



Proceedings of the 2nd (Hybrid) International Conference, Faculty of Social Sciences, Niger Delta University, Held on March 13, 2024

THE EXIGENCIES OF AFRO-CENTRIC SOLUTIONS TO SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES IN AFRICA: IDEOLOGIES AND PARADOXES

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Preamble

Our gathering today because of this conference is in part and totality a fulfilment of the tertiary education mandate. The intelligentsia by all means should proffer solutions to the ills of every organic society. Knowledge-driven solutions engender sustainability with egalitarianism as the second index. Conferences the world over create platforms for the cross-fertilization of ideas. Ideas are everything and nothing is something without ideas. It is in the light of the foregoing that I give great commendations to the conference conveners. The time is apt and the mood is right. Nigeria and by extrapolation the whole of Africa is in dire straits.

Deliberations and recommendations from this convocation will most certainly illuminate our pathways so as to reposition our region (Africa) as a continent that guarantees the optimization of human potentials while building a framework for self actualization. This conference, therefore, draws its justification from the foregoing.

The Memory Lane

Over the decades even in present times references to Africa have often been perceived to be laced with propaganda embellished in stereotype. Ironically, no structural efforts have been made to counter such stereotypes and they have become a reflection of the reality of the times. A few reminders many suffice:

- i) Africa – the dark continent of the world
- ii) Africa – the virgin continent
- iii) Africa – a people so naïve to govern themselves
- iv) Nigeria – a country of the fantastically corrupt
- v) Africa – a continent given to political instability

No doubt we are given to a high dose of spirituality but then these references having stayed with us over the years may be described as truism. A cursory glance at the continent will reveal that things are still the same judging from our childhood. A drive through some datelines and settlements in Nigeria will also show that the landscape has remained the same if not worse.

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Many here will agree with me that it is more adventurous to travel by road to behold the sights and sounds of peoples and cultures. Most unfortunately, the thought of travelling by road in Nigeria today evokes a plethora of fears and anxieties. The inference here from is that security has become an endemic challenge in Nigeria. Incidentally, this is a challenge that finds expression across the stretch of the continent. South Africa especially Johannesburg is known for its high rate of crime while the horn of Africa is always associated with sea piracy and the Sahara region akin to banditry.

The level of disillusionment and despondency in Nigeria has never been this fever pitch. Living without hope is a most traumatic experience. Living in Nigeria today can be described as living in a world of contrasts – the cost of living is high and the standard of living quite low. Public utility is at its lowest ebb with many bereft of expendable income. Each day is a nightmare – a bad dream that never ends. Parodies have been made out of the living conditions of Nigerians with many describing it as worse than hell. Many have created scenarios of the throne room judgment with the wisecrack that Nigerians do not have to be sent to hell again since they are already living in it.

Governments have raised hopes and dashed them. In descriptive terms this can be described as creating a revolution of rising expectations while cascading it with a revolution of rising frustrations. The hearts of many Nigerians have been torn into a thousand pieces and may never be healed again.

A synthesis of the above scenario will depict a thoroughly despicable situation which can be likened to “life in the jungle” where might is right. It is an interplay between the oppressor and the oppressed. Generative businesses are degenerating on a daily basis with capital flight a recurrent decimal. There is a problem of deficit in governance when yesterday seems to be better than the present.

If we attempt a replay of the foregoing discourse, it will assume a trajectory of propaganda, stereotype and reality. The catchphrase references to Africa started as mere propaganda with a steady progression to stereotype. Those stereotypes have in most instances; become true depictions of the dynamics in Nigeria and by extension Africa. This calls for an in-depth appraisal with the reverberations of this conference as the thrust.

Africa and the Monstrous Challenges

For the spiritually minded, Africa is a cursed continent. For the ideologically minded its leadership is bereft of ideology. We as scholars belong to the latter category with optimisms dovetailed within the framework of research as our primal guarantee. In order to accord this discourse a touch of comprehensibility, it may

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be worthwhile to adopt a procedural approach aimed at contextualizing the endemic issues that seem to plague the continent.

Viewed from a systems perspective, every organic society is enmeshed in a system with subsystems as the propelling force. For an animation, the input from the system will sustain the subsystems while the output of the sub-system will in turn perpetuate the system. The best would therefore be a disaggregation of these subsystems so as to create a platform for micro-management. The roll call has just begun:

1. Economy

The Oxford Dictionary sees economy as the state of a country or region in terms of the production and consumption of goods and services and the supply of money. In another instance, it is seen as the dynamics of how money is made and spent within a geographical area. Mill (2014) sees it as the practical science of production and distribution of wealth.

Inherent in the definition above is the distribution of wealth. The presupposition therefore is that the distribution of wealth in a given nation is the responsibility of machinery called government. Government in this regard creates an enabling environment for production and distribution value chain using the instrumentality of fiscal and monetary policies. If the policies are well thought out, then bloom and upswing become inevitable but if the reverse is the case, doom and gloom become the tale of the people with woe as the common denominator.

Over the years the economy of most African countries has taken a downward trend. A few elucidations may suffice:

An AFDB report indicates that Africa accounts for a large share of the world's people living in absolute poverty. The poverty index is less than one USD a day. With the exchange rate of about N1, 600 to a dollar and the minimum wage still oscillating between N18, 000 and N30, 000 the projection is most unhealthy.

The report further notes that income inequalities translate into inequalities in access to basic services and lower opportunities to get out of the poverty trap. In the light of this, Africa remains overwhelmed by unequal income and wealth distribution with poor performances in terms of reducing inequality.

World Bank reports in corroboration show the incidence of poverty among young people in Africa as over 80%. The tales of woe are just too many. Why are the policies not yielding desired and expected results?

Gulhati (2019) notes that most economic reforms by African countries were undertaken under pressure and many policy efforts failed. Conventional approaches like trends analysis using established indices such as

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GDP, poverty etc raise concerns as expressed in questions like “... is something wrong with economic development in Africa?” (Bierschenk and Spies, 2010).

It is interesting to note that economic policies are conceived based on theoretical underpinnings. In terms of economic development, an axiomatic flashback becomes most pertinent.

First was the notion that developed countries were to export their models to the developing nations for scaling up (Arndt 1989). In contemporary times, economic development is contextualized as modernization, industrialization, and westernization. Adam Smith pioneered gravitations in this school of thought – the theory of the “Big Push” resonates here. This accounts for the expectation that massive capital injection into Third World/African countries will change the dynamics. This explains massive subscription to loans as we are experiencing now. For Rostow and Lewis, a structural change is most pertinent. This structural change was countered by disease, illiteracy, inequality and housing deficits. Global institutions like Breton Woods prescribed growth – centric reform models for Third World countries. The effects were truly calamitous – SAP/SFEM strikes a chord. Then came the MDGs followed by the SDGs and so goes the story. The synthesis is that these approaches are Eurocentric.

Governance and the Political Structure

The Cambridge Dictionary sees governance as the way organizations or countries are managed at the highest level and the systems for doing this. Fuxuyama (2013) sees it as the ability to make and to enforce rules. A more functional definition of governance is that of the UNDP which sees it as a system of values, policies and institutions by which a society manages its economic, political, and social affairs through interactions within and among the state, civil society and private sector. Populist ideologies see democracy and good governance as mutually supportive. It has been opined in several climes that an authoritarian regime can be well governed just as a democracy can be mal-administered. The common denominator here is the ability to deliver good services to the people. In some quarters, one may simply refer to it as doing what works best.

Good governance is anchored on:

- i. The rule of law
- ii. Accountability
- iii. Transparency
- iv. Efficiency
- v. Public participation

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Twyman (2013) opines that politics is what people do to get and retain power while governance is how they use the power once they have it. The compelling question therefore revolves around the need to find out if democracy is truly the best form of government. No doubt, weighed on a scale, it is better than monarchy, oligarchy, and authoritarianism/totalitarianism. The practice of democracy as it is being propagated by the West is adjectified as “western democracy.” The compulsion therefore is to know if this form of government is truly delivering for Africa.

Campbell and Quinn (2021) paint the political governance scenario in Africa thus:

Africans will be increasingly alienated from those claiming to represent them. Political instability can manifest itself in severe episodes of violence. Such turmoil will grow as elites compete for power against the wishes of the citizenry and this will in turn inhibit social and economic development to the disadvantage of the continent’s rapidly growing population (para. 4).

Studies have also shown that the foundations of a political culture necessary to sustain liberal democracy have been weak – religious intolerance and ethnic malevolence. The optics are basically the same across the African continent:

- i. Their leaders wear the toga of “leaders for life” who always end up anointing their sons as successors.
- ii. Overt low levels of social development
- iii. Weak institutions of government
- iv. Poorly functional civil organizations
- v. Sit tight rulers with tenure elongation agenda.

It is common knowledge that the executive arm controls the other arms of government – a scenario that allows the executive to wield enormous powers. It is common knowledge that the manifestations are the same in the whole of Africa. The question therefore is: has liberal democracy served us well?

The Social Systems Parameters

The social system is galvanized by education. Scholars see education as a process aimed at freeing a person from the prison of ignorance. In life, information is power with thought processes even more powerful because he who controls the mind controls the world.

Our system of education situates everything African within the conspectus of negative insinuations while contextualizing westernization as the real deal. By extrapolation, our system of education is western styled and seems to perpetuate neo-colonialism. In most fields, household definitions of concepts are western

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based. In the field of communication and media studies, the legendary definition of public relations is that given by the British Institute of Public Relations (BIPR) while that of advertising is that given by the American Marketing Association (AMA). In the broad spectrum of social sciences, the conventional style-sheet is that developed by the American Psychological Association (APA). This trend more or less not only makes indigenous professional associations redundant but stifles every dint of creativity.

In the health sector, gravitation towards (Africa) alternative remedies is seen as a mission to the great beyond. The question now is; what about Chinese acupuncture? Is it not an alternative remedy? Herbal remedies from China, Malaysia, and Singapore are gathering more acceptability while ours are perceived with disdain.

A culmination of the social systems parameters has left a yawning gap in our society thereby stretching our moral index deficit. It must be western to be contemporary, anything short of that is colossal backwardness. Nudity and semi-clad dressing have become a trend. Vices alien to us are being considered normal based on liberalism as propagated by western education. In the light of the above, Gyang (2018) notes that western education has precariously contaminated the traditional values of Africa.

Okpalike (2014) describes western education as a programme to produce from within Africa agents for further impoverishment and enslavement of Africa economically, politically, and ideologically. He further opines that:

African science, arts, religion, philosophy, architecture and technology must not be understood as the remnant of a backward past but that which were stalled at the point of derailment of the educated Africans and which needed to be fixed in order to set African education on the wheel of proper evolution (p. 184).

Allem (2016) observes that western education as practiced in Africa often follows a standardized curriculum and testing system which can limit flexibility and creativity in teaching and learning. In other words, there is undue emphasis on grades while relegating substance to the backdrop. It is common sight in Nigeria today to see graduates who can hardly demonstrate scholarship.

Neocolonialism also finds expression in our system of academic assessments. The “publish or perish” syndrome as associated with web based metrics is equally not helping matters. We have all seen how possible it is to have an academic who is highly visible but lacks scholarly vibrations. A condensation of these three elements so far listed will show that we are where we are today by reason of not adapting these elements to suit our peculiarities.

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Lessons Learnt

From extant literature and observations, it is not in doubt that western models have really not yielded the much desired expectations in our economy, polity and sociology. Albert Einstein in his popular quote opines that “insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

As it stands, our democracy is no longer nascent but it is not working. The economy rather than bring about a better standard of living is widening the poverty margin. Self styled President Ibrahim Babangida was once quoted as saying that the “Nigerian economy had defied all economic solutions.” More unfortunately so, our social values have been completely eroded.

When faced with a bye-pass, just like the scenario painted above, two things become most pertinent – a wide look around and a deep look inside. A wide look around entails looking at how other countries with same past as ours were able to break the shackles of bondage. In this regard, lessons from the under listed countries may suffice:

- i. United Arab Emirates
- ii. Malaysia
- iii. Singapore

A casual question may also revolve around the need to understand how these countries were able to upscale the world barriers from Third World to Second World countries.

Again, we must take an introspective look to fashion out a unique model that caters for the needs of African countries rather than relying excessively on western countries knowing that the west can only help to the limit of their resources and on conditionalities too. This therefore justifies the title of this piece.

Rethinking Pan-Africanism

Contemporary propulsions bearing international dimensions point to projections by UNESCO that there should be a qualitative reinforcement of the endogenous capacities of African countries which would enable them count on their own strength to better utilize their resources and to lead progressively to self reliance.

Potgieter (2021) notes that the concern about the challenges the continent faces have contributed to the mantra of African solutions to African problems. Lobekary (2017) contextualizes that African solutions are relevant over a wide range of issues from development, education, health, and security. According to him,

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it conjures amalgamating politics with action while placing emphasis on pride, indigeneity, self reliance and collective responsibility.

Gravitations towards African solutions are not new. They started in the days of Pan-African movements. Solomon (2015) opines that in Africa, today, there is a discrepancy between holding elections and perpetuating authoritarian rule (para. 3).

In summation, a renowned Ghanaian economist George Ayittey posits that “outside attempts to resolve Africa’s problems have regularly proven ineffective and even counterproductive which points to the fact that long term solutions to problems in Africa can only come from Africans themselves.” This postulation and more brought about the phrase – African solutions to African problems.

Ideologies

An online resource sees ideology as a system of ideas and ideals especially one which forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy. The synonyms include beliefs, principles, philosophies, etc.

What is expected of us as scholars in the light of the subject matter is to come up with solutions employing our own perspective. The following steps may suffice:

- i. Knowledge of the web of intricacies
- ii. Developing capacity to understand and perceive a common thread
- iii. Untying the past
- iv. Projecting into the future

A synthesis of the foregoing will open up a framework of notions of content, ideas, practical action and financial dimensions. This is just a call for minimal disintegration knowing full well that content and ideas should emerge from Africans. Age long aphorisms like putting on the thinking cap and thinking outside the box may come knocking here. A few reflections may suffice:

- i. Was option A4, as used in 1992 elections, a western contraption?
- ii. Was General Abacha’s defiance to the West an Achilles’ heel to our economy?

It is obvious that our system of democracy is not working. It is also a known fact that our economic policies are counterproductive. Globalization rules the world no doubt but globalization is akin to westernization and westernization is akin to modernization. Isolation without leading to self seclusion is what *glocalization* is all about. This is the thrust of ideology upon which our scholarly propulsions should be anchored on.

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Paradoxes

In the context of this piece, a paradox in the light of an online resource is a seemingly absurd or contradictory statement or preposition which when investigated may prove to be well founded or true.

By way of etymology, the word paradox is from the Greek word “*paradoxos*” which means to think beyond or contrary to belief. What this is invariably telling us is to take a second look at the things we may have considered irrelevant in our scheme. It is possible that when this is done, two paradoxes will be staring at us in the face:

- i. The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone
- ii. Wetin dey for Sokoto dey for sokoto

Introspection is key in life. A philosopher once said that the future of the world is in Africa. In his illustration, he likened the shape of the African continent to that of a gun with the trigger in the West African sub-region – precisely Nigeria. The paradox is that we have our solutions within us yet we are looking outside. It is a known fact that:

- i. In the product category of electric cables, Nigerian cables are the best.
- ii. Our palm oil is a raw material of endless possibilities
- iii. Our crude is about the best in the market
- iv. Our nationals, in and outside Nigeria, are giants in tech, medicine, sports, academia etc.

Of a truth, we are suffering amid plenty. We are rich yet poor; we are strong yet weak, bright yet dim. As paradoxical as this may sound, the call is for us to look inward and become the giant that we were ordained to be.

The Way Forward

1. We must build capacities to harness our rich human, material, and natural resources to make something out of nothing.
2. We must dare to be different in our approaches to socio-political and socio-economic development.
3. We must accord premium to African notions, nuances, and sensibilities. This calls for a complete reorientation.
4. Our academic curricula must be redesigned with Pan-Africanism as a common denominator. The academia must develop homegrown theories, models, and constructs which all must celebrate. This should be the new face of triangulation and mixed methods as executed in scientific enquiries.

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Post Script

God in His all-knowing splendour endowed every being and nation with unique capabilities which must be explored and exploited. These capabilities interestingly have the potential to be stretched beyond elasticity. Those who stretch their potentials conquer the world and those who do not are not only conquered by others but are perpetually bound to the apron strings of external forces. We should no longer be bound by the status quo but endeavour to ventilate Africa and illuminate Nigeria. Our actions in light of this will most certainly make Africa great while positioning Nigeria as a nation to beat. This no doubt is the framework upon which emerging ideologies and paradoxes of Pan-African optimism are dovetailed – our tomorrow is in our hearts.

End Notes

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