

Culture: The Identity and History of Every Tribe

By

Esther Ogochukwu Akpulu

Department of Igbo African and Asian Studies

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

eo.akpulu@unizik.edu.ng,

08063010049

Abstract

Our culture is our way of life. No race can exist without culture. Any race that does not have culture cannot boast of any history of their own. It is disheartening that today, Africans have relinquished and traded their culture to promote alien cultures. The evil seed was planted by the colonial masters who tried and succeeded in promoting their culture to the detriment of Africans and African culture. Religion plays a major role to this effect because promoters of alien religion will always try to trace almost all African cultural behaviour to idolatry, paganism and fetishism. It is against this misinterpretation that this kind of study is necessary in order to unveil the relationship between culture, and identity or history as it affects the Igbo culture. The objective of this study is to analyse the role of Western colonization towards the neglect of African culture by Africans. The study is also purposed to call Africans back to their cultural identity as it is the foundation on which other boundaries are established. It is a descriptive study. The data collection was through observation and relevant literature sources. The theory used is the theory of Behaviorism. Among the findings of this study is that African culture and Igbo culture in particular is not devilish rather it has been wrongly interpreted by those that wanted to promote theirs. It is advised that Africans go back to history and embrace their cultural

identity as it is the bed-rock of the present and posterity vision and heritage.

Key Words: Culture, History, and Identity

Introduction

Igbo people are one of the major three tribes in Nigeria. They are found in the south-eastern Nigeria and they are Igbo language speakers. Igbo people have their identity which is the history they live out in their culture. The history of the people is in their culture. And it is culture that sustains the history of any society. Any cultural community that allows its culture to be entirely influenced and dominated by other cultures has traded its existence. This is because the people's culture makes them different from others. Most Igbo people neglect their culture but are rather in pursuit of foreign cultures. Consequently, the cultural heritage that was the bedrock of our ancestors is fast going into extinction and it is equally affecting our vision and growth.

One thing Igbo people are known for is their industrious nature. This is why they are found almost in all parts of the world. While in foreign land, they normally learn the language and culture of their host communities and make sure they teach same to their children. This no doubt enhances their relationship with their host communities. The problem is that most of them on the course of acculturation, forget their own cultural pattern and language. It is a problem because these children thus grow up to believe that everything about Igbo people is archaic and their culture fetish and evil. Also, Igbo culture suffer the same fate among some Igbo people born, raised and live in Igbo land as a result of Westernization and acculturation. They neglect their culture and cultural values. Some of these Igbo people subjugate their culture simply because they want to belong to the class of the modernized thereby losing their cultural identity. Igboin (2012:101)

observes that the colonialists tried and achieved their plans whereby the colonialist is superior to the colonized.

No doubt, Igbo people's culture is how they live as a group of people and what is used to identify them. Therefore, to neglect what Igbo people are known for should not be encouraged for any reason. As a result, this study explores the role of culture in preserving the people's historical identity. The meaning of history and culture will be explained. Culture will also be examined as a context of philosophy and the effect of colonization on African culture also explored. The study is guided by behavioral theory. Analysis of findings is to be carried out and conclusion brings the research to a close. It is expected that Igbo people should restrain from all acts of negligence and embrace their culture. This will save Igbo cultural heritage and historical identity.

Literature Review

This section will discuss the major concepts connected to this work.

History

The word history traces its root to the Greek word *historie*, which means inquiry. History is the study of events of the past that led to the present. It is also the written or even spoken account of events that took place in the past. History covers every aspect of life as there is no aspect of human life that does not have history. Ranging from the history of man to the history of different places, towns, nations and even their practices. In the academic world also, every subject or course of study has its own history. It is this history that educates and enables the present age to be conversant with the past. Obiakor (2015:5) defines history "as the study of man's past events; how and why they happened". History concerns itself with the study of man. Carr (1961:30) refers to history as "a continuous process of

interaction between the past and the present”. Nothing is history until it is behind us in time. History studies the lives of our ancestors and past heroes as well as their ways of life. It records actual course of events known as historical facts.

History is not merely narration and giving account in words of what happened in the past but it goes beyond just narration. It is in line with this that Espie (1965:8) writes that history is not simply description and accounts in words about the past. It concerns the movements of people and individuals who looked, thought and acted differently from ourselves in many respects”. This implies that words alone cannot bring out the complete and full meaning of the past event. Nigeria-Biafra war of 1967-1970 is well understood when one watches the videos of what transpired then; the killings and actions of both the civilian and the soldiers, helps the history to be complete and have its effects on people who did not witness the event.

Moreover, history could also be said to mean the account of what happened in the past which is made up from the writings of people who lived at the time or soon after the period being described. Shaw (1965) in Gella (1993:12) in his contribution maintains that “history is the story of what happened at any time in the past, whether anyone wrote down anything about it or not” No matter the medium used to so. If it is only by writing them down what would have become of our uneducated fore parents who could neither read nor write? But these people still contributed in their own different ways in handing us over most of the information about the past that we are aware of today. Unlike in Europe where history is often captured in a decaying building, in Africa the story of the continent is found in the people who live there.

History is a product of continuous interaction between man and his environment. This Gella (1993:12) agrees while writing on

historical consciousness which he says goes beyond cognitive sphere and is the concept of one's position in the sequence of existence. Historical consciousness is all about a critical evaluation and understanding of the relationships that existed and were entered into between man and man in the process of development over time. Such history Gella (1993:12) maintains "should be an organized critical study of past activities that had significant impact on subsequent developments". It should involve critical interpretation of the past experiences in the light of things that are happening in the historical present.

From the above conceptions of history, it is obvious that Igbo people cannot boast of a future while they relinquish their past. This is because there are interconnections between the past, present and future. Therefore it is right to say that people's culture is their historical facts.

Culture

The meaning of the term "culture" has been highly contested, especially within anthropology (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952). The first highly influential definition came from Tylor (1871:1) who opines that culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society." Herskovits (1948:17) states that "culture is the man-made part of the environment". In the view of Geertz (1973:89), culture is "a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols." Culture, on such a view is like a text or something that needs to be interpreted through the investigation of symbols.

Some scholars have also traced the origin of the word culture. "The word "culture" derives from a French term, which in turn derives from a Latin word "colere," which means to tend to the

earth and grow, or cultivation and nurture. It shares its etymology with a number of other words related to actively fostering growth”, Rossi in Zimmermann (2017). Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habit, marriage, music and arts among other things.

The center for Advanced Research and Language Acquisition goes further to define culture as shared pattern of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding that are learned by socialization. Thus it can be seen as a growth of a group identity fostered by social patterns unique to the group. The concepts of culture above indicate that culture encompasses everything a group is known for. Therefore, any group that jettisons its uniqueness dares absolute degradation.

Culture and Development of People’s Identity

Identity distinguishes individuals or communities from each other. History has stripped Africans of the dignity of building their nation by themselves on their own indigenous values, institutions and heritage. The modern African state is the product of Europe, not Africa. To attempt at this date to return to ancestral identities and resources as bases for building modern African nation would risk the collapse of many countries. At the same time, to disregard ethnic realities would be to build on a loose sand, and a high risky exercise. In the opinion of Deng (1997), ethnicity is more than skin colour or physical characteristics, more than language, song, and dance. It is the embodiment of values, institutions, and patterns of behaviour, a composite whole representing a people’s historical experiences, aspiration, and world view. Deprive a people of their ethnicity, their culture, and you deprive them of their sense of direction and purpose.

In the view of Konadu (nd:37), “history informs us that the closer Africans get to things non-African, whether they be liquor, money, or gadget (technology), the more these Africans become dependent, mystified, and lose their sense of cultural being (including their cultural and material resources).” Africans are not proud of their own inventions but would rate anything foreign superior. Akoto 1999 in Konadu (nd:37) observes that,

A mole is will perceive the world in terms of tunnels and tunneling. In the same way, an ant or bee will understand reality as an expression of the collective... The imposition of the mole’s conception or reality on the bee can only result in a confused and self-destructive bee. The Africans must always try to be like the sun, which contribute greatly to human life but does not proselytize, in all humility, it shines brilliantly each day and simply does what a sun does.

Cultural identity is the sense of belonging towards a culture. This belonging can be justified with the shared set of companionship, principles or beliefs of living. Basically, it can be considered as owning the culture and its various boundaries of ethnicity, nationality, language, religion and gender. And owning a culture means that the person embraces all the tradition that has been passed down throughout history. The cultural identity reveals the person’s heritage as well as helps to identify with others who have the same traditions or similar belief structures. Ownership of culture directly adds value to

cultural identity and it includes practicing religion, wearing traditional clothes, or even eating food the culture is known for. It establishes means of identifying the person as a part of the culture or nationality.

The Effects of Colonization on African Culture

Snowden (1983) expresses that, “the classical view of blacks was not negative among ancient Europeans. Rather his research shows that blacks were taken by ancient Europe as models of beauty. It was after the experiences of slavery that the negative conception of blacks took root.” According to Snowden (1983) this historical event was aided by later conquest and direct colonization by European powers aided by their obvious scientific heritage. Oguejiofor and Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2015:3) agree that the question “whether Africans are what they should be” raises a negative feeling for people do not usually spend time in asking what they should be as a people, a country or a continent. They agree that this negativity was created by the historical experience of the Africans with the West, starting from the time of slavery. Nuun and Wantchekon (2011) in Nunn (2017:115) believe that the long-term impacts of the trans-Atlantic and Indian Ocean slave trades altered the cultural norms of the descendants of those exposed to the trade, making them inherently less trusting.

Igboin (2011:101) affirms that, “... the colonial rule was an imposition that unleashed deadly blow on African culture with the immediate consequences of the introduction of such values as rugged individualism, corruption, capitalism and oppression.” Colonial rule disrupted the traditional homogeneity and practice. The African method of moral transmission was invalidated which resulted in the abandonment of traditional norms and values. This was achieved through the systematic depersonalisation of the Africa and paganising of its values. It was possibly because Africans

could no longer hold on strongly to their communal life, one that places others first. Igboin (2011:101) also observes that the African cosmos became a victim of extraneous ideology which it has continued to wrestle with little or no success.

In his contribution, Copans (1977:21) affirms that ...it is evident that the 'founding' of the field lies ostensibly in anthropology and through agents of the European colonial enterprise. Essentially, the colonial enterprise's physical occupation and its maintenance (pacification, exploitation of Africa)made research possible, research freed of constraints of maintaining order and its own security. The unrestricted access of research 'objects' bolstered the efforts of anthropology, which in turn, provided the knowledge base for much of the other academic disciplines, including colonial planners, whose policies of indirect rule mandated 'ethnographic' data for establishing and perpetuating an effective hegemony even without their physical presence.

It is said that a discipline is marked by a clearly established intellectual parameters with apparent theoretical configuration and that must be delineated. That is what specifically separates what 'we' do as unique in the social construction of knowledge. Unfortunately' both non-Africans studies and Africana studies lack a consummate theory of the study of Africans. Akoto 2001 opines in Konadu (nd:36) "that the source of what these enterprise need but lack can be found in the conceptions of culture, history, and spirituality that have not always been presented in a coherent fashion." There has not been coherence because as Igboin (2011:101) observes that "...colonialism expressed the ethnocentric belief that the morals and values of the colonizer were superior to those of the colonized." This belief was programmatically achieved through the establishment of schools, which the curricula was tailored to achieve the goals of the colonizer rather than train the colonized

to be independent and the missionary ventures, which helped a great deal in vitrifying the religious concept and inclination of the colonized. This scenario naturally created two classes, one being the supererogatory and the other the sub-ordinary, with the deliberate structure that favour the former. This has been the woe of post-colonial Africa.

Culture as Context of Philosophy

Fundamentally in every culture is what one may call “popular philosophy.” This conception of philosophy comprehends proverbs, witticism and insight about reality, myths and religious conceptions of a particular people. Such areas of culture mentioned form not only materials for philosophizing, they also constitute the background to any philosophy Asiegbu, (2016:4-5). Nuun (2012:112) agrees that culture shapes people’s thinking as he observes “... that individuals from different cultural back-grounds make systematically different decisions even when faced with the same decision in the environment.”

In words of Asiegbu (2016:6), philosophy is not culture neither does a popular conception serve as philosophy properly understood. While culture is not philosophy, culture provides the raw material for philosophy. Consequently, a philosopher however great his love for wisdom, would be devoid of any material for speculation should he do away with culture. It means that philosophy is impossible without culture. The major reason for closeness of philosophy and culture is that philosophy is an interpretation, a hermeneutics, a quest for meaning, an attempt at giving meaning to man’s world. Every attempt of interpretation begins with man himself. In fact, man’s attempt at giving meaning entails a self-interpretation. Okere in Asiegbu (2016:6) agrees that man’s understanding of

his world and his experiences of it are all at once “limited, culture –bound and so historical and situated, and finite.”

Theoretical Review

This study considers the theoretical concept of Behaviorism.

Theoretical concept of Behaviorism

Human behavior changes at different conditions, as a result, it is unpredictable. Cherry in Susman (2021) opines that behaviorism also known as behavioral psychology is a theory of learning based on the idea that all behavior are acquired through conditioning. Conditioning occurs through interaction with the environment. Behaviorists believe that our responses to environment stimuli shape our actions. This is the view of John B. Watson the “father” of behaviorism and strict behaviorists who state that all behaviours are the result of experiences. Any person regardless of his or her background, can be trained to act in a particular manner given the right conditioning.

Strength of Behavioural Theory

Behavioural theory focuses on observable, measurable behaviours, so it is sometimes easier to quantify and collect data when conducting research.

* It is a useful application in therapy, education, parenting, child care.
* It is useful in changing maladaptive or harmful behaviours in both children adults. (Susman, 2021).

Weaknesses of Behavioural Theory

* Critics of behaviourism argue that the theory is a one dimension approach to understand human behaviour. It does not account to free will and internal influences like thoughts,

feelings and desires that influence people's action.

* Behaviourist neglects the cognitive approach to psychology and influences in favour of studying just observable behaviours.

* It does not account for other types of learning that occur without the use of reinforcement and punishment.

With this theory, it means that the misguided behaviour of Igbo people presently towards Igbo cultural life is as a result of experiences. Since observable behaviour can help in changing misguided behaviour. This behaviour can be modified through reinforcement.

Data Analysis

Here, the study will examine the factors that formed its objectives.

Analysis of Findings

Findings show that most Igbo communities have jeopardized their cultural heritage because of Western influence via the coming of the missionaries that brought Christianity in Africa. Those cultural practices that helped the ancient people to achieve a stable society have been neglected. For instance, rites of passage like "iru mgbede" which helped the maidens then to guard their purity and virginity is now extinct. This particular rite of passage if still in use would have continued to serve as a moral guide for the modern maidens against living a loose life. This is because any maiden who has lost her virginity must not participate in the ceremony, and no one will dare to stand the humiliation. Consequently, immorality rate would be checked. The issue of rape, abortion etc will be reduced to the nearest minimum.

The rate at which some people disregard their culture and embrace other foreign cultures may not augur well for the preservation of Igbo cultural heritage. It was observed that Igbo communities do not perform traditional rites of passage instead they prefer to Westernize those passage rites. Cases of school graduation ceremonies from nursery to university school levels have taken over Igbo traditional rites of passage like “*īwa akwa*” and other rites that qualify both male and female youths to adulthood. Some parents spend a huge sum of money to make sure their children and wards participate in the graduation ceremony at every level. These same parents cannot take their children home to participate in any form of traditional rites. Evidence has shown that such children cannot understand anything about their cultural background and heritage. Their thoughts are filled with foreign ideas that have little or nothing to offer for cultural development and preservation of historical identity.

The neglect suffered by African traditions can be checked if the people start to add value to their indigenous ways of life. It was gathered that almost all the contemporary illnesses have orthodox medications. But some Igbo people would rather die than take the traditional medicine. These people argue that those orthodox medicine are not scientifically certified despite that people that use them attest to their efficacy. Research findings have shown that older women in most Igbo community did not give birth to their children in the hospitals. They rather engage the services of “*Oji nwa*” or “*ndī na-ana nwa*” as they are popularly known. Even when there are complications like the unborn child being tied by cord, these traditional health workers still dictate the problem, handle it and ensure successful delivery. In those days, Igbo women hardly die during child birth. But it was gathered that this is almost in extinction because there is no longer parents to children transmission of these cultural traits and prowess. In as

far as formal education is good to build ones traits and be professionals in various fields, modernity should enhance our indigenous traits and not kill it.

Also, Igbo culture is used to identify Igbo people as a unique race. This cultural identity is equally achieved through language. Therefore, Igbo language could be used to promote and preserve Igbo culture and identity. It was gathered that most Igbo people now prefer foreign languages to Igbo language. Both Igbo people residing in foreign land and those in Igbo land now speak foreign language to the detriment of their mother tongue. Their children also cannot understand or speak Igbo language. For such children, Igbo cultural norms and values do not exist. Thereby, neglecting, denying their identity and subjugating their culture. Isidienu and Ibeh (2020:239) affirm that Igbo language is capable of developing the Igbo identity since Igbo people are the speakers of the language. Igbo people can be proud of their identity using their language as an instrument of development.

The Igbo culture of communalism can as well be instilled in its members using culture as a context of philosophy. Culture as the material for philosophizing instills the spirit of patriotism and communalism among its members. This means that when some Igbo people enormously interpret Igbo culture as evil, they can never think as Igbo people and this affects the unity and identity of Igbo nation. Since culture is the growth of a group's identity fostered by social pattern peculiar to the group, no society can make any head way by denying their cultural identity. Igbo people should uphold their culture as it will help to revive their social and cultural values.

It was observed that the work of Aristotle, Plato and the rest were properly documented and therefore easily accessible. But our fore fathers who because of their informal form of learning

could not document their work. These ancient and unnamed individuals still tried and passed their wits orally from generation to generation. For instance, the myth of “inception of death” was a story of how death came into the world. The originators of the story meticulously narrated how tortoise in his uninterrupted journey was able to get to heaven before dog who ordinarily should have been the first. Thus the report to God that humans have decided that there should be death. Africans are great thinkers whose work and life style should never be taken for granted.

Conclusion

No matter what culture a people are part of, one thing is for certain, that is, it will change. Culture appears to have become key in our interconnected world, which is made up of so many ethnically diverse societies but also riddled by conflict associated with religion, ethnicity, ethical belief and essentially the elements which make up culture. But while change is inevitable, the past should be respected and preserved. Nuun (2012:113) observes that historical events could have persistent impacts if they alter the relative cost and benefits different cultural traits, affecting their prevalence in the society. In the same way, if cultural traits are transmitted vertically from parents to children, then the impacts would persist through time. The United Nations has created a group called the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to identify cultural and natural heritage and to conserve and protect it. Zimmermann (2017) observes that monuments, building and sites are covered by the group’s protection. According to the international treaty, the convention was concerning the protection of the world cultural heritage. This treaty was adopted by UNESCO in 1972. Many African nations are members of this organization and yet it is still very difficult for them to project and preserve their culture.

References

- Asiegbu, M. F. (2016). "Contemporary African Philosophy: Emergent Issues and Challenges". In *Ogirisi. A Journal of African Studies*. Vol. 12. Pp 1-24.
<http://www.dx.doi.org>. Accessed 26/02/2021.
- Carr, E. H.(1961:30). *What is Culture?* London: Pengun.
- Copans, J. (1977). "African Studies: Periodization". In
- Gutkind, P. C. W. and Waterman, P. (eds). *African Social Studies: A Radical Reader* New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Deng, F. M. (1997). "Ethnicity: An African Predicament".
www.brookings.edu. Accessed 02/02/2021.
- Espie, I. (1965). "History in West African Secondary Schools". In Ajayi, J. F. and Espie, I. (eds) *A Thousand Years of West African History*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press Pp 1-22.
- Ezenwa-Ohaeto, N. and Oguejiofor, J. O. (2015). "Contemporary African Philosophy, Identity and Question of Africa. In *Ogirisi: A new Journal of African Studies*.
<http://www.dx.dio.org/10.43/og.v11i1.1> Accessed 21/02/2021.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gella, Y. (1993). "Cultural Heritage and National Self-Reliance". In Dara, G. G. and Adefuye, A. (eds). *Seven Years of IBB: vol 4 Arts and Culture*. Lagos: Daily Times Pp 2-18.
- Herskovits, M. J. (1948). *Man and His Works: The Science of Cultural Anthropology*. New York: Knopf.
- Igboin, B. O. (2011). "Colonialism and African Cultural Values". *African Journal of History and Culture*. 3,(6) Pp 96-103.

Isidienu, I. C. and Ibeh, F. U. (2020). "Language and the Development of Igbo Culture". In *Odezuruigbo: An International Journal of Igbo, African and Asian Studies*. Vol 4, No 1. Pp 226-242.

Kroeber, A. I. and Kluckhohn, C. (1952). *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*. Cambridge: Peabody Museum

Konadu, K. (nd). "The Cultural Identity of Africa and the Global Task of Africana Studies". *African Studies Quarterly*
<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v7/v71493.htm> Accessed 9/03/2021.

Nuun, N. (2012). "Culture and Historical Process".
<https://www.economics.harvard.edu/faculty/nuun>
Accessed 3/03/2021.

Obiakor, N. J. (2015). "History and Culture of the Nigerian People in the Pre-Colonial Era". In Obiakor, N. J. and Okeke, S. C. (eds). *Discourse on Nigeria History, Culture and Socio-Political Development*. Awka: Anieh. Pp 3-23.

Snowden, F. M. (1983). *Before Race Prejudice: The Ancient view of Blacks*. London: Harvard University Press.

Susman, D. (2021). "History and Key Concept of Behavioural Psychology".
www.verywellmind.com Accessed 15/03/2021.

Tylor, E. B. (1971). *Primitive Culture: Researches in the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Language, Arts and Custom*. London: Murray. Zimmermann, K. A. (2017).
Livescience.com Accessed 10/02/2021.