

A Review of the African Traditional Perspective on Land and Its Resources

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Abstract - *The centrality of land and its resources to economic development and social welfare is unquestionable. Land has been used from time immemorial to promote economic growth and human development to the extent that more than half of the world population live and earn their living out of tilling the land as farmers. In Africa, even in countries such as Egypt, Libya and Niger Republic which are more than 90% Land locked countries, still agriculture is the mainstay of economic activities for the majority of the people. This paper review the African Traditional Perspective on Land and its Resources. It was discovered that all resources belongs to the community/nation, rights to use of land were conveyed through oral history and not formally documented, and the commercialization of land by colonial masters and inflation of its price left many Africans with no land to call their own. This review recommends that all resources should continue to belongs to the community/nation but opportunities should be given to individuals and groups that shown interest of owning some of the land/resources in order to encourage investment, innovation, maintenance of properties and economic development, the review also recommend that henceforth the right to use the land should be documented rather than being conveyed through oral history, and the review further discourages total commercialization of land in order not to stripped of Africans their dignity of having free access to land and its resources.*

Keywords: *A Review, African Traditional Perspective, On Land and its Resources.*

Introduction

As one of the fundamental resources that support our existence, land is viewed as the soil, water, air and other natural resources tied to the earth surface (Barlowe, 1978). Land has frequently been the non-water portion of the earth. However, Brady and Weil (1999) describe land as a broad term embodying the total natural environment of the area of the earth not covered by water: and that in addition to soil, its attributes include other physical conditions, such as mineral deposit and water supply: location in relation to centers of commerce, populations and other land, the size of individual tracts holdings, and existing plant cover, work of improvement, and the like.

In African tradition, land is highly valued. According to Moshoeshe (2011), all natural resources are sacred and should be managed in common with the awareness of the continuity between past, present and future for the benefit of the people living in the present and those who will be born in the future. This was the traditional attitude of people in Africa, all the culture and the land belong to the nation, which means they belong to the entire people. He further explained that in traditional African culture, individuals, communal bodies, the land, and the environment are joined to each other by sacred bonds.

These bonds were the traditional wellspring of the lives of African people, the culture of Africa people and the thinking of African people. These bonds gave rise to their communal sense of ethical responsibility towards the present and the future. Moreover, these sacred bonds constitute nothing other than a facet of the

religion of African people that supports in entirety of what constitute the African peoples thinking and actions (Moshoeshoe, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

The use of land during the pre-colonial era to create and destroy empires and nations, the belief that European settlers economic and political system were built on the acquisition of African countries which led to the expropriation of land, the feelings that post-colonial regimes have not adequately addressed the land question because of their general failure to equitably redistribute land as such disputes and contestation over the control of land have occurred between and within states, the understanding that the inter-state contest over land resources which are mainly the result of the failure of colonial boundaries to adequately address and meet the needs and goals of African people, and the consequent pressure on land and its resources due to population growth and development needs have also exacerbated the struggle over land. This necessitated a review of the African Traditional Perspective on Land and its Resources in order to identify its weaknesses and proper suitable recommendations to that effect.

Land as a Socio-Economic Resources

The centrality of land to economic development and social welfare is unquestionable. Land has been used from time immemorial to promote economic growth and human development to the extent that more than half the world population live and earn their living out of tilling the land as farmers (United Nation, 2006). In Africa, even in countries such as Egypt which are more than 90% desert. Agriculture is the mainstay of economic activities for the majority of people. Despite the development of large scale, capital intensive farming, the majority of Africans are small scale and peasant farmers (Fekri 2002). The majority of these peasant farmers use family labor-mainly women and children to work on the land and produce both cash and food crops. The use of family labor has tended to strengthen some of the traditional patrilineal system (Fekri, 2002).

African economic development has been tied to the significance of land resources to cultural and traditional practices. For example, village chiefs still perform traditional sacrifices to communicate with ancestral spirits (Akpabio, 2007). Ritual related to rain making, thanks giving and prayer have historically been tied to land in Africa. Control of land was thus linked to complex interplay of economic, social and political power. Also, the coming of foreign religious such as Islam and Christianity to Africa further complicated an already complex framework (Akpabio, 2007).

Land as a Political Tool

Historically, in many parts of Africa, land was not owned by an individual, but rather used by an extended family or village community so that different people in a family or community had equal rights to access the land for different purposes and at different times. Such rights were often conveyed through oral history and not formally documented (Wikipedia, 2011). Ownership, control, distribution and access to land have historically been used to dominate and empower different nations, races, genders and classes in Africa. Even during the *pre-colonial era*, land was used to create and destroy empires and nations.

The Bantu migrations from the western and central Africa part downward, more than a thousand years ago were in part necessitated by conflict over the control of agricultural, grazing and hunting lands. The same can be said of the Mfecane period in southern Africa history in the 19th century (Edmore, 1998). The important point here is that the struggle for control and ownership of land in the pre-colonial period left a political legacy of large and dominant state such as Buganda Kingdom in Eastern Africa and the Zulu nation

in southern Africa; alongside these dominant political entities are numerous small ethnic groups and small states (Edmore, 1998).

The relationships between these ethnic groups and nations have not always been smooth, during the colonial periods, contestation over land increased. The land question became enmeshed in the race, color and ethnic division within Africa. European settler economic and political systems were built on the acquisition of African countries which led to the expropriation of land. There are numerous examples of such struggles over land such as the shire high lands in Malawi, the Kenya high lands, the land question in south Africa and Zimbabwe, while the Algeria land struggle against French colonization led to one of the longest and most gruesome wars of independence (Moktar, 1990). Moreover, some African chiefs and ethnic groups who supported the dominant colonial super structure benefited from generous land grants during the colonial period which majorities of African peasants were forced into reserves (Moktar, 1990).

Land and the Post-Colonial Crises in Africa

Land was one of the pillars of the liberation movement in Africa. According to Nkosi (1998), the post-colonial regimes have not adequately addressed the land question. There is a general failure to equitably redistribute land. In this regard, disputes and contestation over the control of land have occurred between and within states. She further lamented that inter-state contest over land resources are mainly the result of the failure of colonial boundaries to adequately address and meet the needs and goals of the African people (Nkosi, 1998). In Eastern Africa for instance, the movement of Massai cattle herders across borders has often created border dispute, between Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, while cementing social and economic ties within one ethnic group living in different countries (Nkosi, 1998).

Political independence without corresponding economic and social transformation has caused socio-economic and political clashes over land. Population growth and development needs have also exacerbated the struggle over land. The genocide in Rwanda and Burundi between the Hutus and the Tutsi can be traced to conflict over the control of political and economic resources of which land is a central feature (Nkosi, 1998). In Sudan, the control of land and economic resources is also tied to the political, religious and ethnic conflict between the Northern Arabs, who are mainly Muslims and the Southern Africans who are predominantly Christian (Nkosi, 1998).

Land Acquisition in Africa

In traditional African communities, land is a birth right of every African indigenous person. It has a communal dimension whereby all members of the community are expected to share its resources, especially in the rural areas, under some forms of traditional authority (Nkosi, 1998). Traditional authority from an African point of view is very central and important, because despite the fact that it is a uniting force, the community leader is seen as a steward with divine authority over land (Nkosi, 1998).

As a result of Colonization, indigenous communities were stripped of their dignity, many lost their identity, language, cultures and spirituality. After acquiring land, the colonizers commercialized it and later inflated its price. That left many African with no land they could call their own. This also left Africans with a confused culture and a hope that God and their ancestors were still with them in their pain and happiness (Martin, 2006).

Beliefs and the Importance of Land in the African Context

The belief in Africa is that land is a gift from God and from ancestors; therefore Africans feel they are the stewards of Gods resources, especially of communally owned land (Rupert, 1996). Even though land

ownership has been men domain. It is interesting that many women, with support from constitution are beginning to access or acquire land in spite of traditional prejudices (Rupert, 1996).

In many African families, the umbilical cord of a new born baby is buried. In other communities, when a boy is circumcised, the foreskin and blood is also buried. The sacredness of Land in Africa is further linked to the fact that the dead are buried in it. Land is also valued as a resource of livelihood. The land produces food and water which gives life. When people go hunting or looking for herbs in the bush especially in Kwazulu, they burn incense and request their ancestors to give blessing. The custom of asking for rain or making rain through the help of ancestors and God still features strongly in some communities (Akpabio, 2007).

In African, land is important as a source of food, as a hunting ground through which essential skills are passed from one generation to another. Land is also a source of shelter and tools (Akpabio, 2007).

Weakness of the African Traditional Perspective on Land and Its Resources

The following are the weaknesses identified after the successful review of the African Traditional Perspective on Land and its Resources:

- All resources belongs to the community/nation, meaning no individual ownership of resources
- Rights to use of land were conveyed through oral history and not formally documented.
- Ownership, Control, Distribution and Access to land in Africa have create and destroy empires and nations.
- Chiefs and ethnic groups benefited from land grants by supporting the dominant colonial super structure.
- The commercialization of land by colonial masters and inflation of its price left many Africans with no land to call their own.

Recommendations

The review proper the following recommendations:

- 1- Resources should continue to belong to community/nation but opportunities should be given to individuals and groups that shown interest of owning some of the land/resources in order to encourage investment, innovation, maintenance of properties and economic development.
- 2- The review also recommends that henceforth the right to use the land should be documented rather than conveyed through oral history.
- 3- Review further discourages total commercialization of land in order not to stripped of Africans their dignity of having free access to land and its resources.

Conclusion

Clearly, the traditional African perspective on land was more pronounced before the colonial era and is linked to the belief that land is a gift from God and that every indigenous member of a community has the birthright of accessing or possessing land. Therefore, land was seen as an ancestral trust, committed to the living for the benefit of the whole community including the unborn. Therefore, Having identified it weaknesses and the recommendations drawn thereof it would go a long way in making the African Traditional Perspective on Land and its Resources the best system among others.

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