

The Media, Minstrels and African Traditional Values.

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Abstract

Africa is a continent with rich cultural/traditional values. Though there are variations in African cultures, there exists commonalities which bind the people together thereby giving room for unity in diversity. Among these shared values are: motherhood, oral tradition (story telling), reincarnation, belief in the sanctity of human life, kinship, respect for constituted authority, moonlight gathering, festivals and others. Despite these values inherent in African countries, it is observed that this present age due to Western influence in the name of civilization has lost touch with some of our highly revered traditional values. This has made some of these cultural practices go into extinction. It is on this note that this paper, employing the qualitative method of research strives to examine the problems underlying the gradual extinction of some core African values. This paper might not explore all the themes mentioned earlier hence its focus is on oral tradition. However, the objective of this paper is to reawaken these traditions which are germane to African unity using the media.

Introduction

The truth remains that a people without culture do not have knowledge of the world. Such people wallow in utter darkness. Culture lightens the path through which the world of a particular people is understood. A people without culture lose their identities and when a people lose their identities, they behave as people without a bearing. Culture moulds and reshapes a people's values and behavioural patterns.

In Africa, traditional values are expressed through many different art forms, such as music, dance, art, sculpture and storytelling. Music for instance, is a form of communication which plays a vital role in African society. In some African traditional ceremonies such as birth, rites of passage, marriage, hunting, folktales and so on, songs accompany them. By extension, music is often used to ward off evil spirits and to eulogize good spirits, the dead and ancestors. It is true that musical styles and instruments vary from region to region, but one thing remains common and that is the mode of expression. This is seen in the most significant instrument in Africa which is the drum. It expresses the mood of the people thereby eliciting certain emotions. This implies that the beat of the African drum is the 'heart beat' of the community while its rhythm is what holds the dancers together.

Dance on the other hand is a good vector of African culture. It is complemented by various symbolic gestures such as masks, costumes, make up and props which serve as modes of communication. Dance movements can be simple or complex. It is also used to express emotion whether joyful or sorrowful which is not limited to the dancers but often the spectators who are in most

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cases encouraged to join in. Music and dance are important African traditions as well as known forms of communication, yet many Africans express themselves in other art forms as well.

Relationships are equally expressed through art forms. For instance, a sculptured mother and child represent 'mother earth' and her people or the strong bond between mother and child. Africans honour men in warfare and so when a man is sculptured with a weapon or animal, it depicts honour to departed ancestors and many more.

Another arm of the minstrels is the griot or a praise singer who possesses a repository of oral tradition passed down from generation to generation. This is the thrust of this paper. Oral tradition is very important in African culture, as it ensures the passage of cultural practices from one generation to another. Numerous songs and dances have been transmitted by word of mouth. Oral tradition has perfected listening which is equally an important skill. Ruth Finnegan opines that;

A further essential factor is the audience, which, as is not the case with written forms, is often directly involved in the actualization and creation of piece of oral literature. According to convention, genre and personality, the artist may be more or less receptive to his listener's reactions but with few exceptions, an audience of some kind is normally an essential part of the whole literary situation. There is no escape for the oral artist from, a face to face confrontation with his audience, and this is something which he can exploit as well as be influenced by. Sometimes, he chooses to involve his listeners directly, as in storytelling situations where it is common for the narrator to open with a formula which explicitly

arouses his audience's attention; he often expects them to participate actively in the narration and, in particular to join in the choruses of songs which he introduces into the narrative. The audience can be exploited in similar way in the performance of poetry, particularly in sung lyrics where it is common practice for the poet to act as leader, singing and improvising the verse line, while the audience performs as a chorus keeping up the burden of song, sometimes to the accompaniment of dancing to instrumental music. In such cases, connection between artists and audience can almost turn into an identity, the chorus directly participating in at least certain parts of the performance (Akporobaro, 7-8).

The Relevance of Oral Tradition in African Tradition

Oral tradition is an integral part of African tradition but sometimes neglected. Definitions of oral tradition abound but for lack of space, two or three concise definition(s) should be considered. According to F.B.O Akporobaro in African Oral Literature, oral tradition is:

The creative expression (such as folktales, myths and proverbs and songs) composed in traditional or primitive societies and passed on from one generation to another by word of mouth.

The totality of verbal expressive forms and beliefs evolved in tribal societies for social entertainment and for the ordering of society and passed on orally from one generation to another.

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Songs, stories, beliefs and legends which have artistic merit and cultural values and which form the cultural traditions of a people and are usually handed down from one generation to another (Akporobaro,33- 34).

The above definitions gear towards one thing which is that oral tradition in any form must be handed or passed from one generation to another. This suggests that it is a unifying factor in African values/traditions. Oral tradition has many genres such as epic narrative, ballads and songs, folktales, myths and legends, proverbs, songs, riddles, orations, festivals, dramas, recitations and chants and ritual performance. It is through these forms mentioned that the minstrels make manifest the benefits and perceptions of social reality. Unlike the written literature, oral tradition thrives on improvisation, stored up in the brain and comes out in form of a narrative. In most cases, the griots are usually elderly people who are well informed about traditions of their societies. They must know the traditions and also be able to improvise songs or stories to suite current events as well as emergencies.

For the African people, oral tradition is linked to their way of life. Most African societies place great worth in oral tradition because it is a primary means of conveying culture. It is also a mode of transmitting feelings and attitudes. For ages, African people depended upon oral tradition in order to teach the listeners important traditional values and morals pertaining to how to run their lives. Oral tradition delivers explanations to the mysteries of the universe and the meaning of life on earth. It achieves these through folktales. Oral tradition is non-written history; it is spoken word only. History has it that most African societies did not have an invented alphabet hence this assertion by an African scholar and writer, John S. Mbiti:

Most African people did not invent an alphabet for the art of reading and writing. Therefore, they could not keep written records of their history. Instead they passed on information from one generation to another by word of mouth (Mbiti, 5).

The human voice is the key element in oral tradition. Africans have been primarily vocal people throughout their history. Language is regarded as a powerful force. Although there are many ethnic languages that co-exist in Africa, researchers say there may be as many as 1000 African stories and folklores were communicated across different regions. Oral tradition relies on the human voice to communicate varied messages. Muli Wa Kituku opines that:

Voice was the vehicle in which knowledge was passed on from one generation to another. Voice unified a family, clan, or community. Enforcement of customs depended on voice. When a person died, his or her voice was no longer to be heard, it was as if a whole library had been destroyed, voice is important (Muli, 15).

In fact, Africans value oral tradition more than any other culture. No person is more valued within a tribal group than the griot. Griots have been said to be living archives/legends, the links to the past.

The Gradual Extinction of Some African Values

Our continent, Africa is rich with various traditional/cultural values that reveal our identities, traditions that comfort us, and values that are compassionate and enduring. It is rather

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disheartening that most of these core values are gradually fizzling out.

There is no doubt that the African traditional media are the indigenous means of communication in various countries of our continent. Some of them are: the talking drums, the folk songs, drama, festivals, town criers, traditional wears, paintings, artifacts, stories and even architectural designs found in palaces, shrines and some village squares. Traditional media or 'oramedia' are the local means of communication which essentially sustain the large population of rural dwellers. This is because they represent the culture and tradition of the people. Indeed 'oramedia' is culturally based as it is natural with the tradition and customs of the people. It involves their language, dialect, individual occupation or family or communal occupation. However, African values still face some challenges as a result of the following:

- I. Extinction of African languages because of the adoption of the language of the colonial masters as official language. This poses a threat to some African languages and once the language of a people is taken, the whole of its culture is eroded.
- II. The erosion of the cultural technology in preference for new technologies.
- III. The gradual disappearance of African value system in various homes in Africa which threatens the folk media.
- IV. The reliance on opinion leaders who are in recent times self-centered and also advocates of western culture that continues to relegate African culture.
- V. Gross neglect of our highly esteemed traditions by the new age in preference to the western culture.
- VI. Mass exodus to the cities (urbanization) which affects negatively the communal way of living.

VII. Religion: Christianity is always at variance with unorthodox one.

Revitalization of African Values through the Media

Every age has its own folklore for instance, cartoon which is a modern folklore. Nigerian television stations such as AIT, NTA and others use advanced digital technology tools to repackage and disseminate- preserving, promoting and projecting Africa's rich cultural heritage in forms of dramas, movies, documentaries, animated television commercials- cartoons. African media play vital roles in promoting African values. They do this by liaising with international media stations such as BBC and Disney satellite channels. Having developed standard African folkloric tales for local and global consumption, diversity is added to the current global digital contents. This is one step ahead in disseminating traditional/cultural ideologies through television platforms.

The mass media are important forces in our society. They provide information and entertainment and at the same time, have persuasive powers that are capable of effecting radical changes. For this reason, the role of the mass media in the development and promotion of our culture, moral and community life cannot be overestimated. Therefore, whenever the role of the mass media in development is talked about, it implies in its totality the roles of these media in encouraging people to accept and practice changes in attitudes and behaviour that will bring about development. Culture could be likened to tradition, which is a belief, principle or way of behaviour which people in a particular society or group have continued to follow for a long time. A culture or tradition seems to

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exist in a community, perhaps forever, because it is passed on from one generation to another through traditional means of communication. Since cultural beliefs are transferred from the older to the younger generation, there is the temptation to ask how the process of transference will continue when the old and aged become extinct. This is where the issue of communication comes in to ensure that there is a continuous flow of culture from one generation to the next.

Many social changes evident today are at least partially attributable to the mass media. The electronic media in particular provide a global view that has allowed us to become involved in concerns far beyond the scope of earlier generations. Cultural, moral and community opinions have been changed largely by the fact that the mass media can provide seemingly uninterrupted news that have influenced community life, indigenous culture and morals as well.

Media are communication channels through which news, entertainment, education, data or promotional messages, culture or values are disseminated. It includes broad and narrow casting medium such as – Print and electronic media.

Africa has for a long time been traumatized by outright degradation of her rich cultural and traditional values. The resultant effect of this has been extinction of some valued traditions. Therefore, there is a need to reawaken these dying traditions through the media. This is because the media are carriers of cultural messages, and they complete the line of communication process. It is also a factual expression of people's beliefs, tradition, world view, relationships and others. Culture is dynamic and ever evolving and this makes it a way of life. Culture is central to man's existence and survival and so without culture, man's development will be hampered. According to Yakubu:

For human beings to build houses, cultivate farms, construct bridges, dams or electricity-generating plants, providing qualitative formal education, manage successful business or organizations, control population growth, prevent or cure sickness and diseases, ensure social trust, good governance, law and order etc, they need an established albeit critically receptive body of ideas and beliefs, designs, techniques and methodologies, rules and regulations i.e. a culture. (Yakubu, 14).

Culture gives rise to development. It is from culture that the ethos of development emerges and it is the same culture that sustains it.

These traditional values can only be preserved, sustained and propagated through the media. Prominent among these are television, radio, newspapers, and magazines film among others. Our cultural values ought to be made popular through the media. Traditional values such as wrestling contests, festivals, naming ceremonies and especially moonlight tales should always be featured in a medium like the television to avoid extinction.

The socio-political and economic systems of a people revolve round the culture. Among other things, the most vital aspect of a people's culture is language. The totality of a people's culture lies on language and any impairment or erosion therein marks the death of that people's culture as well as the essence of being. To this end, the media in Africa must advocate for a resuscitation of the use of indigenous languages both in private and public life particularly in the area of folklore. There is a symbiotic relationship between the

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media and the society. The society impacts on the media their nature and content, likewise the media reflect the society and impact on it.

Recommendations

- Our agents of socialization-the family, school, church and the society at large should endeavour to understand our culture so as to use it as a tool for change.
- We should not only point all that is wrong in the society but should also as a point of duty, recommend solutions from the cultural perspective.
- Our youths should be discouraged from embracing western media where Africans are presented in a bad light-bloodshed, primitivism, and evidence of savagery, moral bankruptcy and images of doom. This can be achieved by promoting our own traditional values via the media.
- Parents living in the cities should always try to take their children to their root- the rural areas periodically especially during festive seasons. This will make them align themselves with rich traditional values.
- We must imbibe the culture of listening to the minstrels who serve as our repertoire to fall back on especially in the area of oral tradition.

Conclusion

The researchers through this paper have X-rayed the attendant problems relating to Africa's mentality towards the traditional values as well as the role of the media in promoting same values, and have come to the conclusion that Africans should wake up from slumber and reawaken our dying culture.

The media must in particular play their role by constantly calling attention to our fast disappearing revered cultural heritage embedded in folktales, taboos, music, poetry, dance, festivals which

teach the people the values of unity, honesty, justice, dignity, love, brotherhood, transparency, and accountability. Professor W.E. Abraham puts it thus;

The future of Africa rests on the present and the present is an outcome of the past. By the present, one wishes to indicate the resultant of the operation of the forces of traditional Africa and the forces which the contact with Europe has unleashed. Scientific knowledge and techniques- modern man's common inheritance may well be regarded as one of the "forces unleashed on the Africans by contact with America and Europe. Consequently, an important test of his maturity, of his quest for self-realization and self-identity, is his ability to domesticate or indigenize these adventitious values brought about by his contact with the white man's scientific and technological culture. "The progress of Africa will depend on Africa's ability both to appreciate problems and to solve them". (Abraham, 25).

Therefore, African's success in her struggle for self-realization and self-identity will largely depend on her ability to subject foreign values to her traditional ones. This way, Africa will be able to counter what Ruth Finnegan said about her; that "Africa is a dark continent yet to unfold to civilization".

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