was in difficulty, all members rallied around and helped him or her. Hence, we can state without fear of contradiction that the economic values of the traditional African society such as the Ibibio were founded on hard work and cooperation.

Having looked at some of the values that characterise the African culture, it is important to state here that these values are inextricably bound together and are to be comprehended in their totality as African cultural values

CULTURAL CHANGE IN AFRICA AND THE PROBLEMS OF ADJUSTMENT

It is pertinent to examine some of the changes in culture and the problems of adjustment. Within this context, "change" means a significant alteration or marked departure from that which existed before. Invention, discovery and diffusion are some of the ways by which a culture can change or grow. Invention, for instance, involves the recombination of existing cultural elements to fashion new things. Ogbum (1922: 200), on this view, maintains that "the rate of invention within a society is a function of the size of the existing culture base". The culture base or the cultural elements, objects, traits and knowledge available in all sections of the pre-1600 African society were limited in types and variation. Thus, few inventions which could profoundly alter the culture could take place. Most appliances and utensils used then were made of wood, as metal was not a commonly known cultural element of the people. For example, a canoe was the only available means of transportation then. It was wooden in all aspects until recently modified with motorised propeller and tarpaulin.

Also, building materials were wooden frameworks, sand and leaves knitted into mats for roofing. In spite of the introduction of new inventions from other cultures, most houses are still built in the traditional methods using traditional materials, probably for economic reasons and sheer conservatism. Again, the pre-European-contact African pattern of exchange was mainly by barter. The need for currency did not arise and so none was invented. Trade by barter, sale without standardised weights and measures and the general non-contractual pattern of exchange, all went a long way to foster, enhance and sustain social solidarity. The introduction of currency along with imported material artefacts generated or at least accentuated acquisitive propensities and profit orientation among the people, thereby gradually articulating social inequality based on purely economic criteria. Inventions may be material or social in nature.

Apart from invention, culture can change and grow through discovery and diffusion. Discovery, unlike invention, does not involve recombination of traits but the sharing of knowledge of an existing but yet unknown thing. The importance of discovery in culture lies in its use and or when it generates certain challenges to the people, which in turn metamorphose into invention for the development and survival of the society. Another process which can bring profound change in the culture of African people is the process of cultural diffusion (the spread of culture traits from one society into another through cultural contact). Diffusion entails intentional borrowing of cultural traits from other societies with which the beneficiary society comes in contact, or an imposition of cultural traits on one society by a stronger society intending to assimilate the weaker society.

The likelihood of reducing the period of culture lag is very much dependent on the desirability of yielding to change in the non-marital culture, the compatibility of the anticipated change with the existing culture or its flexibility, and the nature and magnitude of force available to exact or induce compliance. However, the desirability of yielding to change in the non-material culture depends on whether the people perceive the new mode of conduct to be better than what they were used to.

In most instances the attractiveness of yielding to change is often mediated and conditioned by the compatibility of the expected change with existing culture. A change which calls for the replacement or total abandonment of pre-established and originally preferred modes of behaviour is less likely to be accepted than one that is preservative- that is one which either provides other alternatives and or extends the culture by merely adding new things to it.

Now, it should be known that force has its own limits in bringing about change as it is impossible to spell out every bit of a people's ways of life and formulate legislations to cover them. This is actually where the problem of adjustment to externally induced change has arisen. Most contemporary Africans find it difficult to adjust between their primitive beliefs in certain aspects of their culture and the supposedly modern mode of accepted behaviour. For instance, how does the African explain disasters, deaths, accidents and other misfortunes in the family? A new convert of the Christian church would run to the church for explanation and comfort, but if the church's reaction is not immediate or prompt, the person may turn, in secret, to the native medicine man for immediate remedies. If the relief comes, he finds himself having to hold dual allegiance - one to his new found faith, and the other to his primitive beliefs. This form of dichotomy goes beyond misfortunes and permeates most aspects of the person's life.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

Since values are an integral part of culture and culture is what defines a people's identity, then the values that a people hold are what differentiate them from other people. It does appear that cultures always try to maintain those values that are necessary for the survival of their people. For the Africans, for instance, we see that close kinship relations are held at a high premium. The synergetic nature of the society that allows people to build houses and work on farms together is directly opposite to the Western individualistic model. In those "good old days" as some would say it was usual to see a neighbour, friend or relative correcting an erring child whose parents he knows. This was based on the true belief that the churning out of a well-behaved child would be to the benefit of not only the immediate parents, but also the society. In the same vein, it was believed that if the child turned out to be a failure, it is not only the immediate family that would bear the brunt: neighbours, friends and acquaintances could also fall victim of his nuisance. But today, we see people adopting more and more nuclear family patterns and the individualistic life style of the West. A friend or neighbour who tries to correct an erring child will in no time, to his embarrassment, be confronted with the question: "What is your business?" Kinship ties

and love are what characterised the traditional African culture. It is only love that would make a community, for instance, to tax themselves through the sale of the products of cash crops like oil palm and use the proceeds to educationally support a child who is brilliant. In this respect, the synergetic nature of African culture is what made the society very amiable.

It is part of the African world-view to treat the environment in which he finds himself with respect: the African cooperates with nature and does not try to conquer it. There were taboos against farming on certain days as a way of checking the activities of thieves who may want to reap where they never sowed. It was against the custom to cultivate on certain areas of the community or even fish on certain streams for some time. This system, whether it was founded on myth or not, had a way of preserving and conserving nature. Thus, whether consciously or unconsciously, the society was guaranteed an increase in agricultural productivity, which was the mainstay of the traditional economy. Today, with the violation of those customs and myths, we suffer low agricultural productivity and denuded farmlands because the traditional values that safe-guarded the land, have been watered-down and we do not have the technological know-how to replace these beliefs that have been abandoned.

A look at the African reveals that marital rites and practices are usually carried out in line with the custom of the society concerned. The polygamous marriage was more preferable; not because the African is naturally polygamous as some would say, but because it was associated with wealth, power, influence, social status and the strong African desire to be surrounded by many children and relations.

Children were seen as social security and economic assets and parents took pride in having many of them. A man who marries a woman, expects her to give him many children and if the woman could not deliver on this duty, it was sufficient reason, not to divorce, but to take a second or perhaps a third wife. As a man gets wealthier in farmland and herds of cattle, his children would provide the workforce. So it was desirable for a woman to keep bearing children as long as she was fruitful. From this, it is not hard to see why the first wife would pressurise the husband into taking another wife in order to alleviate her of some workloads and childbearing. Because of the demand for children, African women of old would just keep bearing children until perhaps nature intervened to halt further pregnancies. Apart from this, failure to pressurise the husband to take another wife would be misinterpreted as selfishness - that she does not want anyone to share in her husband's wealth. So she urges her husband to take another wife to avoid being called bad names. Talbot (1969: 136) has observed that polygamy was considered right because of the civil conditions concerning child bearing in the traditional society. He writes that "the custom by which a woman is prevented from being 'spoilt' by a too early pregnancy or through intercourse being tabooed until the child is being weaned by excessive child bearing is, as a rule, strictly kept among most tribes". Childlessness was seen as a curse and the failure to give birth to male children was blamed on the woman since it was believed that she determines the sex of the child. Following this, Etuk (2002: 91) writes thus:

> In my part of Africa, the woman bears the brunt of attack for childlessness in marriage. The male except where he is clearly impotent, is hardly ever suspected as the cause of infertility. So where there are no children, the husband will not go for investigation, although medical experts say the male factor is a lot easier to establish or eliminate. For a man to go for investigation, is already to point accusing fingers at his manhood and that is something no proud African male wants to subject himself to.

Beside this, some societies are still practising the system that if a man dies leaving behind a young wife and little children, the widow is required by custom to name someone in the family of the deceased husband for whom she will stay on and fulfil the life-time obligation that she owes her dead husband. Very rarely do they stop to wonder about the welfare of the widow and that of the children left behind by their brother's demise. These instances show that marriage practices and the cultural values that are held about them are due and in urgent need for revision in some African societies. It does appear that while African culture and values have positive, soul-lifting and humanistic-dimensions, it also has some negative and dehumanising aspects. Prior to the arrival of Mary Mitchell Slessor (1848-1905) in Africa, ignorance, superstition and negative values made multiple births to be seen as a harbinger of evil. Explaining how twins were looked at in those dark days, Udoh (2007: 103) writes that "one of the twins was said to be genuine, the other, an impostor. By sharing the same cradle bed together they were both infected and cursed; their parents were equally guilty of defilement, particularly, the mother". The birth of twins was seen as a very bad omen. In order to save the community from

the anger and wrath of the deities, the twins were killed together with their mothers. Since this custom was stopped by Mary Slessor, multiple births are now seen as multiple blessings. Members of the public freely make donations to aid their upkeep. We do not experience any wrath of those deities that demanded the head of twins today. Twins have grown up to become normal, healthy, respected and respectable members of our society contributing economically, socially, morally, politically and intellectually to the development of the African society.

The conclusion here is simply that those positive dimensions of our culture -our synergetic society, our conservation of nature and even our native arts, dances and games that offer us interesting sources of entertainment and happiness, should be encouraged given the fact that culture ought to be knowledgeably innovative and instrumentally beneficial to people in such a way that the society can move from one level of development to another. Unfortunately, some traditional practices cannot be demonstrated empirically and such go against the spirit of globalisation, science and technology. Therefore, negative and harmful traditional practices that dehumanise people and portray them as unimproved and backward people without future, should as a matter

of urgency be discarded since culture is an adaptive system together with values that play a central role in giving the society its uniqueness.

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