

YOUTH AND NIGERIA'S INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE



HD Human
Development
Initiatives

in collaboration with



CBAAC

Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization
Ministry of Tourism, Culture & National Orientation, Federal Republic of Nigeria



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Edited by
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and
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with the assistance of
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CHAPTER SIX

THE YOUTH AND NATIONAL REBIRTH: THE CULTURAL IMPERATIVES

by

Tony Onwumah Ph.D

Introduction

As an independent nation, Nigeria is fifty-one years old. Within the period, she fought a fratricidal civil war which left scars, pains and sad impressions that are still visible forty years after. In fifty-one years, Nigeria has moved from one trajectory to another, wasted some of her defining moments for greatness, national integration and quantum leap into the league of developed nations of the world.

In Nigeria, post independence events have left her more divided than she was in the colonial days. It is a nation where corruption, though not a part of our cultural heritage has gradually but persistently become an inescapable part of our daily lives. In Nigeria, so many things have gone wrong because in spite of the abundance of human and material resources, the country is by all parameters a definition of poverty, backwardness and underdevelopment. Without any gain saying, the above may sound alarmist and possibly pessimistic but how else can one explain our excruciating poverty in the midst of plenty, rising unemployment, low capacity utilization, low life expectancy, high and ever rising infant and maternal mortality, decadent and progressively depreciating health care system, a mono-cultural economy which for decades, has been lying prostrate and sadly complemented by an educational system that is comatose. Interestingly, those who focus on her potentials alone still regard her as the giant of Africa but those who have chosen to speak realistically call her the sleeping giant. The scenario in Nigeria is further compounded by the lack of pride and identity of Nigerians. Some Nigerians do not take sufficient pride in their cultures and identity.

For instance, while Nigerians are striving (unfortunately unsuccessfully) to express themselves in a foreign language, they ignore their own indigenous languages to their own detriment. In other areas, such as dressing, dietary habit, religion, politics and administration, the country has been an unsuccessful mimicry of western life styles to the neglect of its own heritage and worldviews. The consequences of all these is that the building of true nationhood has been problematic. Nigerians are more concerned with what they can get from Nigeria than with what they can do for her. People are interested in sharing the national cake than in baking it. Only a very few are willing to serve. The attitude is; if you cannot beat them, then you join them even when it is injurious to overall national interest. It is therefore in the light of these painful ironies and inexplicable contradictions that the need for the national rebirth becomes not only desirable but also an urgent and compelling necessity. It is my submission that, this is an important national project in which the youth has a critically important role to play.

Reflections on Culture

Culture has been variously defined such that there is no consensus on its exact definition. The relevance of the concept is applicable to many disciplines in the humanities, social science and the pure or natural sciences. However, there are basic areas of consensus which find expression in the unity or identity of definitions as offered by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Cultural Policy for Nigeria. From these two important documents, culture is the totality of the shared ways of life of a group of people evolved as part of their efforts geared towards meeting the challenges of living in their environments for the domination and optimal utilization of the provisions of nature and for the progressively sustainable enhancement of their quality of life.

From the above, culture is shared and not biologically derived. Put otherwise, no one was born with a culture or indeed any cultural trait but these are acquired by man as member of societies. There are two aspects of culture, the material and non-material. While the material aspects of culture refers to those physically tangible things such as houses, implements, clothes, cars etc, the intangible aspects of culture refer to the ideas, beliefs, arts, philosophies and institutions created by man to regulate human relations in the context of the society. It is this second aspect of culture that includes religion, politics and governance,

economy, the family, education and language. The list is not exhaustive. Culture is pervasive as it permeates the totality of the fabric of a society. It confers distinction and identity and thereby making it possible to distinguish one people from the other. Though it is integrative by the promotion of oneness and unity among a people it is also disintegrative because of the emphasis it places on the differences among people.

All of the above naturally leads to a discussion of the concept of ethnocentrism which entails the equality of all cultures. Ethnocentrism is the evaluation of other people's cultures by the parameters of our own. It is wrong to see one culture as superior to another because all cultures perform the same functions as they manifest in different societies. For instance, culture is normative; it defines that, which, within the context of a society is acceptable. Therefore, it sets the standards of right and wrong. Within the same context, one behavioral pattern which may be wrong and actually repugnant to one group of people may actually be clearly acceptable to another. For instance, among the Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria, the family of an intending groom offers bride wealth to the family of the bride, a practice that is unknown among the Yoruba of South Western Nigeria. Yet, it is wrong to see one as superior or inferior to the other. It is noteworthy that each of the above cultural traits has a unique history behind it and until that history is understood, the function of such cultural trait may not be fully understood. It is in the same light that culture is seen as ideational. It defines that which is ideal. There is no human society without culture. Culture, and particularly, the possession of language is the sole prerogative of man which sets it apart from animals and other lower creatures. Culture is therefore a very important subject because it does not only influence but also regulates the political, economic, family and religious institutions. Culture also impinges heavily on science and technology, communication, governance, law and order.

Nevertheless, there are some peculiarities of contemporary Nigerian cultures. They have been influenced and fundamentally distorted by the rampaging influence of westernization or correctly globalization. In a number of areas, the combined influence of slavery, colonialism and globalization, has left Nigerian cultures distorted that in fact most of her problems and crises are easily traceable to this cultural distortion and it is this distortion and its implications for national growth and development that makes national rebirth desirable.

For example, before contact with the West, the various Nigerian communities lived harmoniously. They also had their ideas of politics and good governance. These may not have been full proof but it kept the various societies going. Colonialism however distorted all these with the introduction of alien political practices. Under colonial rule, the political arrangement was such that there was no fusion between state and society. The reality was such that the state did not derive its powers and legitimacy from the society and did not owe any allegiance to it. Because of its monopoly of the use of force, organs of the state such as the military and police were used to force the citizens into submission. Naturally, this led to alienation. Instead of synergy and cooperation the state and society related on the basis of mutual suspicious and acrimony. When the colonial masters contemplated independence for Nigeria, they ensured that there was mutual suspicion, unhealthy rivalry and competition among the different peoples of Nigeria. This was achieved by the creation of a country where one part was made disproportionately bigger than the others put together. Similarly, in the name of preserving traditional institutions, they pursued discriminatory educational policies for the country. Interestingly, the North, which is bigger than the West and East put together, was made to lag behind educationally with emphasis on Islamic education in contra-distinction from the South (the West and East) where western education was pursued. This state of affairs delayed Nigeria's independence for at least four years (1960 instead of 1956). When independence was ultimately won it was for a nation that was divided along ethnic and religious lines. The consequences of all these, is that it distorted Nigeria's culture of political tolerance, peaceful coexistence and voluntary submission to constituted authority.

Unfortunately, the founding fathers of Nigeria did nothing to reverse the colonial heritage. Instead, the apparatuses and methods of colonial domination and subjugation were inherited and sustained. Therefore, post colonial Nigeria, like its colonial predecessor continued to feature the disarticulation between state and society one that has been rightly described by Adebayo Adedeji (1999) as cohabitation without marriage. It is also pertinent to stress that Nigeria and indeed other African countries have approached the concept and practice of democracy and good governance from the prism of western lenses. Till date, no serious effort has been made to domesticate the practice of democracy by making it relevant to our cultural heritage.

Another reason for the sustained cultural alienation is the dependent educational policy which is still largely a reflection of our colonial educational heritage. It is obvious that in virtually all aspects of our educational system, there is a visible absence of our cultural heritage. There is no area where this is more visible as the failure to use indigenous Nigerian languages as media for the impartation of knowledge. Babs Fafunwa has demonstrated empirically that children who were taught in their mother tongue comprehended faster than those taught in foreign languages. Generally, Nigerian languages have been neglected and relegated in preference for foreign languages. The unwholesome consequences of this for national integration, identity and overall development are too severe and profound. It however suffices to state that no nation has achieved accelerated development on the basis of alien cultures and languages. The examples of Korea, China, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia are too obvious to require any detailed elaboration.

This section of the chapter cannot be concluded if we do not bring to focus aspects of cultural alienation in such areas as the family or kinship institution and the legal system. In the pre-colonial and early colonial days the family system placed emphasis on the extended family network. In addition to other things, the family was an economic unit and operated as a social security system. It was an arrangement by which the pains and agonies of orphans and widows were drastically curtailed. With extended family network and the presence of uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews and widow inheritance, such social problems as destitution and prostitution existed minimally. It was a society where man was his brother's keeper. It was also a time when there was emphasis on family name. People jealously guarded their family names because of the implications it had for their chance in life. Painfully, the pull towards western type nuclear family has eroded all of these. It is therefore not a surprise that the Igbo concept of *Ezigbo Madu*, Yoruba, *Omoluabi* and Hausa, *Mutumun Kirki* are receiving lesser and lesser attention as things of pride.

With increase in education and migration to urban centres in search of white collar jobs, the extended family system is gradually collapsing. Unfortunately, we have not attained the complete *nuclearization* of family system as obtainable in the West. In an environment where both parents are working, with none to care for the children, incidences of juvenile delinquency keeps rising by the day. One of the complications of urbanization is, some individuals and families have disconnected from their roots. Ironically, some of them who could not make

fortune in the cities are too ashamed to return to their villages while some of those who became successful in the cities are too afraid to go to their villages out of fear of witches and wizards (Ishola Williams, 2007). With this state of things and in the absence of any social security system the family ties are losing its grip on its members. When therefore an important organ of socialization such as the family is in disarray the deleterious consequences on culture have been found to be very severe.

There is yet another interesting dimension to cultural dependency and alienation as found in Nigeria's legal and judicial systems. It is objectionable that the bulk of our legal and judicial systems are fashioned after that of Britain. Yet, it has been seen from research that, in instances where indigenous legal and judicial systems were experimented, better solutions to problems and conflicts were attained. Under the alien British system, judgments could be delivered while the problem lingered, but under our indigenous arrangement the goal is to find permanent solutions where the feelings of all parties are assuaged. It is gratifying that there are calls and recognition for alternative conflict resolution approaches based on our world views and cultures and its integration into our legal and judicial systems. Yet, the continued use of wig and gown by lawyers does not only portray the legal profession as conservative it is also a sad reminder of our colonial history which is a history of domination, dependence and enslavement.

The Role of Youths

The youths or young people, aged between nineteen and thirty are the engine room of any society. In all societies, youths are associated with some attributes. These are creativity, exuberance, hard work, courage, altruism and adventure. Youths are very daring and willing to test and confirm new ideas. They are also adventurous and not dogmatic. However, one of the problems of Nigerian youths is the lack of cultural awareness. As a result of the influence of globalization engendered by the control of the World Information Order by the West, youths are mainly exposed to Western cultures and the effects on them have been very corrosive. Since it is beyond argument that they are the leaders of tomorrow, their lack of cultural awareness is tragically worrisome and a situation which calls for urgent reversal. The essence of this could be appreciated if it is noted that culturally disoriented youths cannot drive the much needed development of the future. Since no meaningful development can take place without a cultural platform it means also that a future to be entrusted into the hands of youths who

are culturally unaware or perhaps confused is already in jeopardy before its arrival.

Therefore, to usher in the new society of our dream it is imperative that all the challenges facing the youths should be addressed. One of such challenges is the inadequacy or total lack of access to education. For example, the number of children who are out of school is still very high. These will graduate into uneducated youths with its attendant problems. Similarly, there are many youths seeking admission into higher institutions such as universities, polytechnics, colleges of education but who do not get admitted. Figures from the Joint Admission and Matriculations Board indicate that less than 20% of eligible applicants are offered places in public tertiary institutions. In a situation where fees in private institutions are prohibitively high and thus only affordable by the rich shuts off a good percentage of youths from the educational system. The consequence is that there is a pool of youths who are neither gainfully employed nor in the school system. It is such youths who are prone to be involved in different types of conflicts and violence.

Other challenges of youths include political and economic marginalization. For instance, Nigeria has more than thirty political parties but there is none that is youth based. None has articulated a comprehensive youth development and empowerment policy. In the same vein, under the current dispensation, there are less than one percent of members of the Federal Executive Council (Ministers), the National Assembly (Senate and House of Representatives) who are young people let alone youths.

From the above, it could be stated that Nigerian youths are also economically marginalized. In this society, politics and, to some extent, good education are instruments of accelerated economic and financial upliftment. But in a society where the youths have limited access to formal education and involvement in the political process, it follows also that their economic base is weak which also curtails their ability for full and active participation in the political process. It is therefore a vicious circle that is deserving of redirection.

The issue of violence is also one of the challenges facing Nigerian youths. To fully grasp how conflict and violence have affected and continues to affect Nigerian youths, let us briefly take an overview of the various types of violence. There is political violence such as was witnessed during the first and second,

third and fourth Republics. It has remained common knowledge that, in all cases, be it inter or intraparty clashes that, youths have been at the centre stages of the conflicts and resultant violence. They are the ones who engage in the combats, who get assaulted, maimed and killed. The casualty figures for the old and elderly have always been known to be minimal. There is also religious conflicts and violence which reared its ugly head in the early eighties and have remained ever since. Specifically, we are referring to the Maitatsine uprising of 1980 and others which includes the current Boko Haram crisis in some parts of northern Nigeria. It has been found that all the key actors are mainly youths and the dire consequences of such crises have been borne almost singularly by the youths. There is also the crisis among professional groups, such as the one of the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW). In all of these, the actors and victims are basically youths. All of these get compounded by substance abuse, and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. These are worrisome challenges which require immediate attention.

Road map to national rebirth

As I begin to draw the presentation to a close, it is important to clearly articulate what is meant by national rebirth. In the opening paragraphs of this chapter, I drew a gory picture of Nigerian as a country in a state of political, social, economic, spiritual and cultural decadence which makes a rebirth imperative. National rebirth refers to the evolution of a new Nigeria Society which features the following:

- National pride and identity
- A corrupt free society or one where corruption has been reduced to the barest minimum, with emphasis on hard work and the dignity of labour
- Equity, democracy and good governance
- Security of lives and properties
- Existence of the rule of law
- Strong, independent but complementary institutions
- Religious and political tolerance and freedom of expression

- Gender equality and cultural development.

It is pertinent to make a brief statement on cultural development. It refers to a state of affairs and a process which recognizes culture as the bedrock of development. It could also refer to a society where the individuals take pride in their culture and showcases it to the whole world. The reality is that the youths have very important roles to play in the whole process of national rebirth. The starting point of this is with the educational system. Nigerian youths should be empowered educationally to face the challenges of leadership which grows increasingly complex by the day. Ignorance encourages mediocrity and gullibility. It should be recalled that the category of youths who get involved in all forms of violence are the uneducated. Because of the gullibility of the uneducated youths, the Elites exploit their ignorance to get them into anti social activities such as ethnic and religious violence and election rigging. If they had the requisite education they would have known the consequences of their action on themselves, their generation and the larger society.

There is also the need for political empowerment of the youths. So far, it has been found that most political parties have youth wings. Yet, the youth are not actually integrated meaningfully into the party machineries. If they were, it could have reflected in the appointment of youths into some key governmental positions. In this vein, it is important to have youth culture clubs which are dedicated to the promotion and preservation of Nigeria's cultural heritage. Such clubs could also operate as pressure groups and be interested in areas such as language, folklore, and the totality of indigenous knowledge systems. A major problem facing Nigerian youth is the language problem. Nigeria cannot attain national rebirth in a foreign language. Youth organizations should therefore see and take the language question seriously.

It is equally important for the Nigeria Youth Council to be refocused and be more grassroots oriented. The restriction of its activities to urban centers keeps out of its operation a large and important segment of the youths who reside in the rural areas. Some essential ingredients of culture are values and ideas. The Nigeria Youth Council should embark on sustained and comprehensive cultural orientation programmes for youths. Such programmes should focus on important national problems such as corruption, indolence, violence, religious bigotry and political intolerance. Other areas that should be covered include skills acquisition, vocational training and community service. The Youth Council

should encourage and mobilize youths to form cultural associations and clubs. To complement the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) – cultural exchange programmes between different groups and segments of Nigeria, debates, talks, roundtables and lectures should be encouraged and promoted. The formation of youth based NGOs that are strictly for cultural promotion will also be a step in the right direction. So far, not too many NGOs have addressed the challenges of youths and none known to this writer has focused on leading Nigerian youths to cultural awareness. This paper will certainly be incomplete if a call is not made for some amount of censorship and guarded exposure of youths to international media of mass communication. The most corrosive effects on Nigerian culture resulted from undue exposure and influence of the foreign media. In their interaction with the foreign media, youths should know that it is not everything that should be swallowed hook, line and sinker. Foreign cultural influences should be imbibed, where necessary, very selectively such that it does not obliterate or submerge indigenous cultures.

Conclusion

This chapter attempts to bring to the fore the multifaceted problems facing Nigeria. While seeing culture as the shared and non-biologically derived ways of life of a group, it submits that the complex development challenges facing Nigeria is the outcome of the failure to make culture the platform of its development efforts. On Nigerian youths, it posits that they are the worst victims of cultural dependency and alienation. Therefore to fast track sustainable development and national rebirth, recourse to culture with youths as key players is imperative.

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