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The Okonko Ethos in Igbo land and the Issue of Poverty: An Overview

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Abstract

In Southeast of Nigeria are the Igbos who maintain their existence through culture and traditional institutions embedded in Okonko Society. The Igbos over time have developed stable and independent economic ties and cultural contact with their neighbours. Gradually they aspired for a corporate status that would guarantee justice, equity, fair play and peace. This was aimed at reducing poverty to the minimum. However, the challenge of social change, emergence of modern democracy in Nigeria and increasing rate of corruption tend to destroy the institution and ethos of Okonko Society in Igbo land, Nigeria. In the present study, an attempt has been made to grasp the nature of Okonko ethos within the context of the greater good of the greater number of people. This paper also focuses on the reality of poverty as it affects majority of the people in Nigeria today.

Introduction

The common nature of people, regardless of culture, and the universal character of God point to a common goal and purpose. That is to say, they point to one destiny. In this regard Aristide correctly observed that, there is only one history: that of human beings, that which helps us to explain the struggle for humanity.¹ Those human actions are good which contribute to the realization of the common good; and those actions are bad which lead man away from the ultimate good and obstruct its realization.

In the light of the above, the emphasis about tackling poverty is based on intellectual capital and technology. Natural resources such as gold and oil are no longer the basic determinants in addressing the issue of poverty. The present technological era is based upon oneness of science, on the global character of communications, and on the sustained interrelatedness of the economic world. Above all, people of all cultures are waking up to the reality of a new and more radical dimension of unity;

for they perceive that their resources; as well as the precious treasures of air and water-without which there cannot be life-and the small delicate biosphere of the whole complex of all life on earth, are not infinite, but on the contrary must be saved and preserved as a unique patrimony belonging to all mankind²

However obvious this observation maybe, it does not seem to hold wholly true for the Nigerian situation. The forces of discrimination and corruption seem to be increasing on a daily basis in Nigeria today. Poverty here is seen as the social situation personal to the human being or group in which one cannot afford the funding of essential services to self or group. In this case, participation in social development is systematically lowered if not aborted due to a lack of economic power. Ancestral stereotypes between tribes and regions, between states and classes, now possess a new face of destruction. Arms trading and kidnapping flourish as threats to man's highest good, which is abundant life. Insecurity of life makes the

¹J.B Aristide, *An Autobiography* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993) p.48

²O'Brien & Thomas, *Catholic Social Thought: Documentary Heritage* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992) p.89

poor even more miserable, while making the rich even richer and powerful. Life is constantly threatened from the face of the earth.

The thrust of this study is therefore, to examine the ethical contents of Okonko Society that is meant to enhance the greater good of a greater number of people in South Eastern Nigeria. In doing this, attention is paid to the issue of poverty as a phenomenon and some of the factors that enhance its prevalence in Nigerian Society. The study concludes with a summary of the salient arguments raised in the body of the work.

Theoretical Framework of Social Change

Written materials on society and change in ancient Africa usually centre on the influence of external forces in the elimination of socio-cultural institutions considered as nasty and the enthronement of new ones, seen as dynamic and progressive. Augustine of Hippo, born in 354 AD was among the first scholars to articulate the idea of social change and what propelled historical change. As the proponent of the concept of divine providence, Augustine argued that the trend of human history is directed by beings rooted in the spiritual realm. The crux of Augustine's argument is that God is the cause of all changes. This line of thought ruled the world till the 18th century when the era of enlightenment was ushered in.³

The outstanding minds of the enlightenment period were Immanuel Kant and George Hegel. Kantian-Hegelian theory emphasized the shift from spiritual agency to humans as the agents of historical change. Karl Marx and Frederick Engel stepped in and gave economic interpretations to the Kantian-Hegelian theory of change. As noted by Marx and Engel, any change in society is propelled by the conflict between different classes in society, and the most essential factor in this conflict is group economic interest.⁴ Furthermore, Arnold Toynbee saw historical change within the context of challenge and response.

However, a number of scholars of African studies attribute socio-cultural changes in traditional African settings to colonialism and missionary expansionism. Therefore, the two basic perspectives of change in Africa are: the neo-Marxist school and the orthodox school.⁵ Nwabughuogu in his examination of change, particularly in Igbo land saw responses and initiatives as important factors of change in pre-colonial and colonial Africa.⁶ Thus, this study bases its assumptions on the framework that external influence contributed significantly to the changes that have made Okonko Society to lose grip of social control in Igbo land. The consequence of this socio-cultural change is corruption and wide spread poverty in Africa.

The Igbos and their Land

Igbo civilization as embedded in its conscious efforts to overcome poverty is a gift of the Niger in the same context in which Egypt is said to be a gift of the Nile. As the earliest world civilizations developed around river basins and deltas, so did there develop a vibrant and dynamic cultural heritage around Niger Delta.

The people now known as the Igbos or southeasterners in Nigeria thought of themselves as Awka, Bende, Aro, Ngwa and Ibeku. The word "Ibo" was perhaps derived from "Heebo" which, according to some European traders of the 19th century, was the name given by Biafran traders on the coast to the hinterland

³ P.U. Mbakwe, "Change & Continuity in an Igbo Polity" (A Ph.D Thesis submitted to the University of Calabar, Nigeria, 2005)

⁴ M.L Tingan, *The Economics of Development Planning* (New Delhi: Delhi Press, 1981) p.82

⁵ Mbakwe, "Change & Continuity" ...p.7

⁶ A. I Nwabughuogu, *The Dynamics of Change in Eastern Nigeria 1900-1960* (Owerri: Thompson Press, 1993) p.5-18

