

INDIGENOUS INSTITUTIONS AND SUSTAINABILITY OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL COMMUNITIES FOR GLOBAL COMPETITIVENESS

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Abstract

In spite of a modern national political organizational system, the majority of the people in Africa especially in most parts of rural areas are still organized around their indigenous institutions for carrying out the activities that are important for their development and well-being. In fact, civil society in rural Africa is embedded within their indigenous institutions, philosophy and systems. These institutions are key to the organization of people at the rural level for their political and socio-economic development. These institutions have however been largely ignored by both colonial and post-colonial governments in the development equation in Africa in favour of western-framed institutions. In spite of all the good attributes that can be accorded western-styled institutions, they do not capture the worldviews and wellbeing aspirations of rural communities. This paper argues that western-oriented institutions are exclusionary and leave out the bulk of Africa's human resources (indigenous institutions) in the development process. This situation is an important contributing factor to the demise of Africa's development. This paper seeks to demonstrate the existence and efficacy of indigenous institutions in Africa that could form the basis for organizing rural communities to lead Africa's development process globally. It places the value of indigenous institutions within the context of endogenous development and describes indigenous institutions in Nigeria and their contributions to community development in the country. It concludes by giving some policy directions on an endogenous approach to development in Africa that is premised on mobilizing, revitalizing and re-valoring Africa's indigenous Institutions as the boon for engagement with the global village.

Keywords: *Indigenous Institutions, Sustainability, African Traditional Communities, Global Competitiveness, Development.*

Introduction

The history of Africa's Indigenous ways of knowing and knowledge production did not begin with the coming of Western knowledge systems, and neither should their future depend exclusively on Western and other worldviews. Like other human societies across the globe, African indigenous societies have, for centuries, developed their own sets of experiences and explanations relating to the environments they live in.¹ This is due to the fact that the way learning is perceived and how people actually learn is culturally specific. Different cultures have different ways and experiences of social reality and, hence, learning.² This is influenced by their worldview and belief systems of the natural environment, including the socio-economic and ecological context of their livelihood. These culturally and locally specific ways of knowing and knowledge production are often referred to as traditional, ecological, community, local knowledge systems, among others. They encompass sophisticated arrays of information, understanding, and interpretation that guide interactions with the natural milieu: in agriculture and animal husbandry, hunting, fishing, natural resource management, conflict transformation, health, the naming and explanation of natural phenomena, and strategies to cope with fluctuating environments.³

Indigenous Institution

While most scholars and practitioners agree on basic issues such as the usefulness of traditional knowledge in the local cultural and environmental settings, what should be explored is the role that the concept of traditional knowledge plays in facilitating or discouraging cross-situational collaboration among actors working for indigenous and non-indigenous institutions of environmental governance such as local natural resources regimes, state agencies working with these regimes and co-management boards.⁴ This view fits well in the widely utilized construct of indigenous knowledge which state that:

It is a cumulative body of knowledge, practice and belief evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through the generations by cultural transmission about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment.⁵

Indigenous institutions have been defined to include norms and procedures that shape people's actions. These procedures define practices, assign roles and guide interactions. Examples of these traditional institutions include traditional leadership, traditional healers, ritual forests, traditional midwives and various taboos and sacred sites and practices. These institutions play key role in the management of natural resources through different form of indigenous technical knowledge.⁶ Both local and other literatures identify three key features that characterize the indigenous resources management: first is the indigenous social organization that controls access to natural resources within the community. Second has the customary norms and procedures for control, acquisition, maintenance and transfer for natural resources and finally is the indigenous utilization techniques for conserving and preserving resources.⁷

Whereas institutions have generally included codes⁸ of conduct that define practices, assign roles and guide interactions, these institutions are made up of formal constraints (rules, laws and constitutions), informal constraints (norms, behaviour, conventions and self-imposed codes of conduct) and their various enforcement characteristics.⁷ Local institutions differ based on their functions and objectives. They encompass many different types of indigenous organizations and functions such as village-level governance, acceptable methods of community resource mobilization, security arrangements, conflict resolution, and asset management and lineage organizations. It is against this background that the World Bank's framework considers indigenous knowledge as the basis for local decision-making in all aspects of life—food production, education, health, natural resource management and relationships.⁹

Indigenous Institutions in Nigeria

In many local communities in Nigeria, peoples' cultures affect their perception and relationship with physical and natural environment. In several indigenous communities in Nigeria (like other African societies), indigenous culture is manifest in several component characteristics that transpose into environmental responsibilities and duties not only among present generations in the communities but also unborn children who would be members of such communities by birth. Intergenerational sustainability consciousness (i.e. concerns for the needs and interests of future generations) is deeply rooted in traditional African communities and often extends to non-human objects like rivers, trees, etc.¹⁰ African cultural traditions impose a kind of duty as trustees or stewards of the resources and natural environment on community leaders for both present and future generation.

Traditional knowledge in Nigerian communities, like other African communities, refers to beliefs and perceptions, values and norms, customs and behaviours of the society.¹¹ Culture to local communities in Nigeria is an expression of what the people believe to be true world, their lives, including natural environment and resources and also sets rules, beliefs and societal standards for the local people vis-à-vis the natural environment and god-given resources. Several cultural practices in local communities in Nigeria relate to "God" as the giver of and owner of natural resources (god-given natural resources) and see theirs as a duty to manage god-given resources and environment in a way that would be pleasing unto "God" and for future use by subsequent generations. In most traditional communities in Nigeria, inability to harvest sustainably is taken as evidence of the wrath of God on violators of the taboos and its impacts may extend beyond environmental vicissitudes. Expensive sacrifices are often undertaken to dispel the anger of God in these regards. These practices exist in the Yoruba, Tiv, Igbo and several other local communities in Nigeria and several other African countries.¹² Like other societies, traditional cultural-knowledge is also used to indicate that cognitions, feelings and behaviours are shared among the Nigerian traditional people in a consensual way. By

implication, these shared beliefs, values, and styles of environmental behaviours are passed on to their children, and continues by way of socialization and education of new members of the cultural communities which helps to preserve traditional consensus from one generation to the next and generally aid the process of cultural identification and internalizing the philosophy of the people in the society or the nation.

Cultural identification and internalizations among local Nigerians in resource use manifest in diverse ways but most of them are properly contextualized within the confines of intergenerational sustainability. Dominant among such traditional-indigenous environmental and natural resource systems and practices are land ownership, farming, fishing, mineral resource management, agricultural systems, logging and tree conservation, rivers and marine conservation. It also includes inheritance and intergenerational consciousness, the legal personality of unborn child and right to inherit resources like farm-land, fishing ponds, artisanal mineral-sites, among others. However, in addition to the above practices, attempt is also made below to identify some well-cherished ceremonies, worship, appeasement and related practices. This aspect includes indigenous practices concerning rivers, mountains, trees, plants and others as they affect environmental and natural resource utilization, conservation or management under traditional indigenous systems and the scope of local consciousness in such practices as they affect the right of unborn children within the spheres of environmental management and resource use.

The attitude of the local people to agriculture and farming including plant and animal is hallowed in sustainability. For example, the sustainability aspect of the *New yam* festival among the Igbo of eastern Nigeria lies in the reservation of vital parts of the new yam harvested in the previous season for consecration unto gods for bounty harvest in the coming season. This cultural practice here referred is well illustrated in one of Chinua Achebe's books titled *Things fall Apart*.¹³ This practice could also be likened to tithing in the Bible.¹⁴ This cultural practice ensures continuity of production in a most traditionally compatible way while also ensuring non-degradation of *God-given* natural resources for future use by subsequent generations.

It is also a sustainability taboo among the Yoruba of the Southwest Nigeria to refuse to offer sacrifice to the god of water or cocoa trees to avoid incurring its wrath the next season. Practices similar to the above also exist to ensure environmentally friendly use of *God-given* natural resources for both present and future generations. In the above communities, inability to harvest sustainably is taken as evidence of the wrath of god on violators of the taboos and its impacts may extend beyond environmental vicissitudes. Sustainable conservation also exists among the Tiv of North-Central Nigeria. In this community, bees are reared (though considered a dangerous adventure, the insect never harms the local people but non-natives of the community). This practice is to replenish the valuable commercial insects and ensure sustainability.¹⁵

The Argungu fish festival is a celebration of culture and tradition which exists in Northern Nigeria for fishermen whose activities are mainly in the river. (For the record, Argungu community is historically known as fishing communities. Argungu, in Northern Nigeria, hosts an internationally-acclaimed fishing contest to mark the end of the growing season and the harvest. The event involves such challenges as barehanded fishing, wild duck hunting, swimming, diving, wrestling contests, an arts and craft exhibition and traditional music and entertainment. Thousands of fishermen come to test their skills at this event, where the barehanded fishing competition is the star of the show. The fishermen are equipped with a hand net and large gourd with which to reap the fruits of the Sokoto River. Prizes are awarded to those with the biggest catches in all disciplines. The whole affair is taken very seriously; so much so that fishing is banned along a one-mile stretch of the Sokoto throughout the year so that there will be plenty of fish for this annual fishing frenzy).¹⁶ The magnitude of fish display and cultural implications of the festival leaves no one in doubts as to the existence of ingrained traditional practices of managing and preserving fishes. It is a taboo and established in customary law that particular brand of fishes are not to be poked. This act is similar to Uganda where there are restrictions on equipment such as fishing nets usually based on peer-group pressure, social custom and tradition.¹⁷

The Osun Osogbo festival is also an internationally acclaimed traditional festival in Osun State, South-West Nigeria, to worship and celebrate ancestral gods for their benevolences including but not limited to natural resources of the forest, rivers, and others. This traditional ceremony also has its significance in the preservation of fresh water, marine and general environment and resources. Though the festival has been in existence for several decades, it is continually up-held, amplified and popularized by subsequent generations of the descendants of the communities. The Osun Osogbo festival is a week-or-more-long festival in Osun State, Southwest Nigeria, mainly in honor of the ancient gods. The festival has become an international event drawing people from different parts of the world. Notwithstanding its significance in modern day tourism, tradition, conception of god, nature and environmental considerations underlie the Osun Osogbo festival.¹⁸

The Olumo Rock in Abeokuta Southwest Nigeria is an example of traditional culture relating to mountains, rock-mining and quarrying. The town of Abeokuta was founded during the days of inter-tribal wars. The Egba, who inhabited the area, worshipped the rocks and its caves in the belief that they derive their natural strength and protection from supreme beings. Olumo rock¹⁹ is of religious, historical, cultural and other significance to the Egba of Southwest Nigeria. In a more pragmatic way the rocks with their shelters were an ideal place for cave castles. This cave houses are reputed to have saved the Egba during the old days of inter-tribal wars. As the rocks became famous for being a secure place, they also became a unifying factor. According to Egba history, the rock shielded the Egba and their warriors from the onslaughts of the Oyo people in the war between the two communities.²⁰ This led to deification of the rock and its worship as well as other

mode of celebrations in appreciation. Though the Olumo Rock has since assumed its own prominence in tourism in Nigeria and Ogun State in particular, it is a taboo to allow or conceive any form of rock mining and quarrying of the Rock despite its mining potentials.

Generally, in Southern Nigeria customary land tenure system as regulated by customary law has its roots in the traditional conception of land and embedded in intergenerational sustainability consciousness. Traditionally, land had economic, social, political, and religious significance in Nigeria generally.²¹ It was conceived as a sacred institution given by God for the sustenance of all members of the community, and by implication belonged to the dead, the living, and the unborn. Since the view was that the living merely held land as a kind of "ancestral trust" for the benefit of themselves and generations yet unborn, it was inconceivable for any individual to claim ownership of the land or part thereof or to sell it.

The nature of land ownership in Yoruba land, and perhaps other native communities in Nigeria, gave rise to fundamental principles of customary-trusteeship, with chiefs or traditional rulers acting as custodians or "ancestral trustees". This custom forbids that any important disposition of land be made without consulting the elders of the groups or committee of headship of families or groups. This is a condition precedent to the granting of a valid title or disposition. However, where grant is made to a non-member or stranger, only customary tenancy relationship is created, with grantee becoming a 'customary tenant'.¹⁶

The decentralization process that took place throughout most parts of the Third World since the 1990s was a remarkable change that aimed to strengthen formal institutions. In most situations these institutions have contributed less to sustainable resource management due to several factors, including unclear responsibility and power sharing in the decentralization process and their low endurance to change with political conditions. Thus, decentralization has had less effective in achieving the sustainability outcomes in resource management than the informal institutions. Again it is suggested that decentralization could make important contributions in the implementation of strategies and technologies to sustainable resource management if local levels of resource management were equipped with appropriate power and legitimacy.²³

The domestication of the principle of sustainability among African countries is significantly related to historical, cultural and traditional antecedents of the people of the region. Justification for the above assertion is self-evident. While an *unborn child* may have no right or be legally expunged in certain *Eurocentric* jurisprudence, developing nations of Africa with established customs and traditions of giving due regard to the *rights and dignity* of the inanimate, rivers, mountains, water, trees and animals would likely not only recognize the right of foetus for example, but also readily find justification for adopting intergenerational sustainability concepts.²⁴

However, there seems to be some fundamental absurdities in an attempt to give effect to the present regime of intergenerational sustainability concept by countries if viewed from the perspectives and peculiarities of the African region. Though modern environmental instruments tend to advocate usage of traditional knowledge in resource conservation,²⁵ little regard seems to have been had to the pre-existing traditional norms in domesticating such principles by African countries. A quick look at the regimes of notable countries in the region shows that well-cherished, practically compatible traditional-indigenous practices that could be have been identified and harmonized to achieve practical sustainability pursuant to the new mind-set, have not received remarkable attentions. Indigenous people and their communities, and other local communities, have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices. States should recognize and duly support their identity, culture and interests and enable their effective participation in the achievement of sustainable development. Before the advent of modern sustainability concept, evidence abound to establish serious commitments of the local peoples and their judicial systems to the principle of environmental and resource sustainability by way of protection, preservation and conservation of natural resources for present and future generations.²⁶

Among the Tiv of the central Nigeria, sustainability consciousness is evidenced in the rearing and keeping of bees-which is considered a dangerous adventure-to replenish the valuable commercial insects. Preservation of particular species of bird *Gbargbar* is also tailored towards the same purpose.²⁷ Aside from economic reasons, customs often form the basis of preservation as in the case of the Venda and Satho-Tswana in South Africa, where many wild animals, reptiles, birds and fish are venerated, and any violation of this taboo attracts supernatural sanctions. These and numerous others lend credence to the fact that African perceptions and sustainability consciousness, of the environment and natural resources are both strong and popular. According to Mbiti, Africans have their own ontology which is an extremely anthropocentric ontology in the sense that everything is seen in terms of its relation to man, animals, plants and natural phenomena and objects constitute the environment in which man lives, provide a means of existence.²⁸

Prior to the current reversion to the old order, movement away from the traditional sustainability and conservation practices to modern environmental and resource sustainability has been a gradual process not totally divestible from the colonial experience and its *Eurocentric* notions of resource conservation. The traditional systems of resource management, like other pre-colonial values, became jettisoned due to their perceived "unsustainability" to give way for modern resource conservation, which was then packaged by the colonialists as adequate and sustainable.²⁹

Contributions of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems to Global Economy

The foundation of all knowledge systems is local settings, but due to unbalanced power relations stemming from colonialism and other forms of imperialism, other nations and

cultures have universally imposed their knowledge systems, cultures, and languages upon the citizens of a particular nation or society.³⁰ However, due to globalization, many problems – such as climate change, poverty, and environmental degradation – are universal. This raises important questions about how African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) can contribute to the global knowledge economy. It is suggested that the sustainability of AIKS, given these global challenges, necessitates the convergence of African indigenous worldviews – embedded in African social practices through orality in their indigenous languages and knowledge systems – with other ways of knowing and knowledge production embedded through literacy.³¹

African indigenous ways of knowing and knowledge production facilitates an intra- and intercultural dialogue between ways of knowing, knowledge production, and value systems. It also enables local African communities to better understand the differences and interactions between AIKS and other knowledge systems in order to reconstruct their own knowledge systems and to make better-informed decisions about which knowledge (internal or external) is appropriate for their sustainable future.³²

A founding principle for fostering positive interactions between AIKS and other knowledge systems is that collaboration must be initiated between equal partners. It must be built on mutual respect and understanding, transparent and open dialogue, and informed consent and just returns for the Indigenous Knowledge holders and practitioners through the flow of rewards and benefits. While efforts should be made to combine the best of both AIKS and other knowledge systems, there is an increasing emphasis that intercultural learning should be based on local experiences as a necessary prerequisite and a first step towards intercultural dialogue of knowledge systems for the sustainable development of AIKS and its contribution to the global pool of knowledge.³³

Nkondo states that, in spite of the various contentions on the effectiveness of the indicators used by indigenous communities around the world, Indigenous Knowledge Systems have increasingly attracted the attention of many observers in both developed and developing countries.³⁴ Practitioners are starting to realize the importance of recognizing and working with Indigenous Knowledge Systems, which builds on generations of experience, to best support the adaptive capacity and strategies of rural communities.³⁵ There is increasing acknowledgement that indigenous forecasting methods are locally relevant and needs-driven, focus on the locality and timing of rains, and are communicated in local languages and by local experts known and trusted by the people themselves.

In targeting the rural poor, the strategy in the past till present day of most development agents has been to organize rural communities into community based organisations, co-operatives and similar organisational structures based on western democracy criteria e.g. constitutions and elections. The formation of such organizations is usually facilitated by external development agents for the purpose of mobilizing people specifically for accessing resources for income generating activities, natural resources management and

other group initiatives. Traditional structures and institutions remain the respected local authority and primary means through which rural people organise their livelihoods, however inequitable this may be. Engaging these institutions and structures therefore has the potential for community wide impact.¹⁵ This paper argues that in Africa, the success of development interventions such as the Millennium Development Goals rests to a large extent on the ability to organize civil society, particularly those in rural poor communities to be able to articulate and co-ordinate their voices so as to influence power holders so that decisions concerning resource allocation would reflect their interests.

However, so far, efforts to organize civil society have not been successful in reaching down to the real poor and vulnerable because of poor understanding of how the poor organize themselves. The visible layer is that part where one finds the formal groups such as local NGOs, community based organizations CBOs, Farmer based organizations FBOs, credit unions, faith groups, different types of co-operatives, etc. An important characteristic of the organizations in the visible layer is that they are run by a small group of volunteers/employees, often well-educated and respected members of the community. Such formal organizations are often created in response to an externally initiated development intervention (e.g. European Union projects, Community Based Rural Development projects, Social Investment Fund Projects, Projects funded by various INGOs, etc.) and are based on the neo-liberal assumptions of profit orientation as well as western democratic organizational models and planning processes. These may be classified as the visible CSOs and are the focus of development interventions by both government and NGOs.

The invisible layer is where one finds indigenous organizations and institutions that are embedded within the traditional or local structures. In the real rural Ghanaian context, organization for community development has been going on independently of external facilitation. This has been achieved through traditional leaders and age old indigenous institutions based on their own criteria and local knowledge and accepted practices. These serve as the rallying points for community organization and provide all-inclusive platforms through which the rural poor are able to initiate self-help activities and make demands for resources for development at the local level. Organization within this layer is guided by the traditions, norms and values of the community such as *the belief in consensus, dialogue, inclusion, reciprocity, fairness and trust*. These facilitate cooperation for local self-help initiatives, which do not depend on external prompting and support. These institutions and practices are located within the worldviews of the local populations and go beyond human and material, to the spiritual dimensions of rural people.

Implications for global competitiveness of Africa

The strategy of working exclusively with the organizations in the visible layer means that the voices of rural Africa which are found in the invisible institutions are not heard. Advocacy on global issues are articulated only by the African elite or those that are

captured by the western lenses, leaving out the majority from the invisible layer. Take the case of global issues like climate change, food security, agro-fuels, religious crises management, etc., where do you find the voices fighting against them in Africa? Are they from the institutions of the rural poor? How representative are the so called modern Civil Society Organizations of the rural poor (usually with no western education)? Do their articulations reflect the development worldviews of rural Africa which is composed of the majority of the population? Given this scenario, it should not be difficult to realise that under the current conventional development strategies, Africa can never attain the competitiveness that is required to be able to make its rightful contribution to its own development as well as global development. Mobilization of its human resource is still limited to the small educated population that is organized in the formal civil society organizations while the majority of the population found in the indigenous institutions is left out. And being the majority, it is the people in these institutions that form the legitimate constituency of Africa. It is the people in these institutions that have the innovations that can address some of these global development issues merely by their sustainable lifestyles, production methods and general positive attitudes to nature. This paper argues that for Africa to become competitive and contribute to global development, it will need to mobilize all its human resources found in both the visible and invisible layers of Africa's civil society. This means recognizing, revitalizing and working with people through their indigenous institutions from the perspective of their worldviews as well as from the more educated and visible population captured in the formal western-styled civil society organizations.

Recommendation

Although indigenous institutions have remained something of the past they are locally rated as a superior means of dealing with land and other natural resource management problems, especially in areas with greater land management challenges. Based on the dominance of modern institutions different stakeholders agree that there is a need to mainstream traditional practices into the existing structures and policies. There is currently little documentation of the integration of indigenous institutions in village by-laws but there has been a successful but rudimentary attempt, namely, the village land councils which combine both traditional and government leaders. Although there is little in terms of documented evidences of this unity, suggestions are that formal and informal institutions can work in ways that complement each other by integrating the systems based on cultural values and beliefs with current modernity. This can be achieved by having in places well established policy frameworks that address traditional/indigenous knowledge and institutions. The presence of various sectoral policy statements in support of indigenous practices provides an eminent stepping stone towards preserving indigenous knowledge but the gap exists because there is no platform for a comprehensive promotion of these practices.

Conclusion

The central argument in this paper is that, for Africa to contribute effectively to its development as well as to the global development process there is need to mobilize the total human and material resource base of Africa. This requires re-examining the vehicles through which people are organized for action. Currently this takes the form of formal organizational structures and institutions that fall within western democratic principles such as constitutions, formal government recognition, democratically elected leadership, etc. this approach however leads to the exclusion of the majority of Africans who are still organized in indigenous structures that do not conform to these criteria and are therefore not recognized and mainstreamed into formal development initiatives. The paper proposes the adoption of the Endogenous Development approach which promotes an interface between indigenous and western organizational systems that lead to the mobilization of the total African constituency (with respect to western and indigenous worldviews) for both African and global development.

In a recent study titled "Local Paths for World Development," the World Bank acknowledged that indigenous knowledge is a major asset for developing countries, whether for natural resource management or healing through plants, the fights against AIDS, or even the prevention of conflicts. The study is the result of five years of research on the importance and success of indigenous knowledge in developing countries. According to the study:

Local communities are best judges of what is best for them. Indigenous knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation, it is not static; each generation adapts and improves the practices developed in the past and, provided they are given the means, local communities can develop new approach to solve problems.³⁷

In the face of persistence of pocket of violence in certain areas of Africa, the study also shows that conflict resolution mediations could draw inspirations from indigenous values and principles. For example, the study referred to the Tiv community of central Nigeria where the local customs dictates:

A good judge is not one who imposes a decision on opposing parties, but one who leads the opposing camps to accept and recognize the legitimacy of the verdict". The study recognizes that implications of this principle for the negotiations of contemporary peace agreements in the area are enormous.³⁸

The existing indigenous institutions could also be relied upon as vehicles for sustainable development without disrupting the traditional social fabrics of the people or have negative impacts on other institutions. Similar to traditional knowledge of medicinal plants which is no longer being taken lightly by medical scientists, traditional practices of resource management deserves serious attention by resource conservationists, environmentalist, policy makers, government, managers and other stakeholders of natural resources than being presently accorded.

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