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Indigenous Knowledge as an Instrument of National Power

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Abstract: Indigenous knowledge is an overlooked area by international relations scholars. This explains why it has not been formally included in the other elements of national power. Moreover, its strategic importance to the security and stability of a nation is either played down or simply unacknowledged. However, recent studies on how indigenous knowledge drives the socio-political economy of rising powers such as China and India proves that indigenous knowledge which encompasses herbal medicine, agriculture, technology, warfare, architecture, astronomy, natural resource management, etc. can accelerate the process of national development if properly channeled to do so. As African countries struggle to catch up with the ever changing global world, there is the need for us to look inward and integrate the indigenous knowledge into the military, intelligence, diplomacy, legal, information, financial and economic systems to enable us become more visible and relevant in international politics.

Key words: Indigenous, indigenous knowledge, power, national power, local technology, Ile-Ife, Egypt

INTRODUCTION

Judging from a number of scholarly publications on national power, there seem to be a consensus opinion on what constitute national power. For instance, Jablonsky (2010) categorized the elements of national power into two namely: natural determinants (geography, natural resources and population) and social determinants (economic, political, military, psychological and more recently informational). In the same vein, Palmer and Perkins (2007) adds technology, leadership and morale as key elements of national power. Other components of national power, according to Anifowose (1999) are demographic, governmental and organizational factors.

While the list of the elements of national power is not exhaustive, international relations scholars such as Morgenthau (1968), Clausewitz (1976), Organski (1968) Holsti (1988) among others seldom give room for indigenous knowledge as an important element of national power. Eurocentric views' concerning indigenous knowledge is largely responsible for its dismissal as a viable element of national power. Indigenous knowledge is negatively seen to be local, unscientific and unsystematic and lacks the capacity to cause national development. This is supported by Blaut (1993) who claim that only Europeans can progress and that indigenous peoples are frozen in time, guided by knowledge systems that reinforce the past and do not look towards the future.

This Eurocentric view of indigenous knowledge is damaging as it eliminates the contributions of indigenous knowledge system to the rise of a country's national power. Not only that it discourages African scholars, especially the younger generation from looking inward to promote indigenous technologies, indigenous health care, indigenous agricultural practices, indigenous mode of natural resource management, etc. which holds the key to the survival of African countries in the global age.

Traditional and authenticated history of ancient empires and kingdoms in Africa for instance is replete with great achievements through indigenous knowledge. It was through indigenous strategies, diplomacies and technologies that Benin and Oyo empires rose to prominence in Nigeria. It was through indigenous knowledge and technology that the Asante Golden Stool remained a symbol of unification among the various groups.

However, an examination of what constitute indigenous knowledge vis a vis its relevance to national development will help us to appreciate how strategic indigenous knowledge is to national power and why African countries should integrate it into their national policies.

CONCEPT OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

The increasing attention indigenous knowledge is receiving from independent researchers, research

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institutions, universities, government agencies and international organizations though positive in their direction has not led to a universally accepted concept of indigenous knowledge. It must be noted however that the various definitions for indigenous knowledge vary with only general agreement on the main characteristics of indigenous knowledge. This has made several scholars to define indigenous knowledge differently.

Sillitoe *et al*. (2002) defines indigenous knowledge as the vast and largely undocumented body of knowledge, wisdom, skills and expertise that a given community has developed over time and continues to develop as it grapples with the challenges of its environment with outside ideas and with changing conditions. This definition makes indigenous knowledge unique to a given people who out of trial and error developed certain ideas, norms, beliefs and practices that is indigenous to them.

Warren defines indigenous knowledge as the local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society. To Warren, indigenous knowledge contrast with the international knowledge system generated by universities, research institutions and private firms. Again, this definition position indigenous knowledge in a more strategic angle as it form the basis for local level decision making in agriculture, healthcare, food preparation, education, natural resource management and a host of other activities in rural communities.

According to Grenier (1998), indigenous knowledge refers to the unique, traditional, local knowledge existing within and developed around the specific conditions of women and men indigenous to a particular geographic area. To Grenier (1998), the development of indigenous knowledge systems has been a matter of survival to the peoples who generated these indigenous knowledge systems. Such knowledge systems are cumulative, representing generations of experiences, careful observations and trial and error experiments.

Indigenous knowledge as will be used in this study refers to indigenous ideas, custom or practices developed by a group of people in a particular geographical environment over a period of time, sometimes through supernatural means to control and manage their resources for sustainable development.

When one considers when a particular knowledge could be considered indigenous, it becomes clear that we cannot settle for a universal definition of indigenous knowledge as various scholars see the term differently. However, a particular knowledge could be considered indigenous if it has certain characteristics common to indigenous knowledge. Ellen and Harris (1996) provide ten characteristic of indigenous knowledge which is comprehensive. Among the list is that indigenous knowledge is locally rooted in a particular community; it is tacit in nature and not easily codifiable it is transmitted orally or through initiation; it is experiential rather than theoretical it is learned through repetition and is constantly changing.

Using the various definitions put forward by indigenous knowledge scholars, there seem to be a general agreement on the major characteristics of indigenous knowledge than the definition of the term. Hence, conclusions can be drawn on the basic elements of indigenous knowledge which are given:

It is locally generated: Indigenous knowledge is locally generated within the border of a community. Indigenous people possess invaluable knowledge about their physical and social environments and naturally evolve traditional practices that are essentially theirs to take care of existing and emerging problems.

It is dynamic: Indigenous knowledge has survived centuries of constant change. It is being transmitted from one generation to another through stories, proverbs, festivals, songs, rituals, artifacts and initiations, etc. Institutions such as the family (primary informant), age grade (secondary informant) and secret cults (tertiary informant) play the most critical roles in keeping indigenous knowledge alive over the centuries.

It has indigenous specialists: The dynamism and uniqueness of indigenous knowledge requires specialists who understand its intricacies. These experts receive their non-formal or traditional education from the family, age-grade, secret cults, spirit world and elders in the community and sometimes through self discovery. These indigenous specialists are the engine of indigenous knowledge.

It has spiritual backup: Within the African context, knowledge of hunting, rain making, farming, crafting, weaving, fishing, masonry, iron casting, beads making, herbal medicine, warfare, etc. are directly linked to certain ancestral spirits which serve as the source of inspiration, especially for indigenous specialists or natural experts.

It adapts to foreign influence: Indigenous knowledge is not immune to foreign influence rather, it adapts to foreign influence. Indigenous people have neighbouring lands and sometimes borrow from their technological advances, cultural festivals, traditional gods, battle tactics and norms. These borrowed ideas are naturally examined, practiced and adopted.

It leads to sustainable development: Indigenous knowledge is the driving force behind the rise of kingdoms, states and empires in the African region. The ancient Egyptians relied heavily on indigenous knowledge systems which aid their experts to invent basic technological machines that enabled Egypt to develop a civilization adjudged the greatest visible inheritance from antiquity (Roberts, 1976).

CONCEPT OF NATIONAL POWER

Power is very important when it comes to international relations theory. This is because power is the essence by which states within the international system are classified. States are classified as middle powers, regional powers, great powers, superpowers and/or hyper-powers primarily because of the level of their capability and influence over other states.

Etymologically, power is derived from the old French word pouvoir (to be able) and means capacity (Nation, 2010). In other words, power is the capacity to impose one's will on others by reliance on effective sanctions in case of non-compliance (Morgenthau, 1968). Oyouvbaire (2004) describes power: As the ability to impose on others and get them to do whatever one wishes even when such wishes are against the will and wishes of others.

Power according to Tellis (2001) can be viewed from three approaches. Power could be viewed as resources as strategies and as outcomes. In terms of resources, power is understood as the sum total of the capabilities such as natural resources, armed forces, population, etc. available to any entity for influencing others. As strategies, power is considered within the structure of relations between entities and the result of their interaction determines which entity is more influential in their relations. As outcomes, power is measured in relation to the results expected by an entity over another entity. The claim of power in this approach rests simply on whether the initiator was able to influence the targeted entity to act in desired way even if that entails undercutting the targets own interest (Tellis, 2001).

Further analysis of the taxonomy of power at the state level implies that resources are themselves not adequate to make a state powerful unless they are converted through national process (strategies) to make the state prevail in a particular situation (outcome). While power has been described as the measure of a relationship, national power is relative and not absolute. Jablonsky (2010) notes that:

> National power is contextual in that it can be evaluated only in terms of all the power elements and only in relation to another player or players and the situation in which power is being exercised. A nation may appear powerful because it possesses many military assets but the assets may be inadequate against those of a powerful enemy or inappropriate to the nature of the conflict

In this sense, national power becomes relative because a nation cannot exercise power in isolation of other countries. Rather, countries measure their power capability against other actors in the international system. To say that South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt and Kenya are the regional powers of Africa means that their economic and war-fighting capabilities surpasses other countries that exist in Africa.

National power therefore can be defined as a country's capacity to pursue strategic goals through purposeful action. Going by this definition, the national power of a country is largely influenced by two factors: internal dimensions and global environment. On internal dimensions if a country's resources (both natural and human) is being transformed into actionable knowledge that produces needed technologies then that country could affect the global environment through its economic, political and military technological potential.

Focusing on the internal dimensions, analysts have identified the instruments that drive national power. Binnendijk and Clawson (1995) mentions information technology, nature of government, diplomacy, economic, intelligence, productivity, defense engagement, humanitarian operations and military capabilities. Treverton and Jones (2005) describe the drivers of national power from two perspectives: domestic socio-political and international political. Under the domestic socio-political, population, agriculture and technology are regarded as the most critical drivers of national power. In the international political, economic, energy and environmental resources and quality are said to shape the ways national power is derived.

Some analysts have proposed a more specific internal index of national power. These indexes include military expenditure, military forces, national income, gross national product, energy consumption and political stability.

In addition, several multivariable approaches have been employed by mathematically sophisticated scholars to identify the drivers of national power. The most widely recognized multivariable index of national power was developed by Cline (1980). Cline's equation is now being used to gauge national power:

$$Pp = (C+E+M)(S+W)$$

Where:

Pp = Perceived power
C = Critical mass (population and size of territory)
E = Economic capacity (national income, nonfuel minerals, manufacturing, food and trade)
M = Military capacity (strategic balance, combat capabilities and bonus for effort)
S = Strategic Purpose (national strategy coefficient)
W = National will (national integration, strength of leadership and strategic interest)

Each of these variables is being used to determine the power status of a country in the international system. Having examined the popular traditional elements of national power and the more sophisticated nonlinear measures of national power developed by Cline, one is tempted to ask: why is indigenous knowledge omitted from the elements of national power? Is the omission deliberate or not? Whether the omission is deliberate or not, the non-inclusion of indigenous knowledge as an element or instrument of national power is not justifiable. Indigenous knowledge, as already discussed is the raw basis of national power. Treverton and Jones citing Tellis (2001) argues that:

> Appreciating the true basis of national power now requires not merely a meticulous detailing of visible military assets but also a scrutiny of such factors as the aptitude of innovation, the soundness of social institutions and the quality of the knowledge base. All these factors may bear upon a country's capacity to produce not only effective military power but also a quiver of national instruments

Evidences abound on how indigenous knowledge has contributed to the rise of powerful countries over the centuries. Two case studies drawn from ancient Egypt and Ife Kingdom testify to this assertion.

CASE STUDY: ANCIENT EGYPT

Ancient Egypt rose to political dominance because she converted indigenous knowledge through conscious national process to create technologies that boosted the Egyptian economy and enhanced its military capacity. The ancient Egyptian statesmen valued power and consciously built upon a knowledge system aimed at controlling international politics. To achieve this, they consciously:

- Embarked on empowering their indigenous specialists by creating an efficient domestic markets to enable these specialists have access to resources and credit
- Encouraged indigenous creativity, especially in irrigation and agriculture, navigation and ship building, medicine, buildings and monuments, glass working, furniture etc. which necessitated the invention of basic technologies that revolutionized ancient Egypt
- Worked on national integration of the Upper and Lower Niles which helped them to build a formidable political system that later was known in history as the Egyptian civilization

Thus, the rise of Egypt as the most prosperous and powerful country prior to the emergence of Rome was as a result of the conversion of indigenous knowledge into power capabilities.

CASE STUDY: IFE KINGDOM

Ile-Ife is believed by the Yoruba to be the original home of all things, the holy city, the home of divinities and mysterious spirits, the sources of all oceans and the gateway to heaven called Ilurun. Ile-Ife is regarded in Yoruba tradition as the cradle of humanity and the first centralized kingdom in Yorubaland. The most acclaimed cultural age in Ife history is the Third Ife (Ife Oduduwa). The existence of this Third Ife has been sustained by revolutions in indigenous knowledge and technology when the two preceding Ife (Ife Oodaye-Ife of the Beginning and Ife Ooye-Ife of the Survivors) were destroyed by catastrophe. It was the survivors that Oduduwa who has been regarded as the eponymous hero of the Yoruba met and conquered. Oduduwa's use of superior indigenous technologies and ideas channeled in a new era in the history of Ile-Ife.

In religious essence, Ife's rise as a political and cultural power during Oduduwa cannot be separated from the conversion of indigenous knowledge to power capabilities. Ordinary men were empowered to invent, create and promote innovative technologies that revolutionized the agricultural sector which in turn caused a massive growth in other sectors of the economy. As Ife rose economically, investments were made in building the army, fortifying the kingdom and developing a public diplomacy system that make other neighbouring kingdoms to have reverence for Ile Ife as their spiritual home.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous knowledge has sustained kingdoms and empires in Africa for >1000 years and has been a source of military strength, economic growth and political power for other countries outside Africa. Unfortunately, African leaders embrace foreign technologies and ideas at the expense of promoting indigenous knowledge. It is recommended therefore that the people of Africa should re-visit indigenous ideas and technologies that are relevant to the 21st century needs especially in herbal medicine, agriculture, technology, warfare, architecture, astronomy, natural resource management and integrate these into the military, intelligence, diplomacy, legal, information, financial and economic systems to enable us become more visible and relevant in international politics.

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