

REFLECTIONS ON AFRICAN TRADITIONAL VALUE SYSTEMS & THE CHALLENGES IN SUSTAINING & PRESERVING THESE VALUES IN THE DIASPORA.

By

DR SEO OGBONMWAN KSC

AT

EDO COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEEKEND VIENNA, AUSTRIA.

DATE: 29-31 **AUGUST 2008.**

Mr. Chairman, Guests of Honour, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I would like to thank the organizers of this event for giving me this opportunity to give my views on this very interesting topic especially to those who have the survival of the African and the minority languages in our world today in their hearts. I recall presenting a paper here in Vienna on "is one Nigeria a dream or a reality" in 2006 which rumbled the Nigerian Senate and government and had a lot of rejoinders to it. Today's topic is obviously thought provoking and in spite of the short time since it was assigned to me, I would try to do justice to it.

Each society is organized with different norms and rules which should be respected by all community members for good and safe living. From one community to another, people have become rooted and remained totally closed to their own customs and values which served as their identity but communities are opening up in a global world.

Because of this diversity, we intend to focus on the case of the traditional African by talking first about the African traditional values, second the effects of globalization and emigration on our culture, and finally the conclusion on how we can preserve our culture especially in the Diaspora.

Definition of terms: The active words in this article are reflections and value.

Value in cultural and personal terms is the principles, standards, or quality which guides human actions. It can also be the importance, aesthetics, and market worth of a commodity.

A thing has value if it has some worth, and in this sense man considers life worth living because he finds certain things intrinsically valuable.

Reflections are personal view, appraisal, comments, apothegm, aphorism or a brief statement of a principle.

Africans as we know are a resilient people, and over time they have developed value systems and methods of coping, which have enabled them to maintain their communities and to survive times of great hardship either in the African continent or in the Diaspora. The traditional life of the clan in most tribes of Africa has, as its core value, protection of the family and perpetuation of the tribe. In his traditional life the African holds certain things to be of great value. It is these values which give him a distinct cultural personality and enable him to make some contribution to world knowledge, history, mathematics and civilization. It is not our task in this speech to articulate all the cultural values of the African, but only the dominant ones as we attempt to assess their status against the current tide of globalization and emigration sweeping across the African continent.

Large Family:

One of the foremost traditional values of the African is a large family. Children are of supreme value to the African. His primary purpose for marriage is children and to have as many of them as possible. This is the reason why polygamy or the union of one man with several women still holds great attraction for him, and also why the birth rate in Africa is among the highest in the world. The fact is that the African still counts his blessings by the number of children he has, whether they are educated or not, rich or poor, healthy or sick, well-fed or hungry. The African smiles at the sight of his numerous children and is unmoved at the turmoil at his gate as he has a lot of arrows in his quavers.

Respect for elders:

Another great value in traditional Africa is respect for old people ("senior citizens"), particularly one's parents, grandparents and relatives. The elders are revered by the young as the grey hair is associated with wisdom. The respect and honor bestowed on the ancestors filter through the old people--one's parents, grandparents and other relatives--as living embodiments of wisdom and of the good moral life who are expected sooner or later to join other good ancestors in the land of the "living dead." Old age therefore is an important value to the African. Even the children look forward to old age unlike now when hormones are being taken to remain forever young.

Morning Salutation:

As part of the respect for elders, the Benin people of Southern Nigeria have a unique way of respecting their elders and identifying their family of origin. People say *Latose, La emore la umogun la ogiesan* of which there are 56 of them in total. These salutations are in electronic form at www.edoglobalorganization.org.

Worship of Ancestors

: The worship of our ancestors is the basis for the honor and respect accorded to old people in the traditional African culture is their closeness to the ancestors, for in his ontological conceptual scheme the African places his old relatives closest to his ancestors or dead relatives in his great hierarchy of beings.

It must be noted that in the African universe the living and the dead interact with one another. Life goes on beyond the grave for the African and is a continuous action and interaction with dead relatives. These unseen ancestors called "the living dead" become part of one's living family and often are invited to partake though spiritually in the family meals. The ancestors are not just ghosts, nor are they simply dead heroes, but are felt to be still present watching over the household, directly concerned in all the affairs of the family and property, giving abundant harvests and fertility and warding off enemies at the village gate.

The African ancestors are held in high esteem. People have great recourse to them as powerful intermediaries between God and the living members of their particular families. These good ancestors are expected also to reincarnate into their families in due time.

Extended family unit

: Another important traditional value of the modern African is love for, and practice of, the extended family system. As a matter of fact the extended family characterizes the life of the African and somehow shapes his personality and outlook on life. Unlike Western man, for instance, the African sees his nuclear family as broadening out into a larger family unit. The African child has only to take a few steps in his village to visit several who can substitute for his father, mother, brothers and sisters, and they will treat him accordingly. Thus the child has many homes in his village, and he is simultaneously giver and receiver of widespread attention.

This extended family system is widely practiced in Africa. Indeed it is one "in which everybody is linked with all the other members, living or dead, through a complex network of spiritual relationship into a kind of mystical body." Consequently, it is not just "being" that the African values; "being-with-others" or "being rooted in kinship" is an equally important existential characteristic of the African. He is never isolated since several persons are assimilated into one parental role: his father's brothers are assimilated by extension into the role of father, his mother's sisters into the role of mother, his patri-lateral uncle's daughters into the role of sister. A person is an individual to the extent that he is a member of a family, a clan or community.

Traditional African Religion

: To the African, religion is of an indispensable value. "To be" for him is to be religious." As religion truly permeates his total life, there is for him no "secular" existence or naturalistic vision of world order. In this important way also, the African exhibits a cultural personality distinct from that of Western man, for instance, who easily makes a radical distinction between the secular and the religious, the natural and the supernatural, this world and the next. Apart from ancestral worship Africans worship other natural things that are awesome or humans that have been inspiring or the unexplained like the sun, the moon, the river, the earth or any source of a fulfillment. The African loves nature and feels one with it. Unlike Westerners who, having succeeded in defying nature, proceed toward its complete subjugation, Africans seek harmony with nature and achieve this by sharing its life and strength. The African values the whole of creation as sacred. To him nature is neither uncanny nor for subjugation and exploitation, but something sacred, participating in the essential sacred nature of God Himself and of all reality. Open spaces, fields, forests, trees, oceans and lakes are sacred to him and consequently important as places reminiscent of the ashes of his fathers and the sanctuaries of his gods.

Community Social Security Systems

: As mentioned earlier the African live communally with one another in what is like a very large family in the village; everyone somewhat related to the other. Everyone caring and looking out for one another. The old look after the children when their parents are away to the farm, the market place or the stream. During birth and mourning when there is a death members support one another in domestic work and child care. When the crops fail, the have share whatever they have got with the have not so that no one starves to death. The family with water in his well share with others without water. When anyone falls ill, everyone with traditional medicine knowledge provides remedies without asking for payment. The African society is one in which solidarity, friendship and also brotherhood had been the key elements. In rendering help or any form of assistance in the African community, the exchange of money or any form of payment is not the primary consideration but the alleviation of suffering of a neighbor or community member. Community members as in Edo tribe of Nigeria get involved in mutual activities like the 'Osusu' contribution when money is collected and given to someone who needs it most at that point in time and he gradually pays it back over 13 lunar months without any form of interest being added on the said loan.

Hard work

: Africans value hard work and productivity. The farmers, traders, hunters set out at dawn to come home at dusk to produce commodities for exchange to support their families and friends. Farming is usually subsistence and in small holdings with the use of simple implements and tools so also is hunting for game and fishing for the immediate family consumption and to share with neighbours. This hard work is the greatest African exercise which prolongs life; a longevity that facilitates the passage of oral tradition from one generation to the other thereby keeping the history of the clan alive. Wood carving and brass castings that takes several lunar months to make to depict or celebrate a particular event are made with the story behind such invaluable objects passed on from generation to generation hence when such objects are stolen, a large part of African community history goes with it.

Honour for excellence

: The African value honour and excellence in productivity and conducts and respect physical prowess. There is respect for the best farmer based on the height and length of his yam barn, the number of his seedlings for the next planting season, the extra he has to give away to neighbours, friends and family. The best wrestlers, fishermen and hunters are also revered and nearly worshiped and some of them may be deified after passing to the great beyond. The traditional birth attendant is honoured and respected based on the number of safe deliveries she has undertaken. The younger age groups also have their leaders and heroes based on having done something extraordinary for his age in the community or village.

Communal work:

The African value communal work as an opportunity to share their skills and give his best to his age group and the village community. In the preparation of the bush for farming, the age group members arrange a date to assist Mr. A and the following day assist Mr. B in bush clearing, bush burning, bush gathering, planting, pruning and harvesting without money changing hands. When an age group has reached the age of owning a house, his mates will assist him in putting up the structures and all he has to do is to provide food during the time his mates are helping him. When they have finished building a house for Mr. A, the following year may be Mr. B or C's turn until all in the age group own their own homes. This communal work extends to looking after the village paths, the market place and the King's or Village Head's home. Emphasis is on gerontocracy as wisdom and power flows down from the oldest in the village to the youngest. This co-operation amongst Africans is rare and it facilitates bonding, brotherhood and good neighborliness.

Other

s: Many other values distinguish the life of the African and in characteristic ways determine also his modes of being-in-the-world, such as music, dance, and a sense of family togetherness, hospitality and love for community. I recall as a child when my mother served food, there was always an extra plate for the stranger who is coming on the way. Whenever I asked why there was an extra plate, the answer was always the same – the unknown stranger on his way. On numerous occasions there were always uninvited guests joining us at the table so I stopped asking about the extra ration. The African do not turn away visitors as uncles and aunts appear at the door unannounced and they are usually welcome by our parents. It still happens till today when an African will phone me at 4am in the morning for a pick up at the local airport without any prior information of his planned trip or visit or how disruptive his visit may be. As an African, and being my brothers' keeper, I have to oblige.

As we know, the African society has a very rich civilization. This is due to the high ethnic and cultural diversity and also to the various social structures. This appeared in the education through which, the younger obeyed the elders and women had minimal rights. That's why in some communities for example, fathers could choose a husband for their daughters and the latter were compelled to accept such a choice. African children, in the past, were educated in many ways such as storytelling, tales, and also through maxims and proverbs. These meetings were held by old people with very important and lot of wisdom hence information obtained could guide one through life.

That's why any child could be corrected, when he commits a fault, by any person because, at that time, any individual were considered as a member of all other families.

As far as marriages were concerned, men were always willing to accept any girl brought to them by their parents because they trusted their parents. In most of West African countries, when children were six or seven years old, they were sent to their uncles or aunts in order to learn about independent living and many things about religion, custom and tradition. These moral values were very important and they were one of the fundamental keys of life of the people.

Women, at that time, though they hadn't any power of decision in the society, respected themselves and were afraid of doing bad things such as "adultery". If a woman or girl were pregnant without being married, these were seen as a shame on the family and the victim could be killed by her parents or relatives for bringing dishonor to the family. This is quite common especially in African Moslem community. This fear of repercussion makes the women to be very careful.

Problems in Diaspora

As the African passes from folk to urban society, life with its complicated money economy, high technology and international trade, his traditional values are bound to be affected, old values disappear, in other cases some traditional values suffer disruption, at times to the point of extinction; in yet other cases the African suffers a reversal of his traditional values; lastly, he creates altogether new values with consequent tensions. The main problems in the Diaspora especially in the Western world or northern hemisphere is the lack of his accustomed traditional African language and accent, peer pressure for the young, exposure to social or recreational drugs, exposure to inappropriate mode of dressing, violence against the minority with gun and knife crimes, increased maternal and peri-natal mortality and morbidity because of socio-cultural differences; absence or lack of the traditional African food, The love of money sets in with its attendant problems and lack of value for life in a bid to become rich quickly. There is now increased individuality, fighting back stereotyping and biased perception by the unwelcoming hosts. New immigration laws by the host country to prevent influx of the African from his continent.

In speaking about the cumulative effects of emigration to the old world and its new culture on the traditional life of the African, one must not lose sight of such other factors as education, technology, arts, science and Christianity, which are now part and parcel of modern civilization and which influence the values and destinies of peoples and nations alike in their continuous thrust toward progress and a better life. The African have difficulties in going everywhere as the various governments have black balled them with drugs, banditry, alcoholism, rape, murder and you name it. People act like every African is HIV positive. People want to know why African people in America are for examples so terrible. The problem of Africans in the Diaspora are further compounded by the attitude of the neocolonialist from Africa and the West Indies under the control of drug barons who could sell drugs to our children or make our children hawk drugs and become rich over night and they would not go to jail. This singular factor accounts for the very high level of African descendants in jail in the northern hemisphere. The other factor is breaking immigration rules.

Even those of us who have been able to find a footing, there are many things eluding us abroad or in the Diaspora and even at home now than ever before; and top of them are elders abuse which is the bane of cultural bastardization, disunity, indiscipline among the youths and even the elders to say the least. Africans have drifted too far away from our cultural discipline and mould as an African nation. At the beginning, African children acted as couriers for drug barons and never used drugs, but today there is the belief that there is an increased drug use by corruptly enriched African politicians and business men who globe trot with the resources of their nation meant for infrastructural and socio-economic development.

Africans are now being placed in residential homes in the Diaspora to live their last days in solitary confinement. The African likes to live and die surrounded by his children, grand children, in-laws, great grand children and his surviving friends and family. First generation of African in the Diaspora sees this as a nightmare. Most make plans to be taken home to die in the land of their birth so as to mingle with the spirits of their forebear. African children may not be respecting this wish of their parents due to the cost of such 'uneconomical' trips especially when such African may have completely lost his roots in the land of his birth. In spite of the desire of some Africans to retire to their roots soon after work retirement, they encounter problems. A typical example is the story

of Jamaica immigrants of the 1950s to the England who have now retired from their working lives and went home to Jamaica with their retirement benefit to build big mansions to enjoy in their last days on mother earth. Report had it that quite a number of them were killed by armed robbery gone wrong. That is the problem of being an oasis of affluence in a desert of abject poverty.

Youth restiveness has taken its toll on the social, economic and even, political development of immigrants in the Diaspora. Diaspora children are neither completely assimilated nor completely rejected. They are pressured by their peers for being different, harassed by neighbours and the law enforcement agents due to stereotyping. They are easily excluded from school with no one to fight their cases especially when their parents are illegal immigrants hiding from immigration officers. Due to pressure from home and outside they fall into the hand of drug dealers, pimps, hotelier where they make easy money until they are caught and end up in jail.

Some of the programmes on television can influence average Diaspora youth into being aggressive. The rate of which some African watch and internalize aggressive TV programmes, determines their degree of aggressiveness.

Television, being a medium of information, dissemination, easily influences its audience through various programmes some of which could be aggressive on that note, most viewers; especially youths actualise the aggressiveness when the need arises.

Restiveness is also caused by unemployment of our youths. An idle mind, they say is the devil's workshop. A jobless Diaspora youth can easily be used as thug by gang leaders The youth will always obey the wishes and commands of his master, the gang leader, in order to have his daily bread.

Take for instance where somebody spent four to five years in university only to come out and end up in the labour market. Some that are "born again" will wait in vain for the Lord for about six years after which they would embrace restiveness. The immigrant who eventually gets a job gets by passed for promotion by his peers in spite of his numerous qualifications because of stereotyping and not having the correct hue. This cause bitterness and may decrease productivity. To obviate these problems, the host governments have to get these 'kids' off the street and get them employed to prevent gang leaders reaching them first when they are most vulnerable and this will contribute immensely to reducing gun and knife crimes in the host society.

Socio exclusion especially from schools should be discouraged as it fuels crime ultimately because those socially excluded will form a recruiting ground for armed robbers, drug peddlers etc.

MODERN DAYS

But nowadays, things are changing and many of those traditional values are being lost and the world is moving on the rhythm of modernism.

In our days, we notice that, the world is becoming a kind of village in which there is a wide interaction between people and their different cultures. This phenomenon happens thanks to the new technologies. People have today the possibility to be aware of what is happening all around the world. They also have the opportunity to discover other cultures, other ways of life and behaviors thanks to the radio, television and other various means of communication like the internet.

Above situation as described, leads to a fall of some traditional values. People no longer as it were in the past sit together in order to talk about their daily activities or to discuss about some social problems; it's a kind of break of the family's unity. We look somehow disappointed and we no longer know or recognize which values are ours. People tend to forget their customs; they are most of the time exotic and now consider western cultures as better than theirs.

Old people (grandfathers and mothers) are no longer those persons who educated children by means of stories, tales and so on, they are most of the time seen as boring and talkative.

Children spend all their time watching television; they are fond of films through which they discover some actors that they admire a lot. Apart from the TV, people also have many opportunities to get in touch with other realities for example: books, newspapers, the Internet...etc., they also travel all over the world; this helps them to develop new ways of thinking and are able to cope with any kind of subject.

With these modern concepts, we realize that, "Art" especially music is becoming more and more important; a strong mean of communication, a manner of behavior, a way through which people express their research of the sense of life, of beauty and also the relationship with others.

The increase of the population, in front of the world wide economic crisis, makes the parents neglect the traditional education of their children and the latters, because they have no possibility to make their ways in life, are most of the time, compelled to become delinquents. They begin to use drugs. To believe in what those children say, this helps them to forget their sorrows, their problems. This makes the situation more and more harrowing.

Even if this modernity is good and helps people to develop their mentalities, it has also some disadvantages which are not to be forgotten or neglected.

In my opinion, I think that the traditional values are very useful and should have positive effects on the behavior of people. Even if some of them are outdated because of the intellectual development, there are other values which we must keep with us. I really wonder what will happen if one day we, Africans, realize that all our values, are kept aside thanks to the western culture. I wish that Africans be aware of this dishonorable situation.

We don't need to remain closed to traditions but we have to be selective. We must try to conserve some traditional values and mingle them with other modern concepts because each of them has its own importance.

This is, for me, the only way to create a good society, a "universal civilization."

I would like to share this poem from an admired author Oliver Mbamara with you.

The Predicament of the Stranger
And then somehow the stranger
Finds himself in a foreign land,
Beset with sudden challenges
Of life and living all too strange.
And then he reaches deep in him,
For the strength of his own culture,
But finds himself in a stranger's maze,
Brought by a culture all too strange.
And what was once there in his life,
The root and core that made him strong,
Becomes worthless in the eyes of hosts,
And his predicament would then begin.
To salvage his pride once owned before,
He borrows the foreigner's twisted tongue,
While keeping down his own parlance,
But in the end, he had lost himself.

And no one would really know indeed,
What plight it was that held him down,
Trapped in the puzzling pit of dilemma,
Except the few caught in the same trap.
He had failed in his compelled bid,
To be the man that pleased his hosts,
And he had failed to be the man,
That his kin have known before.
The Jack of two conflicting worlds,
And proven master of neither one,
But what shall be gained by self-pity?
Or harsh judgments that kill the will?
A man does live but a life at a time,
And so his ways may not please all,
But solace lies in the balance of things,
While living these worlds, one at a time.
Oliver Mbamara, Esq. Copyright 2002

Oliver Mbamara is an Administrative Law Judge for the State of New York

Suggestions for raising children at abroad

For African parents attempting to raise children with a semblance of cultural awareness, the task is a challenging one. However, there are some important steps one can take to ensure a sense of connection with African culture. Here are a few suggestions:

- 1) Enforce an African-only language policy in the house. Encourage children to speak African in the house. I know the suggestion is easier said than done, especially after the child enters school. However, even if only basic comprehension is achieved, that is an accomplishment. If possible, try to live in an area where there are other African children to foster a feeling of community.
- 2) The importance in giving children a basic African education cannot be over-emphasized. Especially in these times when our children are being raised in societies with very different and often times opposing value systems. Moral lessons, storytelling cultural norms like morning salutation can be very helpful especially before teenage years.
- 3) Organize a trip to Africa at least once in a child's youth. If possible, travel back to Africa to acquaint the children with their heritage every two years or so. Visiting Africa can provide kids with long lasting memories and a better understanding of the culture and society. Other benefits of taking children to visit Africa is meeting extended family members and improving or learning altogether the African language.

4) Organising language schools in Diaspora. At the Nigerian House in Manchester for example, the Nigerian community organize language classes for the children of immigrants which foster learning, friendship and love of culture by the youths.

These are just a few of many suggestions to help families instill a sense of African heritage in their children. But we must also remember that we are the examples to which our children look to, so if we continue to be clannish, competitive, and vengeful....we will get nowhere as a people. We are truly at a crossroads, and it is time for those of us in the Diaspora to take responsibility for passing on our culture and tradition to future generations.

Even now when as African People living solitary lives in the Diaspora, they still hold on to their ways of life, their own cultures through which it is possible to identify them. There is also a time when people had the possibility to be together in a family just to talk about many things, old times and to discuss about the family's problems. African people had a strong sense of community, brotherhood, friendship. It was really good and interesting to live in such way. Why can we not continue to do that by congregating once a year somewhere in Europe and have one week of holiday and live the African dream that Edo Global Organization has been promoting for a few years now.

Thank you for listening.

Oba ghator Okpere!! Ise!

SEO OGBONMWAN KSC

©SEPTEMBER 2008