
An Appraisal of African Traditional Economy as an Heritage

Abiodun J. Oluwabamide, Ph.D

Department of Sociology, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

ABSTRACT

The cultures and social structures of contemporary African societies are a mixture of both traditional and modern elements. However, the proportion of the traditional elements is higher. It constitutes an enduring heritage which might, in no distant future, be eliminated due to the general tendency by Africans to absorb Western culture and/or social system in its entirety. In sub-Saharan Africa, the age-long cultural traits and social institutions which are regarded by some people as archaic and irrelevant are still an integral part of contemporary cultures, and societies especially in the rural areas. They are no doubt, the bedrock of African societies. This paper therefore, appraises traditional economy in sub-saharan Africa with a view to describing its features. It is recommended that efforts should be made to preserve useful elements of traditional economy like other aspects of African cultural heritage.

Keywords: Persist, African, economic organization, culture, enduring.

INTRODUCTION

To early Western economists, African traditional economies did not exist. This is because often times direct equivalents of the concepts used by economists in the study of Western economies could not be easily identified in African traditional economic systems. In fact, a prominent economic anthropologist, George Dalton (1961) observed that traditional economic systems are ignored by modern economists because there is not in common use a set of analytical categories designed to reveal distinguishing characteristics of markedly different systems: economies without market and machines still tend to be viewed through the theoretical spectacles designed for Western economies. Obviously, it is wrong to use theories and models developed for Western economies to study traditional economies (Mazzucato, 1997). Rather, concepts, theories and models that take cognizance of the peculiarities of African traditional societies and cultures should be used in the study their economic systems.

Anthropologists have through the years, adopted the above suggestion and came up with ethnographic reports of traditional economic systems of different societies and cultures of Africa. Through their works, it has been established that that are traditional economies in Africa societies. They have been able to identify the peculiar characteristics of African traditional economies. The most important of this is that African traditional economies cannot be studied or understood without knowledge of their social structures especially institutions such as kinship and religion. In fact, anthropological studies of African societies and cultures have shown that kinship is the basis of African traditional economic systems (Ottenberg S. and Ottenberg, 1960, Mair, 1975, Ayittey, 1991, Esoh and Oluwabamide, 2006). Work takes place in familiar context of daily life, along with recreation, politics and religious worship. All of these articulate with kinship. Work and family life are not segregated in traditional work, as it is in modern organization (Onyeonoru et al., 2012).

It has been noted that any development programme or project in Africa that does not take cognizance of the traditional sector may be said to be unbalanced (Onwuejeogwu, 1992). According to Onwuejeogwu, economic behaviour is a type of relationship and is determined by other types of relationships. In African societies and cultures social institutions and cultural traits are types of relationships which though operate at various levels, are closely interwoven. It is this single factor that is responsible for the survival of some elements of traditional economic practice in Nigeria and other African countries (Oluwabamide, 2007).

**Address for correspondence:*

abioduntoluwa@yashoo.com

Obviously, in African societies people’s economic behavior can hardly be understood without an understanding of their kinship, religious and political behaviours amongst others. Since the economic organization and all its associated behaviours make up a core social institution in society, one would expect to find a connection between other aspects of culture and economic behaviour (Ottenberg and Ottenberg, 1960; Onwuejogwu, 1992; Olurode and Olusanya, 1966). These connection or interrelationship is very easily observed in African traditional economic systems.

The African economies have been highly modernized. As a region most African countries practice Western type of capitalist economy (Akpan, 2004). Those notwithstanding the societies and cultures of Africa have practiced some form of economic systems prior to their being colonized by the Europeans (Obot, 2004). The economic system known in anthropological literature as “peasant” or “traditional” or “primitive” economy has certain characteristics which are particularistic of African traditional societies. Though the economies of African countries have been highly Westernized there are still some elements of the agelong traditional economy which have survived despite threats of extinction. In fact, certain traditional economic behaviours, which are peculiar to Africa have been merged with the new economic (modern) system. Those elements of traditional economy which have survived despite serious threat from Western economic influences are in this paper regarded as African economic heritage which is an aspect of the African cultural heritage.

In contemporary Africa traditional economic systems still persist in the rural areas where cultural heritages are still obvious. This implies that traditional economy is now an integral part of the overall economic structure of African nations. This paper therefore, appraises traditional economy in Sub-Saharan Africa with a view to identifying its nature and characteristics. It considered traditional economy as part of African cultural heritage.

FEATURES OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL ECONOMY

Economic life in African traditional societies centres around hunting, food gathering, shepherding or animal herding and farming (Okafor, 2012). Generally, traditional or peasant economic systems are so named because of their characteristic simplicity of technology. In fact, because of this factor some people refer to most African traditional societies as “non-industrial” societies. What are the characteristics of the Nigerian traditional economic organization?

Firstly, productive units are small. Generally, all traditional economies of Nigeria – fishing, farming, cattle rearing etc – are organized in small units of production. That is, each productive unit is made up of few people. The most important economic unit is the household (Okafor, 2012).

Secondly, the technology is simple, and is incorporated into the total system (Ottenberg and Ottenberg, 1960; Bradfield, 1968; Falola, 2001). The technology is simple in the sense that the numbers of different tasks involved in any productive activity are few; usually it is the skill of a single or two producers which carries production from the beginning to the end. According to Okafor (2012) traditional societies depend on very simple tools, and specialization is only limited in that household always produce what is needed in the homes. For example, the Mumuye of Taraba State, in northern Nigeria are farmers who wrest a living from a relatively poor soil with uncertain water supply by a skillful method of yam cultivation. Any year when there is a good rain they harvest large quantities of yam, which they sell to buyers from far and near. It is important to note that they use simple technologies, which involve simple tools requiring only energy to operate (e.g. cutlasses, hoes, knives, etc). Similarly, the task structure is simple – a man with his children and wife or wives constitutes a productive unit (Oluwabamide, 2007). There is division of labour based on age and sex.

Thirdly, usually an occupationalist is not a long one (Ottenberg and Ottenberg, 1960, Oluwabamide, 2007). That is a person learns his productive skills in the ordinary business of growing up among family members. Usually work and task are apportioned to the appropriate persons without much regard to differences in skill or productivity. In fishing communities such as Andoni, Ijaw and Itsekiri peoples of southern Nigeria adult men and male children engage actively in fishing while the women and girls engage in fish processing, preservation and marketing. A man engages in fishing activity day after day and in the process his male children who assist him in the act understudy him and after some time they can effectively perform the same activity. Similarly, female children understudy their mothers as they assist them in the act of fish processing, preservation and marketing. After some time they can effectively perform these activities with relative ease.

Fourthly, in African traditional economy the unit of production which is the social organization carrying out the production of goods is dependent on, and derived from other, forms of social life.

Anthropologists have observed that peasant societies do not have organizations whose only tasks are those of productive activities. According to Bradfield (1968), the bonds of kinship, which structure families, clans and kindred are often the bonds, which organize economic activities. Among the Fulani of Northern Nigeria, all the members of a single economic or productive unit are relatives, usually blood relations. Both the men who take care of the cattle and the women who produce milk are members of the same family. There is hardly a situation whereby a man would go and hire the services of an outsider to come and help him extract milk from his cattle, rather he would make use of his wife or wives and female children who have always been performing the activity.

Fifthly, there tend to be many productive units, similarly structured, all doing the same sort of work (Bradfield, 1968; Onwuejeogwu, 1992; Oluwabamide, 2007). These productive units are limited in the number of personnel they are able to recruit, the capital they are able to command and the ways in which they distribute their products. There does not exist a labour market, or a system of distribution for factors of production. In virtually all parts of Nigeria any economic activity that is peculiar to any community is often practiced by majority of the people. For example among the Yoruba of southern Nigeria; in a typical village whose economic activity is mainly farming, most households engage in this same activity (farming). The structure of all economic units are the same, that is, a man, his children and wife or wives constitutes an economic or productive (farming) unit with divisions of labour on both sex and age lines.

Sixthly, there is no direct calculation in regard to production and reward. In Nigeria traditional economic systems, wages are not often paid and if at all they are paid they are not calculated hence, no commensurate reward for any labour put towards production. A father who employs the services of his children and wives in the act of production e.g. farming, fishing, cattle rearing, does not deem it fit to reward them for their labour. However, he takes care of them in all areas of life especially providing their basic needs.

Seventhly, economic ties are looked at in terms of social roles; for example, labour is regarded as a social matter. Economic activities and the relations thereby generalized are lightly personalized. Generally, social relations guide the direction of trade. For example, among the Yoruba a woman who sells her husband's farm products in the market would sell at relatively give away prices to her husband's relatives not minding the loss that would arise from such transaction. She is more concerned about how to strengthen her relationship with her in-laws. She believes if her economic activity would yield this, she would rather use it. It should be noted that the concept of social relationship still guides even modern economic activities among Africans. For example, wholesalers or retailers of modern goods do reduce the prices of their goods for relatives and friends not minding any loss that would arise from such act. Modernity or not, Africans still use their economic activities to strengthen their social relationships.

One of the elements of traditional economic organization which is indeed, very prominent is traditional markets. Therefore, at this juncture, the paper shall describe the features of traditional markets in Nigeria.

MARKETS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL ECONOMY

One common characteristic of traditional economies in Nigeria is the presence of markets, a location where buyers and sellers meet to buy and sell goods. All societies of Sub-Saharan Africa have such markets where goods are sold either on daily basis or otherwise. Generally, in Nigeria part of the goods produced by rural farmers are consumed while the rest are sold in markets. It is practically impossible for the family which, in most communities constitutes the basic economic unit, to produce all its needs on the farm. By a necessity, a surplus over its needs is required to exchange for what it could not produce.

Akafor (2012) describes market in traditional economy as only a place for buying and selling; also used as judicial and communication centers. Ayittey (1991) describes a market as a place where exchanges could be made more easily. According to him, where exchanges occurred regularly, a marketplace would develop. The institution of marketplace is therefore, a natural evolution. In Nigeria, like other African societies, there are two types of markets: the small village market and the large markets, which serve as long distance, inter-regional, trade centres (Oluwabamide, 2007). Most rural markets are sited at bush clearings. Many of the rural markets of Nigeria provide for the needs of the local producers, consumers and traders as well as serving as foci for long-distance traders. While some rural markets operate daily, depending on the volume of trade, others operate on weekly basis.

Foodstuff and livestock constitute the bulk of trade in Nigerian rural communities. Commodities such as yam, cassava, plantain, salt, palm oil, banana, kolanuts, beans, goats, fowls, dried and smoked fishes, dogs, etc (Onwuejogwu, 1975). A variety of fruits are also sold in these markets.

Two steps are involved in opening a market in most rural communities in Nigeria. First, is to bring a group of traders together, at least once weekly, in some open space at which some shelters have been erected. An individual entrepreneur could initially clear the open space. If it attracts attendance from other communities, then the village chief would be called upon to officially establish the market.

Nigeria’s rural markets are periodic (Oluwabamide, 2007). Usually market days are rotated among cluster of villages. The Yoruba operate on 5-day cycles. Ibo rural markets are on a 4-day or multiple of 4-day cycle. The cycling serves a dual purpose. According to Ayittey (1991), this is an adaptation to a situation where the volumes of goods to be exchanged are too small to carry out on a daily basis. It also promotes intercourse between villages and further serves to stabilize prices in neighbouring markets and redistribute supplies among them.

In Nigeria’s rural markets vendors or merchants are segregated according to the products sold. For example, yam sellers are seated at one section of the market. This promotes competition. The same applies to other goods. This characteristic makes it convenient for buyers to locate the regular section for each commodity, to choose from a wide variety of goods and to buy at a fair price since, according to Falola (1985) cited in Ayittey (1991), the traders have to compete with one another at the same time.

In some Nigerian societies especially among the Yoruba markets, are located close to the Oba’s (King’s) palace. A lot of rituals take place at the market (Fadipe, 1970). During major traditional festivals, sacrifices are made at certain spots in the market. It is believed that the Oba speaks to the spiritual world at nights through his visit to the market. Usually in every Yoruba community there is an Oba’s market and other markets as well.

CONCLUSION

Most discussions on African cultural heritage focused on arts in its different forms. However, cultural heritage involves virtually all aspect of culture. These, according to anthropologists include, technology, kinship, religion, political organization, morality, education, health, economic organizations etc. It is therefore, obvious that any discussion on African cultural heritage cannot be exhaustive as long as it does not discuss all aspects of culture at a time. This paper has therefore, described an aspect of the African cultural heritage that has often been neglected by scholars possibly because it was initially believed (especially among early economist) that it never existed. It is therefore, obvious that Africa’s traditional economy is agelong and unique to Africans in their socio-cultural setting. In contemporary African societies, elements of the traditional economy are now part of the modern economic system which the countries of Africa have adopted since their independence, at different times. However, it is pertinent to note that since African countries are still largely rural, traditional economy remains the building block of their overall economic systems. It is therefore, recommended that frantic efforts should be made to preserve useful and enduring elements of the African traditional economy just like other aspects of the African cultural heritage.

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