



**NIGERIA:
OUR PEOPLE
OUR ART
OUR HERITAGE**

Edited by
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National Council for Arts and Culture

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Chapter 6

THE IMPERATIVES FOR THE PRESERVATION OF AFRICA'S CULTURAL HERITAGE: *A CBAAC PERSPECTIVE*

BY

TONY ONWUMAH

INTRODUCTION

I would like to start this paper by thanking the organizers for inviting me to be part of this important event. I also want to congratulate them for the timeliness and relevance of the theme of this festival, "Our Art, Our people, Our Heritage." I am sure that members of this distinguished audience will agree that reflections and analysis on the complex relationships between our art, heritage and peoples can never be too much or superfluous. From the title of my paper the word preservation easily strikes a note of significance. The Chamber's English Students Dictionary states that to preserve is to "to keep from harm; to keep in existence or in good condition; to treat . . . so that it will not go bad." Implicit in this definition is that, that which is to be preserved must be important or better still a thing of enduring value. In another sense, it means that the object in question may not have the ability for self preservation. In this context the object in question is Africa's culture.

In this paper, we shall pose and attempt to answer a few questions such as, what is culture and what is African culture? In the first instance, is there an African culture? If so what are its distinguishing features and characteristics? In the same manner, what has been the effects of the globalisation process on African cultures? All of these are geared towards answering a common question, why is it imperative to safeguard Africa's cultures? We shall conclude with some recommendations on the strategies and techniques for the preservation of Africa's cultural heritage.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

As a concept culture seems to defy a precise definition because a number of disciplines lay claim to it as central to their study. These include anthropology, sociology, history, geography, economics, agriculture, biology and even medicine among others. As a result, the word culture has been misused and in many instances abused. For our purposes, we shall restrict ourselves to only the anthropological and sociological usages of the concept. According to Clyde Kluckhohn (1963) "to be human is to be cultured". He further defined culture as "the total way of life of a people, the social legacy the individual acquired from his group . . . that part of the environment that is the

creation of man". In support of the above, Ruth Benedict (1960) states that "what really bind men together is their culture the ideas and the standards they have in common". The cultural policy for Nigeria (1988) further defines culture as "the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempt to meet the challenges of living in their environment, which gives understanding and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organization thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours". This definition has been influenced by the old but still relevant definition of culture as given by the renowned anthropologist, E.W. Tylor (1871) who stated that " culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society". Though each of the above definition has been criticized, yet their collective strength lies in the fact that they clearly highlighted the basic ingredients and scope of culture.

From the above definitions one could attempt to delineate the basic features and characteristics of culture. Culture is shared and not a personal attribute. Thus, culture could only exist within the framework of a society. It is different from human idiosyncracies. Following from this, is that culture is learned. It is an instrument which enables man to imbibe societal norms as it provides means of gratification for compliance and sanctions for deviance. A corollary to this is that culture is universal, diffuse and dynamic. All human societies have cultures as mechanisms of adjustment and adaptation and this underscores the contention by scholars on the equality of all cultures. Though references have occasionally been made to low and high cultures, the consensus is that in terms of functionality all cultures are equal and those who attempted to prove otherwise are guilty of ethnocentrism. An understanding of culture is very necessary because it serves as an instrument by which the world is viewed. Apart from rationalizing social action it makes a particular action right in a given society and wrong in another. As a result, culture is both integrative and patently divisive.

COMPONENTS OF CULTURE

Because of the importance and reality of culture, sociologists and anthropologists have been able to reduce it to its basic components.

According to Chinoy (1967), culture consists of institutions, ideas and material products. He defined institutions as “normative patterns which defines what are felt to be Proper , legitimate, or expected modes of action or of social relationships”. From this, it becomes clear that institutions serve as the fabric and socially accepted regulatory mechanisms of society. An understanding of institutions as normative systems entails that the plurality of rules which govern social action are tied together in an organized manner. An aggregation of these rules and normative systems make it possible to speak of kinship, political, economic, religious and other social institutions.

Institutions have been further broken down into folkways and mores. While the former refers to conventional practices accepted as appropriate but not strongly insisted on, the latter refers to norms which carry strong negative sanctions. For example, thou shall not kill; thou shall not commit adultery etc.

Other components of culture are generally referred to as ideas.

This encompasses beliefs, knowledge, and values. Beliefs are what man has generally accepted as true concerning themselves and the social, biological, and physical world. It also has to do with the relationship between people including such things as folklore, legends, proverbs, theology, science, philosophy, and technical know how.

On the other hand, values in the words of Chinoy are things to which men assign desirability or importance. In another sense it could mean objects or situations which are considered good, proper, desirable or worthwhile. Of all creatures, culture is exclusive to man alone within a social setting. Though some lesser creatures such as ants and baboons have exhibited some rudiments of social organization it is certainly not at the same level as man. One distinguishing and exclusive characteristics of man is the possession of symbolic language. This unique attribute has facilitated communication and the exchange of ideas. The uniqueness and importance of language lies in the fact that it is a constituent of culture and at the same time a means for its elaboration and accumulation.

Material culture refers to the physically tangible and man made things created to make it easier for man to cope with the demands and challenges of his environment. It includes the totality and varieties of

implements that were used by the so called primitive man to the sophisticated tools and equipment of the modern man. It also ranges from such simple things as axes, pots, canoes to the complex ones like the computer, aircraft and modern skyscrapers.

There is however, a close link between the material and the non material parts of culture. The material components of culture can only exist because of the values, ideas and beliefs attached to them. Put very simply, machines and tools are on their own not important except they are used appropriately. This is only possible if the owners have the knowledge and skills to apply them correctly.

PROFILE OF AFRICAN CULTURES

Our discussion so far leads us to the question of the existence of African cultures. Is there a way or ways of life which are typically African on the basis of which one could speak of an African culture? V. C. Uchendu (1988) agrees on the existence of African culture. According to him , “ there are many shared values and cultural institutions in the continent.” He accordingly provided what he termed a profile of African cultures

1. Africa is the base of unilineal descent groups. All over the continent, there is a strong emphasis on lineal continuity which could be traced either matrilineally or patrilineally. It is important that lineages must not die out. Therefore to die without an heir is considered a serious misfortune.
2. There is the preponderance of large ethnolinguistic units which is indicative of long residential stability. This feature is more pronounced in West Africa. Some of the ethnolinguistic units are as large as ten to fifteen million. Therefore, references to them by early western anthropologists as tribes were calculatedly derogatory.
3. African societies have highly developed prestige and acquisitive culture patterns. There is strong emphasis on achievement as failure is derided while achievement is applauded.
4. A long tradition of urban and intra urban communities as exemplified by the medieval cities of Timbuctu, Goa, and Djamena which were centers of learning and of religion.

5. In Africa, there were found complex political institutions, which incorporated diverse peoples and cultures and ran by an elaborate bureaucracy. In most of the ancient African states, women were given important political roles such as Queen Mother, Queen Sister etc.

Beyond the work of Uchendu, our bibliographical search has shown that African cultures possess the following other characteristics

- a. Culture of Creativity: Africans have been found to be very creative. This has found expression in masterpieces of artworks, complex and advanced technology in architecture, textiles, pottery etc. The cases of Ife, Benin, Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, ancient Egypt and Zimbabwe bear eloquent testimony to a culture of creativity in Africa
- b. Culture of Hardwork and Achievement: African oral traditions, folktales, proverbs and legends abound with stories of heroic figures honored for outstanding achievements while indolence is loudly condemned. In many instances, the hardworking, brave and heroic person has been called upon to lead their people or to occupy other positions of importance in the society.
- c. African Societies Without exception Are Deeply Religious: There is the strong belief in transcendental powers which are in charge of human affairs. Ancestor worship is also prevalent and new gods can be acquired to either replace or supplement old ones.
- d. In Africa, there is culture of respect for elders, tolerance, transparency, honesty and hospitality. It will definitely sound untrue or perhaps a demonstration of patriotism to state that African cultures emphasize honesty and transparency in view of the widespread corruption in most African States. The reality of the situation is that the unfortunate incidence of corruption in Africa is an inescapable fallout of Africa's many years of slavery, colonialism and, neo colonialism. Under colonialism, the public and civil services were seen as the whiteman's job. The colonial boss was a taskmaster and an

exploiter. Therefore, gratification and its likes were not at that time seen as evil but a way to get back at the colonialists who were exploiting and expropriating African resources. Our argument therefore is that corruption though seemingly endemic is by no means indigenous to Africa. Rather, it is one of the concomitants and contradictions of colonialism.

Slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism have profoundly distorted African cultures. These phenomena did not only introduce foreign cultural traits into Africa but also deliberately subordinated African cultures to western cultures. More intriguing is that early western writers on African history, and social life tend to ignore the cultural achievements of Black and African peoples. Where such is acknowledged, it is often spitefully attributed to foreign borrowings. Notice for example that the breakthroughs of ancient Egypt in the areas of architecture, political organization, medicine, and pottery were credited to non African sources. Yet radical pan Africanist writers in the mould of Cheik Anta Diop have painstakingly demonstrated the civilization of ancient Egypt was a completely Black African affair. For instance, an analysis of the sphinx and other rock drawings showed that the pictures were of people with essentially Negroid features, thick lips, flat nose, woolly hair etc. Cheik Anta Diop has empirically fathomed and comprehensively documented the contributions of Africa to the pool of global knowledge. These span the whole spectrum of morbid anatomy, architectural technology, arts and culture, the invention of modern writing, politics and administration, agriculture, medicine etc. All these notwithstanding, eurocentric scholars still deny or pretend to believe that Africa made very minimal or in fact no cultural achievements whatsoever.

GLOBALIZATION AND AFRICAN CULTURES

Unfortunately, the current phenomena of globalization, which has engendered an aggravated convergence of cultures has further compounded the African dilemma. Though cultural globalisation is supposedly a two way traffic the reality of contemporary times is that African cultures have been at the receiving end. Undeniably,

globalization has been beneficial to Africa in some areas, but for her cultures it has had severely deleterious effects especially on the youths. Today, some Africans ape virtually everything that is Western. These include language, religion, modes of dressing and dancing, dietary habits, personal names etc. These Africans who are victims of cultural imperialism strive unsuccessfully to become westernized. Though they have been alienated from their indigenous culture, yet they have not fully imbibed the foreign cultures of their admiration. Franz Fanon in the *Wretched of the Earth* calls them "Black Skin, White Mask" while Nnadabanaji Sithole sees them as the "Superior- Inferior African". Globalization has bastardized African cultures and the unfortunate trend could be further reinforced if left unchecked. No thanks to the world information order which is skewed unfavorably against Africa and facilitated by the technological advancement of the West. It is indeed the threat posed to African cultures by globalization that makes its preservation critically imperative.

It is pertinent to state that other continents have long ago gone beyond mere preservation and advanced into aggressive cultural propagation. It is for this reason that we have The French Cultural Centre, The Goethe Institute by the Germans, The British Council, The United States Information Service to mention only a few. Implicit in the establishment of these bodies is that preservation is best achieved by propagation. It is also indicative of the realization of the potency of culture as a weapon of diplomacy and international relations.

CBAAC PERSPECTIVE

The Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization is a product of the famed Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC'77). Its primary objective is to preserve all the materials used at FESTAC '77 and use that as basis for the promotion of and propagation of the totality of African cultural heritage globally.

For the non material aspects of culture, CBAAC has approached its preservation essentially through seminars, conferences, workshops, symposia, exhibitions, and public lectures. The Centre has held about twenty public lectures delivered by renowned African scholars on

subjects of their choice on the general theme of Black and African cultural heritage.

Similarly, the Centre's seminars on:

1. African Traditional Political thought and Institutions;
2. Black and African Cultures and the Challenges of Globalization;
3. The Role of The Mass Media in The Promotion of African Democratic Culture
4. Globalization, Identity Politics and Social Conflicts have brought to the fore many salient parts of African culture and the critical roles they could play in the evolution of a new and better African society. To engender preservation, papers obtained at the conferences and from other sources have been published for posterity and for the reading public. It is important at this juncture to draw attention to the FESTAC Colloquium papers which have been published in ten volumes under the theme of The Arts and Civilization of Black and African Peoples

For the preservation of the material elements of culture such as artifacts and other artworks acquired after FESTAC '77, The Centre has created a full-fledged department (Exhibition and Museum) for their preservation. The materials are being technically and professionally maintained and to a reasonable extent, the longevity of these materials is guaranteed. To ensure professional standards, the Centre has maintained relationships with local and international agencies such as the West African Museum Projects (WAMP) and the International Council of Museums (ICOM). These bodies have offered training and technical assistance to CBAAC.

The Centre also has an audio visual unit where all FESTAC '77 events have been comprehensively documented. Beyond that, the Centre has equally recorded some contemporary national and international cultural events. The Centre similarly has an outreach programme by which cultural films are shown to students in secondary schools as a way of inculcating our cultural values into the youths.

The purpose of our discussion so far is to demonstrate with evidence the importance of culture to societies. It is a source of identity, and the essence of social organizations. It follows that such a phenomenon is deserving of preservation. It should be stressed that the preservation

of Africa's cultures is the protection of African identity as the myriads of Africa's problems may not be unconnected with her alienation from her cultures. Two quick examples would buttress this point, the food crisis and political instability in Africa. Africa is facing severe food crisis largely because the efforts to address her food predicaments have been fashioned after foreign or non African models. The modus operandi has been for government to establish large scale farming. In a country like Nigeria this has found expression in programmes such as the Green Revolution, Operation Feed The Nation and Agricultural Development Projects. These apparently laudable projects failed because, from inception they did not take into cognizance the traditional agricultural practices of the people. Secondly, government has not been known to be good in business. Therefore, the venture into commercial farming is doomed for failure.

Another example is the occurrence of political instability. Most African countries on attainment of independence either adopted the democracy of America and Britain or the socialist mode of governance. To a large extent, both experimentations failed. With the collapse of socialism all efforts are geared towards the installation of democratic governments all over Africa. This has so far achieved very modest results. Yet, traditional Africa paraded such large and stable states like Oyo, Ghana, Benin Mali and Songhai empires. While not advocating a return to the past, it may be that a combination of the traditional and modern forms of governance may be the much needed panacea to Africa's recurring political quagmire. So far, it is self evident that the blind imitation of foreign models has turned out to be a mirage and a wild goose chase. The failure of the above political experimentations is easily understandable in the context of the non institutionalization of the alien political systems that were imposed on the people.

THE WAY FORWARD

Research is a necessary precondition for the preservation of Africa's cultural heritage because it is important to have sufficient knowledge of the object of preservation. Though, there are many institutes of African studies spread across the continent and beyond, yet the subject

of African cultures in all its ramifications has remained largely understudied at least from an afrocentric perspective. It is therefore imperative to have an African centered, African driven research into African culture. Africans must study their culture and tell their own story and not to rely on Euro-American scholars to do it for them. It will be highly beneficial for instance, that to obviate Africa's nightmarish experience of political instability, to initiate under the auspices of the African Union (A.U) an in depth study of Africa's traditional political institutions. This is not an endorsement of a wholesale return to the past but perhaps a marriage of the traditional and the modern may provide the much needed panacea for Africa's political quandary.

It may also be desirable to establish a database of Africa's culture on the internet. Such a database should contain materials on African folklore, oral traditions, political and economic institutions, literature, traditional marriage patterns, science and technology, religion, communication systems etc. Similarly, African youths should be encouraged to take pride in their culture by the teaching of African cultures at all levels of the educational structure.

The preservation of Africa's material culture is also very essential. In this regard, it is important to establish documentation/conservation centers such as museums with specialized libraries. Training and manpower development should be given special emphasis. The establishment of an agency such as the West African Museums Project (WAMP) is a step in the right direction. Efforts should be made to bring its activities and that of other related agencies to the grassroots. Individuals and the organized private sector should be encouraged to establish museums, archives and conservation centers.

Finally, Africa's cultures is at the crossroads. It is neither authentically African nor truly western, thus its preservation becomes critically important. The onslaught of globalization has had an overbearing and corrosive influence on it such that it should be a priority issue to African governments and the time for action is now. A viable option lies in the concerted actions of the international, national and private sector initiatives.

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