

## **African Value Systems And The Impact Of Westernization: A Critical Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

Africans from the pre-colonial era have their peculiar culture which is evidenced in their ways of life. Their value systems as elements of their culture are depicted in marriage relationships, communal living, religious practices, and legal system and so on. However, the eventual contact with the western culture through colonialism and, with the subsequent upsurge of globalization, these values are not only being challenged but also eroded. Consequent upon this onslaught on the African value systems by the western values, which has been tagged “cultural imperialism”, with its negative and positive impact, what should be the response of Africans to salvage their pristine values that shaped their society morally, economically, politically and religiously in the past. This article is an attempt to make a critical evaluation of the western values visa-vise African value system, stressing that Africans have some good values that are worthy of preservation in the face of western cultural onslaught.

### **Introduction**

This research work explores the value systems of African society and the effect of westernization. To this end, these fundamental questions are raised namely; Does African society have values that are worthy of preservation? Is there any relationship between value and culture? What is westernization? Are westernization and globalization the same? Is any thing “western” superior and better compared to anything African which must be accepted and taken hook line and sinker without questioning? What then are the implications of the push of westernization on African value systems? How can we maintain our distinctiveness in the light of westernization/globalization? According to Ogbonmwan, every society has rules, principles and norms that regulate the conduct of its members. In different communities, people are rooted in their customs and values that make them distinct from others. However, the impact of westernization has brought about changes (Ogbonmwan 2008: 2).

It is pertinent, at this juncture, to define the key terms such as value and westernization for better understanding of this work. “Value” ordinarily means “worth of something in terms of money or other goods it can be exchanged” (Hornby1995: 1319). It can also be defined as moral standards, principles, or quality which underlies the code of conduct of the members of any given society. It follows that something that is valuable is also worthy. If we then ask a

question of what is valuable, we are to consider those things that are worthy of a culture and these are what make life worth living (Egbeke 2000: 182). Values are meant to be spiritual parts of culture, and these values perform the role of piloting, monitoring and humanizing culture as a whole (Chuta 2006:24). The worth of a thing is determined by a given society. Values are what the civilized and rational minds cherish, esteem, prize preciously and have inclined attitude for. They are principles or standards of a person or society for the good or benefit of the person or the society concerned (Asogwa 2008:173). Certain variables of such a society such as history, taste, preferences, among others are determinant factors. Value can be intrinsic or extrinsic. A thing is said to have an intrinsic value when such a thing is of a worth in itself. Conversely, extrinsic value implies that a thing is not only of worth in itself but also a means of obtaining other values. Values can also be material or non-material. Therefore, value is a thing highly priced by a given society. It does not exist in isolation but in relation to culture. As stated above, values of a given society are a function of its culture. Thus, it is necessary to look into the concept of culture.

The concept of culture has received a wide range of academic attention; nevertheless we shall consider some definitions given by some authors. According to Taylor (1891) as quoted by (Okoro 2009: 188-189), Culture is ‘that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs, and all other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society’. Culture is “the customary, social and religious structures and intellectual and artistic manifestations that characterize a particular society. It is, in effect, the civilization of a group of people at a given time such as their customs, attitude to arts, music, sports, crafts, recreation and to life generally” (Irukwu 1983:52). For Chief Ajayi Fabumi, Culture is a combination of all the spiritual and material values created by a society in the course of its existence. These values include the way they dress, walk, speak, dance, and everything developed by such a given society (Ajayi, cited in Irukwu, 1983: 53). Furthermore, in the *Cultural Policy of Nigeria 1988*, culture is defined as the ‘totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempt to meet the challenges of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to the social, political, economic aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organization thus distinguishing a people from their neighbors’. According to the Federal Government of Nigeria (1988:6 quoted in Enebe, 2007: 74-75), culture consists of:

material, institutional, philosophical and creative aspects. The material aspect has to do with artefacts in its broadest form (namely, tools, clothing, food, medicine, utensils, housing, etc.); the institutional deals with the political, social, legal and economic structures erected to help achieve material and spiritual objectives; while the philosophical is concerned with ideas, belief and values; the creative concerns of a people’s literature (oral or written) as well as their visual and performing arts which are normally melded by, as well as help to mould, other aspects of the culture.

As aforementioned, we can simply define culture as a people’s way of life which is transmitted from generation to generation, dynamic in nature, shared by members of that society, and thus makes them distinct from other people.

.Westernization, according to web definition, is the “assimilation of Western culture....” It is also defined as the “adoption of western ideas and life styles by other countries” (Goggle). Western culture originates from Europe. In a general sense, western culture connotes ethical values, traditional customs, belief system, political system, economic system, social norms, and specific artefacts and technologies of the western world. Virtually all modern cultures have been affected and influenced by western culture. Colonization, education, Christianity, technological revolution among other factors contributed tremendously to the spread of Western culture (Wikipedia).

Westernization can not be divorced from globalization. It has been correctly argued, in some quarters, that Western thought gave birth to globalization which in turn propagates Western culture (Wikipedia). Globalization is from the word “Globe” meaning the world. Thus globalization is a process by which economies, societies, and cultures are being integrated into a globe-spanning network of communication and trade (Wikipedia). It is a concerted effort to diminish or eliminate differences among nations of the world and thereby make the entire world a global village. Consequently, it is a cross border phenomenon (Okoro 2009: 191). Globalization is perpetuated by the agency of technological revolution, economic liberalization and democratic system of government. Therefore, to a large extent one can safely submit that westernization and globalization are related especially as regards their impact on the entire international community and their respective cultures. For instance, democracy which is the most widely practiced system of governance globally is of Western origin, so also are capitalism, technologies, and customs such as music, clothing, food, and a host of others.

Africa is made up of several nation-states as a consequence of colonialism. These nation-states are also made up of diverse tribes with differences based on divergent religions, languages, and traditional occupations, attitudes, beliefs, values, and a host of others. Nevertheless, despite these differences, there is a meeting point as regards what they hold to be of great value (Egbeke 2000: 184). It is a common knowledge that Africans are resilient and over the years, have developed their value systems. Africans have peculiar value systems. However, in this work only the salient ones shall be discussed and, in order to appreciate the impact of westernization on these values, we shall consider those things that were obtainable in pre-colonial African society namely; the marriage institution, the family system, communalism and social security system, African traditional religions, African legal system and conflict resolution, African traditional economy.

**The marriage institution:** Marriage is a social institution that is founded on and governed by social and religious norms of a society. Generally, marriage is a union of man and woman which is contracted between persons of opposite sex. From this definition, sex of the parties is a vital criterion in ascertaining whether there is a legal marriage or not. In traditional African society, the marriage institution is largely polygamous in nature. This implies that more than one woman is involved unlike monogamous marriage where the marriage is just between a man and a woman. In African marriage, it is not just the business of the couples-to-be but that of both families involved. Therefore, the consent of the family members must be obtained. In fact, in African marriage institution we still see the communal nature of

Africa society. This is exemplified where an individual's choice of a marriage partner is subject to the approval of other members of the family and even gods. Marriage is an agent of cohesion (Egbeke 2000: 188). According to A.N Analogue, (quoted by Egbeke 2000: 188), marriage is the 'cementing bond between the two extended families of the spouses-between their compounds or communities. By this system of community cohesion through marriage, there came to exist a considerable degree of social integration and stability....' For Africans, marriage is one of the yardsticks for the measurement of real men in the society. In other words, a man of worth must be married to as many wives as he desires depending on his affluence. In addition to marriage institution is child bearing which strengthens the union. For the African there is no limit to the number of children to beget. This is necessary for continuity and perpetuation of the man's family name. Note that some cultures are particular about the sex of the child. In a matrilineal society, emphasis will be on female issues while in patrilineal society, the reverse is the case. Incidentally, in a patrilineal society, a man does all he could to have a male child upon whom his estate will devolve upon death especially were he had only female children who have no right of inheritance in such a society.

**The family system:** In one sense, family may be defined to include all persons with common ancestors. This definition connotes extended family system. In a more restrictive sense, the term 'family' may refer to a smaller group consisting of the man, wife or wives, the children and probably dependants that are part of his house hold (Nwaogugu 1990:ixxvii). It is the cradle of human society and the nursery ground of moral values. In other words, it is the basic social unit of the society. It comprises the husband, wife and the children. However in a traditional African family, membership includes not only the man, his wife and children but also all blood relations of a common decent such as grandchildren, nephews, nieces, and aunts. Consequently, a typical African family is considered as groups with different sizes one bigger than the next one, "like concentric circles or eddies-the 'family', the village, the clan, the tribe-with the 'family' at the centre as the basic social unit"(Egbeke 2000:185). Thus, Africa practises extended family system whereby an individual becomes fulfilled in life only in relation to the fulfilment of other members of the extended family. In the words of Ogbonmwan it is a system whereby

'...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: .... A person is an individual to the extent that he is a member of a family, a clan or community (Ogbonmwan 2008: 3).

Furthermore, Africans cherish children and, by extension, large family. Children, like precious and costly gems, are highly valued in African society. In fact, this is one of the reasons why polygamy is practised in this part of the world. An African counts his blessings with regard to the number of children he or she has. There is this inward satisfaction that

comes from having many children irrespective of one's standing in life such as whether one is educated or not, sick or healthy, rich or poor, hungry or otherwise.

**Communalism and Social security system:** African communalism connotes concern for human beings and their well-being. As an offshoot of extended family system where there is interconnectedness among the members of the community, there is care for one by all. There is the bearing of one another's burden and everyone is his brother's keeper. There is a mutual assistance for one another. The haves help those who do not have so that no one perishes because of wants while his next door neighbour lives in affluence. There is sharing of virtually everything. For instance, in a typical African setting no one goes hungry while the neighbour can help out. In fact, one can easily walk into the next compound and demand for food, and this would be happily offered even when the members of that compound are not at present eating. When a visitor enters such a compound and meets the family in question taking their meals, he would quickly wash his hands and join in the meal. During farming season, there is mutual assistance for one another, whether in terms of getting, for example, yam seedlings for cultivation, depending on agreement reached by the parties, or communal labour like clearing of bush for farming, cultivation, harvesting and other things. Apart from these, where a member of the village is bereaved, others are always there to comfort the person, contribute money to help take care of burial expenses, support in domestic work and child care. It is noteworthy that in rendering help, there is no consideration of monetary gain (Ogbonmwan 2008: 3). Therefore, according to (Egbeke 2000: 186), 'self' is extended to reach out to 'others' and social concern does not end with the individual's skin rather it overflows to the kin. Thus Kwame Nkruma opines that the kinship system as noted by (Egbeke 2000: 186) is:

The theoretical basis of the African communalism which expresses itself on the social level in terms of institutions such as the clan, underlying the initial equality of all and the responsibility of many for one.

**African traditional religions:** From time immemorial, man has always believed in the existence of a reality greater than he is and this has helped to define and shape his culture, and also as a panacea to the fragility and obvious finality of human existence (Coogan 2003: 6). According to Jahnheinz Jahn, 'religion is the practical application of philosophy in the daily life of man' (Egbeke 2000: 190). Religion "expresses, among other things, the presence of the supernatural being(s)" (Ezenweke & Ajakor 2009: 210). Africans are highly religious and this is evidenced in their social, economic, political and cultural life. In fact, according to Mbiti, African traditional religions "permeate all the aspects of the departments of life [of an African]; there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life" (Mbiti 1990: 2). African religion includes belief in spirit whether ancestral or non-ancestral, magic, witchcraft and sorcery. The African believes in immortality and thus worships his ancestors who are acknowledged as intermediaries between the living members of their given families and the gods. These ancestors, who are also referred to as the "living dead" are always there for the family as guardians and protectors of the family members. They are the closest link between man and the spirit-world. In fact, these ancestors are still seen as members of their respective families that should be invited to partake of the family meals. He also worships non-ancestral spirits that control natural events and other creatures of gods which are

awesome in nature (Mbiti 1990: 177). These creatures can be in form of animals for example snake, human beings, mountains, and elements of the firmament such as the moon, star, and the sun, rivers amongst others. For an African, there are various ways through which he can practise his religion. These could be by way of sacrifices offered to the gods either to obtain favour or to appease them to avert their wrath when there is an infringement of the laws of the land. It is pertinent to note that the principle of communalism is also very obvious here in that all are enjoined to participate actively. This is because where an individual commits a sacrilege, it is viewed as an offence against the entire community, and all have the responsibility as a corporate entity to appease the gods. Politically, the African sees these rulers as those divinely ordained by gods whose orders and commands are meant to be obeyed without questions or objections. In some societies, these rulers are looked upon as both political heads and sacred personage that represent the prosperity and well-being of their nations (Mbiti. 1990: 177-178). Economically, the impact of religion on production cannot be overemphasized. Sacrifices were usually offered for bumper harvest, rain, and averting of famine. There are also festivities connected to certain crops like yam. Again, some economic activities that are secretive in nature such as divination or iron work attract more rituals. For instance, among the Yorubas of Nigeria, Ogun, the god of iron was worshiped by blacksmiths, carvers, and those into occupations that made use of iron (Falola and Babalola 1991: 155). The above mentioned instances, which are in no way exhaustive, depict the religious nature of a typical African whose everyday thought and action are controlled by religion. In order to improve on his lot amidst arrays of problems, he engages in rituals to appease the deities or spirits that might be responsible for his misfortunes. He also invokes the help of the gods for healing, fertility, and prosperity. Hence, for the African, there is no separation between religious beliefs and practices, and his economic and socio-cultural life (Falola and Babalola 1991: 155).

**African legal system and conflict resolution:** In every society, the importance of social order and peace cannot be overemphasized. Under traditional African setting, there are laws, customs, regulations, rules, taboos and others which constitute the moral code and ethics of a particular community. These moral codes and ethics are meant to regulate the conduct of the members for the maintenance of community solidarity. They are either human laws or divine laws. While human laws are punished with human sanctions, divine laws, when breached, attract divine sanctions. In most cases, breach of these laws are considered as not just a wrong to an individual but to the entire community and thus, must be punished by all as a corporate body (Mbiti 1990 : 205). Conversely, since the gods are the custodian and final guardian of these laws and moral codes, a breach by a single person is presumed to be that of the corporate body and as an offence against the gods. In administering justice, the elders play prominent roles in settling of disputes arising from breach of the laws of the land, whether they are divine laws that may require sacrifices or not. For every offence, there are punishments of various categories depending on its nature. For instance, heinous crimes regarded as sacrilege may attract death penalty, banishment, or certain sacrifices to appease the gods. For some other offences like stealing, the offender may be required to do restitution. Another method is oath-taking. This is employed in different situations. For instance, where somebody is suspected of some wicked and evil acts like poisoning, adultery or even stealing, which the person denies, he or she may be required to swear an oath to establish his or her innocence (Mbiti 1990: 206). Another way of using formal oath is to

compel a party to a contract to keep his own term of the contract. This could be marriage contract and could be done by exchange of blood otherwise known as blood covenant. According to (Mbiti 1990: 206), “this places great moral and mythical obligation upon the parties.” Furthermore, placing of curse on an offender normally by a person of a higher status than the offender is another way of justice administration. In conflict resolution, different methods are employed depending on the nature of the dispute and the ultimate goal is to restore peace and order in the community.

**African traditional economy:** Before the advent of colonization with its concomitant western culture, African economy was distributive in nature. This implied that those who labour are to reap the fruit of their endeavour thereby ensuring social security while the lazy ones are adjudged the irresponsible members of the family (Egbeke 2000: 186). Importantly, economy at this time was simple and mostly subsistence in nature. There was virtually no competition, and transactions were carried out through exchange of goods and services. There was no monetary value attached to such goods and services. Communal labour was used to boost agriculture through the age grade system. In other words, there was no monetized economy. Other values worth mentioning include respect for elders, mode of dressing, music, dancing, hospitality etc.

Colonialism introduced in Africa clash of cultures and radical changes in our value systems through western education, Christianity, urbanization and monetized economy. We now turn to the modern African to see the effect of westernization on its cherished value systems with particular reference to the specific examples discussed above.

Firstly, we shall consider African traditional marriage institution and the family system. As noted earlier, sex is originally a fundamental criterion in marriage institution. However, the modern trend in the western world is that persons of same sex can now get married as husband and wife in the name of exercise of human rights and fundamental freedom. According to divine arrangement, different sexes were created for the primary purpose of procreation. Even common sense will help us to appreciate that there must be a reason why a man and a woman are physiologically different from each other. Why marriage institution if there is no room for child bearing, companionship, sex and other things enjoined in marriage institution? It is incredible that even the church that should advocate for the preservation of this divinely ordained institution is promoting and practising this abomination all in the name of exercise of human rights. As a way of illustration, on June 7 2003, Gene Robinson, a well known gay Anglican priest was elected and ordained a bishop by the Episcopal diocese of New Hampshire, U.S.A. despite opposition from all over the Christendom. Many European countries have legalized same-sex marriage and other LGBTs (Lesbians, Gay, Bisexuals, and Transgender) practices. What a morally bankrupt society. African society is not left out in this dirty business. The South African government has legalized same-sex marriage. According to David Kuria, Manager, Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya, “homosexual-rights advocates will eventually win in Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria and other parts of Africa, as they have done elsewhere in the world” (Kuria 2010: 15) Even where there is proper marriage as between a man and a woman, the divine order of marriage institution, where the man is the head of family, has been overturned by western women who, for decades have been agitating for women liberalization. Consequently, a lot of marriages end

up in divorce. With particular reference to Italy, it was reported that more than 130,000 couples split or got divorced in 2007. In fact, this led to the hosting of a divorce fair in order to provide services like life coaching and beauty advice to a booming number of separating couples (Ibrahim 2010: 8). Apart from same-sex marriage and instability of marriage institution in the west, there are other challenges to the natural order of families such as surrogate motherhood, abortion, free unions, and single parenthood (Ezeanya 2009:94). Through family programme campaign, African family system, which gloried in large number of children, has been affected. So also is her extended family system which is at the verge of extinction because of the introduction of individualism through westernization. The African practice of extended family system whereby an individual becomes fulfilled in life, only in relation to the fulfilment of other members of the extended family, is no longer obtainable today. Indeed, marriage institution has been bastardized by the west and through westernization; Africa's marriage institution and family are under threat.

The African communalism, underlined by extended family system, permeates every aspect of the life of an African. This principle which presupposes equality for all and responsibility of all for one has been eroded by westernization and its attendant individualism. With the creation of cities during the colonial era, family members were separated and people were detached from their traditional, social and cultural settings. Consequently, parental authority and established marital conventions were weakened. Development of cities resulted in interaction of people from different ethnic groups, thus creating a heterogeneous society. Urbanization introduced fundamental changes to values applicable to its dwellers and more so gave rise to individualization of marital decisions because of dispersion of family members. To live up to the responsibility of city life, high premium was placed on money. Money now became everything. In fact, it became a symbol of status and social security (Egbeke 2000: 194).

Colonization also exposed Africans to western religion- Christianity and education. Through these media, western way of worship which is fundamentally different from that of African worship system was introduced. In order to propagate this new faith effectively, there was the need for western education. On the other hand, Africans in their quest for literacy sent their children to school with the implication of early exposure of their young ones to the influence of western culture. These children are taught entirely new things touching all aspects of human existence. Incidentally, these teachings are openly advertised as opposite to African way of life which is considered barbaric in nature and must be jettisoned. Consequently, these young brains nurtured with western ways of life and thought could not but accept anything European as superior and better compared to anything African.

Effect of westernization is also evidenced in our legal system. Unlike African legal system which is communal in nature, the western legal system encourages and promotes individual rights against the state. Thus, an individual can assert his or her right in a law court independent of the right of others as a whole. It is well established fact that adjudication in law courts does not guarantee peaceful resolution of disputes.

Colonialism introduced monetized economy in Africa. Consequently money is now the measure of everything. It is now the symbol of social status and means of social security. The



quest for personal enrichment at all costs is now the order of the day. The pursuit of material possession has so obsessed many Africans that a lot of social vices abound today in the society. These vices are innumerable but some shall be mentioned such as: arm robbery, materialism, corruption, kidnapping, political assassinations, political thuggery, electoral malpractices etc. Some of these instances shall be briefly looked into.

Arm robbery- Some argue that lack of employment, poverty etc are the reasons why our youths engage in this crime today. However, it is our case that greed, quest to acquire wealth, get-rich-quick syndrome is the fundamental cause.

Materialism- Ordinarily, materialism refers to the ideology of emphasizing the material rather than the spiritual side of man. It stresses material values with the assertion that money makes a man. To a materialist, all that matters in life is material possession such as money, food, drinks, cars houses etc and the ability to acquire whatsoever he desires. He can do anything to amass wealth. Unfortunately, he is highly admired and revered in the society without considering how he made his money (Chuta 2004: 58).

Corruption- Why corrupt practices everywhere? The leaders are more interested on what to gain and not how to impact on the life of the citizenry. In Africa, the rule of the game is that leadership is for life. These rulers can do anything possible to perpetuate their stay in the office. The question is why? Is it because they want to serve the people? No. All their manoeuvrings to remain in power is just for accumulation of wealth for themselves, family members and even generations unborn, all at the expense of the poor masses. In Nigeria, for instance, corruption has become so pervasive that one kept on wondering whether there would ever be a way out. Parents teach and encourage their children to be corrupt. What does one make out of a situation where parents will either buy certificate for their children or arrange for some one to write exam for their children? No more dignity of labour! What a pity! How about a lecturer that will demand for money or subject a student to sexual exploitation either to pass a course or make a better grade, or a law enforcement agent who must always demand for kickbacks before he can perform his duty? In fact, it has gotten to a level that there is no more free passage on our roads today. One must give out money or risk one's life. The church is also not left out. Many so-called pastors are there to make merchandize of the followers. Their interest is not on the salvation of the followers rather they concentrate on mapping out strategies on how to fleece their flock in the name of the Lord. Even in the traditional setting, the elders who are known as the custodian of truth in those olden days are not immune from this contagious and deadly social malaise. They can knowingly distort the truth in favour of a rich man at the expense of the poor in anticipation of some material gains whether in cash or kind. Instances of corrupt practices can continue being mentioned till eternity. According to (Okadigbo 1987) writing about corruption during Nigeria's Second Republic-1979-1983:

The corrupt man is everywhere, the man on the street, the man next door, the man in the church, or mosque, the man in the market, or the department store, the police-Man on beat patrol, the soldier at the check-point (quoted in Chuta 2004: 27).

All these are perpetrated for acquisition of material gain either directly or indirectly for personal aggrandizement. Thus the essential existential characteristic of the African that is

not just 'being' but 'being-with-others' or 'being rooted in kinship' is no longer to be. Thus, 'to be' is 'to have money' to acquire personal material wealth as much as possible." The individual or the families within a community are no longer 'rich' or 'poor' according to whether the whole community was rich or poor ( Egbeke 2000: 192).

By way of conclusion, we have shown what African values and by a way of extension culture and their expressions are with specific reference to marriage institution, family system, communalism and Social security system, African legal system and conflict resolution, African traditional economy and African traditional religions before contact with westernization. We also considered the concept "westernization" linking it to "globalization". In Africa, it has been established that westernization was first initiated through colonialism and subsequently Christianity, western education, and globalization. We have also shown the implication of westernization and its effect on African value systems. How then can Africans maintain their distinctiveness in the light of globalization which is a continuing process of westernization? There is no gainsaying the fact that the western world has contributed tremendously in helping man to conquer and enjoy the earth to its fullest through western civilization.

Westernization or globalization has its advantages, but not without its attendant woes. Wisdom demands that there is the need to sift the wheat from the chaff. It is also important to note that since culture is dynamic in nature, our African culture and its values just like the culture of any other society can not remain the same. However, our argument is that not all western values propagated through globalization are good for Africans as a people.

Our case is that there is no need for Africans to allow inferiority complex concerning African values when compared with Western values. One may concede that some of these African values that could be regarded as primitive or outdated in the light of intellectual development should be jettisoned. However, the good ones must be preserved and mingled with modern concepts thereby maintaining our distinctiveness.

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