

Work and an African Technology: Towards Economic Emancipation

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Abstract

Since the beginning of human existence, the human being has witnessed many civilizations. Each generation is accompanied by its own civilization. But the underlying factor of the past, present and future civilizations are nothing else but the human work. Civilization, development or technology of any kind is the product of work and is determined by work. In this article, we set out to show that work is the most effective means of development, technology and economic emancipation. The article looks at the importance of work and the influence of the changing times on work, the worker and the working environment. The article notes that the economic emancipation of the African nation depends on the general attitude of the Africans towards work. The article, however, observes that work is not limited to the narrow understanding of manual or physical work, but that work importantly includes intellectual activity even for the sake of truth. The article concludes that work is a human vocation ordained by God and thus, through work the human needs are met and God is served.

Key Words – Work, Technology, Development, Africa, Economic Emancipation

Introduction

Human kind has witnessed many civilizations. But, of course, civilization is the product of man. Since the beginning of human existence, each epoch, each generation is marked by a certain civilization – a specific system of social development – from the development of tools to the manufacture of the most sophisticated machine now available in the human world. Generations come and go with their accompanying civilizations, but one thing remains and will continue to remain as the underlying factor of the past, present and future generations and civilizations. This is nothing else but work and, we mean human work. Civilization or development or technology of whatever kind, is the product of work and is determined by work.

Work, therefore, remains the single most effective means of development, the single most effective means of civilization, the single most effective means of technology and consequently of economic advancement and emancipation. On the other hand, the pace of development in technology and its nature, dictates the pace and nature of economic emancipation. Thus in discussing the topic: “**Work and an African Technology: Towards Economic Emancipation,**” we are discussing a topic whose terms are so intertwined and so dependent on the other, that one cannot exist in its true and good form without the other. “The form and nature of work process help to determine the character of a civilization, but in turn, a society’s economic, political and cultural characteristics shape the form and nature of the work process as

well as the role and status of the worker within the society”(St., ed. 1992). However, in this paper, we shall consider work not in its limited sense of manual or physical nature, but also and more importantly, intellectual work which is the basis and which gives meaning to any form of human work. It is not the prerogative of this paper to enumerate kinds of work. That in itself, would present an impossible task since it would involve the enumeration of all forms of human activity.

Definition of Terms

Work is described or defined as “human activity, designed to accomplish something needed and valued for its functions in civilized life” (Kaiser, 1981). In other words, work is a human and conscious activity with a determined intention or purpose. From this description, a distinction can be made of work as essential in providing the basic and physical needs of food, clothing, and shelter and other explanations given at different times for the existence and purpose of work for human survival; and work as a human value for self-fulfillment and thus, *re-creational*. This is to say that human beings work not so much simply because they want to earn a living, but also because work in itself is a value, a good and hence, desired. Although work is commonly applied to manual or physical labour, yet its understanding does not exclude intellectual or other psychological prowess. We must however, note that physical labour or work was not held in high esteem especially among the Greek and Roman civilization. The reasons were partly because of the existence of slavery as an accepted institution. Since slaves were regarded as sub-human species, they were, as it were, condemned to physical labour, they were meant to exercise their bodies manually in work; and partly again, because of the overemphasis or exaggerated value attached to the occupations of soldiers and political life. Thus Plato would place the workers, the artisans at the lowest level of the social ladder of the society. Even contemplation in relation to external activities had its bias. This is not to say that the value of work was not recognized. It does mean that a distorted concept of work was presented which overshadowed its inherent worth and the dignity that goes with it.

What is technology? Technology is summarily defined as a systematic study of techniques for making and doing things. It is the application of mechanical arts and applied sciences. It has been pointed out already that technology or development of any kind is the fruit or rather, the product of human work. It can be said, therefore, that work in many ways, is the practice or the production of technology, and in turn, technology in many ways, has been the guide of work. It would be difficult to imagine technology without work or to think of work that is not in some way, technical, since work is a conscious human activity with a purpose. In this way, the modern world has become a vast social complex based on a new kind of work with a great multiplicity of inter-related and inter-dependence functions. The next question that imposes itself on us is: Is there an African Technology? In other words, can we identify a body of technology or a system of development, for that matter, that is specifically African? If there is an African technology, what is its nature or what form does it take? I am afraid to say and it is arguable and I stand to be corrected, that there is nothing like African Technology unless it is used in a derogatory sense. There is no technology that is strictly African. The existence of such technology can only be borne out of an African nature of work. On the contrary, one can actually argue (and this may not be very far from the truth) that the slow pace of technology in Africa or the technological backwardness that Africa seems to experience, is as a result of poor attitude towards work. Therefore, the question of African technology does not warrant any special treatment. We rather focus on work as the bedrock of every technology.

Work and the Changing Times

Time is an indefinite continued progress of existence. As it is often said, man waits for time but time does not wait for any man. There exists in our world today radical, profound, and social transformations. These transformations have great impact on all sectors of life including work. Every transformation is an innovation and every innovation is, in a way technology. It brings new things. But at the same time, in every transformation, there is an element of tension between the old and the new. Almost all forms of work today have become corporate-like. Even the ministry is similar to corporate jungle. The inter-dependence of one form of work on the other and the indispensability of all can be easily noticed. Traditionally, work as an exertion of energy has been a reserve of men. But now that arena has yielded to the other sex. It becomes important that man has to have a rethink of the meaning of work in the changing situations. He has to think through a whole lots of work related issues.

These transformations have also brought about tensions between the instruments of work and the worker himself/herself, between technological innovations and the need to safeguard the work place. Pope Saint John Paul II points out that: “In the more industrialized countries, the phenomenon has taken on such dimensions that the model of dependent work that was carried out in the factories with set hours already belong to the past” (John Paul II, 2001). The developments and introductions of new technologies into the work places have changed not only the attitudes of workers towards their work, but also have affected the meaning of their personal existence. There is no doubt that these changes have great and profound impact both on the human person and on his/her economy. For one thing, many workers in the modern market place feel increasingly bored with their jobs and with life. Robert Hicks offers this advice: “Since work occupies one half of man’s waking hours, this area of life is critically important. For activity claiming so much of our time, we ought to reflect more on its nature, essence and meaning”(Hicks, 1991). Pope Saint John Paul II is even more emphatic in his observation and admonition. According to him,

It would be a serious error, however, to think that the changes taking place happen in a deterministic manner. The decisive factor, the *arbiter* of this complex phase of change, is once again the human person, who must remain the true protagonist of his work. He can and must take responsibility in a creative way for the changes that are happening, to ensure that they promote the growth of the-person, of the family, of the society in which he lives and of the entire human family (John Paul II, 2001).

Therefore, it is to be said and expected that the human person who is both the subject of work and the protagonist of change, must not allow him/her to be left behind, swallowed, confused and be led astray in the changes that take place. The human person is the author of technology and technology is made and exists for the good and well-being of the human person. Thus, technology which brings about changes in the place of work must be fully harnessed for the good of human being so that he/she does not become a tool in the hands of technology. It must be said that technology of any kind is indifferent to the use that is made of it. The actual use of it may be ethically right or wrong or it may be right or wrong from the point of view of the technique itself. There is no doubt that technology has immensely increased the productivity of unskilled labour. But the proportion between the increased productivity and the remuneration to the labourer has left more to be desired. If the remuneration were proportional to the production, then, the unskilled labourers would for the first time in history, enjoy the high economic position. In other words, technology can be and should be put to a good use for economic emancipation of the

human person.

African Attitude towards Work

It can be said that every person who has attained the use of reason spends the great majority of his/her life at work. Work here includes all human activities. This is even more true of the Africans whose working life begins much earlier. The Africans are generally hard workers. This is so because they are born into situations where they must struggle in order to survive. “The kind of work they do during these many hours and the attitude they take toward that work impact profoundly on their development as persons, on the solidity of their sense of self and on the nature of culture they produce in common”(Doering, 1990). It is an observable fact that the social etiquette about work is gradually changing. The *how do you do* or *how is work?* Pleasantries are slowly eroding and giving way to *what do you do or where are you working?* For most people this is not merely a chanced or an incidental question, it gets to the peoples identity. People’s identity is becoming closely tied to their work. This, of course, should or would not be a problem in itself. The problem seems to be that what one does is beginning to determine how one feels about oneself, how he/she does his/her work and the attitude towards such a work.

There are certain works, especially among the Africans, that are seen or perceived to have some prestige or dignity attached to them and there are some others without such prestige or dignity. We cannot put a tag on these because they vary from place to place and from one community to the other depending on what value gains the upper hand in a particular locality. The truth is that the attitudes of the subjects towards work are different and I mean in terms of positive and negative attitudes. People tend to see more respect attached to some kind of work than to others. Definitely, the productivity levels would, as well be different. It can even happen that those with the so-called prestigious kinds of work have allowed themselves to be carried away, their heads swollen and their egos magnified by their mere association with such kinds of work that their commitment level is at the barest minimum. Thus the productivity that should befit such positions and work is not forth coming. Worse still, are those who perceive or think that society perceives their work as non-prestigious. Not only that such people are not proud of their work, but they are not happy to be associated with it. One can only imagine their level of commitment and consequently, the out-put of their work. This group of people is simply at work in order to get their livelihood or to make ends meet. They have neither the joy nor the satisfaction that one should derive from working and they are careless about the effect of their work on others and much less the contribution of their work to the society. In such cases, there is very little dedication to duty and there is no sense of fulfillment. There are others still who are merely opportunists and lazy especially about what does not concern them. They have a kind of *laissez faire* attitude at work and only wait for their pay. C. T. Adebayo expresses it better when she says: “There are some workers, who knowing that their salaries would be paid, would prefer not to work. This is especially applicable to the civil servant who knows that his paycheck at the end of the month is constant, whether he is seen to work hard or not” (Adebayo, 2000).

In attitudes such as described above, work offers very little to human beings in terms of growth, productivity, fulfillment, satisfaction and economic emancipation. It becomes merely a means of recognition, a symbol of status or style, personal significance and means of survival. Work must be seen to go beyond means of survival and proofing of personhood to the outside world. Poor or minimal attitudes towards work may not only be accounted for by workers. Several other factors can actually encourage indifferent and lackadaisical attitudes at work.

These would include: poor remuneration, lack of appreciation and poor condition of the working environment, to mention but a few. Every worker deserves and expects, at the end of his/her working hours, week or month, depending on the terms of agreement, a just wage or remuneration. But where the wages are proportionally lobe-sided compared to the amount of work done, the indifferent attitude of the worker towards the work is not and should not be a surprise. It is actually expected. Worse still, is when the wages are not paid at the expected and needed time, that is, as at and when due. It would be difficult in such a case to have the good disposition of the worker at work.

Again, the worker needs to be appreciated. Most workers are simply *used* by the authorities of their establishments. They are roughened and consequently toughened because of abuse coupled with little or no encouragement either in words or in kinds. They are simply not appreciated and this creates unnecessary tension and an atmosphere of distrust between the employees and the employers on the one hand, and between the employees themselves who struggle to find favour with the power that be. In a word, lack of appreciation of workers is counter-productive and economically non-viable. The dignity of the human person must not and should not be sacrificed on the altar of gains no matter the kind of work.

Where one works, the environment of the work place, the atmosphere and generally the conditions, contribute to the general disposition of the worker and his/her out-put. These also influence the attitudes, positive or negative, of the worker towards the work. The *terminus ad quem* or end result of all these, is either a generous in-put or out-put on the one hand or poor in-put or out-put, on the other. As it is often said, one cannot eat one's cake and continue to have it. If the workers are not respected and are made to work in an environment only a little bit better than that of the animal, one can only expect a little bit better than animal in out-put and results. If the interests of the workers are not the concern of those for whom they work, it would be difficult to expect the workers, on their part, to show interest in the work and in those for whom they work. The mathematics is just that simple. That is why, if one should expect economic productivity and emancipation from conditions such as mentioned, it would be more difficult than to reap where one did not plant.

In all these, we must not forget that work is technology in practice. There is no use to even speculate about African technology because the nature of the work process determines the nature of technology and technology in turn, guides the work process. Africa cannot expect to have a higher or more sophisticated technology when the Africans attitudes at work and towards work are still at the primitive level. It goes to confirm the old adage that the effect cannot be greater than its cause. The Africans should not expect a miracle in the area of economic emancipation when the machineries of such emancipation are not properly oiled.

Changing Attitude towards Work and the Economic Emancipation

Work is said to be anything we do to sustain ourselves in the world. The word sustain should be understood in a wider sense. Robert Hicks explains: "It should be clear that work involves far more than a mere job or occupation. It involves our goals, our times, our motives, and ultimately our views of life and ourselves" (1991). The human being is not a machine, thus work is not a mechanical system that can be set and organized in such a way as to operate on its own. Work is a conscious human act and must be applied to some human purpose which goes beyond merely economic value. Pope Saint John Paul II captures the picture:

As long as man exists, there will be a free gesture of authentic participation in creation, which is work. Work is one of the essential components in realizing the

vocation of man who, in fulfilling himself always discovers that he is called by God to dominate the earth Today, compared with the past, these concepts appear to be increasingly inadequate to interpret the facts, because they fail to recognize the absolutely original nature of work, which is man's free and creative activity (2001).

The above passage by the Supreme Pontiff sets a tone for a changing attitude towards work for the economic emancipation but above all, for emancipation of the human person, from the burden of work itself. The human person has to come to terms with the fact that to work is part of the human living. He/she has to recognize and accept that it is not the kind of work that one does – it is not the so-called prestigious kind of work that gives prestige. What actually gives prestige is the fact that one works, in other words, one is creative and fulfilled. Put it otherwise, we can say it is not *what* I do but *how* I do what I do. We have to embrace the old ways of *how do you do* and *how is work*? And try to minimize or deemphasize the *what do you do*?, question so as to deemphasize and minimize the question of which work is prestigious and which is not? Everybody is working: one who flies an aircraft and one who drives a tractor in the field; one who sits in the air-conditioned room of the skyscraper and one who cleans the public toilet at the basement; one who discovers the most current cloning technology and one who weeds in his flower garden; etc. All these are works and workers and it is how they do these works that really matter.

This is the basis of African technology. We cannot import technology that is above and beyond the nature of our work process, otherwise, the best technologies will, at work be put to a very bad use since it will not be fit to put a square speck into a round hole. Africa must develop its own technology based on its own philosophy of work. We must become specialist in whatever we do by the way we do it. This, of course exclude becoming specialist in crime or whatever is contrary to human good and development. We cannot become specialist if we do not recognize human work as duty, creative activity and as a divine mandate, and thus accept it whatever it may be, be proud of it, enjoy it, put our best in it, improve upon it and get the best out of it.

We mentioned above, certain circumstances that encourage poor and indifferent attitudes towards work. These, once again, include unjust and untimely wages, lack of appreciation of the worker and the inhumane working conditions. It is true that work should not be evaluated or valued merely on the basis of economic gains. But it is also true that the labourer deserves his/her wages. A worker has to be paid for his work. He/she needs that to support his/her family. It is however, difficult to have a situation in which one's salary is exactly proportionate to one's work. Human energy and potentials cannot really be quantified. But it is expected that a worker should be given a reasonable just wages for his/her work. This enhances the performance and encourages the worker to put in his/her best since he/she sees the immediate and material gains for his/her labour and as an incentive to worker harder. The wages should come in time too, since the worker depends on them for his/her daily needs.

Every person needs to be appreciated and affirmed especially for what one has done. It is a common fact of experience that to get the best out of a man, the better aspect of the man must be recognized and appreciated. If we can praise a machine that runs well and maintain it for continued and increased performance, how much more the human person whose potentials are inexhaustible? If the worker is appreciated he/she in turn will appreciate what he/she is doing. Again, to expect a good working condition is not demanding too much of the employer. The old Latin adage is not out of place here: *mens sano est in corpore sano* – a sound mind is in a sound body. When the atmosphere of work is conducive, you can only expect the best and of course,

from one who is ready to work.

The points we are trying to make here can be summed up thus: that a good work process produces a good technology, and a good technology cannot but enhance the human work. The result of this cannot only be quantified in terms of material and economic gains, but goes also to give a whole new meaning to human life. Therefore, for the economic emancipation of Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, there must be a reorientation. On the one hand, there must be a positive attitude towards any work and all kinds of work, then, on the other hand, there must be favourable economic, physical and psychological conditions to enable the workers bring out the best in them.

Intellectual Work

So far we have been talking about work as physical or manual. We mentioned earlier that to limit work only to physical or manual will give a narrow understanding of the concept of work. We have already described work as the “human activity designed to accomplish something needed and valued for its functions in civilized life.” In other words, work must also be seen as a value. Thus, there is also intellectual work and consequently, intellectual worker. Intellectual activity, more often than not is considered an activity of the privileged few or group. The question, however, would be: is there is anything human work that does not involve intellect? Here we are referring to intellect not purely as practical. Compared to manual work, intellectual work is an activity that one need not bother about. The truth must however, be said that there is no work which is human that is not at the same time intellectual or intellect based.

We want to set out with the premise that knowledge is work because it is a human activity. It goes without saying that if one wants to know something one must work hard for it. It is even said that reason acquires its possession through work. Thus knowledge is the fruit of human intellect or human effort. However, let us understand knowledge here in two senses: useful knowledge, that is, knowledge that is directed to useful ends or practical purposes. It can also be called functional knowledge. In this case, it is not difficult to understand knowledge as work – intellectual work. According to Pieper, “Intellectual work in this context would mean intellectual activity in so far as it is a social service, in so far as it is a contribution to common need” (1970). In the second sense, we refer to knowledge that is gained for the sake of itself, that is, for the sake of knowledge. It is very easy to recognize knowledge in the first sense as work and whoever possesses it, is an intellectual worker. This is the sense in which Francis Bacon refers to knowledge as *power*. This is knowledge of science and technology. Like the manual worker, he too, “is harnessed to the social system and takes his place in the division of labour; he is allotted his place and his function among the workers; he is a functionary in the world of total work; he may be called a specialist, but he is a functionary” (Pieper, 1970).

The critical question is actually in the second sense of knowledge. The first question is: Is there any knowledge, human activity, which is so liberal and so disinterested that it does not need to justify itself by some practical purposes? Second, if such knowledge exists, can it be called work and can the possessor of such knowledge be called intellectual worker? In the modern man’s understanding of the concepts *intellectual worker* and *intellectual work*, more especially in the modern man’s understanding of man from the point of view of functionality, the answer is clearly *no*. In other words, in ordinary functional world, that is the work-a-day-world, there is no knowledge that does not point to some ends outside itself.

But let us examine the question from the point of view of philosophy. Philosophy is regarded as the most free and the most disinterested kind of knowledge. In fact, it is said that

knowledge is more truly free when it is a philosophical knowledge. We do not in any way question or doubt the role and the value of natural, applied or functional sciences. Their place is clearly defined and they bring about economic emancipation. But we must also agree that the world cannot be exhaustively defined merely as the *world of work, whether practical or functional world*. Therefore, there is a necessity of purely academic knowledge that is sought in a philosophical manner for the service of truth and nothing else. The ancient Aristotle recognized and maintained that there was and still a legitimate place for knowledge that is non-utilitarian in character. According to him the speculative science is more learned than the productive (Aristotle, Bk.1, ch. I). Again in chapter II of the same book he noted:

Again among the sciences we consider that that science which is desirable in itself and for the sake of knowledge is more nearly Wisdom than that which is desirable for its results, and that the superior is more nearly Wisdom than the subsidiary; for the wise man should give orders, not receive them; nor should he obey others, but the less wise should obey him (Aristotle: Bk. 1,Ch.II).

This is to say that the functional knowledge is not the only kind of knowledge. There exists also “knowledge of the gentleman” solely for the sake of knowledge. “There is no need to waste words showing that not everything is useless which cannot be brought under the definition of the useful. And it is by no means unimportant for a nation and for the realization of the *common good* that a place should be made for activity which is not *useful work* in the sense of being utilitarian” Pieper: 1970).

The point here is that in the world of work, where every work and every worker aim at some useful gains, it is not out of place to have people who search for truth solely for its sake and not so much for the benefits it brings. This is good not only for the individual who so devotes himself/herself to seek for truth but also for the good of human society.

Conclusion

God created the world and gave human beings the charge of caring for it. That is the human first responsibility, or put it differently, the first work of human being. Work, therefore, is part and parcel of human existence. Through work, the human person enters into a certain relationship with God the creator who is himself a worker. Not to work is not only dehumanizing, but it is also a denial of the fact that human beings are made in the image of God to be a worker. Even the Holy Scripture has it: “So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should enjoy his work, for that is his lot; who can bring him to see what will be after him” (Qoheleth: 3, 22). In this article we have shown that work is truly human activity and that it is through the process of work that technology is developed. Thus work and technology can be considered as the two sides of the same coin. Technology, no doubt has given new perspectives to work. But despite this fact, any and every kind of work (human activity) should be accorded its deserved dignity. Thus the worker should be justly treated, appreciated and the working conditions should be humane. We have emphasized also that work is not limited to manual or physical activities it importantly includes intellectual activity and not only intellectual activity for the sake of productions, but also for the sake of truth.

Therefore, we must not look at work as servitude, but rather we must see work as that which sets us free from economic bondage, free us from idleness, gives us the opportunity to do good to others but above all, in work we serve God. *Laborare est orare – To work is to pray*. Hendricks and Sherman sum it all thus: “Through work we serve people, through work we meet our needs, through work we meet our family’s needs, through work we earn money to give to

others, through work we love God.” (1991).

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