

IMPACT OF WESTERN CULTURE ON TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETY: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

The western culture has tremendously impacted on African traditional society in a very positive and negative dimension. It has given rise to acculturation and improved on the value system in the African society. Obviously, culture is simply the way of life of any given people that is transmittable from one generation to another. It incorporates issues that bother on technological development, language, marriage, mode of dressing, arts and craft, food, festivity, religion, social life, education and the political system of the people. This research carefully made, use of the analytical method. Books, internet sources and journals were used in this research. The research went further to address issues that bother on definition of culture and western culture, types of culture and characteristics of culture, causes of culture change and impact of Western culture on traditional African society: problems and prospects. The research recommends amongst others that in order to avoid African culture extinction, there is an urgent need for cultural restoration.

Introduction

The socio-cultural evolution in Africa in one way or the other has provoked development and crisis as well. Most of the time, the crisis generated are intolerable at the extreme, antagonistic and provokes war. The various conflicts which greeted the coming of white-man in many parts of Africa were eloquent enough to this. Some harmful

cultural practices were abolished and Africans were given formal education. The existence of culture is aimed at meeting the needs of the physical and social environment. Virtues and values are important and indispensable aspects of culture. The rate of cultural advancement in a given society depends on the level of that society's moral value or virtues of consciousness.

A critical look at the Western influence on African culture shows both good and bad influences. This has made much of African native culture give way to the European culture. Either by design or accident, Africans have imbibed the Western culture and have appropriated it so much that it now becomes almost part and parcel of their lives. Rodee (1983) saw African social problems which emanated from Western influence as one-crop economies, pervasive corruption, spiraling inflation, massive unemployment, over-crowded cities and destitute villages. Obviously, the culture of African people is still undergoing contacts and conflicts which results to a healthier life of the society resulting in an improved social system. However, in the light of the present state of African culture which Nigeria is included, mismanagement, greed, embezzlement, bribery, tribalism has downplayed the influence of culture on the social system. Culture should act as a watchdog to African social system. This is a clear indication why modern method of birth control as abortion has been rebuffed in many cultures despite the enormous efforts of its proponents to give it the best recognition.

Culture Defined

Skinner (cited in Agha, 2014) defines culture as “totality of how people live and behave” (p. 38). Akama (2012) states that culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, society” (p. 91). Kluchohn and Kelly (1988) described culture “as all those historically created designs for living, explicit and implicit, rational, irrational, which existed anytime as potential guide for behaviours of men” (p. 44). According to Otite and Oginwo (2016) culture is “the complex whole of man's acquisition of knowledge, morals, beliefs, arts, customs and technology, which are shared and transmitted from generation to generation” (p. 86). Sibani (2014:107) posits that “culture is the entity that incorporates the totality and is synonymous with the people's way of life, transmitted from age to age, generation to generation” (p. 107). Obiajulu (cited in Onwuekwe, 2006) posits that culture is “The sum total of human creations, intellectual, technical, artistic, physical and moral. Culture is the complex part of living that directs human social life. The things each generation must learn and to which they eventually may add” (p. 86). Culture distinguishes human being from other animals, in that human are able to construct patterns of behaviours for themselves, and are able to transmit this from person to person and through generations. The study of culture is the key component of sociology along with the associated notion of socialization, and

of social anthropology.

Western Culture

Westernism is a coinage from the word westernize which refers to the act of bringing ideas or ways of life that are typical of Western Europe and North America to other countries. Therefore, western culture connotes the knowledge, belief, morals and way of life of the Western world.

Types of Culture

Culture is divided into two broad categories, using such terminologies as Material and Nonmaterial to depict its distinctiveness.

Material Culture: This is the aspect of culture that is observable and overt, relating to the tangible products of art, technology, craftsmanship, industry, skill, etc, which can be seen; or the visible possession of man in society as stated by Okoye (1995). Examples of material culture include artifacts, such as farm implements such as hoes and machetes, hunting and fishing implements such as guns and traps of different kinds, cooking utensils like pots, knives, tripods plates; these are physical tangible and noticeable culture artifacts of any society. Thus material culture consists of those objects which people have invented to meet their needs in society.

Nonmaterial Culture: The Nonmaterial aspect of culture, on the other hand, is intangible but is noticeable through the psychological

state of the mind and manners of a people. Ejiofor (1996) say that they are acquired by members of a society through socialization. These include such aspect as language, attitudes, morals, values, habits, philosophy, knowledge, principles and conventions. The material and non material aspects of culture together form the totality of the way of life of a people.

Characteristics of Culture

Culture is Learned, not a Biological Inheritance: According to Linton (cited in Anderson, 2004) “Culture is learned by growing up with it the process of cultural transmission from one generation to the next is called enculturation.” (p. 649). Culture is a social heritage because it is hereditary and transmissible from one generation to another.

Culture is symbolic: Akama, (2012) described it as “the most symbolic elements of language functioning in this case as the substitution of words for objects; with language, humans are able to transmit culture from one generation to another.” (p. 54). Language is a very important index of culture. Once one speaks one's native language, it is easy to identify where he or she comes from. s

Culture is Dynamic: According to Akama (2012), Culture is dynamic because all cultures change overtime, changes take place in response to such events and phenomena as environmental pollution and crisis, intrusion of migrants and cultural diffusions, or modifications in behavior and values within the social system.

Arinze (2006) opines that cultural dynamism takes place alongside acculturation, which is the emulation of the objects of one culture by another culture. Acculturation takes place simply by a person or a group of persons beginning to adopt another culture. The people of the culture being imitated may even be unaware of their being imitated. Therefore, cultural dynamism is the changing of a culture. This change can be by absorption of new ideas into a culture. It can be by the removal of old ideas or ways of doing things from a culture. For instance, Mary Slessor, a foreigner who lived all her life in Calabar stopped the killing of twins in Nigeria.

Culture is a set of Shared Ideals, Values, and Standards of Behavior: It is the common factor that makes the actions of individuals intelligible to the group and its members. It can be shared and has the capacity to influence the any individual knowingly or unknowingly. Uwandu and Nwankwo (2006) hold that values are important ingredients in the content of culture. They are aspects of cultural practices, objectives or actions that a society holds in high esteem or consider important for its members. They are the goals that make the norm meaningful within the cultural context. For example, norms of a particular society ensure that life which is a value is preserved. These African values as stated by Onwubiko (1991) are articulate and include the sense of community life, sense of good human relations, sense of sacredness of life, sense of hospitality and sense of the sacred religion.

Sense of Community Life: Living together and the sense of

'Community of brothers and sisters' are the basis and the expression of the extended family system. Citing an example of a practical demonstration of this sense of communalism in Nigeria, it is stated that in many parts of Southern Nigeria, most of the earliest educated elites are known to have been sponsored using palm nut products simply to underscore the fact that their communities used the resources of their palm nut products to pay for their studies in the United Kingdom and other Oversea countries.

Sense of Good Human Relations: this indicates African people's ability to relate cordially with one another and tolerate each other, tolerate and endure successive bad governments. Africans have a sense of respect for constituted authority and elders.

Sense of Sacredness of Life: African respect life and hold it as sacred. This is of course why legalization of abortion has not been passed into law in any African country.

Sense of Hospitality: Africans are very hospitable people. Hence the existence of so many expatriates doing their business without disturbance and molestation in the continent attest to this.

Sense of the Sacred Religion: Religion, faith or even creed are personal and should not be discredited, toyed with or dominated. Hence, violent clashes result in any attempt to breach any of these esteems.

Culture is Integrated: It is structurally broken down into parts, and there is the tendency for all the parts to function as an interrelated whole. The various complements are compatible, and they operate

in harmony and complement, as integrated patterns and interrelated system of institutions, mores, folkways, and usages.

Culture is Continuous and Comprehensive: Members of a culture may die but the cultural patterns subsist in time from one generation to another. Also, the impact of culture on its members is comprehensive, without exception. As humans cannot escape death, so they cannot escape cultures' influence and direction of life course.

Causes of Culture Change

Change is an inherent aspect of culture. No culture remains static. Currently, we are experiencing social and cultural changes on a global scale. According to Uwandu and Nwankwor (2006), culture change must be distinguished from culture dynamism, which refers to just the susceptibility of culture to receive and add to itself certain other cultural values. Culture in itself grows and changes. This occurs over a period of time. Over the years, western culture has indeed accounted for a lot of changes in our culture. There has been such intense Western effort to change the status of women all over the world, most especially in Africa where it is obvious that women are lowly placed in the scheme of things when compared with their male counterparts. Western style of education has been entrenched in our African constitutions, styles of dispensing justice and politics. However, according to Christie (2014), there are diverse factors that lead to cultural change which includes:

Invention: This is a process whereby new cultural elements are

created, often out of previously existing elements such as the radio, the computers, or the microchips, the telephone, each of which has had a tremendous impact on our way of life.

Discovery: It is a means whereby we recognize or gain a better understanding of already existing elements present in the environment, usually through scientific research. Recent scientific discovery involve the identification of another planet beyond Pluto and amazing discoveries.

Diffusion: It is the process through which the cultural traits of culture are transmitted to another. This can take place through trade and other forms of economic exchanges, migration, or wars. Cultural diffusion is more likely to take place and is more intense at border areas where populations of neighbouring cultures are more likely to interact.

Environment: Environment is the surrounding in which a person, animal or plants lives or operates. Basically, we as people have to change to adapt to our environment. As a result we have to change the way we react to certain situations in our culture. Popoola (2016) says that culture changes because the environment changes. When the environment is stable and does not shift, then the culture stays and is same. Culture also changes because of new found ideas that may seem more beneficial for that way of life. When a culture feels that a way of life is better than the current way then it is likely the culture will adapt to those better ways and incorporate that way into their lifestyle.

Acculturation: According to Suarez, (2013), “acculturation is a process in which members of one cultural group adopt the beliefs and behaviour of another group” (p. 92). Although acculturation is usually in the direction of minority group adopting habits and languages, patterns of the dominant group. Acculturation can be reciprocal, that is, the dominant group also adopts patterns typical of the minority group. Assimilation of one cultural group into another may be evidenced by changes in language preferences, adoption of common attitudes and values, loss of separate political or ethnic identification. Also when alien cultural traits diffuse into a society on a massive scale, acculturation frequently is the result. The culture of the reliving society is significantly changed.

However, Obinna (2016) states that acculturation does not necessarily result in a new, alien culture trait completely replacing old ones. An example of acculturation is immigrant to America eating peanut, butter, and pumpkin pie and picking up a southern accent within a day or two. Also, when a large number of immigrants from the same country settle into a new neighborhood. One might witness a change in the way that the people who were original residents dress or speak. Conversely, the new inhabitants may also alter their dress or speech to blend in with their new environment. According to Akama (2012), it also connotes “the constant communication between two or more distinct culture groups during which our group takes on element of the culture of the other group” (p. 18).

Impact of Western Culture on Traditional African Society: Problems and prospects

Deviation from the Traditional Politics: Consequent on African ontology, authority and power belongs to the entire community just like the vital forces. Every member has the share of the power. In African traditional politics, the power to govern is invested on a group of persons and at times, a worthy leader to act on behalf of the community. The community confers the authority on the persons to exercise power on behalf of the living and the dead. By so doing, they become symbols of unity and agents of maintaining the ontological harmony of the community. Due to cultural change, Okon (2016) avers that the political atmosphere in African land is now a problem which has made the contemporary African politician no longer see themselves as leaders who have the mandate of their people to serve. Today, people now fight, kill and bulldoze their ways into positions of power. This shows deviation and abandonment of values, especially the sacredness of human life. High values and respect should be reposed in African leaders and there is a need to re-evaluate the traditional leadership systems which are more of hereditary in nature. We should also embrace the democratic aspect of leadership to check the excesses.

The Challenge of Worship

In the contemporary era, culture of African people has been greatly eroded due to Western culture influence. Alloy (2003) holds that it is

very clear that the traditional ways of worship has drastically changed and modernized. The local or traditional drums that makes the music of the people very significant and meaningful has greatly being replaced with band-set and English songs. Africans should return back to their heritage and revive the locally made drums and music which makes them distinct in their nature of worship. The acrobatic dance of the Africans when drums and music are played is far richer than the Western pattern of worship which has gradually turned African worshippers into iroko trees that stand very erect in the place of worship.

Communication Barrier: According to Venkatesh (2012), it is a means by which interpretation and transmission of ideas between individuals or groups are made because of cultural change. Vast number of Nigerians today which speak English instead of their ancestral language has caused a barrier in communication between the young ones who migrated to the Urban Areas, some people living in the rural areas, and old men and women. As native African societies continue to do this, most communities will be experiencing a corresponding loss of their traditional culture. There is a need for Africans to teach and educate their children in the midst of acculturation so that the local language of the people will not be completely lost to Western languages. Government should see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or language of immediate community and at a later stage, English language.

High Rate of Divorce: In the old Igbo set up, a young man or woman does not tell his/her parents who to marry. It was the full right of the parents of the girl and the man to begin to find a wife for their son, and give their daughter to anybody of their choice. The next was for him to wait for them to tell him where and when the marriage would take place. According to Ubani (2007), the work of doing the investigation, finding money and other things is not in the hand of the man. Investigation here means finding out whether the girl's people can give birth without difficulties, a trace of rampant adultery, stealing, and premature death and so on.

Due to cultural change, men find their wives on their own without the consent of their parents. They are not willing to know or investigate things about who to marry; they make decisions on where and when the marriage will hold. Which has often times resulted to regrets, abandonment and even quarrel between the two parties. In Africa, both the living and the dead gather during marriage. It is a conglomerate that no single individual must stand alone. In order to avert frequent divorce cases in Africa, it is imperative for young men and women going into marriage to listen to their parents especially when there is a sense of danger.

Indecent Sexual Behaviour: This is an unwanted conduct of a sexual nature, or other conduct based on sex affecting the dignity of women and men. Sykinner (2015) avers that due to cultural change, women especially go along the road, school, and churches and so on half-naked. Putting on sexy clothe that reveals special part of their

body all in the name of fashion which negatively leads to sexual harassment, raping etc which at times opens way for divers Sexually Transmitted Diseases in our society is rampant. All hands should be on desk to stop this deadly practice in our society.

The Challenge of Education and Technology: Westernism accompanied by advanced technology stepped down the pace of African local technological development and oral tradition. In fairness however, Western technology has tremendously improved the lifestyle of Africans in various areas such as Medicine, Communication, Transport, Agriculture, Sports, Education, Clothing, and so on. However, we should not keep basking in the euphoria of Western technological achievements and forget to improve on our local technology as stated by Arinze (2006). We should appreciate the products of our local art works of painting, sculptures, and molding just for what they are and it will encourage development.

Conclusion

All cultures change through times. No culture is static. However, most cultures are basically conservative in that they tend to resist change. Some resist more than others by enacting laws for the preservation and protection of traditional cultural patterns, while putting up barriers to alien ideas and things. E.g. the French government forbids the commercial use of English words for which there are French equivalencies. It is now, abundantly clear that we

are in an accelerating culture change period all around the world regardless of whether we try to resist it or not. African culture should act as a means of checking, adopting and transmitting such changes as technological development, political development and social development. In order to avoid cultural extinction, there is an urgent need for cultural restoration in Africa owing to erroneous impression or Western indoctrination. This is very necessary because a people without a culture are a people without an identity.

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