

Understanding Human Relations in African Traditional Religious Context in the Face of Globalization: Nigerian Perspectives

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Abstract

The main focus of this paper is to explore the role of African traditional culture in understanding Human Relations in Africa, using Nigerian context as a point of reference, in the face of globalization. Globalization is the intensification of the compression of the global world thereby, removing the boundaries of socio-cultural considerations and bringing people of diverse human relations thought into closer contact which is capable of creating conflict. It appreciates the many positive changes global culture has brought to African soil since its inception but also noted that it has also changed many desirable elements of human relations which aided African civilization in the traditional days. Nevertheless, the African traditional religion has played a remarkable role in sustaining such values but with serious challenges. This paper therefore, aims at exploring the role of the traditional religion in sustaining African values, human relations in particular in spite of the challenges of globalization. It further highlights the challenges of reconciling the traditional views of African human relations with the impact of global culture.

Introduction

Before the advent of Western civilization and culture to Africa, the sense of brotherhood and hospitality were some of the cardinal values of an indigenous African man. The African man's idea of security and its value depended on personal identification with and within the community. The African human relations were indissolubly connected with culture and permeate the whole of life. The celebration of ritual ceremonies takes place in common and the existence of the individual cannot be connected outside the framework of his integration in society and there was the practice of submission to established authorities. Communalism in African world was a system that was both supersensible and material in its terms of reference. In the words of Onwubiko (1991), "both are found in a society that is believed by the Africans to be originally "God-made" because it transcends the people who live in it now, and it is "man made" because it cannot be culturally understood independent of those who live in it now" (p. 14). However, with the arrival of the colonial overlords, different ideologies and philosophies about human relations such as individualism and Marxism came into play. While the African social definition of a person displays the human person as subsistent relationship – in other words, the person as fundamentally "being-with", "belonging to"- Western philosophy lay emphasis on absolute originality and concreteness of a human person "a being for itself". In the words of Uzukwu (1996) "the "I" is already constituted before ever it chooses to be related; the autonomy and the incommunicability of the "I" are fundamental" (p. 43).

This exaggerated western notion of the human person is drawn from the tradition which emphasizes the concreteness, singularity, autonomy, and incommunicability of the human person, who, to realize the self in existence, may choose to be related. The impact of this western individualistic notion of the human person is glaring enough and it poses a serious problem to the world. If the individual is prior to society, and if society emerges through the voluntary contact of individuals trying to maximize their self interest, the survival of both the individual and the society becomes problematic. African anthropology (the doctrine of the human person) differs from this western system of thought to insist that communicability is the very essence of the person.

To this Mbiti (1990) noted that for the Africans, to be human is to be in a community, participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community that gives them sense of belonging. Membership of the community is emphasized more than member's individuality for a society is based more on obligations, than on individual rights and individuals assume their rights in exercise of the obligations, which makes a society a chain of inter-relationships. The autonomy and rights of the individual person are enjoyed in relationship. Nevertheless, the western pioneer visitors to Africa had their own ideas about how a society ought to run and they went ahead to implement these ideas. Attempts at industrialization and urbanization, with their accompanying detribalization have, to a large extent, disintegrated African family and social life. Consequently, religious and other values and sanctions of tribal life have broken up. The secularization of life and conduct in an essentially religious society cannot be overstressed. It hardly occurred to the pioneer Europeans to Africa that Africans had value systems and relational networks that ought to be treated with respect. In the process of implementing their ideas of human relations, anything indigenous suffered neglect or subjugation. Informal, traditional education, literature and indigenous means of human relations were suppressed. Ansu-Kyeremeh, (cited in Akpabio, 2003) believes that the marginalization was deliberate and that it rested on two planks. First, the world was already in the age of modernity and was witnessing the passing of traditional societies. The second plank being the Eurocentric claims that African traditional values and life styles are wrong and outmoded attitudes. However, our contention in these few pages is to establish the fact that African traditional human relations has continued to thrive despite all appearances to the contrary. It has remained relevant even with the level of technological leap of its modern counterparts.

Clarification of concept

The concept of human relations is so vast and encompassing that it touches every aspect of life. Whatever we are doing involves human relations and interactions in one form or the other. Human relations is concerned with the ways of the people and their groups. It also means that which can be done to anticipate, prevent or resolve conflict among a given people. Lussier (2008) says that "human relations are about you and how you get along with your family, friends, coworkers, and everyone else you interact with" (p. 4). Our major interest in these few pages is a peep on human relations in African cultural context especially before the arrival of the Europeans to Africa and we shall be discussing African human relations in its two dimensional modes - the horizontal and the vertical modes.

Sofola (1982) sees African cultural value as wholesome human relations among people which includes respect for elders, community fellow feeling, as reflected in communal land tenure and ownership, "live-and-let live" philosophy, altruism and hospitality. Human relations denote channels that are embedded with the traditional mores of a people and contributing significantly to their history and culture. Akpabio (2003) explains traditional human relations to embrace traditional communication system which is the process and system that utilizes symbols, values and institutions which directly appeal and readily connects with the people and thus enhance the variety and effectiveness of messages that circulates in the community. This translates to the various actions or tasks performed such as presentation of kola nuts or water to a visitor to indicate hospitality. These elements are constitutive of the African human relations. Relationship for the Africans is not simply a way in which the individual may realize his objectives, it is the essential element of personhood and the quality of a person is dependent on the intensity of maintaining these relationships. A common thread that runs through various definitions of human relations is the idea of being embedded in the culture and as a corollary all the ways of doing things of a community or people.

Extra-mundane or vertical human relations in African cultural context

Human relations are basically two dimensional-one horizontal (with fellow humans) and the other vertical (with the divine). The extra-mundane relationship is foundational and gives flesh and meaning to the horizontal relationships. It is therefore this aspect of the divine-human relationships among the African people that will form our basis of discussion in this part of the paper.

According to Obiefuna (2008) "There can be no meaningful human relations without the spiritual/abstract qualities that religion offers" (p. 10). For one thing, the traditional African man is religious to the core of his being. Many old African administrators made wide use of the phrase, "this incurable religious people" to characterize the religious ardour of the African (Parrinder, 1974).

Indeed, religion is the main principle that dominates the life of an African man and sets a definite tone in his relationship with nature and his fellow man. The Africanness which has its roots in the soil of our continent rather than the lecture rooms of western universities is basically a religious phenomenon; we are who we are because of our attitude to the mysterious depth in life, symbolized by birth and death, harvest and famine, ancestors and the unborn. One may thus appreciate the importance of initiation and passage rights in the growth and development of persons in Africa. Through these rights one learns about and experiences the channels of relationship in order to become a person. Hence Obiefuna (2008) maintained that “human relations are nothing but an extension of religion” (p. 9). He went further to say that to talk of religion and human relations is to lay emphasis on the communal dimension of religion, to indicate that religion is a social function. Morals and stimulus are elements of cultural environment and therefore community based. In other words, the interconnections which create the human person and human communities impose moral obligations on the relationship between the individual and the community, and between communities. When, therefore, relationship goes beyond the realm of intra-personal and interpersonal to embrace supernatural beings or when they involve processes, elements or abilities that are super human, it would readily qualify as extra-mundane relationship. Wilson (1998) noted that it may involve intra-personal processes, physical revelation, magical other worldly verbalizations, spiritual transmigration and it may; convey elements of cultural celebration, dedication and consecration. These features and elements can be collapsed into bottom-up and top-down relationship within the extra-mundane mode. Bottom-up relationship necessarily involves attempts, by human beings to get the attention of supernatural forces for a variety of reasons. These include a desire to curry favour from the divinities, or an attempt to meet spiritual requirements expected of every member of the community, among others. The top-down relationship is actually the feedback component of the extra-mundane mode of relationship. Here the supernatural agent communicates his or her pleasure or displeasure to the human beings in the relationship. All in all, it involves the display of supernatural or superhuman abilities (Akpabio, 2003). According to Arinze (1970):

Every Igbo man believed that an invisible universe was in action all around him and that his term of life was short if he happened to fall foul of its denizens; he felt that it was up to him therefore to propitiate them and to treat them with courtesy and deference. That was the fundamental reason why he had such a penchant for sacrifice in all its many terms. (p. 41).

Man must therefore endeavour to get rid of any calamities and seek the benevolence of the unseen beings by any means. This explains the reason why an African man must maintain a cordial relationship with his neighbour in view of the benevolent act of the spiritual beings. He stood for what he knew was right and kept away from what tradition condemned as evil.

Apart from the divinities, there are the ancestors as well. Life is not utter extinction for the African man. His dead relatives continue communion and relationship with him after death. Mbiti (1990) opined that the dead remain members of the society and there is the belief that there is a community of the dead alongside the community of the living and that there is a symbiotic relationship between the two communities. These dead relatives have power to influence, help or inflict injury and pains on those relations physically alive. These unseen ancestors (the living dead) are part of the particular African family, and are often invited to the family festivities. According to Okolugbo (1984), In Ukwuani, it is believed that during some festivities certain divinities or ancestors come out of their groves to feast with their living relatives. These ancestors are usually reluctant to return to their groves at the end of the festival after being richly fed by their descendants. Parrinder (1974) also noted that “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 harvest and fertility” (p. 28). These ancestors are held in high esteem as intermediaries between God and the living members of their particular families. The ancestors act also as family protectors:

The Igbo man strongly believes that his good ancestors, not the bad ones, are reincarnated into the family. The reincarnated children usually bear the identity mark or marks of the good ancestors in question; the ancestors of course are not the creators of the reincarnated children. Nor do the ancestors actually come back to life in their persons but only their qualities and influences. (Okolo,1985:36).

The dynamics of horizontal human relations in African cultural context

In this section of the paper we shall be looking at the various ways in which relationships between man and fellow men was and is still demonstrated in Africa. These relationships are shown in African sense of community consciousness, respect for elders, the care for the age and less privilege, African sense of free conversation, hospitality and so on.

I am because we are

A true African man is known and identified in, by and through his community. The community is the custodian of the individual; he must go where the community goes. In the material term, the African must go to the community centre or village square which is a social, political, judicial and religious centre. Davidson (1969), in this regard had said “Go the way that many people go; if you go alone you will have reasons to lament” (p. 31). Hence the community life and the basic ideology is a wholesome human relations. This is why individualism as an ideology and principle of life is not encouraged in Africa, even though it is not destroyed. Biko, (cited in Onwubiko, 1991) puts it this way:

We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competitions among us but as a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life. Hence in all we do, we always place man first and hence all our action is usually joint community oriented action rather than the individualist. (p. 15).

Living together and the sense of community of brothers and sisters are the basis of, and the expression of the extended family system in Africa. For the African man, the basic belief is I am because we are. Uzukwu (1996) puts it this way, “one is human because of others, with others, and for others, and since we are therefore I am. I belong therefore I am” (p. 37). The rationale behind it is that, the balance of wholesome human relations is seen as an integral part of the balance of nature itself which is a basic prerequisite for material survival in the African world. It is said in Africa that the prosperity of a single person does not make a town rich, but the prosperity of the town makes persons rich. It is not considered repugnant to ask one’s neighbour for help if one is struggling to make ends meet. In almost all instances, there was help between individuals, tribes, and communities, e.t.c. even in spite of war. This again explains the reasons why a community may have poor people but may not have beggars. Onwubiko (1991) describes a beggar in this context to mean someone who is not accommodated in the elastic means of the community’s life and resources. Such a person is outside the “clan vital”, and he has no hope of survival.

African Sense of Solidarity

The traditional African community attitude to work is one factor that explains wholesome human relations in African cultural context. In a typical African community, building of a hut or a house for a kinsman especially of someone that is old or a person that is not well to do in the material sense of it, is often seen as a collective responsibility that calls for the contributions of many. More so, the whole community or kinsmen as the case may be, can mobilize a workforce to the farm of a dead relative or someone who is bereaved to help out in maintaining the farm and keep the bereaved family going. When such a job is to be done, the whole community turns out enmass with their supplies and music and proceeds to sing and dance their way through to the successful conclusion of each particular job. In this way work is converted into a pleasurable productive pastime. Such type of solidarity is such a vital value that Africans cannot but work hard to sustain.

For Ifemesia (1978) “interdependence is a fundamental principle of Igbo philosophy of life because a tree does not make a forest” (p. 70). The Igbo ideology of interdependence recognizes that unity is strength (*Igwebuike*). It promotes discipline, reduces crime and humanizes relations. African religion recognizes personal/individual salvation, but it exists mainly for the preservation of the collective life and of the community. Thus the concept of a man as a person who co-exists with others give rise to collective responsibility, interdependence and human living which is an important aspect of African socio-religious life.

Within the framework of his community solidarity, and in the traditional African view, what is crucial to the individual in terms of identity and personal satisfaction, are not the things he possesses or even his position, but the warmth and security he enjoys because he belongs to and feel secure within his village and society.

As a result, Africans would not want to opt out of the community by violating the norms of the community because that would amount to breaking the integral human relations that holds the community together. Life in African community is based on the philosophy of live-and let-live. Hence, Ifemesia (1979) sees human relations in Africa as “a way of life emphatically centred upon human interests and values, a mode of living evidently characterized by empathy, and by consideration and compassion for human beings” (p. 41). In the same vein, Obiefuna (2008) sees human relations as “a desire to understand others, their needs and weakness, and their talents and abilities” (p. 10). Relationship between individuals in Africa therefore, recognizes their worth as human beings and not only what they possess or what they can do for each other, even though these can come as later or secondary considerations, in terms of reciprocity and in terms of interpersonal relationship. People help one another without demanding immediate or an exact equivalent remuneration. Everyone is mindful that each person has something to contribute to the general welfare of the society.

African sense of solidarity is also evident in the people’s action when someone dies in a community or village. In most cases people forego their personal businesses, in solidarity, not by sanction, to condone with the bereaved family and to assist in burial arrangements and funeral of the dead person. In this way the entire community gets involved in the mourning rituals.

However, some believe and fear that since these interconnections operate in kindred or tribal settings, there are unusable and even destructive in the modern multi ethnic or multinational states. Such pessimists fear that group solidarity, along with other moral imperatives, tends to limit its operation within the ethnic group or within kindreds and clans which can trace their origin to an ancestor-real or putative. However, it is to be noted that African societies are not inexperienced in federating nations, as the history of African kingdoms shows. According to Uzukwu (1996):

Solidarity within the ethnic group and between groups is not built on a lie but on truth and is linked to control by spiritual forces. The conflicts which began during the slave trade and matured at the colonial period gave birth to the lie which we call African states with artificial boundaries. This lie created the dominant extroversion of the societies, making them respond simply to the interests and objectives of the colonizers. (p. 38).

Indeed the challenge of reexamining the meaning of solidarity in modern Africa must be courageously faced. The trans ethnic links, which are part and parcel of the African experience of person and political organization, are necessary tools for reexamining the tribalism or ethnocentrism that accompany the African system of social organization especially as they have evolved in the post colonial period.

African sense of conversation

The art of dialogue and conversation is another area where the African people display their enviable sense of horizontal human relations. People freely discuss their problems and look for suggestions and solutions together. The unwillingness to talk to people about either private or public affairs can be interpreted as bad manners or sign of enmity. Above all Africans believe that he, who discusses his affairs with others hardly, runs into difficulties or make mistakes in the execution of his plans. The Igbo people say: “*ome akoro oha oghom anaghi agho ya*”, which means, he who tells people what he does never suffer mishap. In this regard, the exposition of a typical African gathering by Adigwe and Okoye (1980) is instructive:

They were sitting on fragile low desks in a crowded room, some on the bare floor in a physically most uncomfortable atmosphere. They sit there for hours without haste. They will be talking, singing, dancing and taking far-reaching decisions on vital issues of investments of human resources and heavy financial involvement. There is laughter, there is seriousness, and there is joy. Thoughts come out, they are given time to mature, and decisions are taken on them. A meeting that starts at 9am may end at 9pm without any official declaration of break. The attendance will be upward of 500 in a crowded room. Meals will be served during discussion and interesting contributions will be greeted with short spontaneous songs. You do not know whether it is a feast, convocation, a business meeting, a church service, a prayer meeting, a bazaar, a lecture session or a combination of all. These are what the outsider sees and do not understand. (pp. 42-43).

Onwubiko (1991) put it this way:

Ours has always been a man-centred society. Westerners have in many occasions been surprised at the capacity we have for talking to each other. Not for the sake of arriving at a particular conclusion but merely to enjoy the communication for its own sake; intimacy is a term not exclusive for particular friends but applying to a whole group of people who find themselves together whether through work or resident-requirements. (p. 20).

However, such discussions must respect individuals' sentiments; hence conversations that may cause misgivings are avoided. More so, since one man's problem affects the entire family and in some cases the entire community, there is often the act of coming together for the purpose of finding solution to such problems. Thus the concept of democracy which is contained in the African philosophy of republicanism is deeply rooted, for example, in Igbo life and thought as embodied in *umunna* concept. Before taking any decision the Africans have the tradition of gathering together to discuss matters of interest in order to arrive at a consensus and agreement. This is called in Igbo *igba izu*. This is the basis of African republicanism which Ekwurum (1999) calls "the consensus philosophy" (p. 134). And it is being referred to by Nwala (1985) as "unanimity" (p. 168). Republicanism is a system with clear pattern of organization and a mode of behaviour. Hence, in African republicanism, individuals and groups have rights and responsibilities and contribute to policies.

African communalism and the extended family system

In traditional African culture, the weak and the aged, the incurable, the helpless, the sick are affectionately taken care of in the comforting family atmosphere. The comforting family atmosphere is provided by the extended family system. To this, Udo (1999) noted that:

As with most Nigerian peoples, the extended family is the basic social unit of the Yoruba. And since the family lives together, each extended family has a territorial existence (the large traditional compound) within the town as well as distinct area of farmland in the rural areas. (p. 17).

The African man has a strong love for his family, including the extended family which Okolo (1985) calls the "African value of fecundity" (p. 37). It is a system that ultimately rested and still rest on the philosophy of live-and-let-live. It is a principle which defines rights and duties, responsibilities and obligations towards the less fortunate, those incapacitated in one way or another. For instance a man has the obligation to cater for the widow and orphans of his dead relative. Failure to do this earns him strong public opprobrium and as a result, it is difficult to find someone in the community without help. This is where and how the African sense of community and human relations, when misplaced, promotes nepotism.

The care of the aged, as an African institution is situated within the family. It is so cherished and so organized that there is no need, in the African setting for the cheerless nursing homes for the aged as exist today in Europe and America. The idea of old people's home and its introduction into Africa would lead to the abuse of the African sense of and care for the aged. It must be remarked therefore, that nepotism and tribalism in their present and dangerous forms are not offshoots of the African traditional culture. They arose through the African contact with the outside culture. Nepotism and tribalism in Africa are often political and are not indigenous to the traditional African cultural concepts and practices. The term itself is lacking in many African languages (Anifonose, 1982).

African sense of hospitality

The African sense of hospitality is one of the African basic elements of human relations that still persist till today. Africans have symbolic ways of expressing welcome. These are in forms of presentation of kola nuts, traditional gin, native chalk, and so on. The Africans easily incorporate strangers into their own communities and often give them lands to settle. All these are giving to visitors to show that they are welcomed and safe. According to Onwubiko (1991), "Among the Igbo, the basis of hospitality is the general accepted principle that a guest must not harm his host and when he departs he should not develop a hunch back on the way home" (p. 23). In traditional African culture, whenever there is food to be taken, everyone present is invited to partake even if the food was prepared for far less number of people without anticipating the arrival of visitors. It would be a height of incredible bad manner for one to eat anything however small, without sharing it with anyone else present or at least expressing the intention to do so (Okafor, 1974).

African sense of respect for the elders

Africans generally have deep and ingrained respect for old age, and even when we can find nothing to admire in an old man, we will not easily forget that his grey hairs have earned him right to courtesy and politeness (Canton, 1966). Though it is natural for the African to respect an elder, this respect in some cases, can be relative to what we can find and admire in an elder. The elders are respected first because they are believed to be the teachers and directors of the young. The Igbo say, he who listens to an elder is like one who consults an oracle. The oracles are believed to be the repository of truth, thus the elders are also believed to say the truth and their words and instructions are heeded to for the promotion of good behaviour among the young. In the same vein, Udo (1999) noted that the Yoruba stand out as a deeply religious people which inform their great respect for superiors and elderly people and resentment for despotic leadership. These were qualities which have been clearly expressed not only during the pre-colonial Yoruba states but also in the politics of Yorubaland since Nigerian independence.

The elders are also taken to be the custodian of communal wisdom and therefore they are conceded leadership in the affairs of the people. One of the reasons for this is the nearness of the elders to the ancestors. And in the African concept, a legitimate power lay in the office sanctioned by ancestral norms, not in the person, and the person lost his right to exact obedience once he abused that office (Davidson, 1996). The respect given to the elders has its practical effect in the maintenance of custom and tradition. The young are always looking forward to being elders and they are often told that if a child respects an elder, he would be respected by the young when he becomes an elder. This is the fundamental principle behind human relations in African cultural milieu.

Human relations and social stratification in Africa

In Nigeria, as in many other African cultural settings, a very rigid caste system did exist, the phenomenon being described in misleading terminology such as 'cult slavery'. Caste is much less flexible than slavery. Where a specific caste is despised or abhorred, the trauma it creates is much greater. The *osu* caste system in Igboland is a classic instance of an abhorred caste. The *osu* was dedicated to a deity. However, "There are hints that they were once an honoured priesthood, and that the abhorrence was an element which came later" (Basden, 1966: 249). *Osu* were free to earn their living as they chose, and they often became wealthy. But, as Isichei (1983) remarked "They were shunned by other Igbo as horrible and holy; and could only marry other *osu*; their children inherited their condition" (p. 254). It is possible that this abhorrence originated in an association with death, as they were offered to a deity, like a human sacrifice. It is very striking that Henderson (1972) draws a comparison between *osu* and Onitsha kingship, because of the latter's dedication to the deity, Udo. In Onitsha itself only one kind of person approximates the condition of a cult slave, and that is a king. Like the cult slaves of the Onitsha hinterlands, the new king is thereafter regarded as a living sacrifice of atonement and is the object of attitudes of mingled awe and revolution.

Similar caste systems could also be found among adjoining African peoples. In this regard Isichei (1983) observed that the Marghi engage in farming and iron smelting, but not in blacksmithing because blacksmithing and certain other craft occupations are the preserve of a group called Engkyagu. Marghi and Engkyagu do not intermarry, or eat together. A Marghi will not drink the beer brewed by an Engkyagu. Strangely enough, however, here again there is a close linkage between the Engkyagu and the sacred king. Engkyagu figure prominently in the legends which describe the foundation of several Marghi kingdoms; the king married one Engkyagy wife, his hair is shaved by an Engkyagu, and he is buried like one on an iron stole with charcoal around him.

African sense of family relationship

In pre-colonial Africa, family relationship has been described mainly by anthropologists, often in terms which seem closer to a mathematical proposition than to the study of the dynamics of man in his environment. Nineteenth century observers tended to see African women as oppressed, they saw polygamy as an institution which degraded them, an impression strengthened by the fact that women were always excluded from masquerades, which often acted as an instrument of social control to keep both women and slaves in subjection. Isichei (1983) recreated the average day of an African house wife in words strikingly thus:

She would go early to draw water, sweep the house clean, make the fire, cook and peel a yam for her husband to eat, then go out to work on the farm and on her way home, she would collect some firewood. Having brought this in, she would pound up the corn, fetch a grindstone and grind it to flour, singing as she worked. When they had finished their meal, she collected and washed up all the utensils. Then she went down to the stream to bathe, draw water and brought it back with her to the village. After this she rubbed some can wood on her body and lay down on the ground to rest. (p. 100).

This is a confirmation of what Emetarom and Ogbonna (2006) believe about the position of African women in family human relations when they posited that:

In the traditional Nigerian culture, the woman's place was considered as primarily the home. The woman was not expected to venture into areas that changes her being involved with home-keeping and effectiveness were well appreciated within these stereotyped situations. (p. 185).

In this same regard, Ezenweke (2009) and Uchem (2001) believe that Igbo women, like the majority of African population are subject to inequalities in the political, social, economic and cultural field. However, it is much more difficult to analyze the position of women in pre-colonial African societies generally. Their circumstances varied from the enforced seclusion of the hundreds of wives of a great and wealthy man, to the major entrepreneurial undertaking of the great women traders, to the much more typical palimpsest of varied duties which made up the day of a village African woman. Many women were involved in trade, at various levels, and in other forms of productions. The women are the active traders in produce which they purchase from the farmers. In this context, the female population could be said to be the life of trade in the pre-colonial African society.

Most African peasant women, like most peasant men lived labourious lives, with few possessions. They relied on their children and on their extended family to cushion them against the misfortunes of life. But their life styles had its own advantages; companionship made tedious work more bearable and they were seldom lonely. Occupations outside the home, especially trade, absorbed much of their energy. It was at the opposite pole of human experience from the bored discontent of the modern, urban, prosperous housewife in the western world.

Both mothers and fathers valued large families, and tended to have an intense emotional relationship with their children. The lives of women who found a polygamous household less than wholly emotionally satisfying tended to revolve round their children. In any case, there were practical reasons for desiring a large family, and therefore a polygamous home. A father and sons made an effective farming unit, and children were the only source of support in old age. Again, the incidence of divorce was infrequent, at least among the Africans of the pre-colonial era. Though childlessness was liable to break up a marriage in most societies, however, the effect of childlessness was always cushioned by the practice of polygamy.

In a western Yoruba town, in the 1890s, a missionary noted a mothers devotion to her son, as cited in Isichei (1983) that the black woman is not at all behind the white woman in this (material affection). It can be said that she is still more, a slave to her child. In the case of sickness or infirmity, she lavishes attention on the child and care for him. This buttresses an African saying that, a child who eats with his mother does not need to cry for what remains in the plate.

Symbolic expressions and human relations in Africa

Symbolic relations comprise elements which communicate or pass across messages. However, based on a society's peculiar history, experience and circumstances, elements, symbols and icons do not uniformly communicate the same message. As Doob (1966) had noted. "In a symbolic relation, the medium is able to suggest reality because, not through any necessary or inherent connection but through custom and habituation, the symbol arouses responses very similar to those evoked by reality itself. (p. 60). So based on established ways of doing things, the elements of this mode are used in relationships that members of the community conform with. There is no limit, however, to the elements in various communities that are part and parcel of this mode of relationship. For instance, among the northern people of Nigeria, drinking water is first presented to a visitor to show that he is welcomed. The presentation of kola nut represents this sentiment among the Igbo people of Nigeria. White egg, white hen, white clothes, depending on the culture are used to indicate peaceful relationships. Alligator pepper indicates long lasting relationship as in marriage.

Native chalk (Nzu in Igboland) if presented to a visitor is used to depict the hospitality of the host. Omireh, (cited in Akpabio, 2003) posits that the native chalk also has a role to play in the political domain of the Benin people. Once an Oba is been enthroned, he would send, through an emissary, a piece of native chalk round his domain to the various vassal chiefs and rulers. Symbolically, therefore, the acceptance of the native chalk meant an implicit acceptance of the authority and allegiance to the new Oba. A rejection meant non recognition of the Oba's supreme authority and defiance.

The palm frond called *omu* by the Igbo and *marino* by the Yoruba has tremendous capabilities in traditional human relations. Wilson (1998) says that one of the most important elements of human relations of the African past, which still retains its potency and effectiveness, is the palm frond. Its various uses include summoning people to meetings, declaring lands in dispute, serving as a symbol of traditional authority and a reminder that disobedience will result in dire consequence, indicates the presence of a shrine, notify the general public about certain routes that are off limits, restraining factions in conflicts from continuing in their feuds, and so on.

Conclusion

African traditional human relations in its various forms are still very much alive despite all appearances to the contrary. This is particularly true in the rural areas for, as Akpabio (2003) puts it, they know that a fruit tree or path is off limits once they see red cloth or palm fronds strung around such sites. When masquerades come around they know that the ancestors have come to visit and they comply with the various taboos associated with such outings etc. Hence, morals are seen as elements of cultural environment and therefore community based and the interconnections which create the human person and human communities impose moral obligations on the relationship between the individual and the community, and between communities. Kalu (1978) rightly noted that the African traditional society is so tightly constructed that a puncture from any angle poses a threat to the whole. Thus the African man stood for what he knew was right and kept away from what tradition condemned as evil. This reveals that the modern African, whether literate or illiterate, traditionalist, Christian or Muslim, still view his world as his forebears did. But whereas his forebears enjoyed a stable society and relied undisturbed upon wholesome human relations (divine-human and human-human) to preserve it so, the modern African, insecure in his changing world, seeks frantically for 'refuge' wherever it may be found. A resurgence of repressed practices is therefore inevitable. Hence Okolo (1985) has strong reasons to re-echo the sentiments of the East African Bishops at the conclusion of their plenary business meeting in Nairobi in 1982:

We Africans are a religious people. We have our own values. Without these values no ideology can offer an adequate and lasting reason for respecting one another. Our own African and religious values are the rock foundations on which our society must be built. These are the values that our society must reflect in its policies, its public morality and on its daily life. (p. 37).

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