

SOME FEATURES OF CULTURE IN THREE MAJOR NIGERIAN ETHNIC GROUPS FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

It is a fact that man cannot live without culture. Culture is a social heritage, and is a specific way of life of a group of people. Culture designs a complete way of life of living and creates skills that the society uses to survive. It is the culture of a society that directs and spells out their way of life or patterns of behaviour. Culture when well harnessed affects the growth and development of the society. The problem seems to be that, it is cultural diversity that has led to instability, corruption, and underdevelopment in a multilingual nation like Nigeria. The study therefore aims at the investigation of some similarities in some features of the cultures of the three major Nigerian ethnic groups, Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa. The aim is to seek a common ground for peace, harmony and togetherness amongst Nigerians. This will on the other hand breed honest citizens that will create a stable economy for national development. Data collection was done through oral interview, observation and library sources. It was however; found that, cultural values if articulated and incorporated into the nation's policy will bring an unending peace and stability in the Nigeria society. Culture, therefore is a veritable tool for the development of any nation.

Introduction

The neglect of indigenous culture is the problem facing African countries today. Some of the cultures have gone into extinction while others are striving to survive. Culture is seen as encompassing the totality of human behaviour, life style, values and value system, customs, beliefs, and a general behaviour pattern that shapes a particular society. It is the way of life of a people, group or society. This way of life encompasses how the people think, act, what they cherish or dislike, what they wish to be associated with or strive to achieve; generally, what their value system are (Bo and Ugande, 2013:46). The relationship between culture and national development is complex; culture is the key to a nation's ability to growth and development if harnessed positively. Nigeria has more than two hundred ethnic groups which were amalgamated as a nation in 1914. Although the ethnic segments were grouped into three major ethnic groups, Nigeria as a nation has never experienced lasting peace and stability. There is obvious and extreme contention amongst the ethnic components over economy, political affairs and way of life. The incidence continued after Nigeria got her independence in 1960 till date. It is not an over statement that ethnic rivalries have continued to be one of the basic problems in Nigeria.

Nigerian society has everything it takes in her cultural values for developmental processes but the major problem lies in the ethnic groups not accepting themselves as an entity. Frankly speaking ethnicity can be a major element of growth and development, given the fact that people were from different ethnic groups on the onset, they preserve their cultural values as a heritage before being recognized as a nation. These cultural values put together will breed developmental strategies for the common good. The former president of Nigeria, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, states that, “my belief in our ability to overcome all retrogressive and divisive forces in our midst and build a strong, united and prosperous nation by turning our unique diversity into a source of strength remains unshaken” (The Nation, 2014). This strong admonition shows that African society, Nigeria in particular can attain growth and development by harnessing her diversified culture, given that, culture holds the key for togetherness, stability, and improved agricultural productivity, integration, furnishing skills for industries and providing quality life. The role of culture in national development should not be denied within the activities of each ethnic group, let alone when they are harnessed together as an integral part.

Unfortunately, Nigerians are more concerned with glorifying their ethnic groups. Ethnic politics and blatant ethnic sentiments have become obvious realities of the Nigerian social existence. These have pervaded every sphere of social life of the nation (Nwankwo, 2020). Certainly, it is not an over-statement that ethnic groups in Nigeria have continuously engaged in competition for power, to advance their group and parochial interests as against national interest and public good. Similarly, languages in Nigeria were diverse, same as communities, but all these groups have caused unprecedented problems and shown less interest to the national growth and development. However, if all the ethnic groups in Nigeria will forget their cultural differences and seek for their sameness, the problem in Nigeria will come to an end and the nation will move to the highest height. Nigerian nation emphasizing on there similarities rather than her differences is possible, since before the dawn of colonialism and westernization, Africans had developed their own form of government, high discipline, matters of morality, positive Self-concept, importance of dignity and integrity. They had a very rich culture heritage depicted in the fading African cultural values such as proverbs, folktales, arts, artifacts, festivals, ceremonies, moral checks and balances, respect for elders, social justice and sanctity of human life, community consciousness and solidarity (Eze 2013).

Eze (2013) notes that all these values helped in maintaining unity and brotherhood, community spirit and cooperation and invariably promoted national development among Africans. Culture of the people affects their policy and development patterns. Culture could be distinct and have various effects on growth and development in the society. What it means is that since there are dissimilarities among people and groups, there are differences in culture and this is the case with Nigeria. Different ethnic groups in Nigeria have their cultural values, belief system, political organization, laws, morals and rules of conduct. Culture maintains ethnic uniqueness, motivation for innovations and creativity thereby determines the volume of growth and development. It is against this background that this work tends to examine the major Nigeria ethnic groups, Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. If however their uniqueness and similarities were to be harnessed together, it will be an avenue for lasting peace and stability in the nation

It is against this background that this paper contests that culture is a powerful tool and a facilitator and able to bring growth and development in Nigeria society. This paper will therefore examine various facets of culture in the three major Nigeria ethnic groups; to ascertain how cultural commonalities can function as a means of achieving growth and development in Nigeria society.

Mode of Governance

The ethnic groups in Nigerian society have in one way or the other affected one another as they come in contact and get in touch with other external forces. However, the conservativeness of culture has not allowed the traditions to be abandoned completely. Governance among the Hausa people of Northern Nigeria was autocratic in nature. They were organized in states and their political organizations are hierarchically structured. Onwuejeogwu (2007:156) enumerates the political organization and the state officials in hierarchical order thus:

- The state capital (Birni)– The King (Emir)
- The districts(gungumomi)-the districts head (*hakimai*)
- Communities(jama'u)/villages(kauyka)-chief or village heads (*dagatai* or *sarkunan kauyka*)
- Wards(*unguwoyi*)-the wards head (*masu unguwa*)
- Compounds(*gidajai*)

However, Okodo (2006 :39) states that, “Emir ruled according to the provisions of the laws based on Islamic religion. The Alkali and Emir courts dispense justice and maintain law and order”. Okodo (2006) also emphasizes that Emir controls the three arms of government and was autocratic in nature and appoints officials for administrative purposes. It is obvious that Emir’s power and words were unchallengeable. Everybody must abide by the rules or punished for being disobedient. By so doing peace and order were maintained in the community.

The Yoruba of Western Nigeria maintain a hereditary kingship. The first is the Ewi, which is the title of the Oba, who is a divine rule and the personification of the whole town. Okodo (2006 :38) and Onwuejeogwu, (2007: 147) assert that the Yoruba people looked upon Oba for direction. He directs all their affairs and controls the arms of government. It is obvious that Yoruba leadership is also autocratic in nature and Oba as the chief executive enforces power over his subjects; even at that, these communities were able to live in peace. Among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria, they have a kind of political leadership that was democratic in nature. Onunwa (2005) states that

The Igbo people were described as people that were highly egalitarian, relatively classless and democratic or essentially republican, a society in which decision making was only possible through the consensus of all the parties concerned. In spite of the autonomy of individual villages or class, there were many traditional institutions which helped to order the life of the society. There were institutions which

held rebellion- prone man in check. Unity was obviously built not on imposition of rules by a single personality but on a mutual trust.¹⁸

The governance in Igbo political system assures freedom of speech, peace and unity and protection of lives and properties. With respect to this, Okodo (2005: 40) asserts that it is this way of life of the Igbo in Nigeria that is the most widely known practice of democracy within the geographical location called Nigeria. Igbo people therefore, were able to rule themselves for a stable community through their democratic style of leadership.

Marriage Custom

Marriage is an essential institution in all the ethnic groups in Nigeria. It has continued to have great impact in the lives of the people. Ezenweke (2012) in Isidienu (2015:149) states that marriage “Represent the joining of two people, their life, missions, families and the entire lineages.” Amongst the ethnic groups in Nigeria marriage is not an individual’s affair. Speaking about Igbo people’s marriage Isidienu (2015) asserts that

Marriage is a lawful living together of a man with his wife or wives, with the aim of begetting children who will be trained in an acceptable manner as required by the custom, children who will take care of their parents for immortalization. It is a sacred and religious obligation which involves everybody that is related to the married and the entire community.¹⁴⁹

Marriage is not consummated without mate selection, the ethnic groups in Nigeria have different and some similar ways of selecting mates. Among the Yoruba people mate selection could be done by the parents, on the other hand if it is the young man that found the girl, it must be communicated to their parents through a middleman. Dioka (1997: 82-83), identifies five stages of marriage among the Yoruba people as

- *Ifo usode* is the process of searching for the right partner to ensure that there were no hereditary problems.
- *Alarena* is bringing in of an intermediary or middle man who would run errands for the intending families.
- *Iyojusile* is when two families were formally introduced to each other.
- *Idena* when the bride price was paid to the family etc.

Among the Yoruba people, marriages unite people, and contribute to a stronger society.

Among the Igbo people, parents could choose a wife for their son. A young man on the other could seek a girl’s hand in marriage before communicating to their parents. Stages of marriage depend on how each community kept it. However, According to Nnokwe (2009:47) these stages were universal in Ideato-North LGA of Imo State:

- Investigation Stage or Enquiry(*Iju ase*)
- Introduction stage or Seeking consent(*Iku aka n'uzo*)

- First wine carrying (*Ibu mmanyanya ụmụnne*)
- Presentation of gift stage (*Igbanye ihe*)
- Taking the woman home (*Nkọrọ na ndula*)
- Traditional Marriage and Bride wealth stage (*Igba-nkwu na Ime-ego nwanji*)
- The woman's parent presenting gift to their daughter (*Ogọ bịa mara be na idu-ulo*)

Generally speaking, middle man (*onye akaebe*) is very important in Igbo marriage. His duties were to be at the center of both families, to take record of all expenses, to give advice to married couple in case of any misunderstanding and to return bride price in case of unsuccessful marriage. Marriage in Igbo land is one of the avenues of keeping the society together and it makes for more closely and friendly relationships.

Among the Hausa people when a man sees the woman he wants to marry, he first of all seeks permission from her parents. The family of the bride to be will then conduct an investigation on the background of the man to determine his religious beliefs, ethics, moral and family customs as well as every important detail concerning his upbringing. (Efagene, 2020). If the woman's family approves the marriage, the groom to be will be allowed to see the woman briefly without any physical contact. Other things that follow after the acceptance of the bride to be are:

- Formal approval by the bride's family (*Gaisuwais*)
- Payment of dowry (*Sadaki*)
- Process of fixing the wedding date (*Sarana*)
- Wedding day and joining both families (*Fatihah*)
- Preparing the bride for marital life (*Kunshi*)
- Wedding reception (*Walimah*)

Totem Objects and Animals

There are certain objects and animals that are revered in some communities amongst the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. In Igbo land, among Awka community of Anambra State of Nigeria, monkey (*enwe*) is regarded as a sacred animal and as such, were not to be killed by the natives or the visitors residing in the community. Likewise, all the communities in Idemili Local Government Area of Anambra state do not kill python (*eke*). In addition, the Nkwere community of Imo State of Nigeria does not kill grouse (*okwa*). These animals amongst others in almost other communities in Igbo land are referred as sacred because of different roles they played in the lives of the people. In Igbo land Iroko tree (*oji*) is a sacred tree amongst various communities.

Furthermore, among the Kano people of Hausa land, Dalla hills is regarded as sacred. It is seen as the center and protector of life. They were considered as the abode of the spirit of life and protection. Besides, they contain iron which was a major source of their economy (Dioka, 1997:106).

The Yoruba also have sacred animals and objects they responded to, due to the interactions they have had with them over time. The parrot is regarded as a sacred bird among the Yoruba; they do not kill it but try to domesticate it. In ritual performance, only a feather of the parrot is used, which the Yoruba believe to be possessed. (Olusola, 2005:157).

Some of these sacred objects and animals have traces of stories of origin attached to them. Some of them protected their host communities from the attack of enemies and some even helped them to defeat their enemies.

Disgust for Abomination

A number of offences and actions were considered as abomination among different Nigerian groups. In every community in Nigeria, adultery led to divorce. Among the Yoruba, if a woman committed adultery, her husband was entitled to divorce her. (Dioka, 1997: 102). Hausa people also abhor incest, stealing, and adultery among others. Among the Igbo people, stealing of yam either in the farm or barn or uprooting somebody's yam is condemned in its totality. Any case of adultery, especially when it concerns women leads to divorce and host of others acts.

Literature

Accumulation of people's culture is found in their literature. Literature enables people to study their history, connect it to the present situation for future use. Literature unlocks the culture of the time in a way to give wisdom to the modern society and allow them to interpret life and emotions. Literature is the collection of written work of language through different periods and culture (Hepolito, 2016). Literature could be written or oral, it is the "performance in words or oral language in use or the study of impact of words" (Ogbe, 1997:16). Literature can serve the functions of entertainment, politics, religious tolerance, and promotion of trade, reinforcement of value system, high moral standard and technological development. Nigel (1977: 6), states that "Literature can principally serve any of a wide range of functions, including but not restricted to communication". As an aspect of literature different ethnic groups use proverb, moonlight tales, folktales etc to train their children. According to Akidi (2013: 49), "Through literature and use of language we derive happiness. Through moral lesson we get from folktales, we teach children our life styles and desire for empire building".

Proverb is an indispensable aspect of literature found in all the ethnic groups in Nigeria. It is a wise saying mostly used by orators to settle difficult cases, draw attention and make one's saying an interesting one. According to Isidienu (2016: 73), "The use of proverbs as an instrument that directs man's activities cannot be over emphasized. It penetrates all circumstances, deal with situations and proffer solution to problems." Proverb is about life, and always realistic. We gain insight through proverbs and children who stay close to elders learn wisdom from them. Isidienu (2018:10) affirms that "Proverbs speak much about people's religion, moral values, ethics, politics, economy and social life."

The ethnic groups in Nigeria cherish a lot of virtues. Elechi (2005:52-53) referring to the proverbs that have direct bearing on ethics, states that, on the need to respect other people's feelings the following proverbs speak out:

- Yoruba: The finger of a man who has only nine, are not counted in his presence. (*a ki n ti oju onika mesan ka*)
- Igbo: Disgracing a king is worse than killing him. (*mmegha ogaranya ka ogbugbu ya*)

- Hausa: When a Fulani is near, you do not discuss the high price of milk. (*n'da Fulani na kwusa basa kwuyi magana sada madara*)

These proverbs stress the need for tenderness in personal relations. There is need to respect other people's feelings and these proverbs, and many other proverbs serve the purpose. Olugbamigbe (2003) in Umezi (2020: 89) states that, proverbs are formed from life experiences and people's relationships with one another and with the environment. From the foregoing, it is obvious that proverb is an inevitable means of socialization and mutual relationship amongst people that live together.

Wrestling as part of literature is found in different Nigerian's ethnic groups. Wrestling serves as an entertainment and a forum for bringing people together and a means of socialization. Through this coming together, people forget their differences and make their communities stronger. Idowu (1973), asserts that, among the Yoruba, wrestling is an art implying artistic movements and beauty of strategy; and when any part of a contestant's body has touched the ground, be it no more than the tip of a finger that contestant has been defeated and the contest is over. This analogy is almost the same in all other ethnic groups in Nigeria. The defeated member does not fight but in the spirit of sportsmanship accepts the defeat. The defeated wrestler will however learn from the mistake made not to lose in future. The *Dimgba* (great wrestler) as it is called in Igbo ethnic group is held in high esteem.

Different ethnic groups in Nigeria also express themselves in works of art. Arts include music, performance arts, visual arts and storytelling and literature (oral and written). These manifestations of human creativity sometimes are called expressive culture. According to Kottak (2009: 321), "people express themselves in dance, music, song, painting, sculpture, pottery, cloth, storytelling, verse, prose, drama, and comedy". Igbo word for art is *Nka*. Different parts of Igbo land were known for their art work. For instance the Awka people were known for blacksmithing in the past to the present time. They produce a lot of things such as farm implement, cooking utensils, war implements and hosts of others. Kottak (2009: 321-322), also states that; "among the Yoruba of Nigeria, the word art, "*ona*", encompasses the designs made on objects; the art objects themselves and the profession of the creation of such pattern and works". Kottak also states that the suffix *ona* found in the names of two Yoruba lineages of leather workers, *otunisona* and *osiisona*, denotes art. Yoruba artisans practice numerous art forms. They work with brass, iron, wood and terracotta sculpture, mask making, textiles, woodcarving, and exquisite leather and beadwork. These art traditions are often practiced by men with the exception of weaving, dyeing, and beading, which are done by both men and women. Woodcarving is one of the most distinguished and notable art form for the Yoruba because the woodcarvers serve to create some most sacred objects such as *Agere* (divination bowls), *Ibeji* figures, dance staffs, *Opon* (trays), *Iroke* (tappers used for divination), *Egungun* and *Gelede* masks (Everson Museum 2007)

Areas of Common Grounds in some Features of Nigerian Culture

There are certain areas of cultural similarities which if harnessed will help to boost sustainable development in Nigeria. It was observed that the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, Igbo Hausa and Yoruba have different languages, and English language as a national language. It was stated that it is necessary for Nigerians to develop the three

major indigenous languages, Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba to a very high standard, such as using it in the teaching and learning from primary schools to tertiary institutions, for technological developments, marketing and trading strategies, policies, politics and in all other spheres of life. Then every Nigerian citizen will have an opportunity to learn the three major Nigerians indigenous languages enabling them to interact and relate with one another irrespective of where they find themselves. There is also a need for a change in national policy to emphasize more on the cultural commonalities; and so make the teaching and learning of the three major indigenous languages in the primary and secondary schools compulsory. The indigenous languages will at all levels be translated into English language in order to carry everybody along. It was opined that indigenous language has developmental capabilities if harnessed to meet the needs of the people.

On governance, it was gathered that the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria have different leadership styles. There were rules and regulations that guide the day to day activities of the people. People accept these modes of leadership and were obedient to their leaders. It was gathered that, for Nigeria to attain a better developmental strategies, there would be a need for her to restructure her mode of governance. A change in Nigerian policy was advocated; this entails less powers of governance at the center and more powers of governance to the three major Nigerian ethnic groups. The three major Nigerian ethnic groups will be allowed to use their leadership styles to govern her citizenry. This will create a better understanding between the government and the governed, breed a lasting peace and development.

It was discovered that the three major Nigerian ethnic groups inter marry. It was therefore gathered that in all the ethnic groups in Nigeria, marriage breeds unity and lasting relationships. Chastity of the girl is also highly demanded in all the marriages of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. In other words, the girl is supposed to be a virgin before marriage. It was observed that this long lasting tradition has the power of reducing to the lowest minimal the act of abortion, rape, unwanted pregnancies, and other related crimes in the society. It was believed that if these common features that are found in the three major Nigerian ethnic groups were harnessed; it will help to tackle the excessive moral decadent, especially rape that is ravaging the nation at the present time.

It was observed that the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria have objects of reverence. It was gathered that the Dalla hills among the Kano communities still remain sacred even at this present time and people continue to take protection under the hill. Awka communities among the Igbo still have reverence for monkey (enwe imo Awka). It was gathered that among the Yoruba animals are believed to be divine in nature. For this reason they must be valued and respected. Equally, the Yoruba regard some animals as sacred and so they cannot to be killed or eaten. For instance the devotees of Oya deity among the Yoruba cannot eat Buffalo because Oya deity is believed to be the mother of all buffaloes. It was opined that if the act of respect given to objects and animals in the three major Nigerian ethnic groups were harnessed, the Nigerian nation will attain developmental strategies. The respect given to animals will be transferred to human beings. It was argued that if much respect will be attached to human life, the killings and waste of human life will come to the lowest ebb. Furthermore, if respect

attached to objects will be transferred to the national flag and other objects of national unity in the country, Nigeria as a nation will be united and national development will be easily attained.

There are behaviours that is condemned and so regarded as an abomination in all the ethnic groups in Nigeria. It was gathered that rules were made against such behaviours, and as such, rules mostly against murder, and many other abominable acts were not created for its sake, they are made to ensure law and order in the society. If these laws were not kept and maintained; there will be chaos, instability, anarchy, corruption, theft and killings of people at will.

Furthermore, it was stated that through the use of proverbs found in all the ethnic groups in Nigeria, people can find a common ground to discuss political affairs, share religious belief, exchange economic activities and relate as brothers. It was observed that most of the proverbs found in the major ethnic groups in Nigeria were classified to serve various purposes. Some emphasize the need for good inter personal relations. Some of the proverbs teach virtues such as humility, truthfulness, honesty, selflessness, kindness, and respect for elders among others.

Generally, those who perform exceptional tasks in the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria are held in high esteem. It was gathered that for instance among the Igbo traditional society people such as wrestlers, hunters, etc were regarded very highly in the society. When hard work is encouraged, the young generation will be zealous to attain greatness through hard word. It was stated that those who represent Nigeria in athletics, people of high academic performance, and those who represent Nigeria in various capacities with outstanding results need to be honoured and encouraged. When honour is given to who deserved it, it will be a source of encouragement to the younger generation.

Finally, it was found that the ethnic groups in Nigeria express themselves in works of art. The works of art boost economy, and a sure indication that the ethnic groups in Nigeria abhor laziness but rather cherish hard work. From the foregoing, it is assumed that these similarities have sustained the ethnic groups in Nigeria and will be a sustainable avenue to growth and development for the entire nation.

Suggestions

This paper has attempted to expose the position of culture in development of different ethnic groups in Nigeria society. It is therefore advisable for indigenous cultural values found in all the ethnic groups be integrated for national policies, this will in a great way move action that will take the nation to the desired change. Such values found in these ethnic groups which portray brotherhood, hard work, respect, love, honesty, chastity, obedience, should be integrated for national development.

Every ethnic group in Nigeria has their cultural uniqueness based on marriage, literature, politics, mode of socialization, languages, etc. Their unique nature has sustained these communities to recent times, if however harnessed, will lift the nation to a very great height. Within this uniqueness, there are certain similarities which if

integrated will be a powerful force towards national development.

Politics without rancor, democratic leadership, and spirit of patriotism and selfless service which was exemplified in different regions should be incorporated and re-emphasized in the national policy. A clear method of implementation should be made, so that a great nation like Nigeria should be able to have a legacy kept for the future generation.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is obvious that different ethnic groups in Nigeria have different cultures that held them together before they were joined together as one nation. Their cultures, although distinct have some similarities where the different ethnic groups can find a common ground. Marriage amongst these ethnic groups involves every member of the community and cannot be achieved by the bride and the groom alone. In cases of inter-tribal marriages, it can serve as an avenue for peaceful co-existence. Nigerians, should as a matter of urgency examine those areas that bind them together such as works of art, proverbs, disgust for abomination among others, rather than emphasizing the aspects of their culture that set them apart. Once adhered to, unity of purpose, peace and progress will be achieved.

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