

The Importance of Comte's Laws of three Stages in Modern Africa's Socio-Economic Development

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Abstract:

Auguste Comte's law of three stages continues to reverberate on the walls of nations and societies around the world. Even from a cursory view, much of Africa still operates at the first, theological stage where gods, spirits, and magic play strong roles in individual, family, and community life. African nations therefore remain in the group regarded as "transition societies." New concepts of development are required to make African societies move into the positive stage of thinking and development.

1. Conceptual Framework

Comte's laws of three stages lean on the intellectual and regards thoughts and indeed visions and dreams as harbingers and catalysts of action. Auguste Comte identified intellectual stages which societies pass through in their evolution. The first, the theological stage, sees almost everything in individual and societal life from the religious angle. Concepts and issues are imbued by magic which implies the interplay of forces associated with the supernatural such as gods, spirits, and ancestors. In the birthplace of philosophy - Athens in Greece - this orientation existed for Thales, the earliest pre-Socratic philosopher left the quote, "Everything is full of gods" despite his bent towards natural philosophy.

The second stage Comte called the metaphysical. This stage does not appear to be too different from the first beyond uncoupling to make human thinking separate from ethereal principles as in the case of the occult. Conceptualizations on first causes, ultimate reality, and related issues dominate thinking even when, in Comte's opinion, they do not lead to acceptable explanations of nature and society. Plato's 'forms' which relate to essences in the outer realm as original copies of what obtains in the physical plane can be associated with this second stage.

The third and last stage described as the positive can be summed up in the word science with the scientific method as the *modus operandi*. The modern world with mind-boggling developments is the child of the third stage with positivism as the major operational tool. It can be argued that the slow development in some societies in Africa and parts of Asia results from their functioning at the margin of Comte's positive stage and more at the lower stages.

2. Between the Theological and Positive Stages

Apart from ancient Greece where Comte's second stage appears to have been very relevant, it appears most countries that are now seen as developed skipped the second stage. Science, run by the principles of the scientific method has been the driving force behind the rapid socio-economic developments in countries regarded as developed or emerging. The American Association for the Advancement of Science (2021) quotes a statement by Professor Charles Weiss of the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, given on October 5, 2001 as follows: It is science alone that can solve the problem of hunger and poverty, of insanitation and illiteracy, of superstition and deadening customs and traditions, of vast resources running to waste, of a rich country inhabited by starving people. Who indeed can afford to ignore science today? At every turn we have to seek its aid. The future belongs to science and to those who make friends with science.

Africa does not need to reinvent the wheel. She simply requires a change of thinking processes from the theological to the positive. Scientific and entrepreneurial orientation may as well be the big push conceived decades ago by Paul Rosenstein-Rodan in 1943.

Empiricism in which ultimate reality lies only in matter and energy, may not be the last word in development, Refusal to let go even the concept of forms which places thinking in the metaphysical level is anti-development. Pragmatism played a significant role in the United States of America (USA) during her transitional stage and provided the platform for landing men on the moon. This need be adopted in Africa to push forward development effort.

3. The African Experience

On a prima facie case the practice of animism in every African society into the second decade of the 21st century should be seen as counterproductive or as Haynes and Jeffrey (2007) in Awuah-Nyamekye (2021) anti-development. The orientation sustains African communities in the first stage of intellectual development as conceived by Comte. Socio-economic development presumes structures and processes which improve well-being in the economic sense. Operation on the high socio-economic ladder reduces the stranglehold of tradition on people.

More work has been done on the place of religion in Africa. Heinz (2006) sees African traditional religion as animistic and polytheistic. The average African (including the educated ones and 'strong' Christians) subject their thoughts and actions to the dictates of religion. The lack of focus or concentration and therefore having to tend to a multiplicity of deities generates a peculiar difficulty in the perspective of allocation of scarce resources.

The Pew Center (2010) carried out a study of 19 African countries and submitted that among other things Africans are still deeply into their traditional religion. Belief in juju ranged from a high 85% in Senegal to as low as 5% in Rwanda. Belief in the 'secret eye,' supernatural healing, consultation of mediums, and related issues continue to pervade and pervert.

4. Way Forward/Research Agenda

Development economists have churned out several theories which appear not to work in the African set up. Several African and Asian nations have depended on aid which post several outcomes from clash of goals, approaches, and interests among donors (Scanland, 2020) to outright failure as in the case of aid being used to prosecute local wars. It appears not much attention has been given to issues outside science but which have strong impact on development effort.

A new research agenda to focus attention on the non-science aspects of underdevelopment has become imperative. The simple research question would be whether the African psyche can be re-oriented away from the metaphysical to the positive. Can a sick person and his/her family make a hospital and medical laboratory the first rather than the last port of call? Can Africans develop the habit of checking their blood pressures instead of waiting till stroke arrives then blame witches and wizards? Can business failure be analytically determined to stave off reoccurrence as against search for enemies and detractors? Would business training not be better than ad-hoc approaches to operations? In essence, can tradition be made to relax its strangle hold on the development throat of Africa? Eton, the protagonist in Bassey Ubong's "Zero Sum Game" (2006) laments the pervasiveness of tradition in every aspect of life of everybody and as the play ends, loses his life to the unrelenting dictatorship of tradition.

It can also be asked, how, for instance will post-COVID-19 Africa be when the next global or even localized pandemic strikes? Shall it be said that because mortalities were few in Africa despite the carefree attitude of citizens towards preventive measures during COVID-19, the people must continue to rely on the phrase "germs do not kill Africans?" Institutions of higher learning, research institutes, the private sector, public policy makers, and executors have a burden on their heads and hands - to re-orientate the African mentality towards positive thinking if the countries are not to remain in permanent transition.

The drive for mass acquisition of wealth has also limited growth of the commonwealth. Almost at every level, from the market woman to the corporate Chief Executive Officer; from the office messenger to the topmost public servants and molders of the future (teachers and clergy), the desire for material wealth for consumption rather than investment should make anyone worry about African societies and the possibility of nations in the continent being in permanent transition. Operation at the first stage of intellectual development and the drive for material wealth are the two evils which have kept Africa down if not at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder.

5. Recommendations

Africa can adopt the British paradigm which also exists in some other countries. Useful, pro-development traditions are retained and made to run with modern science-based development once conflict between the two can be avoided or minimized. The festival of Halloween for instance is based on mysteries and the other-worldly but a national holiday on it is observed in the USA. The costumes, fireworks, and related paraphernalia cum processes are generators of business income.

With respect to the conceptual framework, can it be modified to reflect societies with two legs in two camps? Many Africans and Asians have and display the desire to migrate to the positive

stage but they are limited by the environment. Maybe another transition stage can be developed to reflect and assist the situation.

6. References

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