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## Leadership and Sustainable Developmental Africa: Lessons from Traditional Yoruba Society

**Balogun, O.A**

Redeemers University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria.

Email: [balogundele@yahoo.com](mailto:balogundele@yahoo.com)

### **Abstract**

*Africa has been permeated with high level poverty, hunger, sicknesses, low literacy education, gender inequalities and insecurity making her be classified as underdeveloped. The paper postulates that effective leadership is critical to attaining sustainable development in Africa. In order to end poverty, sicknesses and neglect of environments in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Africa, there is need to reengineer the concept of leadership to foster development in Africa. The fundamental principles of effective leadership as practiced by traditional Yoruba society would be critical to African leaders. Commitment to societal goals, equitable distribution of wealth and sustainable management of resources and the environment, are critical to sustainable development. In addition, there is need to undertake the oath of performance and covenant of commitment that binds the leader to the society as demonstrated in traditional Yoruba society. The methodology adopted is analytical and critical exploring conceptual analysis in discussing the myriads problems facing Africa and how sustainable development goals can be used to combat these problems. There is need to adopt the fundamental principles of effective leadership as practiced in traditional Yoruba societies.*

**Keywords:** Leadership, Sustainable development, Africa, Traditional Yoruba

Received: July  
25,2022  
Accepted: 26  
Sep 2022  
Published: 9<sup>th</sup>  
Nov 2022

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## **Introduction**

Nigeria experiences myriads problems which hinder sustainable community development. These problems have been identified as poverty, crime, illiteracy, women's disempowerment, and depletion of the environment. Like many African nations, Nigeria lacks the basic necessities to lift her citizens out of poverty and hunger and provide descent shelter and employment opportunities for the citizens. Inadequate infrastructure and resources to enable citizens access quality health, education and a good standard of living is worrisome.

Like many other African Nations, it is surprising that Nigeria after years of identifying the essential ingredient for development; is still under-developed due to inadequate. human capital, lack of peace, security, sound health system, quality education, effective and accountable governance thus Africa remains under-developed.

This paper seeks to establish the relationship between leadership and level of days is critical analytics. Critical analysis is used to examine and break down the concepts in order to understand the meaning and nature of the concepts discussed such as leadership and development. On the other hand, the expository method is used to expound and investigate the nature of the Yoruba traditional society, the social values embedded in their customs and tradition and how such lessons practices to promote sustainable development in contemporary times.

## **Sustainable Development in Africa**

Despite decades of independence and development strategies and policies, many African countries experience severe socio-economic crises and political problems. Over the years, Africa has attempted to implement a series of development theories, agendas and approaches with the aim of increasing the standard of living and maintaining the quality of life.

The Bruntland Commission Report (1987) described the concept of sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". The concept refers to the ability and process of achieving sustainable development.

The idea behind this is the belief that human societies ought to live and meet their own needs without having severe negative implications for the future. The need for sustainable development was borne in response to the challenges faced by the people of the world and the environment. At the heart of sustainable development are 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which call for actions to take in achieving the desired better future for all through efficient use of natural resources.

In 1992, in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil, 178 countries adopted the Agenda 21, a plan of action to build a global partnership for development with the view to improving human lives while protecting the environment (United Nations, 1992). In September 2015, world leaders converged at the United Nations Headquarters in New York to consider and adopt a new comprehensive, ambitious and transformational development agenda. The Outcome Document strategy adopted during the summit outlines a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets aimed at eradicating poverty in all its forms and shifting the world into a sustainable and resilient development pathway while ensuring that 'no one is left behind.

The goals were presented as;

1. No Poverty: This deals with the problem of poverty and how to curb it.
2. Zero Hunger: The second goal aimed at achieving food security and improving nutrition and sustainable agriculture.
3. Good Health and Well-being: The need for good healthy lives for all, regardless of age.
4. Quality Education: Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promotion of life-long learning opportunities for all.
5. Gender Equality: Achieving gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls.
6. Clean Water and Sanitation: Ensuring availability and sustainable management of water resources for all.
7. Affordable and Clean Energy: The goal here was to produce and ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for everyone. This would also help reduce the problem of pollution and shortage of electricity.
8. Decent Work and Economic Growth: This SDG aimed at promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.
9. Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure: To build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation, and foster innovation.
10. Reduced Inequalities: Reduce inequalities within and among countries. Some of the benefits of this goal are that it fosters aid, reduces financial crisis and eases the migration of people.
11. Sustainable cities and communities: Aimed at making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.
12. Responsible Consumption and Production: To ensure sustainable consumption and production.
13. Climate Action: This goal calls for urgent action to combat climate change and its impact.

14. Life Below Water: Aimed at conserving and sustainably using the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.
15. Life on Land: Protecting, restoring and promoting sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, and loss of biodiversity.
16. Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
17. Partnerships for the Goals: strengthening, implementation and revitalization of United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022.

Whereas these sustainable development goals were formulated to ensure environmental protection, social equality and economic profitability no substantive development has been realised on the African continent.

### **Challenges of Leadership and Problems of Development in Africa**

According to Tannenbaum et. al (1961), leadership is the interpersonal influence exerted in a situation and directed through communication systems towards the attainment of specific goals.

While development refers to the process of positive change, growth and progress economically, politically, socially, environmentally and physically, development is a complex term but widely used to describe improvement, especially in relation to socio-economic conditions. Development also implies a high level of security, good standard of living, and stability in the various sectors of a nation.

Africa is described as one of the world's second-largest and the second most populous continent and blessed with land area, people, rich historical culture, an abundance of natural resources such as gold, oil, and is home to a wide array of biodiversity. It occupies about one-sixth of the earth, and early civilisation has also been traced to Africa (Sayre, 1999). Nonetheless, Africa is also heavily affected by various socio-economic, environmental and political problems.

According to the United Nations Economic Report in 2004, sub-Saharan Africa was listed as the least successful region of the world with regard to reduction of poverty, which was attributed to unsuccessful foreign policies and programmes as well as bad domestic government policies (United Nations, 2004).

Many African countries are experiencing various problems and challenges with their political and economic development. Coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, many African countries

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have been economically crippled and relegated to recession (United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs, 2022). The issues associated with under-development in Africa can be traced to poor leadership, lack of sound governance, bad policies, and poor-implementation of domestic policies.

Taking a look at Mali, South Sudan, Nigeria, and Kenya, among others; the myriad political unrest, economic decline and unstable social situation facing can be traced to modern political leadership and lack of adequate standards.

Thus, the availability of rich resources and human capital, Africa lacks decisive and selfless leaders, which is why it remains in the web of under-development and saddled with various problems such as hunger, poverty, unemployment and insecurity. The continuous state of insecurity in terms of lives, property, food and agriculture has made the continent prone to attacks, threats to her peace and the lives of its citizens.

Over the past decades, African leaders have failed to establish proper infrastructures and policy implementation frameworks for their proposed development agendas. The lack of sound governance can again be traced to the lack of ethical and effective leaders and public officers. This a majority of African leaders have no regard for the welfare of the people and disregard the duties associated with the offices they are elected to.

Nigeria for example, is faced with severe challenges to her development despite the policies drafted and resources allocated to support development of agenda due to incompetence leadership.

The incompetent leadership has resulted in corruption and embezzlement of national resources, lack of infrastructure and amenities such as hospitals, quality education, terrorism and banditry, increase in poverty and unemployment, insurgency, ethnic clashes and many other vices that currently cripple economic growth of the country.

In the various democratic led administrations, there have been many attempts by past leaders to develop comprehensive plans and policies for economic growth and development. However, these policies, after passing the legislative stages, upon the allocation of resources, never led to sustainable development. Instead, public leaders and officials use these avenues of policy-making, programmes, schemes and propaganda to embezzle national funds and enrich themselves.

The setbacks encountered due to inefficiency and inadequacies of its government has contributed significantly to the inability of the government to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

Besides poor leadership, sustainable development has also been hampered ethnic politics, nepotism and godfatherism. The problem of ethnicity exacerbates the poor socio-political

situation in Nigeria demonstrated by numerous Inter-ethnic clashes, ethnic-religious conflicts, and ethnic politics leading to lack of equality and equal distribution of resources across the nation. Ethnic politics is characterised by the tendency of politicians mobilizing support based on an appeal to ethnic identity leading to people supporting leaders from the same ethnic group” (Lynch, 2015).

This becomes a problem when political leaders begin to favour members of their ethnic group for political assignment rather than through a system of merit and due assessment. Contracts and projects are awarded based on ethnic membership rather than competence and efficiency; communities and society are developed as per the choice and origin of the political leader, thereby denying other members and regions access to the same social amenities, resources and infrastructures, breeding unhealthy competitions, social inequality and injustice.

On the other hand, nepotism and godfatherism are exhibited in many African Countries and remains an obstacle to achieving and maintaining sustainable development policies. This has affected socio-economic and political development and continues to leave a trail of negative impact.

The underlying factor that encourages nepotism and godfatherism in Nigeria is the high level of political power and authority concentrated on specific individuals, especially past political leaders. With its demands for favour in return for the political support of those considered superiors to aspiring political aspirants, Godfatherism continues to endanger the democratic process and gives room for corruption and unaccountability of present political leaders and public officials.

In addition, corruption is an endemic problem that Nigeria has battled since independence runs through every level, from the local to federal, and every political and economic sphere is riddled with the problem of corruption. This is associated with lack of transparency, accountability and poor governance.

Because of corruption resources allocated to implement policies and sustainable development-goals, are lost in the web of embezzlement and is never duly accounted for. Hence, corruption leading to economic loss and inefficiency, which undermines the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The government’s failure to implement policies that would address the problem of corruption.

In 2015, for example Nigeria adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) focused on ending poverty, protecting the natural environment and climate, and ensure a good life for



all. However, on the first four goals, which are; No Poverty, Zero Hunger, Good Health and Quality Education, Nigeria, like other African nations, are yet to achieve these.

Poverty and unemployment rise rapidly due to lack of jobs for employable youth and graduates, leading to youths engaging in criminal activities such as kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery and insurgency. Inadequate medical infrastructure and inaccessibility to good healthcare contributes to increased morbidity and mortality from preventable illnesses. These factors make it challenging for Nigeria to achieve any form of development in vital areas.

### **Sustainable Development: Lessons from the Traditional Yoruba Society.**

Against the deficit of growth, development and effective leadership in Nigeria and Africa in general, this paper proposes that the African government take a cue from the indigenous leadership systems.

This has become imminent as the modern system of governance has failed to satisfactorily contribute to the achievement of sustainable development across the continent. Instead, the implementation of foreign policies and governance continues to limit the agenda of development and authentic leadership.

It is no gainsaying that excellent and effective leadership is the bedrock and foundation of growth and development of any nation, and to address the endemic nature of the challenges facing Africa; there is a significant need to address the role of leadership.

This paper aims to examine the notion of leadership and the socio-political institution of the Yoruba people as an example and framework for effective leadership in Nigeria and Africa. It is our belief that the indigenous political system of leadership will offer a solution to governance challenges in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. The Yoruba people a major ethnic group in Nigeria possess a rich cultural, social, economic and political institution and tradition. Prior to colonial administration in Africa, the Yoruba people led their own socio-economic and political institutions which had a well-established system of order and governance.

Although, the Yoruba political system was mostly monarchical, it was effective. Thus in the Yoruba society, the *ilu* (town or settlement) is led by a monarch known as the *Oba* (King) supported by the cabinet of *Oloye* (*chiefs*). In the old Oyo empire for instance, the Oyo kingdom was led by the *Alaafin* of Oyo who is usually installed by the group known as *Afobaje*(Kingmakers)and then his chiefs, *Otun*, *Osi*, *Iyalode*, *Abobaku*, *Oyomesi*, etc.

Political authority in the Yoruba society was communal rather than individualistic. The implication of this was that the *Oba* and his chief of staff represented the interest of the people and worked in achieving them. When the king goes astray or acts in unfavourable ways that

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would not benefit the community, he is called to order by the chiefs. This necessitated a principle of check and balance of power and authority.

When the king failed to deliver on the promise and duties attached to his office, he could be impeached by his cabinet members and even the people themselves through a traditional method. The *Obaship* is seen as a sacred and highly spiritual position and in as much as the *obaship* was monarchical, it was not absolute nor hereditary. In this sense, the first-born son of the *Oba* could assist in political matters of the community but was not in all cases the next in line for the leadership position. One of the many factors that ensured effective leadership and socio-political stability in the Yoruba society is the act of taking oath swearing or the oath of allegiance which is a religious and culturally act embedded in the Yoruba tradition. It ensured the commitment of the political individuals, leaders and rulers to keep their oath of office and diligently carry out their duties.

Furthermore, the oath of allegiance and commitment is a spiritual exercise that binds the King, particularly to his subjects and acts as a guiding factor to curtail corrupt, selfish or bad governance. The oath is taken to ensure participation and fulfilment of political roles and duties.

According to Ikeora (2016), those invited to take the oath, directly submit to a supernatural tribunal. It was an effective means of enacting and ensuring good morals, detecting crimes and stopping wrongdoings. This, in turn, deter leaders from engaging in questionable actions and compels them to conduct the political affairs with commitment, transparency and accountability, fear and diligence.

The act of oath-taking is a spiritual enterprise backed up by the African traditional religion and belief in deities and ancestors. It encourages the virtue of truth and trust as the individual taking the oath, is made to swear before any of the Yoruba gods, who unlike their Western counterparts do not hesitate to cast judgment on those who betray their allegiance or words. The undertaken covenant promotes social equality, justice and social order.

In this vein, Oladipupo (2012) avers that “the gods sworn to in the Yoruba societies are known for instant justice”. He also notes that the effect of oath swearing and covenant-keeping goes beyond the individuals who swore to such oath but also extends to family members who share in the consequences associated with abuse of the oath.

When leaders undertake the oath-swearing process, they do so in truth, believing that they are bounded by the spiritual laws of the oath, and are ready to face the negative consequences if betrayed. Awolalu revealed this inevitability. He posits “A person who is given to oath-breaking or falsehood is believed not to be prospering in life” (Awolalu 1979). It is strongly believed among the Yoruba that, anybody who swears falsely or breaks an oath to which



*Ogun* (The Yoruba god of iron) is a witness cannot escape severe judgment in a ghastly accident (Awolalu 1979).

Based on the foregoing, this paper argues further that for effective leadership devoid of both domestic and foreign superimposition, policies and problems to sustainable development in Nigeria and Africa, lessons can be extracted from the Yoruba political socio-religious institution and culture of oath-swearing rather than the foreign religion which seems to be doing nothing in effecting actual changes and transparency of governance.

It is the submission of this paper that, the fundamental principles of leadership exemplified in the Yoruba tradition such as accountability, check and balance, transparency, commitment to social goals and justice, equality and good character should be indoctrinated into the modern political sphere and followed judiciously. In addition, the paper advocates the oath of performance and covenant of commitment which necessarily binds the leader to the society as demonstrated in traditional Yoruba society must be taken by every leader in Africa.

## **Conclusion**

Until Africa, as a nation begins to produce committed and functional leaders, its development as a continent will remain stunted and slow. Arguably, good and effective leadership is the pillar that holds and directs the activities and actions of any nation. If this is achieved, then the actualization of Sustainable Development Goals will be seamless, especially for African countries.

African countries possess natural and human resources as well a stable environment and support, both internal and external. Initiatives and innovative policies should be implemented to tackle the challenges and the problems that need to be addressed at the root cause. Everyone including the government, political and communal leaders ought to put their heads together, and find common grounds and a way forward. This can potentially lead to creation of employment, sustainable agriculture and overall improvement in the quality of life in Africa.

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