

## Reawakening African Cultural Practices towards Global Harmony: Role of Kinship

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### Abstract

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It is almost impossible to conceive of a people without culture for this would mean that such people do not experience or have any knowledge about the world. Culture determines the perspective or purview through which the world around a people is understood. It shapes their values, practices, behaviours, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and conduct. There are variations in the way Africans view the world but within these variations, several common themes are evidently visible giving room for unity in diversity. Some of these themes include the notions of motherhood, respect for constituted authority, belief in the sanctity of human life, life in the hereafter, dignity in labour, moral uprightness, need for inter-subjective living, and close-knittedness with nature. The goal of this paper is bipartite in nature. It argues on the one hand that these cultural practices which are deeply rooted in African worldview, when extended globally would contribute to global harmony. On the other hand, it observes at the same time that this present age and civilisation have lost touch with the cultural practices that are fundamental to the unity and harmony of Africa and by extension, the world, hence, the need for a reawakening of African cultural practices that are germane to global harmony. The paper intends to achieve this by cashing in on the numerous values in the practice of kinship in Africa that encourage shared values and discourage cultural prejudices as kinship is conceived to extend beyond one's immediate family to the community and embracing the whole of humanity. However, in a paper of this length, one cannot obviously fully explore how each of the aforementioned themes will influence global harmony. Consequently, focus is here only directed on a few.

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### Introduction

The importance of culture in one's understanding of the world cannot be overemphasised.

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Culture is “the shared patterns of behaviours, values, and ways of thinking, interacting, and understandings that are learned through a process of socialisation among certain groups of people...”<sup>i</sup> It is imperative here to note *ab initio* that the notion of kinship is not the exclusive preserve of Africans. This is because all peoples of different cultures and tribes belong to families, at the very least, nuclear families. The point of interest in African practice of kinship is that it is at the root of their culture and it goes beyond the immediate nuclear family or extended family and to the entire community. It is also noted that it is not impossible for non-indigenes of a particular community to be incorporated into the kinship system of that community in Africa, as there are several instances where foreigners are given titles which traditionally belong to certain families thereby integrating them into their kinship system.

Conventionally, a kinship relationship is through blood relationships or through marriage. At the basis of kinship is the primary mother-child bond to which diverse cultures have added different familial relations. Additional kin are recruited to this basic unit by the principle of descent, which connects one generation to the other in a systematic way and which determines certain rights and obligations across generations.<sup>ii</sup> It is also the case that beyond the principle of descent, culture plays an important role in kinship. The way a society views kinship sometimes may not have any biological undertone. This is because in traditional societies in Nigeria for example, the expression ‘father’ can be used to describe the biological parent of a child and can as well be used to describe the head of a clan. A man or woman in whose care a child not biologically related to them was brought up is referred to as the child’s father and mother. It is also noted that mothers and fathers are expected to play parental roles wherever they find themselves. They act as parents to whoever is old enough to be their child while younger individuals pay due respect to whoever is old enough to be his or her parent as he or she would do to his or her biological parents. So, kinship relations can be established biologically, socially or as a particular culture deem fit.

This paper argues that there are some African cultural practices which are rooted in the notion of kinship that are presently in dearth. It emphasises the point that such practices when reawakened could engender harmony of global significance.

It is evident that economic power plays an important role in social stratification and the consequences of this socio-economic imbalance are overwhelmingly on the negative side.

This has engendered social vices such as fraud, robbery, kidnapping, and terrorism which pose a threat to global peace. So, a return to indigenous cultural practices and especially those that show concern for kinship which is the primary interest of this paper will help to bridge the gap of differences among people and nations thereby curbing these vices, encouraging peaceful coexistence and global harmony.

### **Role of Family in Culture Dissemination**

The family is basically the smallest unit of the society and the first point of contact and interaction of a child with the larger world. According to Raditlhalo "a child is held to be the property of the community, and it is the community who are going to see to it that the individual child becomes a significant member of the community, an asset to all."<sup>iii</sup> It is from the family that the child begins to learn the manner of behaviour of his people which he will later grow up to discover to be different from individuals of other cultural backgrounds. The family is a primary agency of socialisation within a given cultural context in Africa. As soon as a child is born, he or she begins the process of acculturation through imitation and series of initiation rites that are involved in naming, circumcision, and initiation to adulthood. He or she learns the culturally acceptable ways to relate with siblings and parents, peers and elders, nature and the sacred. These give the individual knowledge of how the world within his or her culturally privileged purview is interpreted. According to I. A. Menkiti, it is after the individual has fully undergone these rites that he or she acquires his or her identity as "a full person in the eyes of the community."<sup>iv</sup>

The individual is therefore necessarily influenced by the views which are shared in his or her culture. Culture therefore is an important factor in the determination of the identity of an individual in Africa. It is "the shared patterns of behaviours, values, and ways of thinking, interactions, and understandings that are learned through a process of socialisation among certain groups of people which in return shape their identities."<sup>v</sup> Every individual therefore derives his or her sense of identity from the cultural group in which he or she grew up and was socialised.

The influence of the community on the individual cannot be over emphasised and the individual is in turn expected to make his meaningful contribution in return to the community.

S. Gbadegesin, noted that, "a person whose existence and personality is dependent on the community is expected in turn to contribute to the continued existence of the community...The meaning of one's life is therefore measured by one's commitment to social ideals and communal existence"<sup>vi</sup>

The culture of a person moulds that person's identity and because other individuals who belong to the same culture are also shaped after that culture, the identity of the cultural group becomes the identity of the various individuals. The cloth an individual puts on speaks a lot about his or her social orientation and cultural background. From the way the African dresses his or her identity as an African is immediately revealed. Although, names distinguish one individual from another it is actually an expression of the individual's interconnectedness with a community. According to C. Calhoun, "we know of no people without names, no language or cultures in which some manner of distinctions between self and other, we and they, are not made..."<sup>vii</sup> but such distinctions in Africa are not made outside one's cultural boundaries. The name for instance is a very important link between the individual and the community to which he or she belongs. Names according to D. A. Masolo, "give individual persons their specific positions within the 'community' of forces. By acquiring a name, every person becomes a link in the chain of forces linking the dead and the living genealogies. No one is isolated. Every person makes part of that chain of forces in nature, both active and passive."<sup>viii</sup> So, we see that every individual is interconnected with the community and children as community assets begin their cultural orientation from the family. This interconnectedness or inter-subjective life is well enshrined in African cosmology.

### **Inter-subjectivity in African Cosmology**

The universe in African cosmology is not "understood as something discrete and individuated rather, it is conceived of as a series of interactions and interconnections. This general cosmic vision is particularly applicable in coming to an understanding of the relationship between self and community."<sup>ix</sup> This is why Placide Tempels in his description of Bantu psychology stated that the Bantu (African) cannot conceive of man as an individual, as a force existing by itself and apart from its ontological relationships with other living beings and from its connection with animals or inanimate forces around it.

The Bantu cannot be a lone being... No, he feels and knows himself to be a vital force, at this very time to be in intimate and personal relationship with other forces acting above him and below him in the hierarchy of forces. He knows himself to be a vital force, even now influencing some forces, and being influenced by others. The human being, apart from the ontological hierarchy and the interaction of forces, has no existence in the conceptions of the Bantu.<sup>x</sup>

Just as each individual in the community derives his meaningfulness or identity from the community, so is the notion of the interaction of forces. Every force is sustained not in isolation but in its continual situatedness in what J. M Nyasani calls, the cycle of unbroken chain of horizontal and vertical relationships. In this communal relationship, he said, my own individual life-force is not mine by right or by nature but a gratuitous conferment from the *ex post facto* reality of those who already enjoyed it and who jealously safeguard it for purposes of continuity, social cohesion, social harmony, social and physical integrity and for the sake of realizing the teleological good of human (African) existence...in perpetual communion and perpetual vitality.<sup>xi</sup> This shows that there is a mutual, continuous interconnection or interaction of people and forces in African cosmology. So, the practice of kinship goes beyond one's immediate kin, it extends to the entire community and further still. It is a practice that encourages being one another's keeper.

This idea of extended kinship is closely linked to the importance of connecting and sharing with others. For this reason, the universe for the African is an active force kept alive by the constant activities of people. So, the whole universe appears as an infinitely small and at the same time infinitely large, network of humans and life forces.<sup>xii</sup> This network of forces shows that people do not live in isolation; one individual needs another to continue to exist. Humans need other humans to be truly human. Therefore, "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through persons)."<sup>xiii</sup> And I. A. Menkiti stated that, "in the African view it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory."<sup>xiv</sup> The source of man's humanity is in his interaction with the 'other' and J. S Mbiti said that the African "recognizes the sources of his or her own humanity, and so realizes, with internal assurance, that in the absence of others, no grounds exist for a claim regarding...[his own] standing as a person. The notion at work here [he said] is the notion of an extended self."<sup>xv</sup>

Considering this inter-subjective ability as embedded in the practice of kinship, individualism could be conceived of as alien to Africans because according to M. M. Makumber, "the central values of Africans in the traditional societies were communal rather than individualistic."<sup>xvi</sup> Traditional African society had shared values and every man and woman lived cooperatively as in a family. This is quite different from Marx's socialism which is a product of class struggle. In traditional African communities there was no individual landownership, no private water sources even children were communally owned. Obviously referring to Africa, Alex Thomson said there had been no landowners in these societies, it was argued, and the interest of the community had always been put above those of the individual. In this respect, L. S Senghor believed Africans had already realised socialism before the coming of the Europeans. African socialism was therefore an attempt to rediscover these traditional values, and marry them with new technology and the modern nation-state.<sup>xvii</sup> Drawing from this practice of coexistence or inter-subjectivity therefore, one can say that there were no (Marxian) classes in Africa, there were no oppressors or oppressed. So, in order to resolve social and economic imbalance in the society there is the need to reawaken the culture of kinship and coexistence, and it should be noted that inter-subjectivity also demands coexisting with nature and the environment.

### **Kinship Relations between Man and Nature in African Culture**

Kinship relationship in Africa is not only among humans but also among humans and nature as well as the sacred. This is responsible for the use of totems as symbols of kinship. For this reason, "analogies are possible between a human group and a lower animal group, for instance: He who is the chief in the human order 'demonstrates' his superior rank by the use of a royal animal's skin'."<sup>xviii</sup> Closeness to nature is an important part of African life and the natural inclination towards eco-friendliness and sense of community among different African peoples is easily noticed. And for the sake of transmitting this idea to generations, this culture is preserved mostly in folktales, proverbs and idioms that are meant to teach moral lessons and also include the ways the people ought to relate with their environment.

Greed for example is never tolerated in African culture and Shegun Ogungbemi opined that;

In our traditional relationship with nature, men and women recognize the importance of water, land and air management. To our traditional communities the ethics of not taking more than you need from nature is a moral code.

Perhaps this explains why earth, forests, rivers and wind and other natural objects are traditionally believed to be both natural and divine. The philosophy behind this belief may not necessarily be religious, but a natural means by which the human environment can be preserved. The ethics of care is essential to traditional understanding of environmental protection and conservation.<sup>xix</sup>

This shows that Africans greatly care for and preserve their ecosystem by handing down practices that prevent an individual from being over-demanding on nature. This is expressed in African traditional culture, where children are educated on the need to eschew greed. According to Akintunde Akinyemi, "Children are trained that greediness should not be practiced in both private and public lives. Appropriate stories are told to the child, motivating her/him through her/his sub-conscious mind onto the results and problems of greediness. For instance, the child could be told of how the Tortoise became bald-headed as a result of greediness."<sup>xx</sup> With this kind of education, children grow up with the consciousness that greediness has a negative consequence on their continual survival on earth.

Consequently, this belief plays a major role in shaping the attitude of the child towards not just fellow human beings but also towards nature itself. Children therefore grow up with the understanding that taking more than one needs from nature would lead to calamities. So, traditional Africans know how to manage the resources found within their surroundings and this knowledge is embedded in their cultural practices, proverbs, idioms and folktales. This is why Darrol Bryant said that, "It is essential that this wisdom be recovered if Africans were to address the environmental problems and other challenges facing the continent and its people... This is because, African traditions understood nature more than just matter for exploitation. Nature was a natural home. Being in harmony with nature meant living in close contact with the deeper sources of divine life."<sup>xxi</sup> So, we see that a practice is never separated from its environmental, societal, or spiritual significance. There are benefits and consequences attached to every form of practice in Africa. When a harmonious relationship is established between humans and nature, they enjoy its fullness and benefits but, when they become over-demanding or negligent they experience chaos and calamities.

For this reason, with regards to the preservation of natural forests and its inhabitants, some forests today are still designated as sacred in *Oza (Ojah)* community of Akoko-Edo in Edo state and many other communities as well. In such forests, no farming, hunting, bush burning or felling of trees are allowed. They are a perfect example of natural environment. They serve as natural botanical gardens and as home to numerous species of animals, birds and wildlife. Rare plants and animals are protected from extinction and remain available to serve the purpose of balancing the ecosystem. J. Peter Brosius observed that “the extinction of biological diversity is inextricably linked with the destruction of cultural diversity. With the loss of native cultures, there is also disappearing the vital and important knowledge of a way of living in balance with the earth and the value system in which it is encoded”<sup>xxii</sup>

It is therefore obvious that the neglect of traditional culture which does not see man as a conqueror of the land and the things therein but as co-inhabitant is partly responsible for the present environmental crises such as air and water pollution, desertification and global warming that are threatening the world. According to J. Baird Callicutt, this culture of eco-friendliness, “changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Therefore, in handing this knowledge down to children and from generation to generation the role of parents and mothers especially cannot be neglected.

### **The Notion of Motherhood**

R. Akujobi defines motherhood as “an automatic set of feelings and behaviours that is switched on by pregnancy and the birth of a baby. It is an experience that is said to be profoundly shaped by social context and culture. Motherhood is also seen as a moral transformation whereby a woman comes to terms with being different in that she ceases to be an autonomous individual because she is one way or the other attached to another-her baby.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Motherhood is widely celebrated among many tribes in Africa and this is because the woman is seen as a symbol of care, fertility and love. Apart from the biological notion of mothering in Africa, among the *Oza (Ojah)* people of Edo State for instance, any woman or lady who plays the role of a mother is *ipso facto* considered a mother. That is why in a family where the biological mother is deceased or incapacitated it is often the responsibility of a close female relative or the older females in the family to carry on the roles of the mother in the home. It is not also difficult to find African women adopting children from friends and relatives when the occasion arises.



According to W. Duncan, "the concept of mothering is indicative of a function rather than a 'persona' and this function is not necessarily situated in the biological mother. It includes the sensitive attachment which flows from the attention devoted from day to day [attention] to the child's needs of love, physical care, nutrition, comfort, peace, security, encouragement and support."<sup>xxv</sup>

The woman in African society is a symbol of fertility and for this reason it is believed that she necessarily bears children. A barren woman is seen as incomplete; and J. S Mbiti lamented the fact that she is the "dead end of human life, not only for genealogical level but also for herself."<sup>xxvi</sup> This is as a result of the premium attached to motherhood; it is also the reason why in most traditional societies in Africa there is no worse misfortune for a woman than being childless. In the practice of the *Oza (Ojah)* people of Edo-State, motherhood is believed to be divinely ordained. It is the potential title of every girl child as a model of fertility (*muoma*). To attain this status, a woman should be married and bear children. Also very important is the experience of pregnancy which should culminate in childbirth. According to A. P. Egejuru in reference to Igbo worldview, "Not only does a mother give birth to life, she nourishes the baby with her milk just as the earth does to all living things that she gives birth to."<sup>xxvii</sup> This emphasises the usual classification of women or mothers' roles in African societies "into two categories, 'productive and 'reproductive."<sup>xxviii</sup> The subtle power of influence which mothers have on their children is not comparable to the imposing stature of fathers in the home. This influence is derived from their lavish expression of love, care, and selfless commitment which they exhibit in home building and social harmony as they inculcate proper moral behaviours in their children. This makes them highly revered and Remi Akujobi noted that, "While mothers are revered as creators, as providers, cradle rockers, nurturers, and goddesses, they also inspire awe because they are known to wedge huge powers in their children's lives."<sup>xxix</sup> Besides the value of motherhood and motherhood roles in Africa is the high premium place on human life.

### **The Sanctity of Human Life**

One of the fundamental questions that ethicists find unresolved is whether euthanasia, capital punishment or murder could be justified under any circumstance while adherents of the sanctity of human life are facing the challenge of producing convincing evidence to support their claim.

Africans do not tarry long on a debate such as this because the value of human life is non-quantifiable, no one can give it therefore no one should take it. According to J. O Ejim, "Among all communities in Africa life is regarded as sacred. The shedding of blood in Africa is an abomination. Each individual's life is a gift from God to the community and to the family."<sup>xxx</sup> It is the respect for human life that makes a typical African to undergo ritual cleansing whenever he kills, especially in times of war. Africans accord so great respect for human life and hold it as sacred, so they believe that taking human life is an affront on one's own life and also tantamount to a repudiation of the divine life force. This view is widely held because man is considered to be God's creation so, taking of human life demands accountability. This is because no one has the exclusive right to take life. As you cannot give what you don't have, so you cannot take what you don't have.

## **Conclusion**

Considering the significant roles that kinship play in culture dissemination in African communities, beginning from the family one discovers that it is the first point of contact of the child with the rest of the world. It is here that the child is first initiated to the dos and don'ts or the proper and acceptable mode of conduct expected of a child among family members, peers, constituted authority and the elderly. Parents often make their children or wards understand that any inappropriate behaviour of theirs outside the home could tarnish the image the family. As a result of this children grow up with the orientation that they owe a duty to themselves and their families not to engage in any act unbecoming of the acceptable norms. In a society such as this children grow up to become responsible adults with the society recording less of law offenders.

The notion of inter-subjectivity in Africa demands that no individual lives in isolation from other people. It is often emphasised that one individual needs another to continue to exist. Humans need other humans to be truly human, that is, 'a person is a person through persons'. Man as a 'being with others' necessarily lives and interacts with other people. He does not live in isolation otherwise he would be regarded as a beast. The inter-subjectivity of man in the society predisposes him to influence and be influenced. So, man is contractually bound with the society in which he finds himself and therefore, cannot live a life of individuality.

The significance of this is that just as individuals with kinship relationship coexist and live interdependently so are individuals of the larger society expected to rely on each other. Inter-subjectivity requires being one another's brother's keeper. Extending a hand of fellowship and cooperatively striving for the collective good of the society.

In African societies so much responsibility is placed on mothers or women as they are held as symbols of love, care, fertility and often analogously conceived of as the earth in relation to its fruitfulness and being a home to man. Some may argue that this gender role subjugates and confines the female folk to family life. But beyond this, their role in the society is highly revered and felt in the outside world. This is because they are indirectly responsible for what becomes of the society since they wield so much influence on their children. They are known to be able to negotiate peace in situations where youths or children are engaged in social disturbance.

Also, people's eco-unfriendly attitude to the environment is observed to be responsible for the present eco-catastrophes that the world is yet witnessing and this is as a result of the neglect of some good cultural practices. Traditional African societies believe that man should not take more than he needs from the environment. Stories and proverbs are told to children to discourage this attitude, but with the uncontrolled thirst and quest for wealth in a capitalistic orientation the natural environment has been greatly depleted without remediation.

These cultural practices -the role of kinship in culture dissemination, role of mothers in moulding the behaviours of children, the need for inter-subjective living, respect towards nature and belief in the sacredness of human life are all suffering a dearth in this present generation in Africa. This is mostly attributed to westernisation which is not the problem per se, rather the inability of Africans themselves to achieve a synergy between their traditional practices and western civilization in quest for modernity.

This work has argued that just as traditional African societies were able to achieve peaceful coexistence through their various practices; it is also possible for the global community to achieve harmony if these practices hinged on kinship become globally appreciated. In this wise, moral education would not be left mainly in the hands of formal educators but would rather complement the role of the family.

The present dominance of capitalist cum individualistic tendencies would give way for inter-dependence and coexistences with others and nature. This attitude when combined with respect for human life would help forestall the problem of insecurity, threat to global peace, and bridge the gap of differences among people and nations. It hereby affirms that since individual cultures and traditions have their own uniqueness, a synthesis of these cultures would produce a world of harmony. Therefore, there is the need for reawakening African cultural values and practices which contribute to global harmony and the kinship system is a viable tool for achieving this.

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