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THE IMPACT OF MODERN CIVILIZATION ON SOCIO-POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT OF THE AFRICAN PEOPLE: AN IGBO COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of modern civilization on the socio-political and religious development of the African people using Igbo Community as an example. The study is descriptive in nature and as such, our source of data collection is secondary source. Content analysis was used to evaluate the information gathered. The paper agrees with the position of Akude (1992) that in every society, there are institutions and agencies which act as instruments for coordinating various socio-political and economic activities within such a society. It holds that the advent of modern civilization impacted positively on the socio-political and religious development of the Igbo people.

KEYWORDS: Modern Civilization African, Socio-Political, Religious Development

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the advent of modern civilization to African and in particular the Igbo land, the various ethnic groups in Nigeria such as the Igbo people, the Yoruba people and the Hausa-Fulani people had their various strategies for organizing the public affairs of their people as well as ensuring progress and development in their respective areas. There were traditional institutions through which the public affairs of the people were organized. In Igbo land, for example, the traditional institutions included the traditional rulers, the Age Grades, and the Umuadas. Others were the Council of Elders and the Village Assembly or the Oha-na-Eze. This fact was supported by the report of a committee of the Eastern Nigeria House of Assembly in 1948 quoted in Ogunna (1996:81). The report stated inter alia that:

The theory of Native Administration presupposes the existence of a degree of inherent authority capable of development to such an extent that it can provide for effective and efficient administration of the people, at all stages of progress

CONCEPTUAL ELUCIDATION

Politics and Social System

The political system of a place is believed to be determined or largely influenced by the political culture of that area. Political culture is said to be the values, identities, symbols and premises of society. Lucian Pye (1966) quoted in Das and Choudhury (2002:91) defines political culture as "the set of attitudes, beliefs and sentiments which give order and

meaning to political process and which provide the underlying assumptions and rules that govern behavior in the political system." According to Ball and Peters (2000:82) "a political culture is not static but will respond to new ideas generated from within the political system or imported or imposed from outside". It is perhaps, for this reason, that Ajayi and Ikara (1985:3) said that one of the values of exploring the evolution of political culture in Nigeria within its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural setting is to shed light on the extent to which some of the contradictions in Nigeria politics are due to clash of different norms which if better studied and understood, could each contribute something positive to the evolution of a truly Nigerian culture.
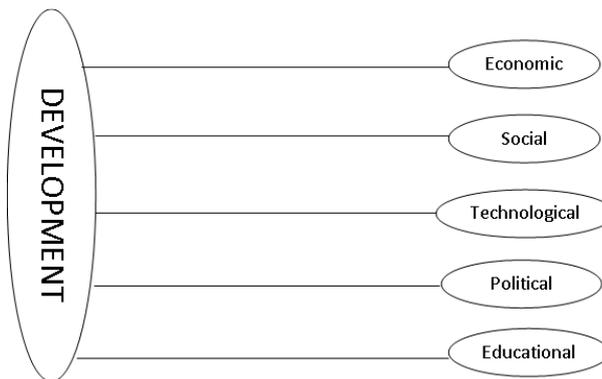
Religion

Religion is defined by Iain Maclean (1996: 426) as the worship of transcendent or supernatural beings whose existence is outside or above the realm of the normal, which is mortal and temporal. Religion is said to be of huge ethical significance. This is because what people ought to do is derivable from the existence, nature, and will of God. Iain Maclean (1996) posits that it would be difficult to be seriously religious in any sense without that religion determining some of one's political beliefs. He said that the most natural relation between religion and politics is one in which the most important political questions have religious answers such as the legitimacy or otherwise of regimes, the limits of a particular authority and the rightness or wrongness of legislation. The answers Maclean said could all be derived from religious revelation. He sees tradition as anything, which is typical of the past, customary or part of cultural identity. He further posits that tradition could include such diverse items as religious beliefs, sporting customs, linguistic practices, or dietary habits.

According to Cicero quoted in Das and Choudhury (2002: 289), "religion is a word which is derived from the verb 'religere' meaning to inflict pains on one self by means of repeated effort. Das and Choudhury quoting Lactantius, a teacher of Latin rhetoric in the first half of the fourth century said that the word religion derived from the word 'religiare' which means to bind together. Lactantius interpreted religion as essentially a 'bond of piety'. Das and Choudhury (2002) posited that the two interpretations (Cicero's and Lactantius) suggest the two-fold aspect of religion. On the objective side, they held that religion involves the recurring performance of certain human activities, while on the subjective side; it is the pat of the hidden experience of the psychic life. Religion for us here can be defined as a belief in the existence of a Supreme Being known as God who made heaven and earth and everything thereon and upon who every man looks up to for life, protection and progress.

Development

The word 'development' means different things to different people. Some people take it to mean change; others see it as advancement, improvement and progress. Some scholars see the term development as modernization or westernization. Many others argue that for the concept to be properly understood, it has to be pinned down to specific area of life such as economic, social, technological, political and educational development, and so on (Agalamanyi, 2009: 155). It can be demonstrated diagrammatically as shown below:

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Figure 1

Paralambora (1971) sees 'development' as a continuous process of positive change in the quality and span of life of a person or group of persons. This would include;

- Ability to feed, clothe and shelter oneself resulting from more income earned from ones occupation, telecommunications and from provision of infrastructural facilities like roads, water, electricity, telecommunications and improvement in other factors of production;

- Ability to live much longer life as a result of provision of health and medical facilities, prevention of diseases through better sanitation and other preventive measures;

- Ability to read, write and to understand forces surrounding one through provision of formal and informal education;

- Ability to participate meaningfully in political activities and in policy making at governmental level;

- Ability and willingness of an individual in a society to contribute his best in any form to the collective output of services from which he will in return receive services that enrich him materially, culturally and emotionally.

Graphically, development has indicators and these indicators can be shown as below;
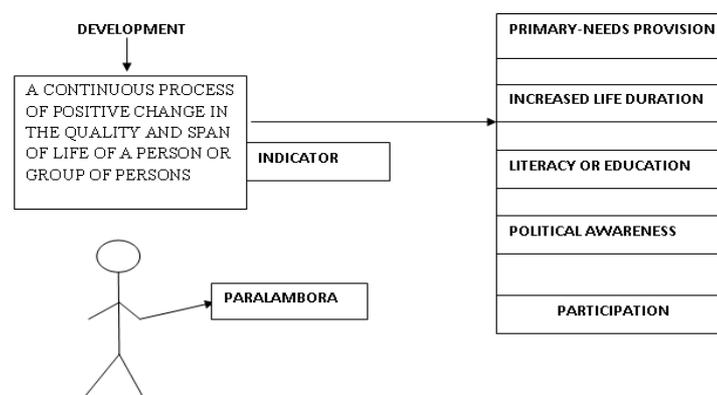
Source: Adapted from Oni and Ohiani: 1987:7

Figure 2

Walter Rodney (1974) defines 'development' as 'a many-sided process' implying for the individual 'increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility, and material well-being'. According to Gauba (2007: 477), people wish to make best use of their natural and human resources in order to achieve their social ends.

He explains that the process which facilitates their effort in this direction is called 'development'; and the factors which hinder them in this effort are called 'underdevelopment'.

The Igbo People

The Igbo people inhabit the forest belt area between the Cross River east of the River Niger and Benin West of the Niger. According to Onwubiko (1986: 107), the dominant physical feature of most of Igbo country is thick tropical forest. This physical environment has greatly influenced the history of the Igbo people. This thick forest provided excellent natural defense against invasions from external invaders. There was no conquest of the Igbo people which could have influenced the socio-cultural development of the area as was the case with the Fulani conquest of Hausa land and parts of Northern Nigeria and northern Yoruba land. Secondly, the inaccessible nature of the forest made mobility and communication among the Igbo's themselves impossible. Hence, no one Igbo group was able to unite the people under one government through conquest. These reasons explain the non-evolvement of a centralized polity as was the case with Yoruba land. Another important reason was that the Igbo people are by nature extremely egalitarians and individualistic. They love personal freedom and strongly resent autocratic government over them. They enjoy living in small village republics.

The government and administrative system of the Igbo was a peculiar one. The society was made up of many clans, each clan comprising people who spoke similar dialect and have certain distinctive social and religious customs, traditions and institutions. A clan is divided into villages, the village or lineage is made up of people from ancestor. A village is further sub-divided into kindred, a kindred comprises a number of families who claim descent from a great grandfather. The village was the basic unit of political organization in Igbo and. Village government is carried out through two institutions – Council of Elders and the Village Assembly. The Council of Elders consists of heads of families who hold the "Ofo" or staff of authority symbolizing the collective will of the people and the sanction of the ancestors. The Village Assembly consists of every grown up male in the village.

Ukaegbu (2005: 81) discussing the Igbo customs pointed out that "the highest religious institution in Igbo land prior to the advent of Europeans is the 'Ofo' (God of Justice) under the priesthood of 'Aka jiOfo'. Issues pertaining to customs, traditions and rituals were referred to the Council of Elders, while important matters of policy affecting the life of the villagers were decided by the Village Assembly. The meetings of the Village Assembly were not regular. The Assembly met in the village market square when necessary at the sounding of the village gong. Like the Assembly of the Athenian citizens in ancient Greece, every grown up male had the right to air his views on a matter under discussion. Discussions were reached not by voting but by a consensus. Generally speaking, the government in Igbo land in pre-colonial times was essentially democratic, and each village was a small republic. However, the Igbo of Onitsha and West of the River Niger were notable exceptions to this general pattern. In these areas, some form of monarchical institution said to have been inherited from Benin has been preserved in the as the Obi of Onitsha, Obi of Aboh, and Obi of Agbor. These Obis like the Oba of Benin governed through a Council of titled notable known in Onitsha as the Nidichie or Red Cap Chiefs.

In the administration of justice, the democratic approach was also used. The making of laws, the settlement of disputes and the punishment of offenders were not left to a selected jury but to the whole Village Assembly. In the event of more serious cases which the Village Assembly could not easily resolve, oracles such as the Igwekala of Omunoha near Owerri, the Amadioha of Ozuzu and the Agbala of Awka or the Chukwu of Arochukwu were consulted and their verdicts

were final and indisputable. Ukaegbu (2005: 84) commenting on the legal system of the Igbo people prior to the coming of the Europeans noted that 'the ancient Igbo had no earthly king; God was their King. This is the foundation on which the Igbos built their worship of the 'God of Justice'. Through effective management of life on a daily basis, any unusual occurrence was investigated. The very mysterious ones were referred to the Diviner at Arochukwu'. The Age grades were responsible for carrying out of social services of the village. Therefore, the notable features of the pre-colonial government and administration in Igbo land were:

- **Democracy:** This is identified not only with the people's right to govern their own affairs but with the belief that individual rights should be observed;

- **Republicans:** Each village was a small republic. The Igbo society was a cephalouss. They did not have any particular figure one could point at as their Leader; and

- **Equity and Justice**: Dispensing justice with fairness and fear of God.

The Age Grade

According to Akude (1992:316), 'the age grade is a very important organ of social structure especially in our traditional Nigerian communities.' The formation and membership of an age grade is much revered activity. It is a universal social institution that is highly appreciated by various communities. Akude notes that 'over the years age grades in different communities have distinguished themselves in performing such roles that aim at enhancing the socio-economic life of the people.' They help in such traditional functions as maintenance of law and order, settlement of disputes between warring members, construction and maintenance of roads and markets, ensuring the cleanliness of the local streams and above all, protecting their communities from external aggression.

Olowu and Erero (1997:6) noted that 'in communities for instance, where the age grade system is very strong, non-resident community members cannot avoid going home periodically to participate in the activities of their age grades, for the age grades define a person's status in the community.' A person who is not processed through the age grade system cannot function in any meaningful way n the community.

The Umuada

In the pre-colonial era, among the Igbo people, women were held sacred and they participated in collective decision making on certain sensitive issues that touched on their interest. They do this through an institutional group known as Out Umuada. Njoku (1974) observed that the members of the Out Umuada were dynamic, powerful and were well respected by their communities. They were at times regarded by some as guardians of the village traditions. Nelson (1972) while appreciating the contributions of women in that era noted that they (Umuada) often intervened whenever the constitution of the village was violated and they imposed sanctions on offenders.

Women were even one of the forces that check-mated the incursion of the colonial imperialists in Nigeria. The colonial masters were not comfortable and their historians and recorders wrote on that. The reaction of the colonialists was captured in Rose (1965: 97) thus – for the first time in our imperial history, we were faced with and insulted by mobs of irate women, who marched up and down the country decrying our rule and pulling down local institution of our authority.

The Igbo traditional society has some problems of underdevelopment. Most young people who now crowd our cities come from villages in the rural areas which they have abandoned because of lack of essential amenities such as water, electricity, motorable roads, health centres and good educational institutions. But these traditional societies have not been without development no matter the snail speed. Under the ages of the traditional rulers, the people are mobilized to build roads, schools, hospitals markets and rural water and electricity projects.

Individuals pursue various trades like trading, blacksmithing etc. In all, the basic occupation of the people is farming. Other occupations include fishing (for people in the riverine areas), hunting, and crafts.

Impact of Modern Civilization on the Traditional Igbo Community

The appreciation of the impact of modern civilization on the Igbo traditional society will be hinged on the following sub-themes:

- Rulership in the Igbo society today

- Religious practices, and

- Socio-economic and political environment of the Igbo society

Rulership in the Igbo Society

The Igbo traditional society never had a single pyramidal system of government. They lived in a small village communities often described as village democracies. They were democracies in the sense that the government of the communities was the concern of all. There was no purely political or governmental organization and there was no clearly delimited sphere of political affairs. As observed by Emezi (1985: 95), "the Igbo traditional society being basically segmentary, central government within each relatively autonomous unit was a federation of equivalent segments, each of which retained a large measure of power and authority". Emezi (1985) emphasized that "among the Igbo, religion, law justice and politics are inextricably bound. Law and custom were believed to have been handed down from the spirit world and, from time immemorial, from ancestor to ancestor". The issue of rulership or chieftaincy today is a serious business among the people of Nigeria, especially among the Igbo people where the selection and in some cases election of an Igwe or Eze has generated controversies and litigations.

According to Emezi (1985: 94), Chieftaincy today in Nigeria is identified as an institutionalized expression of powerful traditional interests. It provides a platform for criticisms of existing administrative and political innovations which are part of the process of political development. The institution has become a channel of political participation in the ever-changing political cosmos in the country.

Broadly speaking, traditional rulers in Nigeria are of two main categories. The first, and most influential, refers to the holders of full-time executive traditional titles who were rulers or offsprings of rulers in the past and who are revered by their communities. This category is called "natural rulers" and they are found in the Northern, Western and other parts of Nigeria. The second category is holders of honorific titles bestowed on them by their communities or by a superior (political) authority. This category was termed 'Chiefs'. It is really this second category that is found in most of the Igboland under such titles as 'Igwe' and 'Eze'. They were creation of the British which started with the Warrant Chief System.

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The advent of the Whiteman and his introduction of the warrant chief system altered greatly the process of rulership. The process of adjudication was changed as initially native courts and later customary courts were established.

Religious Practices

Religion and politics were merged and seen as one in Igbo traditional society. But with the process of modernization, there was demarcation of the two. We now have three religions, namely Christianity, Islam and traditional religion. Even among the Christians, we now have the Pentecostals or what have you. The Christians now regard the traditional religion believers as people who do not know God. The elders are no more seen as spiritual heads of their villages. The herbalists, medicine men, soothsayers are now seen as agents of darkness. The herbalists who really practice as a result of their knowledge of herbs and roots are regarded as useless because they do not subject their drugs to our modern day scientific process.

Shrines, deities and oracles with their priests are now agents of darkness. People who patronize them are equally seen in the like manner.

Socio-Economic and Political Environment of the Igbo Society

Socially and economically, we must admit that our people are much better-off today. The advent of the Whiteman brought about western education which enhanced the social and economic growth of the people. Politically, the process is that of mixed feelings. In one hand, the process of modernization widened the political base of everybody in the society but on the other hand, it created an opportunity for dubious and people of questionable character to mount the stool of political leadership in our societies.

CONCLUSIONS

There was no separation of religious and political leadership in a typical traditional Igbo community and this was as a result of the belief in the existence of a Supreme Being who makes all things happen the way they do. The people observed the society norms, moral values and traditions. People naturally observed the societal values as any deviation could incur the anger of the gods and the ancestors. This has been an important social control mechanism in traditional Igbo community as nobody would like to incur the displeasure of the gods.

However, the advent of British colonialists brought about many changes in the land. Some of these changes like in the socio-economic sphere brought about tremendous progress and development in our societies. The separation of religion from the political authority has not helped matters. It created opportunity for people of questionable character to occupy high positions in the land.

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