

Politics, Culture and Development in Nigeria

A Festschrift for
Gabriel Olatunde Babawale

Editor:
AKIN ALAO



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Culture and Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria

*Tony Onwumah

Introduction

THE issue of development has been of grave concern not only to Nigeria as a country but also to Africa as a continent. As the second largest continent, with Nigeria as the biggest black nation in the world, development is of necessity a serious issue to all well-meaning Nigerians. With her low position on the development index, Nigeria, in spite of the abundance of human and material resources, is still rightly grouped as one of the poorest countries of the world. More explicitly, the income per capita is low, so is the level of industrialization and life expectancy. Nigeria has equally experienced one of the worst forms of political instability. With a vast expanse of arable land, Nigeria is a real but inexplicable metaphor of hunger and food insufficiency. Other worrisome areas of Nigeria's public life include poor medicare and low level of school enrolment. Perhaps the only area where she ranks or, better still, competes with trail-blazers is in corruption.

Grim and demoralizing as the above scenario is, one is tempted to ask, what happened and what went wrong? To obtain a credible answer to this question, a recourse to history becomes most alluring and inevitable. Like other parts of Africa, colonialism profoundly distorted traditional Nigerian societies. It interrupted and halted the indigenous political development of the various communities in Nigeria. Slavery, which preceded colonialism, truncated the development process by depleting the most able-bodied men and women. It also introduced internecine war and strife in the process of acquiring slaves. This diverted attention away from productive activities. It is noteworthy that colonialism, as an inevitable fallout of the end of slavery, distorted Nigerian culture in a number of ways. For instance, the colonialists portrayed African traditional religion as inferior to their own religion.

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Colonial education also ensured that we replaced our world-views with, those of our conquerors (Kofi Awoonor, 2001). A dependent educational policy was pursued, with the result that even our universities are now institutions, not of vigorous endogenous research but places of intellectual consumerism. It is necessary to state that education is a tool for the promotion of culture and it goes without saying that the culture which our educational system is promoting is Western culture. Closely related to this is the effect of colonial rule on Nigerian languages which was portrayed pejoratively as primitive. To be civilized, therefore, meant to acquire the language of the colonizer. It is very disturbing that while scholars worldwide are studying and exploring ways of improving their institutions, Nigerian and most other African scholars are denying theirs. Kofi Awoonor captures it succinctly in the following words:

We... are the first people in modern times made to deny our personality. By a series of truncating and traumatizing acts and thought processes we deny our very identity. As if these were not enough, we have been compelled by the subject act of denial to strive to assume the identity of others. In this specific situation that of our conquerors (Awoonor, 2001).

What is Culture?

There are as many definitions of culture as there are scholars. In fact, the word 'culture' has been so widely used and sometimes misused, if not even abused. Because of the multiplicity of usages, we have such expressions as political culture, economic culture, democratic culture, medical culture and so on and so forth. As a result, a variety of disciplines lay claim to culture as integral to their areas of study. These include anthropology, sociology, economics, political science, geography, history, agriculture and even medicine.

Culture has its origin in the Latin word *cerere*, which means 'to cultivate or tend the soil.' A sociologist, Piddington, sees culture as "the sum total of the material and intellectual equipment whereby a people satisfy their biological and social needs and adapt themselves to their environments." The Cultural Policy of Nigeria rightly defines culture as:

The totality of the ways of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenge of living in their environment which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organization thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours.

Another very broad and comprehensive definition of culture was offered by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) which defines culture as:

...the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group.

All the above definitions share close affinity with the age-long but still relevant definition by the renowned anthropologist, Edward Burnet Tylor, who in 1871 stated that "culture is that complex whole which includes' knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society".

From all of the above, it is easy to distil some characteristics of culture. It is a social construct and not biologically derived. This entails that though people are born into cultures, no one was born with a culture. Thus, culture is a shared attribute of man as opposed to his idiosyncrasies. More fundamentally, culture is universal because all human societies have cultures. It is also diffuse and dynamic since it keeps changing, influencing and is being influenced by other cultures. The phenomenon of globalization has further accentuated the dynamism of culture contact. In a world that has been reduced to a global village, it is difficult, if not impossible, to talk of isolated and pure cultures which have not been influenced by or is influencing other cultures.

With this as a background, is it possible to speak of a Nigerian culture? With over 250 languages and culture groups, it may not be possible to refer to a Nigerian culture. Yet, there are cultural traits that are peculiar to Nigerians. These include, but are not limited to, culture of religion, respect for elders, communalism, hard work, creativity, tolerance, transparency and accountability. It is necessary to comment briefly on the last assertion. In the light of revelations of corruption even against the very apostles of anti-corruption, and in view of Nigeria's very poor rating by international agencies, such as Transparency International, is the claim of transparency and accountability not a mere play to the gallery? However, a close and dispassionate scrutiny of traditional Nigerian societies reveals that the peoples were traditionally honest, transparent and accountable. For instance, if you make a Nigerian the custodian of his family or village funds he will more often than not guard it jealously. Two things are at play. He will never permanently avoid his family or village being his primary group. Secondly, there is the fear of offending the gods whose wrath should be avoided at all costs. The prevalence of corruption is a fallout of our colonial heritage. I have argued elsewhere that under colonial rule, the Nigerian worker saw the workplace as belonging to the white-man. Moreover, the white-man was seen as a taskmaster and a cruel exploiter. Thus, to be corrupt was a way of getting back at the unscrupulous taskmasters. We therefore want to submit that corruption is not in the character of Nigerians. Indeed, Nigeria's anti-corruption crusade could be easily won if it is approached culturally.

Cultural Diversity

Though we have highlighted some cultural traits that are common to Nigerians, Nigeria remains a heterogeneous society. According to Ali Mazrui (1992), a heterogeneous society is one in which no one culture is close to 50 per cent of the overall population. Cultural diversity in Nigeria, coupled with a varied environment, makes her an excellent specimen of a multicultural society.

For instance, the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa/Fulani and other ethnic groups have their differences. These “complementary differences” rather than serve as potential sources of division and disunity should be explored as mutually reinforcing factors for growth and development. Nature has been so liberal to Nigeria that there is hardly any climate which is not available in the country. The very hot and arid climate is found in the northern areas of Kano, Maiduguri and Sokoto. On the other hand, parts of the middle-belt or the central northern areas around the Jos and Mambilla Plateaux are cold all year round. The entire coastal region experiences all-year rainfall with heavy forest vegetation. This digression into the explanation of the environmental diversity of Nigeria becomes necessary because of the very close tie between culture and environment. People in different environments will respond differently to such environments and the responses will result in different behavioural patterns which become an integral part of their cultures.

The diverse environment in Nigeria is such that virtually all types of crops found anywhere in the world could grow in different parts of Nigeria. Therefore, Nigeria can invest in agriculture and use it as a catalyst for economic development. The beauty of Nigeria is that what is not available in one area is available in another. Therefore, with good leadership and political will, these positive differences or what was earlier on referred to as complementary differences, could be harnessed to drive development.

Cultural Factors in Development

To understand the role of culture in fostering development, an answer must first be found to the simple question, what is socio-economic development? For the purpose of this paper, socio-economic development is an increase or a rise from one standard of living to another; that is, a higher and more fulfilling one which is internally inspired, people-centred and culturally relevant. In practical terms, it entails an improvement in the overall standard of living of a people in terms of sufficiency and availability of food, shelter, medicare and education, law and order, good roads, water supply, institutionalized participatory governance, and freedom of expression. Full and gainful employment and an independent judiciary are all essential elements of development. A recourse to an explanation

of socio-economic development is inevitable because, more often than not, people have equated development with economic growth alone. Some have also associated it with industrialization only. Yet, socio-economic development transcends all these.

The dilemma of promoting socio-economic development becomes very challenging because Nigeria, like most African and Third World countries, has been enjoying the benefits of externally inspired development. Though they (the Third World countries) cannot produce the simplest of items, they have all these available to them. For instance, there are automobiles, ocean-going vessels, textiles, skyscrapers, information and communications technology, electricity and what have you. The availability of all these point to growth without development. This situation also has some serious implications for Nigeria's internally stimulated development. It is a situation in which Nigeria depends on the West for virtually everything, thus stultifying its own growth potentials. Currently, the situation has led to the phenomenon that has made Nigeria one of the dumping grounds of used or what is popularly called "secondhand items". Nigeria revels in the consumption of used or leftover items while stultifying its capacity for endogenous development. It is shameful and worrisome that fifty years after independence and with an abundance of resources, Nigeria still imports such things as second-hand clothing. In many instances, some Nigerians have expressed preference for the "tokunbo" or "second-hand" items over new or original ones. The argument has always been that the imported "second-hand" items are superior and more durable than the new ones. The above is demoralizing and paints a picture of a people who are thirsty in the midst of water.

Our next challenge is how to address and redress this painfully worrisome situation. The main thesis of this presentation is that culture does not just have an important role to play in the development of Nigeria; it should be the bedrock of all efforts at attaining development.

For example, Nigeria can achieve the much-needed agrarian revolution by a recourse to some aspects of our traditional agricultural practices. Previous efforts failed because government went into direct large-scale farming. But it is possible to give our small landholder farmers modern implements and fertilizers, as well as provide them with storage facilities, and there will be an agricultural revolution in the country. The argument is that there should be a fusion of modern and traditional agricultural practices to engender the much-needed green revolution. To completely modernize and jettison cultural practices in agriculture has proved and will continue to prove counter-productive.

Another key issue is that emphasis should shift from cash crops to food crops which provided food self-sufficiency for traditional Nigerian communities. For

instance, in 2008 the world generally was faced with severe shortage of rice. Nigeria budgeted N80bn (eighty billion naira) for the importation of rice alone. Why should a sovereign country invest such a huge amount into the economy of another country? The other question is, must Nigerians eat rice? It was not until the mid-seventies with the advent of the petro-dollar that rice became a staple food in Nigeria. For example, in the late fifties and early sixties, the Indian textile factories were faced with severe shortages of cotton. In response to the call for importation of cotton, the then Indian leadership stated that if India could not grow cotton, then India should go naked. Contemporary Nigeria is faced with a similar situation and it was argued at that time that if Nigerians could not grow rice, then rice should be removed from the country's menu list. The argument is still valid. Luckily, Ekiti State offered that, with the necessary support, she alone has the potential of growing rice for the whole nation. If the importation of rice is stopped, the growing of rice internally will be stimulated. The situation where we are producers of unfinished products which are bought cheaply, processed overseas and returned to us exorbitantly is very disturbing. It is also possible to research into African traditional architectural technology and use it as a basis for the housing challenges facing the country. This approach, which is cheaper, will make less demand on our foreign reserves.

Cultural industries in the area of pottery, arts and crafts, black-smithing and textile technology should be studied and evaluated. It should be recalled that during the civil war, the small enclave of Biafra refined her crude oil, and produced equipment with which she fought the war. This was achieved based on traditional technology. Some of the skills that were utilized are still available and could be harnessed for industrial development. Unemployment in India is at the lowest ebb because of the many cottage industries available. The same could be done in Nigeria if we revive our cultural industries.

In addition, it is important to review our educational system to take culture into account. Central to this proposition is the issue of language. It is neither true nor logical to think that our indigenous languages cannot be used to teach the sciences. According to Ali Mazrui, the South East Asian countries did it because they "scientificated" their languages. The poser is, with many languages, which should become the national language and be used in schools? The point is, let us agree first on the desirability of the use of indigenous languages and then work towards identifying which of the many languages should become the lingua franca.

Similarly, attention should be paid to tourism. Contemporarily, tourism is the highest income earner for most countries. Nigeria is blessed with abundance of tourism resources, be it waterfalls, lakes, landscapes, beaches, wildlife, parks, etc. All that is needed is to put this under the management of professionals. A form

of public/private sector partnership should be worked out. There are also many festivals which are capable of attracting the attention of tourists. Nigeria and Africa are known for festivals and not carnivals. Carnivals that are found in other parts of the world should not be replicated in Nigeria. Overseas tourists want to see something different from what they are used to. For tourism to thrive, security is of paramount importance. Adequate arrangement should therefore be made to guarantee the security of tourists in Nigeria. Most, if not all, of the above are hinged on politics and it requires political will to implement.

Politics is actually an integral part of culture. That is why we can speak of political culture. So much has been written and said about the attainment of liberal democracy and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The failure of democratic rule in Nigeria and other African countries is because it is a system of governance that is not institutionalized with culture as superstructure. Rather than dissipate so much energy on democracy, emphasis should shift to good governance. As a people, we should look inwards, discover how our people attained good governance and political stability and adopt the positive aspects into our contemporary system of politics and administration. In the current situation, Nigeria should see the concept and practice of governance from the viewpoint of African culture. Undue reliance on Western-type democracy with all of its appeal is indicative of the notorious dependency syndrome which has not augured well for the country.

The above also applies to management because we cannot talk of socio-economic development without analyzing the way our public and private sector enterprises are managed. For too long, we have heard of Management By Objectives (MBO), Total Quality Management (TQM) and currently, Best Practices. We seem to change with each new development in concept and operate as a rudderless ship. For instance, MBO is nothing short of American work ethics systemized and handed over to the whole world. Similarly, TQM is Japanese work culture that has been studied and reduced to some principles. Nigeria, and indeed Africa, can do the same about our indigenous work ethics. For example, it has been shown that, traditionally, the work ethics in Nigeria is favourable to productivity. There is no Nigerian culture that favours laziness. Dafe Otobo found that, in Nigeria, the self-employed people and those in the private sector are very hardworking and productive while the same cannot be said of those in government employment. The reasons for these are many. The perception that government work is nobody's work, the management style and alienation of workers from the ownership of the public agencies encourage indifference and lackadaisical attitude to work.

Finally, in many Nigerian schools, at the secondary level, the teaching of history has been stopped. Yet, all parts of the world are encouraging the study of their

history. We cannot talk of cultural development when we are not encouraging our children to study and understand our past. This should be changed. History should be reintroduced into the school system in Nigeria. It should be borne in mind that Nigeria and other African countries are being cajoled into stopping the teaching of history as a grand imperialist design to make them forget their past, so that they cannot take control of their future.

We therefore want to conclude on the note that Nigeria has a lot of lessons to learn from the emergent economies popularly referred to as the Asian tigers. These include Japan, India, Malaysia, Korea, China, etc., all of which have used culture to drive their development efforts and have in all instances recorded gratifyingly unqualified success stories. In these countries, indigenous religion is still largely being adhered to, and in most cases the mother tongue is the official language and lingua franca. They also have indigenous work ethics which have been brought to the workplace, be it in the public or private sector.

Lastly, we conclude that, for Nigeria, development will remain not only elusive but a far fetched dream till it is conceived of in cultural terms.

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