

African Culture a Mixed Bag: An Aesthetic Appreciation of Divine Religion in Refinement of African Cultures

A.O. HASHIMI

Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria

Abstract. Culture is an important aspect of African communities, a pivot for sincere development, a mode of existence and an aspect of man's existential experiences. Without culture there can be no society and without society there can be no humanity. African culture has passed through different stages of evolution from the earliest period to the contemporary time. What constitutes culture in Africa today is embedded with many alien ideas and erosion of values. Therefore, in the quest for achieving the fundamental mission of placing Africa contemporary globalized world, African culture needs an ethical overhaul in separating it from accretions? Therefore this paper examines the conditions of African people with particular focus on the forceful influences of colonialism on African culture. The paper employs analytical research method. The paper argues that there is a need of belief in the importance of divine religion and relevance of God to human existence for improving human existential conditions. Hence, the guidance of God is a source of light to African tunnel.

Keywords: Africa, Culture, Mixed bag, Divine religion and Refinement

1. Introduction

Africa is one of the largest continents in the world. It is surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea in the North, the Isthmus of Suez Canal and Red Sea in the northeast, the India Ocean in the Southeast and Atlantic Ocean in the West. It extends beyond the tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, while Equator passes through its middle. Africa is considered by most paleoanthropologists to be the Oldest Earth, with human species originated from the continent and evidence of human occupation as early as 7 million years ago (BP). In his work, Lasisi noted that Africa

has shape like the shell of big snail, which is large at the top and narrow at the bottom (Lasisi, 2011:5).

The early man in Africa began to adjust to his environment. He made tools of stones, copper and iron. He cultivated grains, such as wheat and barley and advanced from being a tool maker and scavenger to a cattle rearer and agriculturist. The history of people of Africa and emergency of settled communities marked the beginning of African culture and the people passed through three distinct phases of history, the Early Stone Age (ESA), Middle Stone Age (MSA) and Late Stone Age (LSA). In the archeological records, the Early Stone Age and Middle Stone Age are defined as pre-metal using societies, and the characteristics toolkits were microliths, ground stone axes, trimmed flakes, pebbles, bifacial core-axes and chisels. These two early periods were characterized by the aforementioned tools while the populations lived only on pursued hunting gathering and fishing activities (Thurstan Shaw, 1975 and Alabi, 2005). It was during the Late Stone Age that agricultural societies of more sophisticated hunting technology emerged. In general, the pace of cultural change quicken during the LSA, compared with the earlier periods, human population occupied all the ecological niches of the region from the Sahelian belt in the North to the coastal parts of the Atlantic Ocean, and human settlements were located at different terrains, from hilly locations and low lands to open sites and rock shelters. Human populations seem to have exerted more control on their environments and more regional cultural variations were discernible during the Late Stone Age than in their earlier periods. The period witnessed intense migrations from north to the south due to changes in ecological conditions and a region – wide increase in population. These migrations were instigated by the

increasing desiccation of the Sahara during the Late Stone Age.

1.1 Culture

Culture is defined as a way of life, the mental outlook, and the characteristic artifacts produced by a fairly homogenous group of people over a limited period of time. (Thurstan Shaw,1975:8). Culture is shared understanding about norms, rules, laws that govern and control behaviour, belief as in religion, superstitions, witchcraft and sorcery, myths, legends, ideology and artifacts (Swartz and Jordan, 1980:47). According to White, (1976) Culture is ideational; it resides in the minds of a group of people and is reflected in behaviour, rules and sanctions, mandate, objects, social structure and in symbols. In his work Hofstede, declares that culture is mental and social programming which is influenced by man's environment and is reflected in such things as greeting, eating, showing or not showing feelings, keeping a certain physical distance from others, maintaining body hygiene; even the way people actually carry out their sexuality. Culture facilitates the gratification of the basic human need; the need for food, shelter and satisfaction of sexual urge. etc. (Howard and Mckim 1983; Language, 1974:77). Culture is sub-divided, while some cultures are distinguishable from one and others, by clothing, gesture, etiquette, language, religion etc. Culture is universal in nature that all human beings generate and share culture, but is varied from one society and environment to others, (Herskovits, 1955:117). Culture is a shared or collective phenomenon, as no one person can possess his or her personal culture. Culture cannot be assessed on face-value, this is because some aspects or elements of culture are manifest, while others are latent. Culture is generally shared in a group, but not shared equally. Culture is acquired through languages and other symbols by instruction, imitation or identification, through personal or group experience. Culture includes the past, the present and the future societies and events there in. Culture is also a way of life of a distinctive group of people, community or society. In the words of Mahnowski, culture is a vast apparatus, partly material, partly human and partly spiritual, which make man to cope with the concrete and specific problems that face him. (Mahnowski, 1960:36).

Africa is multi-cultural; one of the simplest tests to confirm the utility of culture is to examine situations in which common understandings are absent. Conflicts and contradictions prevail as different people try to use different understanding that do not

elicit consensus. The culture of Africa is a product of diverse populations that live in the continent of Africa and African Diaspora. The culture is varied and multi-cultural. It consists of a mixture of many countries with various tribes that each has her own unique characteristics with tribal emblem. The cultures are expressed in its crafts and arts, folklore and religions, dressing, music and languages. Indeed, cultural expressions are done and abundant with Africa with cultural diversity even, within single countries. African cultures entail diversities and similarities. These include the morals they uphold, their love and respect for culture, strong respect for the aged and kings and chiefs. Through contact with outsiders, Africans and their culture have been influenced and just as they have influenced people of other continents. Nevertheless African cultural values are deeply rooted in the way of thinking and revolve around showing respect and treating others with hospitality.

Taylor is a popular scholar who first coined and defined culture in his work *primitive culture* (1958), defined,

Culture as complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs or any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. In his words: culture embraces a wide range of human phenomena, material achievements and norms, beliefs, feelings, manners, morals and so on. Culture is a patterned way of life shared by a particular group of people that claim to share a single origin or descent.

Given the above, the culture of a people is what marks them out distinctively from other human societies in the family of humanity. Culture, as it is usually understood, entails a totality of traits and characters that are peculiar to a people to the extent that marks them out from other peoples or societies. These peculiar traits include, people social norms, taboos and values. Values are to be understood as beliefs that are held about what is right and wrong and what is important in life.

2. Foundational Ideas and Development of Culture in Africa

The history of early man and subsequent emergence of settled communities in different parts of Africa marked the beginning of African culture. Among the great relevance to the cultural history of early human ancestors was the economic shift from hunting-gathering to food production. In his essay work on this issue, Alabi notes that a school of scholars has argued that the knowledge of agriculture emanated

from the Nile valley, the Maghreb, and the Sahara and then spread down to the Sahelian, Savanna, and rain forest belts of West Africa. These carriers of the knowledge of agriculture into West Africa are described as displaced populations forced to migrate southwards into the Sahel and the Savanna during the period between 4500 and 4000 YBP as a result of the desiccation of the Sahara. (Alabi, 2005:94). It should be noted that the change to food production has never meant the total abandonment of hunting and gathering. While men in north eastern Africa started to gather grains and raise sheep and cattle, those in western Sudan started with gathering seeds and nuts while men in South West Africa did not go beyond hunting and food gathering even till today. (Lasisi, 211:6). Thus, the hunting of wild birds and animals continues, as well as the gathering of wildnuts and berries, and all are valued ingredients in the diet. Adding value judgment to this, Thurstan Shaw notes that there are few economies (people) left in the world today in which their subsistence depends upon food collecting and not on food production (1975:9).

The change from hunting and gathering to food production by means of agriculture and stock-raising resulted in the growth of towns and cities, the formation of states, organization of war, and the development of the arts of writing, metallurgy and more advanced architecture. Thus, food production in Africa is the essential basis for urbanization, state formation and the emergence of high cultures. Therefore, food production was initiated when human culture had reached a point cable of it. Along the line, the invention of agriculture, the development of urbanization, the accumulation of wealth, the concentration of power and the advent of organized warfare are all connected with cultural development. In our contemporary age, knowledge and ideas have been added to human muscle-power. Various forms of mechanical power have been developed, first by harnessing animal muscle-power, then, water and wind power, then power derived from fossil fuels, then atomic bomb and chemical weapon, tomorrow something else. It is not surprising that among the most inspiring verses of the holy Qu'ran that have predicted geometric progress in human development over one thousand four hundred years ago. Suffice are the following verses Q17:70:

And surely we have honoured the children of Adam, and we carry them in the land and sea, and we have given them of the good things and we have made them to excel by an appropriate.

In his work Abdullahi Yusuf (1978) notes that the distinction and honour conferred by God on man are recounted in order to enforce the corresponding

duties and responsibilities of man. He is raised to a position of honour above the brute creation, he has been granted talents by which he can transport himself from place to place by land, sea and now by air; all the means for the sustenance and growth of every part of his nature are provided by God; and his spiritual faculties raise him above the greater part of God's creation. Should he not then realise his noble destiny and prepare for his real life in the life after.'

The progress in human societies in Africa shows the effect of the application of scientific method both to the investigation of the physical world and to industrial processes that has led to unprecedented rapidity in our age. The nature and direction of change can be largely under man's control, but the mental and spiritual attitudes to guide this development reside in religion. With the geometric progress in science and technology, the rates of development are not the same among different cultures and different peoples in Africa, as there are differences in the course of time too, so that an area that is advanced in one time lagged behind at other time. Researchers have disclosed the richness of cultures in Africa, both diffusion and dependent inventions played significant role. The independent innovations that occurred at a number of different times were due to environmental need and opportunity. Diffusion and culture borrowing have remained important for culture change in many areas in Africa. Contact between cultures is always important as a factor in change, thus culture transmission takes place.

3. Precolonial Africa

In the history of humanity, the first civilization which emerged over five thousand (5,000) years ago was that of Egypt in the northeastern part of Africa. Egyptian civilization was assembled by technology that produced the pyramids, hieroglyphics, migration and architecture. In the later period, Egypt had trade and cultural as well as political relations with other civilizations and people outside Europe such as the Assyrians, Persians, Greeks and Romans. Egypt was first to step within the threshold of civilization, but it was not the only civilization in Africa at that early time. There were perhaps older civilizations whose achievements were also commendable. Among these were Nubia which conquered and ruled Egypt almost a century. The civilization and glory of Egypt naturally attracted political assaults from the early civilizations in Europe and Asia and this led to its conquest first by the Persians, Greeks and Romans before the Christian era. Besides, the Nubia, there were other civilizations existing in different parts of Africa

before the end of BC years and since the present Christian era. These included Kush and Axum empires. There was also the Monomatapa or Zimbabwe empire which emerged more than nine hundred years before Christ and which was noted for its great walls and gatens (Thurstan Shaw, 1975).

Ghana which was founded early in the second millennium AD was the first well-known civilization in Western Sudan. It was followed in succession first by Mali empire and then by Songhai. In the succeeding centuries, Kanem-Bornu Empire, the Hausa city-states, the Benin, Dahomey kingdoms and Oyo Empire in the forested regions to the South emerged. The creation of civilizations in Africa continued until the 19th century when the continent's relations with the outside world, particularly Europeans, hampered these indigenous socio-political and cultural developments.

Throughout recorded history people had developed and aware of cultural difference between their own group and outsiders. In prehistory, people lived in different parts of the world but they differed in their way of life, therefore, civilization developed in some places than others. The differences between human groups and others have been thought of in terms of a supposed inherited superiority. One group or race regards others superior to another.

The ancient Greek regarded all those who did not share Hellenic culture as barbarians. Another reason made for cultural differences has been in terms of climate, and this explanation has an ancient pedigree. In fact, climate affects physical characteristics, climate also influences culture. Climate is the major determinant of vegetation. Vegetation is one of the most important elements of the environment and one which provides many of the possibilities and limitations for human culture. The attitude of Europeans to Africans is very long in time and period. Europeans disliked Africans, their attitude is somehow xenophobic. It was argued among Europeans that no one in Africa ever invented a wheel. In their work, Singer *et al*, remark that: *What was forgotten or not known was that no one ever invented a wheel in Europe either. Europe received the invention by a process of diffusion from Asia* (Singer *et. al*, 1954:204 – 211) (Walls, 1964).

The idea of cultural inferiority was inspired by the European people by the egalitarian principles of French and American Revolutions. Africans have contributed enormously to the programme of mankind in all spheres of life since a creditable past. The museum of primitive art, founded by an

American millionaire in New York Nelson D. Rockefeller contains works which have not been produced either by the cultures of European or Asiatic antiquity nor by the European Mediaeval and later traditions; they are works of art from Africa (Thurstan Shaw, 1975:9). The effect of such works of art upon European artistic tradition that had become stale and jaded, had the effect of revivifying it and inspiring it to fresh life and vigour. Among the most important of the dubious justification for the enslavement of African peoples was the myth of Black racial and cultural inferiority. The eighteenth century British philosopher, David Hume; 'Blacks were naturally inferior to whites; no civilized nation had ever emerged among them, no individual eminent either in action or speculation; no ingenious manufactures, no arts, no science'. Thus, African people were condemned to the debris of human race by the whites in their jaundiced and parochial views. The social heritage and traditional organizations, coupled with African linguistic traits, religious practices, patterns of family organization, and modes of song and dance are elements of high culture. The Black man (1963) and the rising son (1874) were directed to prove that:

Many civilizations of antiquity were offshoots of Ethiopian or African civilization and that many important personalities of antiquity were Africans (Okon Uya, 2013:9).

It was generally averred that Black people were destined by God to be hewers of wood and drawers of water. Slavery was thus justified as the natural condition for Blacks in the community of peoples. It is averred by some schools of thought that culture changed in different parts of the world, as a result of a various forms of contact with each other. Therefore with contact with outside world, cultural elements of the Europeans, Africans and Indians, interacted with one and other, each as a recipient and donor in the exchange. The spread of African people to Europe, America, and Caribbean aided the spread of African culture. This assisted to create vibrant living communities whose culture and social institutions were discernibly African. Such communities in diasporas represented African cultures and institutions, which have flourished with varying intensities to this day, as especially in areas such as Brazil, the southern United States of America and the Caribbean Islands. The commonalities in cultures, religion, cosmology and world view remained a major resource for African culture in Diaspora.

The European powers have the attitudes of superiority and a sense of mission. The French only recognized and accepted an African if he gave up his

culture and adopted French ways of life. Skill in Portuguese language and proficiency in it and adoption its culture, with abandonment of traditional African ways of life, qualified one as civilized

4. Elements of African Culture: As Model for Reconstruction of African Culture

The major thrust of African history, for this generation is explication of African cultures and heroes who have made significant contributions to the life of African people African continent is a continent of many communities and rich cultures. The culture of any community in Africa is a representational symbol of that community. African culture manifests the traditions, philosophies, conventions and aesthetic values of diverse communities. In Africa, each culture portrays the cultural beliefs of the people of that community.

Some of the African cultures of the people of the past are preserved in figures, such as terracotta, which are found mostly in many parts of Africa. Other cultural materials are bronze, stone ivory, wood and metal. Some sculptures have tribal marks on the face, while some were decorated with beads on the neck and wrist, while some male head were bald or capped, still female figures have special hair style and facial marking of particular Africa communities, and some figures depict royalty. Adjudged from the above one could perceive the same material cultures of the past people.

In his work, Babalola, (2008:11- 26) showcases some of these figures of terracotta dated back to 500BC – 200AD. Archaeology and allied disciplines have led to important discoveries about human record and its milieu during the Pleistocene in Africa (Graham Connah, 1983:4), and the staggering extension of the history man on the African continent to the period 2 or 3 million years ago. Among the cultural inventory include a number of distinctive fire places with vertical sides, thick sherds of large pots, the clay figurine art. Burials contained bronze discs and bracelets, while stone lip plugs, glass-beads, ostrich eggshell beads, carnelian and other objects (Connah, 1969:120). The aesthetic appeal of the material is an impressive documentation for element of a veritable African cultures and civilizations.

In the words of Maulana Karenga:

Our culture provides us with an ethos we must honour in both thought and practice. By ethos, we mean a people's self-understanding as well as its self-presentation in the world through its thought and practice in the other six areas of culture. It is above

all a cultural challenge. For culture is here defined as the totality of thought and practice by which a people creates itself, celebrates, sustains and develops itself and introduces itself to history and humanity.

In African context, the characteristic identification of culture is possible by geographical locations, the homeland of the cultural ethnic group. The search for culture is based on the tribal home of the people. In his words, Adepegba (2002 :1) argues that:

African art is a tribal art- or rather a multiple of tribal arts- and what is not tribal is not African. Contemporary art, like skyscrapers is a part of the extension of Europe in Africa. There is no Nigerian art, her is Yoruba art Art, Afo art and Hausa (Islamic) art, have hardly more in Common with each other than with the Sepik River in New Guinea.

5. African Culture and its Dark Shades

Philosophers as harbingers of social change, in their attempts of making relevance of philosophy to ameliorate the condition of African people identified some unflattering aspects of African culture which must be avoided in the quest towards development. In his work, Balogun (2014:31) identifies anachronism, authoritarianism and supernaturalism as predominant elements in African culture which he regarded as dark shades in African culture. This is in consonance with Wiredu (1980:2), who notes that “there are many anachronistic ways and practices in Africa that refuse pavement for new insights and the innovativeness of modernity. Instances are mentioned such as political authoritarianism, binding force of custom and ancestral paternalism, belief in living-dead supernaturalism, unquestionable policies based on the whims and caprices. In addition Wiredu lists various cultural belief systems in Africa which must be jettisoned on the note of their belief they are not relevant to development. Reverence for ancestors and other departed relatives in African belief systems power capable of fact the living, elaborate rituals of mourning, the belief in varieties of spirits, fetishes (Wiredu, 1980:11). In addition to listed examples are female circumcisions in African culture and the various mythologies attached to twins. In analysis of the listed problems through philosophical lenses, one can say it comfortably and confidently that the position of the renown philosophers Wiredu (1980), and Balogun (2014) and their agitation to reject the such cultural aspects are same and in consonance with messages brought by the two ‘foreign religions’ Islam and Christianity.

Balogun (2014:38), notes that there are many aspects of traditional values that are anachronistic with some

unhappy consequences for human flourishing in contemporary times. In this sensibilities and nuances of some unflattering aspects of African culture religion in general, Islam in particular can help in distinguishing between the various interacting cultural elements and the values of African heritage by promoting the ones that are beneficial to African people through preaching and teaching. As pointed out in Balogun (2014:37) in Oduwole (2017: 12), truth telling, the uses of proverbs are components of religious beliefs in Islam and Christianity. Religious moral teachings are relevant to transforming modern African states and promote the moral and social status.

Religion is the best tool to inject moral values into African societies in constructing new values. Goodness to parent, respect to elders and obedience to the constituted authorities are well enshrined in the revealed books and all the followers of Abrahamic faiths are aware of these moral codes. Thus religion constitutes and provides building cells upon which super-structure of African community can be built. Without hesitation, religious instruments through its mechanism is a good antidote to removing or reducing to barest minimal the problems of social degeneration and decay. Religious education is another forum through which moral values can be passed to the citizens especially the young generation of people of Africa. It will instill in them at early stage of life. Through religious education, parents are informed better about their duty towards their children and children on the other hand should appreciate the gesture of parent through obedience and goodness to their parents especially at old age. When viewed objectively. Religious moral teachings keep people away from deadly sins that are enumerated in the revealed books, such as human Sacrifice, killings of twins ,etc

Worse still, twin infanticide was a common practice in Africa traditional belief, a widow is so held in contempt that she is made to sleep with corpse of her deceased husband and also drink from the bath of the corpse, all in an attempt to prove her innocence of the husband's death. (Opeloye, 2006:3). More so, in African social belief, women are labeled with witchcrafts and in most cases women are not allowed to go out during the celebration of African festivals, talkless of their participation. (Olajubu, 2003:647)

6. Findings of the Study

In the course of this research work, the following findings were made:

- African culture has a long history, and it has passed through different stages of development, from the Early Stone Age, Middle Stone Age and Late Stone Age.
- The economic shift from hunting-gathering to food production by means of Agriculture and stock-raising with human settlements marked the foundation of African culture.
- Human populations as a result of migrations have impact on the environments hence regional cultural variations were developed.
- Africa does not have a single culture; rather Africa is a multi-cultural continent, with a homeland of a distinct culture.
- Cultural change occurred as a result of various forms of contact elements of the Europeans, Africans and Indians interacted with each other, each is a recipient and donor in the exchange.
- There are some aspects of African culture that are questionable such as human sacrifice, killing of twins, belief in living dead etc.
- In spite of human progress in science and technology, human wisdom is not sufficient to bring success and happiness human beings still need the support and guidance of God which African people cannot be exempted.

7. Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is evident that Africa is a multicultural continent because of its multi-ethnic communities. African cultures have passed through different stages of development. In the course of cultural change, both diffusion and independent invention have played their part due to environmental need and opportunity, thus diffusion and culture borrowing have remained important for culture change in many parts of Africa, where culture transmission takes place. In making African culture remain relevant in our contemporary time, the paper maintains some aspects of African cultures that call for repudiation as rightly identified by scholars of philosophy. However, in our hope for African development, the paper recommends religion as appropriate tool for African development. This is so, because some of the questionable aspects of African cultures that call for repudiation are the elements of human cultures which Abrahamic faiths declared wars upon. Among these are human sacrifices, killings of twins, belief in living-death etc. that are capped as dark shades of African culture by Balogun (2014) and anachronistic ways and practices by Wiredu (1980). Therefore, application of religious

moral values is desideratum in our quest for African development. Even, the tagged ‘foreign religion’ Islam and Christianity have African elements in their foundational ideas. Biblical Moses (Prophet Musa (AS)) for instance was born and lived in Africa, Joseph (Prophet Yusuf) lived, served and became king in Africa. The holy Prophet Muhammad married African woman, and the first man to make call to prayer Bilal was an African man.

In all, this paper argues that human intellect or wisdom is not sufficient for happiness of humanity; as we need in addition, the support and guidance of our Creator with his fundamental principles of life which are enshrined in the revealed books.

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