A Contextual Approach To Development in sub-Saharan Africa

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**Introduction**

Despite the influx of development aid, both in-kind and financial, from donor nations and international financial institutions, Africa’s economy remains abysmally weak, and accounts for less than 1.2 percent of the World’s GDP (World bank, 2006), even though more than 10 percent of the world’s population calls it home (UNDP, 1996). The World Bank and the IMF, beginning in the early 1970s, used different combinations of monetary and fiscal policy instruments that included loans and technical assistance to help spur development in the region but to no avail. By the late 1990s, it became clear to all concerned that reform efforts in Africa have failed (Meredith, 2005); but why? Why has development proved so elusive in Africa? Why was Europe able to get back on her feet after the second World War under the ‘Marshall Plan’ with relative ease, and the ‘Asian Miracle’ made possible and sustained while Africa continues her backward slid in the face of massive assistance, and windfalls from the oil revenue? World Bank staff economists took the lead in seeking answers to these questions, and as a result numerous economic studies have since been commissioned, and undertaken (Van de Walle, 2001). The results and policy recommendations vary.

In the main, economists tended to equate development with economic growth, and these growth models essentially regressed a measure of Gross Domestic Product over a standard array of endogenous and exogenous variables believed to influence national income (Barro, 1991). The regression results invariably lend support to the usual expectations: the stock of physical capital, the level of human capital development, openness to international trade, political competition, level of inflation, and government expenditure, all presumed to have remarkable effects on economic growth (Klein and Luu, 2003). However, in most of these studies, the dummy variable that captures everything else outside the standard vectors were consistently found to be significant (Van de walle, 2001), thus giving credence to the suspicion that there are certain African characteristics that are not malleable to the Western notion of development.
What the ‘dummy variable’ captured has been given different interpretations. Hagen (2002) argued that geographical (landlocked or not) and geopolitical circumstances are to blame for Africa’s poor performance. Chen and Feng (1996) pointed to political and social instability as the main culprits, while Lal (1988) posits that harmful cultural norms are partly responsible for Africa’s underdevelopment. Landes (1998) concurred with the findings of Lal, and emphasized the importance of certain cultural features that ‘spring from a society’s most deeply held ethical principles’ in moving a country towards the path of sustainable development.

Problems to be addressed
The thesis to be explored in this paper is that underdevelopment in Sub-Saharan Africa, but especially so in Nigeria, is rooted primarily in two public policy initiatives and a mixture of inherited and native social practices: national development strategies based on free international trade, near-exclusive reliance on extractive industries to propel economic growth in total disregard of other sectors of the economy, and prevailing social institutions. All three are presumed to be singly and severally responsible for the perennial absence of economic growth and development in the sub-continent, and particularly relevant in the case of Nigeria where economic development has remained illusive since it gained independence from Britain in 1960. The goal of this research endeavor is to show why these policy initiatives and controlling social institutions have failed, and to suggest how to cure their deficiencies. But first, a review of the literature.

A Brief Literature Review
Beginning in the early 1970s, African leaders and ‘well-meaning’ international agencies grappled with the forces that have, almost interminably, subdued socio-economic development in the continent despite generous foreign aid, progressive moves toward western-style democracy, and significant independence in resource management (UNDP REP., 2000). But in spite of these indicators that should, in the normal run of things, conduce to sustainable development, Africa remains economically backward, and boasts the highest incidence of poverty and illiteracy in
the world while being ravaged by devastating civil wars, and intractable diseases (World Bank, 2001).

Up until the mid-1970s, development experts from the IMF and the World Bank advised African leaders that development was synonymous with economic productivity and growth (Killick, 1998). The leaders concurred; in part because they needed financial assistance since they had essentially bankrupted their economies, and because they had no pragmatic alternative description of what development in Africa entailed.

But this interpretation of the essence of development by foreign experts was not merely advisory; African leaders could not take it or leave it, for it formed the basis of aid or loan programs received from the IMF, the World Bank, and members of the Paris Club of international lenders (Klitgaard, 1990). Since the assumed goal was to help African countries develop economically, it was deemed essential that domestic productivity be modified to accommodate more export-oriented goods. However, for these goods to be competitive in the world market, domestic currencies had to be devalued; moreover, currency devaluation served the additional need to dampen the appetite for imports, and compel more internal consumption of domestically produced goods. Currency devaluation and ‘Structural Adjustment’ of domestic programs thus became the primary prerequisites for loans from both the IMF and the World Bank (Van de Walle, 2001).

Evidence now shows that both programs failed miserably, and that their combined effects were devastating to African economies ...currency devaluation meant that these countries could not afford to import advanced technologies from developed countries, and the structural adjustment programs insisted on by the World Bank experts in the early 1970s discouraged investment in human capital, i.e. healthcare and educational systems (Klitgaard, 1990). The precipitous decline in both sectors in Sub-Saharan African countries is a direct consequence of these policies; for they enabled venal African leaders to re-direct resources to ‘white elephant’ projects that
were more conducive to misappropriation of financial resources than to production of goods and services needed to enhance industrial capacity, and infrastructure development (Jeffries, 1993).

This economistic view of development, which held sway from the early 1960s to the mid 1970s, is essentially one that requires a shift from an agrarian economy to one dominated by export-based manufacturing, and provision of modern services in secondary and tertiary sectors. The aim being to stimulate faster growth of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), encourage more export of domestically produced goods, attract foreign investments, aid, and loans for infrastructure enhancement, and capacity-building (Emizet, 1998). Thus, to the economist, development in Africa is reducible to certain quantifiable indicators that indicate a trend ----the economy is either moving in the right direction or not; if the GDP is rising and sustainable over a certain period, then mission accomplished; the country is developing. Other social factors that should complement a developing society were essentially ignored, e.g. the level of literacy, availability of adequate healthcare services, the educational system, political stability, housing, and cultural observances.

The literature on development is immense, and continues to evolve to reflect the insights of specialized fields and disciplines that were once considered outside the scope of matters relevant to development studies. There is now near unanimity amongst academics and practitioners that development is driven by innovation (Knack and Keefer, 1995), good governance (Osborn, 2004), responsive institutions (North, 1990), and other yet unknown variables. These views are particularly relevant to the forty-eight countries that constitute Sub-Saharan Africa, where all efforts in the last three decades to nudge them towards sustainable development have failed (Williamson, 1994).

The problems of underdevelopment in Africa continue to be severe, and unabating. A number of reasons have been cited for this conundrum, including in many instances, the persistent contradictions between private and public roles (Johnson,
1982). In this regard, it is emphasized that most African nations are yet to fully emerge from the patrimonial mode of post-colonial era wherein transplanted ideas and domestically informed notions of integrity compete and clash with the goals of personal enrichment and group enhancement made possible by the state apparatus (Meredith, 2005). Thus, ‘the legacy of colonial legality, with its suppression of indigenous economic and political competition against the state’ has encouraged and enabled African elites to dominate and misappropriate resources by means of the state rather than allow transparency and accountability (Goldman, 1980). This outcome, argues Berg (1993), is the essence of bad governance which perverts the norms of legitimacy, laws, and conventions embodied in domestic institutions designed to administer the affairs of a society.

These institutions, in a very important sense, are rules; rules that dictate, regulate, and constrain civil activities and behavior, and consequently play critical roles in the economic development and the wellbeing of society. On this basis, Caiden (1992) theorized that the difference between developed Western countries and poor African nations has less to do with productive capacity than with prevailing domestic institutions that affect individual incentives for innovation, and the deployment of factors of production. Furthermore, because developed economies have institutions that support contracts and property rights that are essential for effective market transactions and complex commercial agreements, the system is able to enhance predictability of actions by restraining opportunism and arbitrary influences by the elites. To this effect Douglass North (1990) wrote, “The inability of societies to develop effective low cost enforcement of contracts is the most important source of both historical and contemporary underdevelopment in the Third World.”

Masters and McMillan (2000) studied the effects of climate and scale on economic growth. Using climatic and productivity data from 1960 to 1990, they concluded that countries in temperate climates converged towards a high level of income, while those in the tropics generally moved towards a variety of income levels. Their
conclusion was also based on the possible effect of seasonal frost that killed-off harmful diseases, pests and pathogens in temperate climates, thus enhancing human productivity; the absence of seasonal frosts in the tropics, they argued, has the opposite effect. The resultant low-income accumulation in the tropics reduced investment in both human and physical capital, and ultimately constrained economic growth and development.

Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (2001) argued that institutions matter in the economic development of countries. Using evidence from countries colonized by Europeans, the authors theorized that geographic and climatic conditions of individual countries determined the social institutions the country inherited from colonizing Europeans, and these institutions made, and continue to make the difference in the levels of economic development experienced by erstwhile colonies. In this vein, colonies with harsh climatic conditions that discourage settlement by Europeans were used as sources of productive materials by the colonizing country, and treated as ‘Extractive States’ with investment in physical and human capital geared towards institutions accommodative of this objective. This model fits the experiences of many countries in West and Central Africa. Countries like Australia, New Zealand, and the United States inherited different institutions from colonizing Europeans because the Europeans came with the intention to stay, and thus established institutions that resembled the ones back in their home states. This, the authors concluded, is the basis for observed differences in economic development and performances by the various former colonies.

The Dutch Disease syndrome or the natural resource course has for many years been serviceable in explaining why countries that unexpectedly discovered highly marketable natural resources end up with a poorly performing economy or actually experience de-industrialization. While this was the original comprehension of the concept, it has now been used to explain similar experiences in aid-recipient countries. Typically, this economic phenomenon manifests itself in one of two variants. In a fixed nominal exchange rate regime, an influx of foreign exchange
income from any source, i.e. income from natural resource export, foreign aid, etc., would tend to impact domestic relative prices. Since prices of internationally traded goods are set by world markets, prices of goods consumed domestically would be inflated, thus giving rise to resource reallocation towards domestically traded goods. This causes a reduction in investment in export goods, and a subsequent decline in the amount produced. Domestic production of all goods may actually fall if the inflow of foreign exchange income makes imported goods cheaper, and more attractive. This is one variant of the Dutch disease effect.

Another variant is when the influx of foreign exchange income occurs in a flexible or floating nominal exchange rate regime; in this instance, the influx induces an appreciation of the exchange rate of the domestic currency, thus making exports more expensive while cheapening imports. This has the unwanted effects of reducing domestic production in favor of imports. At the extreme, it discourages industrialization or induces de-industrialization as the country relies ever more heavily on imported goods at the expense of domestic production, experience, and technology that come with learning by doing. This is the classic sense of the Dutch Disease syndrome, and affords a reasonable guidance to the Nigerian experience, and those of countries in central Africa (Fielding, 2007).

To many disinterested observers, however, the principal cause of Africa’s vicious and debilitating cycle of underdevelopment is bureaucratic corruption (Klitgaard, 1990; Mauro, 1995). While bureaucratic corruption can be found in both developed and developing nations, its consequences (its distortionary effects on resources allocation) are particularly baleful to nations in Africa with weak socio-political institutions, and inadequate economic infrastructures (Ifediora, 2005). For in these developing African countries, important policy decisions are often guided, not by sound public policy but by personal interests; the outcome is usually a thoroughly compromised and debased economy (Ifediora, 2005).
The Case of Nigeria

If country-specific data, and the statistical analysis based on them are good surrogates of what they represent, then figures from The World Bank indicate, by any reasonable standard, that Nigeria's economic performance since independence in 1960 has been abysmal. Using the most reliable survey of the country to date, the figures show that in 1970 the per capita GDP for the country was US$1,113, but by 2000 it had fallen to US$1,084. Between 1970 and 2000, the poverty and income distribution indices show similar deterioration. The poverty rate, measured as those living on less than US$1 per day, had risen from 36% to approximately 70%; this means, in raw numbers, that the number of people living in extreme poverty had risen from 19 million in 1970 to 90 million in 2000. The income distribution figures are no less discouraging; for they show that in 1970, the top 2% and the bottom 17% of the population had an equal percentage share of the national income; but in 2000, the top 2% and the bottom 55% had about the same share of the national income (World Bank, 2005). This, in spite of the fact that between 1965 and 2000, Nigeria had derived a total net revenue of US$350 billion from oil exports. Similar surveys of many Sub-Saharan African countries reveal equally disquieting trends (World Bank, 2007).

The sources of these undesirable attributes are readily identifiable, and indeed well-documented (Rose-Ackerman, 1978); it is the fundamental causes that remain problematic, both in identification, and attempted solution. Incompetence, graft, and mismanagement of resources at the national level are known culprits, but so are attempted solutions to underdevelopment problems by African policy makers at the behest of foreign aid givers, and international lending institutions.

The need for Industrialization

Since the late 1970s, Nigeria's industrial policy has been guided by policy recommendations from the Washington consensus (The IMF and The World bank), in the main because the country is heavily indebted to these institutions, and thus obliged to implement prescribed economic programs aimed at creating the ability to
pay back borrowed funds. While these programs may be useful in meeting short-run goals of debt-reduction, they are, however, at odds with long-term objectives of sustained economic growth.

The current national industrial policy is one that advocates export-substitution in near total disregard for domestic-based manufacturing. The point being why expend borrowed and needed resources re-inventing the ‘wheel’ when all essential manufactured goods could easily be imported from industrialized countries? Thus, under this policy of export-substitution, no emphasis is placed on developing a domestic industrial base with manufacturing capabilities. The country thus went from an agrarian economy to a service and trade based one, and in the process bypassed the crucial stage of industrialization, a platform which all future steps towards development are necessarily based. This strategy of export-substitution as means to economic growth, is not confined to Nigeria; it is the controlling strategy in almost all Sub-Saharan African countries indebted to the IMF and the World Bank.

I here contend that the absence of industrialization in Nigeria, occasioned by the strategy of export-substitution, is a major cause of underdevelopment in the country for it denies the country the industrial base it needs to develop and mechanize all relevant sectors of its economy. The ability to manufacture products domestically is essential to economic growth through the process of ‘learning by doing’ which in turn enhances the opportunities for technological innovations necessary for sustained development. It is on this ground that I urge a significantly limited import-substitution strategy (as opposed to export-substitution) that targets and protects a few relevant industries that are essential to the establishment of a domestic industrial base. This policy would afford import-protection to these industries for a fixed time period, and then gradually lifted to expose them to foreign competition once they are reasonably established. By gradually lifting the initial protection, firms within the industries would be compelled by competitive market forces to learn, innovate, and adopt efficient production practices.
The harmful Effects of 'Free” International Trade

A major contributing factor to underdevelopment in Nigeria is the belief that free international trade based on the concept of comparative advantage would lead to economic growth. In this regard, Nigeria was encouraged, again by the Washington institutions, that it should devote its resources on export-based production of agricultural and extractive primary goods with a view to attracting 'hard currency' into its economy. The outcome of this trade policy is that it encouraged Nigeria to specialize on productive activities subject to diminishing returns to effort, and ‘perfect competition’. The economic history of the World’s industrialized countries makes it abundantly clear that countries that remain largely at the extractive and agricultural stage of economic productivity remain poor for two reasons: first, these activities depend on a fixed input, land, and as such productivity is subject to diminishing returns; second, the products are universally ‘similar’ and thus operate in a world market where producers have no control of the prices for their products, and face intense competition from more efficient producers in industrialized countries. The combined effect is restraint on income for producers, and by extension, for the country. The country must therefore industrialize to enjoy the benefits of economies of scale.

Experience has long shown that free international trade amongst countries that are far apart in their various stages of industrialization harms the least developed ones. It therefore follows that free trade on the basis of comparative advantage is most advantageous to countries near parity in industrial strength, and that countries like Nigeria without an established domestic industrial base are better-off economically protecting their agricultural sectors from the ravages of international competition until they first industrialize. This, I posit, is but one component of the causes of underdevelopment in Nigeria; other relevant causes are immediately discussed below within the framework of ‘Contextual Development.’
A Contextual Approach to Development

Any serious effort to engage development problems in Nigeria must begin by taking notice of the reality that socio-economic development in the country may be attained, and sustained only if the processes engaged toward these ends are properly mindful of the cultural and social experiences of Africans. This means looking at things from the point of view of those whose welfare one seeks to improve; for only when the life experiences of the indigenous people are clearly understood would it be possible to work within the context of their cultural and traditional observances to establish accommodative social and economic institutions necessary for sustained development. This approach is what I have termed ‘contextual development’; a process that requires a balanced integration of indigenous cultures, religious beliefs, prevailing social arrangements, and new ideas from developed nations into a unique development strategy that suits a particular nation-state. Contextual development thus requires a good understanding not only of the needs of the people but how to design and implement programs that take advantage of the peculiarities of the society, and expectations. It also requires, as an imperative, that one who embarks on development programs in Nigeria be acquainted with the cultural belief system in the country, the role religion plays, the level of literacy, availability of skilled labor, traditional roles of the sexes, prevailing social arrangements, and most importantly, what development means to the people.

The novelty of this approach to development can be found, not so much in the idea, but in its implementation; for experts in development studies are now very much aware that the old policy of imposing change from without has not produced desired results, but has instead made matters worse despite decades of development assistance to Africa (Easterly, 2001). This strategy necessarily rejects the old development model of one-size-fits-all that assumes social and political institutions as given, and then proceeds to impose pre-packaged solutions that lack relevance to local practices. The culturally determined subjection of women is a case in point.
The Subjection of Nigerian Women and the Effects on Economic Development

Of all the known culprits for Nigeria’s stunted economic growth, none is perhaps more pernicious than its patriarchally determined cultural practices, and traditional observances. These pervasive practices are traceable, with relative facility, to controlling cultivated traits of ancient origin that have remained resilient to the moderating effects of education, and experiments with ‘liberal democracy.’ The failure to incorporate cultural sensibilities, and to see things from the point of view of Nigerians continue to frustrate all otherwise reasonable attempts at development. But while capital accumulation and industrialization are widely recognized as mutually self-sustaining and fundamental to economic development, how a society treats and deploys its human capital ultimately determine its development trajectory.

By testimony of evidence, it may now be forcefully declared that a chief hindrance to social and economic development in Nigeria can be found in the cultural norm that regulates the relations between the sexes ----- the quasi legal subordination of women to men. This state of affairs in which African societies have perenniially subjected women, instructs African women of their roles in society; which are, in the main, directly opposite to those reserved for men. They are informed, in this regard, on how to perfect the art of subservience to their male counterparts, not to aspire to self-governance, or act in manners indicative of self-will (Bereria, 1982). They are told that morality requires of them to faithfully execute the function nature has reserved for them, which is to reproduce; and by abnegation of self, to nourish both husband and children through affection and dedication. For centuries this understanding has defined the collective lot of African women; and sadly, it remains a debilitating influence on economic development efforts in the continent.

In urban and rural parts of Nigeria, the vast majority of women are employed in the extralegal or informal sectors of the economy. This informal economy includes small scale farming of cash crops, trading on domestically produced or imported household wares, and provision of service as domestic helps. In almost all instances,
and even in cases where they are successful enough to derive more than subsistence income, they are deprived access to bank loans necessary to leverage their operations to a higher level because their activities are outside the formal or legal sphere of recognized business practices. This lack of access to credit in the formal sector drives, in the main, from the inability to furnish banks with verifiable titles to real estate or to assets that may be used to collateralize loans. The inability to leverage business operations through serviceable credit is, incidentally, a major cause of underdevelopment in Africa; for, men who also operate in informal sectors are subject to the same experience (De Soto, 2002). But it is the case that the most successful entrepreneurs in Nigeria, though limited in number, are men who have unique access to government issued contracts, access to credit, and other privileges not readily available to women, except for a few. It is also the case that the many who are trapped in the informal sectors of the economy make economic growth almost impossible, and as a consequence also bear disproportionately the burdens of an underdeveloped economy. Since women are over represented in these informal sectors, they are invariably saddled with low income, and poverty; the fact that they also represent more than 50% of the country’s population means that the drag effect on the economy would be remarkable, and sustained economic growth impossible. Herein lies one of the major consequences of subjection, and denial of equal educational and employment opportunities to African women.

The economic effect of female subjection can also be traced to the fact that women in rural Nigeria, with minor exceptions, deploy their entire productive talents, in one form or the other, in the agricultural sector. The problem with agrarian economies, especially those based on unskilled labor and unmechanized form of production, is that the level of output is subject to diminishing returns to effort, and derived revenue is determined by the interplay of market forces. This is because the production of agricultural commodities and raw materials depend heavily on the availability of a fixed input, land. As a consequence, and by operation of the properties of physics, the fixed capacity of land means that agrarian production is invariably subject to the law of diminishing returns after a certain point. This
necessarily imposes a limit to growth; and because the commodities produced are universally ‘identical’, producers have no control over prices received for their products. They must rely on demand and supply to determine how much their products would fetch in the market; this is the essence of ‘perfect competition,’ where under free and unmonopolized market conditions, competition in identical commodities lead to the lowest prices possible. Thus, there two natural phenomena operating against small scale farmers: with diminishing returns to effort, agrarian economies cannot improve their collective lot through higher sustained effort beyond a certain level; and when compelled, as they must, to engage in trade, the market further depresses their level of income through competition that includes competitors from countries with advanced industrial capacities. The result is lower income, and when coupled with population growth, abject poverty. This is the collective lot of many African countries where the vast majority of their productive human capital, women, is consigned to the agricultural sector.

**Differences in Years of Schooling As a Contributing Factor**

It is still an observable fact in Nigeria that social institutions, with varying degrees of vitality and longevity, continue to impute right to might, and make it possible for those who originally acquired power through morally unjust avenues to retain it as a matter of course. And while other social institutions are gradually yielding to modern dictates by becoming less rigid, and accommodating of change, the ones more directly relevant to the relations between the sexes remain peculiarly intransigent, and less responsive to reformed sensibilities. That women, who make up more than half of Nigeria’s population, remain largely in the unnatural state of inequality, and subordinated to their male counterparts in both familial and public spheres are manifestations of, and a cause of significant social and economic dislocations in the country.

The socially ascribed roles as now exist between the sexes did not originate from legitimate differentials on natural talents or capacities, but arose instead on assumed limitations on the part of women, and privileges advanced to men. The
assumptions and privileges are further advanced by the differential treatment of the
sexes within the family unit. In Nigeria, it has always been the case, until lately, that
boys receive disproportionate portions of a family's resource in all manners of
investment in human capital or in training necessary for independent pursuit of
career choices. It is only after the educational or training requirements of the boys
have been reasonably satisfied would those of the girls receive attention, assuming
the family's resources are not yet depleted or severely constrained. This disparity in
treatment is based on the customary belief that investments in girls are unwise, for
once of the age of maturity, they are expected to leave their homes of birth by way of
marriage, taking with them any investment in human capital, and all prospects for
future returns on such investment. A parallel view does not apply to boys, for
tradition requires of them to sustain their family of birth, and to do so in perpetuity.
It is this initial distortion in resource allocation between the sexes at the family level
that further aggravates the already compromised social and economic status of
women. Lacking in skills and educational credentials, they are compelled to employ
their substantial natural talents in domestic activities, petty trading, or in
subsistence farming. While honorable, in the sense that these activities make for a
reasonable livelihood, and help support immediate and extended family networks,
they are not undertaken by ‘free’ choice, and hardly conduce to high-income growth
rates or self-fulfilling careers necessary for sustained economic self-sufficiency, and
national economic growth.

Data and statistical figures from the World Bank, and the IMF indicate that the rate
of participation in formal education amongst the sexes in Nigeria has been
improving in both absolute and relative terms since 1970; even though the same
cannot be said about the quality of instruction received. In 2005, the adult literacy
rate was 69%, with a Gender Parity Index for all educational levels of 83%
(measures the ratio of male to female enrolled in schools). A break-down of the
national educational data reveals the following figures:
Primary school enrollment rate: Boys -- 67.6%; Girls – 58.2%
Primary school dropout rate: Boys --38.6%; Girls --35.9%
Primary School completion rate: Boys --83%; Girls -- 68%
Number of primary school age children out of school: Boys --3.6 million; Girls -- 4.5 million
Primary School Gender gap: 9.4%
Primary school Gender Parity Index: 82%

Secondary school enrollment rate: Male -- 35.6%; Female—2 9.2%
Gender Gap: 6.4%
Secondary school Gender Parity Index: 83%

Tertiary Schools Gross enrollment: Male -- 12%; Female -- 8.3%
Tertiary Schools Gender gap: 3.7%

Note, however, that these figures are only averages; the actual figures varied widely with income and geographic location. In comparison to the average figures for all sub-Saharan African countries in 2005, gross enrollment figures for primary school age children rose from 72% in 1990 to 93% in 2005, while completion rate went from 51% in 1990 to 62% in 2005. The gender difference in completion rate remained unchanged over the period.

In instances where the family of birth has sufficient resources to provide tertiary education for the girls, a major consideration that would discourage such commitment arises, not from the presumed absence of future returns on such expenditure, but from the pragmatic consideration of ‘marriageability.’ For, sadly, many African men are yet to be comfortable with the idea of marrying African women with advanced degrees; thus, to avoid educating herself out of marriage prospects, the family withholding needed support for education beyond a certain level. This cut-off line is, in many instances, the secondary school level. But this need to preserve the marriage prospects of daughters by limiting the level of education
they may acquire is not without cost; for it is this need to be eligible for marriage that deprives women of the skills they need to be economically self-sufficient, and once married become completely dependent on the husband for sustenance. This dependence on husbands for economic well-being is a primary source of subjection of the African woman who fulfills both her wishes and those of society by becoming a wife; it is also from this source that some of the most vicious human rights abuses emanate, specifically the emotional and physical abuse visited upon many African women through genital circumcision.

The point, ultimately, is to remove all disabilities imposed by society on African women; this means their recognition as moral equals to men, the opportunity for all meaningful employment of their talents, and equal access to educational and training programs necessary for effective participation in modern societies. For, by allowing African women the free application of their faculties, and making it possible for them to engage their talents in occupations undertaken through free choice, society would, in effect, double its collective mental faculties, and its pool of skilled workers. Where previously society had one qualified engineer or medical doctor to serve its needs for instance, it now has the opportunity to make it two; and given that there is always a shortage of well-qualified talents in any endeavor that requires considerable ability, the loss to society by not using half of its whole remains a major setback to development.

**The African Experience as a Guide to Solutions**

In African societies, especially those found in West and Central Africa, important personal and collective decisions have perennially been made from the vantage point of clan or group interest (Schraeder, 2000). While Western democracies may trace democratic principles to ancient Greece, Africans have known and practiced its essence from time immemorial, for, decisions on social matters are seldom made without proper consultations with members of the clan, the elders or ‘titled’ men in the community. Depending on the matter to be resolved, deference is usually given to the elders or titled men (Chiefs) during deliberations, but in no instance would
the final decision be devoid of controlling traditional and cultural precepts (Laitin, 1986). This has been, and to a very large extent today, the primary method of decision-making in traditional African societies; the advent of colonial rule never changed much at this grass-roots level.

Thus, traditional observances and cultural constraints remain very powerful determinants of behavior amongst Africans as manifested in different social arrangements throughout the continent (Huntington, 1996). The Ibos of Eastern Nigeria for instance, defer to titled men for final adjudication of social issues; the Yorubas of the same country on the other hand, look to a collectively recognized leader to make important decisions for the social group. In either method, the final decision invariably enjoys near universal acceptance, and almost without exception carries with it some form of penalties for dissenters. The reason for this is simple; in traditional African societies, there is a strong need to belong to a social group, if only for the fact that an individual is defined by his or her group affiliation. One is first and foremost an Ibo, and secondarily a Nigerian; it is never the other way around. It is this need for group affiliation that shapes and determines how African societies deal with social and personal matters, and it is within this context that one must seek ways to introduce new ideas of development.

References