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Chapter Seven

Development in Africa: Cultural, Ethical and Religious Considerations

Statement of the Problem

For a long time now, many have conceived development solely in economic and technological terms. The religious, cultural, and ethical dimensions were seldom recognized. Seldom did experts consider that religious and cultural conditions are important for any development strategy that is geared towards human promotion. The failure of so many development projects and strategies and the consequent critiques or rejection of the very idea of development by many in recent times can be attributed largely to this lopsided and anti-cultural understanding of development. The euphoria of modernization carried many African countries with their elite away. Consequently, they lost touch with original sources of African culture; but they did not succeed to become European. The wisdom saying among the Igbo applies “people who do not look back to posterity, cannot look forward to prosperity”. The development models conceived in western nations and transported to African Nations failed woefully. Attempts by people of non-western cultures to develop themselves according to their priorities and their own innovative rationality have all too often been dismissed as irrelevant. Efforts at cultural authenticity have in many cases been repressed in spite of the cosmetic and external show of readiness for inter-cultural dialogue.

However, there is a growing agreement today that there is much scope for closer investigation of the ways in which development choices are sustained in their turn by religious world-views of widely differing cultural origins. By way of analogy, one could draw from a reminder the need to search for innovative potentials from the cultures of the third world that have the ability to carry on and sustain a self-reliant and independent, rationalization and modernization process. Because of the specific affinity of religion to rationality, Max Weber accorded religion a primary role in this process of rationalization and modernization and this is what could be new in the contextual reading of Weber’s writings considered in other cultures. It is not just the transfer of economy or technology from the west to African nations

that is at stake; rather, it is the search for categories for the definition and evaluation of cultural, ethical and religious conditionality relevant for the development and modernization potentials of Africa. The evidence of cultural change attests to the well-known fact that culture is not static. As society develops and history progresses, people interact and modify existing traditions to suit new situations. Cultural change therefore is a constant challenge for one to redefine one's identity anew. This challenge can hold where there is a preservation of cultural continuity. This is the "internal logic" which, according to Weber, is the basis of all societal rationalization.

Thus mastery cannot be achieved only through economic or technological transfer. What we need in Africa are avenues for creating a basis for categories necessary for the determination of religious and cultural conditions of development potential. This would form the base upon which a society could revolve. Consequently authentic development is given ethical, cultural and religious grounding.

Development in the Context of Africa

Africa is a continent of striking features and embarrassing paradoxes and contradictions. It is the second largest continent in the world and perhaps the richest continent in terms of natural resources and potential wealth. Yet, Africa is perhaps also the weakest continent on the globe. Her sons and daughters rank amongst the poorest of the world and her societies among the least developed. It is peripheral in the world's geo-politics and economics; and is characterized by the paradoxes of rehabilitation, acculturation, fragmentation, retardation and location.

Socio-Economic Environment:

In the socio-economic sphere, the African condition is a painful and disgracefully reality, a distressing scene of a vast majority of desperately poor people living side by side with an aristocratic, privileged and shamelessly opulent few. In its mid-term review of Africa's recovery programme (1985-1990) an ad hoc United Nations Committee submitted that:

The African situation is characterized by unsustainable, crushing burdens of external debt, substantial declines in export earnings due to several depressed commodity prices and significant decline in resource transfers and private investment and land.

As in the rest of the third world, this situation is traceable to two broad categories of reasons: one, natural factors of inclement conditions and,

secondly, human factors of an unjust world economic order, corruption and the incompetence of political office holders. For, as Paul Harrison points out, *“the astronomical order is as unfair to the third world as the economic order”*

Problems of Africa’s Geographical Location

At the centre of this “unfair astronomical order” is the unrelenting sun whose debilitating rays fall with unremitting intensity on the world with the two tropics, Cancer and Capricorn, cutting across the continent and making of it the world’s hottest zone comparable in heat only to some of the desert areas of Asia. To be habitable, the earth has to maintain a radiation balance; that is, to reflect back as much heat as it receives from the sun. Different parts of the globe, however, do not do so at the same rate. The temperate zones have a radiation deficit, sending back more heat than they receive, while the hot zones have radiation surplus, absorbing more heat than they return. A balance is maintained through a global weather machine consisting of winds, rains and storms.

All the poor nations of the world including virtually all of Africa belong to the hot zones and pay a high price for holding mankind’s “front line” against the sun. Most parts of Africa have a temperature average of well over 25 degrees Celsius at which level humus is broken down much more quickly than it forms. The effect is that most parts do not have good agricultural soil. There is an explosion of life from hostile animals to humans. For example, mosquitoes, tsetse flies, black flies, sand-flies along with their diseases, which weaken or kill humans, wilt and blight their plants, eat up crops alive in the fields or quietly feast on them in granaries and storerooms. Finally, Africa suffers from an irate pattern of rainfall. It is always the typical tropical weather: “never moderate, always extreme. Too much rain or too little”. This, too, is linked to the tropical sun. The net result of all this is that several parts of the continent get flooded and suffer drought at different times of the year. The floods create enormous erosion problems with gaping gullies dotting the landscape in several parts of the continent, and the attendant loss of arable lands and plant nutrients.

Human Factors Impeding Africa’s Integral Development

The human angle to Africa’s deplorable socio-economic status can be divided into two: the external factors of an unjust world economic order and the international division of labour, and the internal factors of corruption, incompetence and mismanagement. The external factors are easily traceable to Africa’s colonial past and neo-colonial present. The success of the 19th century industrial revolution in Europe created the need for ready markets

and secure sources of raw materials for her nascent capitalist and industrial economies. Slave trade was forcibly suppressed. At the instance of the then German Chancellor, Von Bis-Marck, the infamous Berlin Conference (1884-85) was held during which African colonies were divided and made the dumping ground for European industrial manufactures and the economies of Africa were carefully tailored to meet European industrial needs.

World War II (1939-45) generated sufficient momentum for nationalistic demands for change, which brought political independence to most countries of Africa in the 1960s. This momentum was however, not strong enough to alter the essentials of colonial economic relations with the west. The essence of the colonial order was the exploitation of the “men and materials” of the colonies for the benefit of the metropolis. In the past, colonial administrators supervised Africa’s production of raw materials and minerals for European industries. Today, under the dutiful supervision of native leaders, African still produces raw materials and extracts minerals which are hauled away mainly to western industrial nerve-centres.

Thus, the exploitation continues on two broad platforms, through an international division of labour effected during colonialism which assigned to Africa the task of producing low-priced minerals and raw materials; and through an unjust economic order in which the west determines, much to African’s disadvantage, the prices of our own exports as well as their own industrial manufactures.

The Kenyan novelist, Ngugu Wa Thiongo in his book, *Devil on the Cross* graphically portrays the nature of this unhealthy relationship of exploitation in a moving parable about a peasant farmer and an ogre. He writes:

The old man told me of a peasant farmer who used to carry an ogre on his back. The ogre had sunk its long nails into the neck and shoulders of the peasant. The peasant was the one who went to the fields to get food, the one who went into the valleys to fetch water, the one who went to the forest to get firewood and the one who did the cooking. The ogre’s job was to eat and thereafter to sleep soundly on the back of the peasant who became progressively thinner and more depressed at heart. The ogre prospered and flourished, the extent of being inspired to sing hymns that exhorted the peasant to endure his lot on earth with fortitude for he would later find his rest in heaven. One day, the peasant went to a diviner. The diviner told him that the solution

was for the peasant to boil some oil and to pour it on the nails of the ogre when he was fast asleep. The peasant said: "what if I should burn my back". The diviner said, nothing good was ever born of perfect conditions. Go home". The peasant was saved from death only when he did what he had been advised to do by the diviner.

Our continent has found neither the pluck nor the wits to free itself from the stranglehold of various exploitative tendencies. Nothing demonstrates the truth of this affirmation more clearly than the insuperable debt burdens of the various nations of Africa. It is, according to Babu, a pathetic situation of "institutionalized colonialism". By 1985, the total debts of sub-Saharan Africa were put at between 130 and 135 billion dollars. Reports by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Bank for International Settlements indicate that by the end of 1984, Nigeria, Sudan, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Congo and Mauritania owed net debts of 20.8b, 7.1b, 2.1b and 1.8b dollars respectively to western creditors. These debts average at \$1, 170, \$1, 230 and \$2, 003 per head in Mauritania, Congo and Gabon respectively.

Today, Africa's worsening economic crisis has resulted in the deepening of her debt crisis. In Nigerian, for example, the total external debts have risen from 20.8 billion dollars in 1984 to 32.2 billion dollars by the end of 1990. Nigeria spent over 3.2 billion Naira in servicing those debts. Far more worrisome and, perhaps, more damaging than any harm done from without either by nature or by the human agent is the sufferings which Africa's political leaders and public office holders inflict on their people through a growing culture of corruption, mismanagement and gross incompetence. Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, whose history is said to be "a story of missed opportunities, of how a nation could snatch defeat from the jaws of victory" will suffice for an illustration. Assessing Nigeria's thirty years of nationhood, C. Don Adinuba writes:

Mobilization and utilization of human resources have become the world's technology and economic miracle, Nigeria has an abundance of natural resources, but owing to gross inefficiency in management, remains a typical "third world" country. Unlike the mountainous South Korea whose arable land is only 22 percent of its 98, 484 square kilometer but today exports food, Nigeria with 87 percent of its 923,768 square kilometers arable, import food items. Unlike Malaysia which some three decades ago began to plant Nigerian palm trees and cocoa seeds in its soil and has since

become the world's largest exporters of palm produce and coca, Nigeria has in the recent past had cause to import palm oil from the Asian country. Unlike the Arab countries which have used their petro-dollars to invest massively in different countries, thereby diversifying their revenue sources, Nigeria, at the height of its oil boom in the 1970's... preferred to play Father Christmas by paying the salaries of striking workers in the Caribbean, by sponsoring expensive jamborees and embarking on white elephant projects with its head of state telling the world that money is not our problem but how to spend it".

These white elephants or abandoned projects can be seen scattered around the country and are valued at several billions of Naira. In Kaduna state alone, the total value of abandoned projects was placed at 5.5 billion Naira in 1987. It is thus the case that after three decades of independence and the launching of five national development plans, Nigeria still lacks most of the basic amenities of a modern state, dependable sources of good drinking water, steady supply of electricity, mass-transit systems and good roads. Most Nigerians still live either in rural huts or in urban slums under very poor sanitary conditions. More than 30% of school age children are not in school because their parents cannot afford the fees paid in the nation's poorly equipped and ill-staffed primary and secondary schools. Yet, Nigeria has spent billions of Naira importing five-star hotels, modern stadia and television stations, and more than fifteen non-viable local airports and three international airports.

Millions of scarce foreign exchange has also been wasted in sponsoring expensive sports jamborees, unnecessary foreign travels by ministers and government officials and in maintaining bloated foreign services around the world. With the growth of profligacy in government spending, corruption in public office has also increased. In 1983, for example, the then communications minister, Mr. Audu Ogbeh, in a newspaper interview, revealed to a bewildered nation that Nigeria was losing 50 million Naira monthly in the Post and Telecommunication department as salaries to non-existent workers. In order words, in one year, Nigeria would have lost a whopping 600 million Naira in this single racket alone. And, of course, that says nothing of corruption and looting in other federal ministries and in the civil service of the twenty one states of the federation nor does it speak of the Customs department and of the private sector.

In sum, the above factors: inclement weather, an unfair world economic order, corruption, incompetence and mismanagement in public office, political instability have combined to drive Africa into a very severe socio-economic crisis. Consequently, hunger and malnutrition are the greatest killers in Africa. According to figures provided by the United Nation's Economic for Africa, 100 million African, a quarter of the continent's population, get less than 80 percent of their daily food needs, while thousand, died every day from malnutrition. This situation reached a climatic head in 1984/85 and 1991/92 with several hundreds of thousands dying of hunger and starvation in Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia. Only the effective intervention of the international community and the highly successful fund-raising efforts of leading pop musicians prevented catastrophe from reaching the proportions of the Nazi holocaust. Human misery of such proportions calls for a programme of development that is ethically grounded.

Development Cooperation and Ethical Propositions

The problems of the north and the south are interlinked. Many of the problems that exist in the south and characterize the so-called "under-development" are also to be found in the north, for example, destruction of the environment, health problems, refugees. Many of the goals that have been set in the context of cooperative development work for the south are equally important for the north, for example, strengthening democratic structures, environmentally supportable food production. A lot of the problems that currently exist in the south can be traced back to structures and modes of behavior found in north, for example, the debt problem, unequal trade relations, culture alienation.

Development must take place in the north and in the south simultaneously and on a reciprocal basis. "Development" can no longer be understood as something that is almost exclusively necessary for the so-called developing countries. Cooperation development work can no longer be regarded as something that is applied by the North to the South. Cooperate work only make sense and is justifiable when it is viewed from a global standpoint and when its activities are defined on reciprocal basis. Development has to be redefined through a more democratic process, socially, politically and economically with simultaneous interdependent changes in the north and in the south. For example, the analysis of the problems, the discovery of the potentials and the definition of the goals in a particular area must take place simultaneously with regard to the north and to the south. Parallel measures to realize the collectively defined aims have to be undertaken in the west as well as in the third world.

Interference in Foreign Society is justifiable on the Basis of Reciprocity

The dominance of the north over the south is based on economic and military supremacy. A solely economic viewpoint that prevails in cooperation development has thereby justified the one-sided interference by the north. This standpoint reflects a hidden Euro-centric ideology that requires the south to evolve along the same lines as the North and accepts the “logic” of market-based economic thinking. The industrialized countries are regarded as the center of the world and the model to which the developing countries as marginal and subordinated areas are adjoined. It is in this sense that cooperative work has to be decolonized.

Cooperative Development Work requires new Forms of Communication and Analysis

Development is a complex social process in which a very large number of different influences and powers interfere. Cultural, social, emotional and symbolic aspects are therefore as important as the economic dimension. Development models cannot completely take account of the role played by these powers. For comprehensive cooperative development work the intensification and distinction of the communication between partners in the north and the south is important. Democratically organized structures and forms of communication and analysis have to be developed cooperatively, in which vision, openness and willingness to learn have a place, and values as measured by the north do not dominate. This also requires that existing power differences are made transparent and subject of discussion.

Cooperative Development Work has to be engaged in just Distribution

The worldwide prevalence of the market economy system also integrates the so-called developing countries more strongly into the world market. The exception is the poorest countries that tend to be dissociated from the world economy. Attempts at delinking from the world market as a chance to pursue self-reliant development, have to lead to a dead one. It is the task of cooperative development work to counteract the continuing concentration of economic power in the north. The aims in the south as in the north are the limitation of unchecked market forces, the redistribution of power and wealth at all levels and the strengthening of local and regional structure.

Decision Making to Lie with Mixed Bodies

The competence to take decisions has to lie with bodies in which south and north have equal representation. The democratic functioning of these organs and the realization of common criteria for the implementation of the measures have to be guaranteed.

The Interdependence of Problems of the North and the South Demand Specific Strategies for Resolution

Cooperative work between two countries, regions, partners can in practice take on different forms: Change will be realized by targeted measures that have positive effect on global problems. For examples, alliance with the same objectives between partners in the north and south that attain the goal through the use of specific measures, for example, the reduction of carbon monoxide emissions. In both regions, appropriate measures should be adopted to improve a situation that has a particularly negative effect in the south although the problem is rooted in the north. For example, the prevention of the flight of capital from a third world country to Switzerland.

Cooperative Development Work is not only the Business of Aid Organization

Cooperative development work that is based on double approach cannot remain the business of aid organizations alone. It demands cooperation with movements, organizations and institutions in the north and in the south, that are accordingly active in the area. Governments, Churches, trade unions, etc, cannot delegate the responsibility for balanced development between north and south to aid organizations. The aim of this broad based cooperation is an improved coherence in the relationship between the west and the countries of the third world.

Making Contacts are Concrete Ways of Gaining New Experiences

The simultaneous realization of activities that are by their definition interlinked makes possible a broader exchange between groups, organizations, villages and towns in the north and in the south. This means a further development in initial links that already exist today. What is important is the development of networks between individual projects and their foundation within a global framework.

NOTES

1. Max Weber, *Gesammelte Audratze Zur Wissenschaftslehre*, 3. Auflage, Tübingen, 1968, 594.
2. A.A. Mazurui, *The African Condition*, London: 1982, p. 116.

3. Quoted in L. Salim, "Tough Compromise on African's Economic Crisis" in *West Africa* No. 3721, London, and Dec. 5 – 11, 1988, p. 2286.
4. P. Harrison, *Inside the Third World*, London: 1988, p. 22.
5. Loc. Cit.
6. Ibid. pp. 23-24
7. R. Watson, "Current Food Conditions", in *Africa: A Season for Hope*, ed. by W.D. Roberts, (California, 1985), and p. 48.
8. Harrison, op. Cit., p. 24
9. Ibid, p. 25
10. Ngugi W.T., *Devil on the Cross-*, London: 1988, p. 62.
11. A.N. Babu, "A more Sinister Form of Colonialism" *Africa Now*, 31:30-11, Nov. 1983, p. 31.
12. E.C. Ngwoke. *The Crisis of Underdevelopment in Africa*, Unpublished B. Phil. Thesis, Ikot Ekpene, 1986, p. 26.
13. C.D. Adinuba "Nigeria: The Making of a Nation" *African Commentary*, Dec/Jan. 1990-91, p. 35.
14. See C. Achebe. *The Trouble with Nigeria*, (Enugu, 1983), p. 39.
15. See *Newswatch*, Lagos March 5, 1990, p. 16.