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# TOWARDS THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE NIGERIAN CULTURE

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## ABSTRACT

The Nigerian nation is an amalgam of over 400 ethnic groups with its own culture. The country is built on the cultural configuration of "Unity in Diversity". Though Nigeria is multi-ethnic it is a nation that strives to achieve greatness like every other nation. Like other nations too, it has its own culture which is quite different from the culture of the numerous ethnic groups that make up the nation.

The Nigerian culture, because of its multi-ethnic environment is based on such principles as unity in diversity, Federal character, quota system, et cetera.

The writers observe that the practice of these principles which we regard as national culture has helped Nigeria to enjoy relative peace and progress despite its low and violent political culture. The paper advises that the compromise of quota or Federal character as basis for recruitment should give way to skill in some aspects of national service such as membership of National football team, recruitment of air pilots, et cetera.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper aims at creating awareness and drawing attention to the existence and uniqueness of the Nigerian culture. Unlike many other nations all over the world, this Nigerian culture is different from the culture of each of the over 400 multi-ethnic groups that make up the Nigerian nation (see appendices I and II).

In this paper therefore, it is intended to discuss some of the cultures of the ethnic groups within the nation. The traits that form the Nigerian culture will be discussed before observations on the consolidation of such traits are made before their conclusion.

## CULTURAL GROUPS IN NIGERIA

The Nigerian nation has over 400 ethnic groups as noted in appendices I and II. Only a few will be discussed here to try to prove that each ethnic group in Nigeria has its culture which cannot be taken as the Nigerian culture. Tylor (1871) sees culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits required by man as a member of society. By Tylor's definition, Nigeria has a culture, but the different ethnic groups in Nigeria have their own cultures too which when put together cannot in any way be regarded as the Nigerian culture.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretically, the above assertion could be explained from the configurationism of Ruth Benedict. In her patterns of culture she argues that culture must be taken as wholes each integrated on its own principles each with its own configuration. She stressed that a culture is organised around a basic theme and that all the various elements of that culture fit together. She applied this approach to cross cultural studies looking at several societies and describing them in terms of their personality configuration.

Among the societies Benedict studied were two North American Indian groups: The Zuni Indians of the South Western United States and the Kwakiut Indians of the South West Coast. She saw the Zuni Indians in terms of their basic configuration as Apollonian - very cooperative never excessive in any aspect of life, not seeking to express individuality. No one in Zuniland wanted to stand out as more important than others. They all wanted to blend into the group. Benedict went on to outline how this personality type was reinforced in other elements of Zuni culture thereby forming the overall cultural configuration. Fried and Pfeiffer (1977) observed that Zuni child training patterns were designed to suppress individuality. Initiation ceremonies were characterised by a lack of ordeal and youths were initiated in a group setting. Marriage was relatively

casual. Leadership among the Zuni was declined whenever possible and was accepted only with great reluctance. People tended to shun positions of authority. Ceremonial and religious associations likewise reinforced this configuration.

The Kwakiute Indians presented a cultural configuration much different from that of the Zuni, a configuration seen as 'Dionysian' by Benedict. Benedict saw them as people characterised by a frenzied outlook, excess being the rule rather than the exception. Field and Pfeiffer (1977) regarded them as ambitious, and striving and individualistic. The ideal man was one who had a will to power who always attempted to prove his superiority. Indeed their child rearing practices reinforced this pattern, emphasizing the achievement of the individual over cooperation with the group. In the initiation ceremony a boy was expected to singularly have a personal relationship with the supernatural. Marriage in kwakiutland entailed a tremendous celebration and not the casual type of ceremony between two people that it was in Zuniland. Leadership among the Kwakiute was sought by any possible means. The society was characterised by a constant struggle for power.

Benedict's study suggests that the personality in Zuni or Kwakiute is more likely to conform to the cultural configuration of their people though this is not to say that every one is just like that. There are frenzied zunis and passive kwakiutle also.

A higher element of this theoretical framework is that Ruth Benedict shared with Kroeber the Boasian commitment to the integrity of each culture and the need for historical documentation of any generalisations about cultures and observation of cultural universals and also culture change.

Each culture is unique but from the superorganic structure of culture, other cultural traits could be evolved that could lead to a new culture for the communities that decide to unite as an entity. Here lies the point of departure for this paper.

In this paper, the writers believe that like in Zuni and kwakiut that Benedict studied many of the Nigerian ethnic groups exhibit similar opposing characteristic behaviours. We shall discuss about five of these numerous ethnic groups. The five were just randomly selected from the ethnographic data pool of one of the authors.

## THE YORUBA

The Yoruba are an urban people (Lloyd 1973: Nwanunobi 1992) who are very industrious and cooperative. Because they are urban people, their large villages are equatable to the so-called large towns of some rural ethnic groups. In the Yoruba villages farmers predominate. Over 60 percent are still in the farm sector, growing subsistence and cash crops. Those who are not in agriculture are mainly local specialists, like black and gold smiths, bicycle repairers, traditional medicine practitioners, chiefs or Oba, and other government employees like district officers, teachers, dispensers (Bender 1973.30).

Ibadan is the biggest Yoruba city and one-time capital of the Western Region of Nigeria. Its urbanism is based on pre-industrial technology and oriented largely to the needs of effective administration and trade (Mabogunje 1973.126). The Yoruba of Ibadan prospered through openness. They needed other ethnic groups for the provision of some essential needs. They, for example, trade with the Hausa/Fulani in a cattle trade that demands cooperation especially as credit sale is allowed.

## THE IBO

The Ibo are very numerous especially if viewed from the fact that they are regarded as one of the three main ethnic groups in Nigeria (National Policy on Education 1981). They are hardworking too. They are mainly traders who go to distant lands to purchase valuable and scarce items for sale in Nigeria. Their big towns such as Onitsha and Aba are big trading centres known throughout West Africa (Uchendu 1965). Different clans of the Igbo ethnic group have their myths of origin (Modo, 1994) but the culture of hardwork and accommodation of others appears to be a central cultural configuration (Benedict, 1934). Administratively their village and village groups constitute two levels of political organization. Villages are tightly linked through exogamous marriages especially since lineage group members form one village. They do not have centralised system of government.

## TIV

They are the most populous group in the Benue area of the Middle Belt of Nigeria. They take themselves as children of a single ancestor - Tiv. The lineage system among the Tiv forms the basis for all local interaction, not only of the family system but also of the geographical and political

organisation. Two main features of Tiv society are the absence of official office holders and the marked fundamental equality of opposed lineages. There is no role above the level of compound head that can be called by a title to which authority in any sense may adhere. The Tiv are organised into age sets called Kasagh. Each set includes men born within a period of about three years. Age set is used mainly to maintain rights and to stave off the pressures of other members of the lineage who may be jealous, or who may resist the advancement or wealth of the incoming group of elders (Bohannon, 1965).

The Tiv imbibe the philosophy of limited good, it is believed that goods are scarce and one man's property is a loss to the one who does not have it. Little wonder that other ethnic groups in the Benue area especially the Idoma do feel that Tiv are too self-centred. The Tiv are very hardworking and produce most of the food crops that feed many urban areas of Nigeria.

#### **IBIBIO**

This is a very large ethnic group in the South East of Nigeria. Theirs is mainly a patrilineal system with agnatic kinsmen spreading out from one village to another.

The people are hardworking and friendly but there is intense competition (Ekong, 1983). At the village and clan level people compete for offices; people even compete for fame through sports like wrestling. They compete for fame through being initiated into secret societies like Ekpe and Ekong. The society encourages this competition but unfortunately this has caused a lot of harm in terms of rivalry and conflict among the people. This has led to acquisition of juju power for warding off enemy attacks. The fear of this attack has prevented many people from displaying their wealth. They sometimes refuse to build good houses in the village for fear of unseen enemy attack through witchcraft (Ekong, 1983:51). People envy one another but there is also a high level of cooperation. Children of a compound cooperate in their recreational activities and may sometimes gang themselves up to perform such masculine tasks like bush clearing and roof renovation. Modern cooperative societies have been formed to pool members' finances together for meaningful economic pursuits. The Ibibio also cooperate with strangers especially businessmen, for provision of goods and services.

The Ibibio cooperate and compete with these strangers also. In local disputes among Ibibios such as in land matters, a third party might be

needed to delineate the property. In dispute with strangers petitions may be written for such third party's intervention these days. Much competition could be dysfunctional when even winners are afraid to enjoy their wealth for fear of witchcraft attack or mysterious death (Ekong, 1983:51).

#### **BINI**

The Bini or Edo people live west of the Niger Delta and in pre-colonial days had chiefdoms or large villages in which secret or titled societies, age groups and lineage elders managed public affairs.

The Benin people succeeded in evolving a centralised system of government. This appears to be because of their long standing culture, customs and political inclinations. This Edo (Kwa language groups) speaking people have lived for centuries in their present place. Their neighbours were poorly organized hence they were no match for the dreaded Benin Army. Benin was therefore able to build up her commercial, political and military institutions without serious challenge from the neighbours (Stride and Ifeka, 1971:318).

Lineage groups form villages in Benin. Such groups cooperate and compete in craft production, and in cooperative labours. The strong centralized system of administration with Oba at the helm of affair discouraged lineage affiliation in state matters. Even in villages age grade associations of Edionnwere, Irognas and Ighele were promoted to the detriment of lineage groups (Igbafe 1979).

The Bini people are friendly but compete stoutly with one another for the state office under the Oba. This culture of strong central government is a legacy the Western Ibo Villages of Issele-uku, Olona, Eze, Onitsha Mmiri, etc. inherited from Benin for reasons of migration and myth of origin (Modo 1996).

Bini people offered much human sacrifices in the late 18th century because of the superstitious beliefs that stability of the kingdom depended on good relationship with departed ancestors and gods. The Oba was also eliminating his kin and agnates whom he saw as threats to his position. All these earned Benin "the city of wickedness", an appellation that actually contradicts and misrepresents the behaviour of the good and friendly people of Benin.

This paper does not intend to review the ethnographic features of all of the over 400 language groups that make up Nigeria (see Appendix II). The point being made here is that the different cultural groups have their separate cultural and political orientations. Some have strong traditions of centralised government while others only organise at village or village group levels. All these different cultures became subsumed in one modern Nigerian culture.

The argument has been made elsewhere (Modo, 1996) that Nigeria has a culture and this culture is different from that of any of the numerous ethnic groups that make up Nigeria. The 1914 amalgamation of Northern and southern Nigeria completed the process of making one country out of a number of culturally diverse nation states, empires and kingdoms.

Nigeria has blended into a single entity, and this cultural entity founded on new cultural traits have enabled her to move forward in socio-economic and political development.

Having seen the brief Ethnography of some ethnic groups, it is necessary to know that their different cultures cannot be taken as the Nigerian culture.

Rather it is the effort to make the ethnic groups to work as a family that has given rise to the laws, conventions, habits and sentiments that form components of the Nigerian culture. We now examine this Nigerian culture.

## THE NIGERIAN CULTURE

This Nigerian culture is first and foremost based on the *principle of unity in diversity*. The diverse cultural origins of the different ethnic groups in the country are therefore acknowledged. Indeed the motto of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is Unity and Faith, Peace and Progress. The 1979 constitution aptly describes this cultural diversity of groups making up Nigeria and states that the state shall, for the purpose of promoting national integration, provide adequate facilities for, and encourage free movement of people, goods and services throughout the Federation, encourage intermarriage among persons from different places of origin or of different religious, ethnic or linguistic association or ties, and promote or encourage the formations of associations that cut across ethnic, linguistic, religious or other sectional barrier. This unity in diversity principle has led to a number of important political land-mark decisions and creations.

### (a) Creation of States

The fear of domination of the minority ethnic groups by the majority ethnic groups was addressed from 1967 in the creation of states. Each cultural group or associated cultural groups are allowed a state in such a way that such state can realise the destiny of its people within the Federal Republic of Nigeria. There are presently 30 states and a federal capital territory in Nigeria.

### (b) The Tripartite Legal System

This is in vogue in Nigeria because a single legal system may not adequately accommodate the yearnings of the majority of Nigerians for justice based on their different religious beliefs and customs. It accommodates the African customary traditions, Islamic influence and the British colonial experience.

The 1979 constitution section 6 lists the courts in Nigeria:-

- (a) The Supreme Court of Nigeria
- (b) The Court of Appeal
- (c) The Federal High Court
- (d) Sharia Court of Appeal of a state (mainly in the Northern states that are predominantly muslim).
- (e) Customary Court of Appeal of a state
- (f) Sharia Court of Appeal of the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja.
- (g) Customary Court of Appeal of the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja.

All the Courts have lower courts of different grades at the state and local government level.

### (c) Policy on Nigerian Languages

Since there are over 400 languages spoken in Nigeria, the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria has decided to promote Nigerian languages at various levels of the educational system. The Nigerian national Policy on Education (1981) expresses this cultural policy clearly: "the government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn three major (Nigerian) languages other than his mother tongue. In this connection the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba".

**(d) Creation of Unity Schools**

The National Policy on Education directs that among other things secondary education should foster Nigerian unity with emphasis on the common ties that unite us in our diversity. Accordingly, Federal government colleges have been set up. Here students from all states of the federation are admitted on quota basis. From early 1960's to date federal government has established 63 of such schools in Nigeria. "In this school young people in their formative and impressionable years from all parts of the federation, with different languages, ethnic and cultural backgrounds are given the opportunity to work, play, live and grow together, to learn to understand and tolerate one another and thereby to develop a horizon of a truly united Nigeria" (Mohammed, 1996:19).

**(e) Establishment of National Youth Service Corps**

In 1973 the Federal government of Nigeria promulgated decree 24 which brought into being the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC). The objectives include the development of common ties among the youths and the promotion of national unity through ensuring that the youths engaged in the scheme are assigned to jobs outside their states of origin. The youths are exposed to the modes of living of the people in different parts of the country with a view to removing prejudices, eliminating ignorance and confirming at first hand the many similarities among Nigerians of all groups. This service is compulsory for all Nigerians below the age of 30 who are fresh graduates from Universities or Polytechnic either in Nigeria or abroad.

It is believed that this age grade of educated Nigerians (men and women) are the people needed to develop common ties among themselves and with the host communities where they serve, if this multi-ethnic nation is to have common ties and become a united country.

TABLE 1

TABLE SHOWING THE NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE FIRST TEN YEARS OF THE SCHEME  
1973/74 - 1982/83.

Service Year	Male	Female	Total	Regimes/administration
1973/74	2,024	340	2,364	General Yakubu Gowon
1974/75	2,529	469	2,998	" " "
1975/76	2,920	593	3,513	Gen. M.Mohammed/Obasanjo
1976/77	5,003	1,104	6,107	" " "
1977/78	8,944	1,870	10,844	" " "
1978/79	12,003	3,599	15,602	" " "
1979/80	14,789	3,840	18,629	Alhaji Shehu Shagari
1980/81	17,822	5,217	23,039	" " "
1981/82	20,509	6,394	26,903	" " "
1982/83	25,322	8,898	34,220	General M. Buhari
Total	111,895	32,324	144,219	

Source: National Concord July 5, 1983

The youths and millions more to come serve in ethnic groups other than theirs in order to understand their fellow countrymen of other ethnic groups.

**(f) Family Support Programme (FSP)**

The Family Support Programme (FSP) has become a National culture among women in Nigeria. Formerly called "Better Life for Rural Women" and introduced by Mrs. Mariam Babangida, wife of the then Head of State of Nigeria, it sought to bring co-operation, understanding and trade among women. Okon (1993) observed that "today, Better Life Programme has touched millions of homes, both rural and urban and has gone national, international and even academic".

The Family Support Programme is now an official arm of government in every state and local government area. What is worthy of note in Family Support Programme is the commercialization of activities and the encouragement of craftsmanship among women in the villages and its environs. This is glaring in the marketing traits of her activities; for example, garri processing units in many villages are business ventures. Cassava farms, tomato farms, okro farms, etc are not just small gardens, but large acres of land where the fruits are sold for profit purposes. This is done to encourage the women in trading and reinvestment.

When the National policy on education (1981) encouraged technical education, little did it think of the adults as attention was on the youth. The Family Support Programme has today inculcated these ideas into training women in craftsmanship as an aspect of technical education. Examples are craft centres for pottery, mat making, weaving, sewing, dyeing, etc. These craft centres achieve a dual purpose by training and retraining women in creative arts and in merchandising as these products are sold for sustenance and profit making. The process of trading in either farm products or craft products demand a sense of accountability on the part of the sellers as good record keeping are encouraged.

Periodically, trade fairs and National competitions, seminars do bring the women together where knowledge is exchanged and progress assessed.

#### **(g) The Federal Character Principle**

The 1979 constitution has it that the composition of the government of the federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that government or in any of its agencies.

It is further stated that the composition of the government of any state of the federation, a local government or any of the agencies of such governments and the conduct of affairs of such government or such agencies shall be carried out in such a manner as to recognize the diversity of the people within their areas of authority and the need to promote a sense of belonging and loyalty among all the people of the federation.

Since its début in 1979 the principle has been employed in appointments into political offices and for recruitment into public service at the federal, state and local government levels. It has become popularised as quota system. In federal services like customs, internal affairs and in military recruitment every state is expected to present its own quota of the personnel. The 1995 National Constitutional Conference noted the effectiveness of the principle of federal character in ensuring that no section, ethnic group is marginalised in the allocation of state offices. It further recommended that there should be federal character commission from where such policies will centrally emanate. The writers however note that

this quota system should not be extended into areas like soccer where skill and talent needed might be for specially gifted people and do not depend on ethnic balancing.

The Federal Military Government observed that for social justice and equity in governance to have deep root and remain sustainable the incoming democratic government of October 1998 should be based on the principle of zonal division. Accordingly, the country has been divided into six zones. One each of the six zones will produce a president of the Federal Republic every five years.

In addition to all these principles meant to hold the country as an entity certain cultural habits have developed on their own while certain prime values have been introduced. One cultural habit is that of inclusion. A citizen of Nigeria from Illella in Sokoto State sees a person from Awka in Anambra State as a brother and fellow countryman when compared to a Niger citizen whose village is only fifty kilometres from Illella. The culture of national destiny and the fact that every citizen has a laid down system of citing the wrong done by a fellow countryman make this national consciousness obvious in the treatment of fellow Nigerians and absent in the treatment of aliens.

Finally, the nation has since 81 years of its existence (1914 - 1995) imbibed certain prime values that have helped to keep Nigeria together as well as providing the bedrock for sustainable development. Such prime values include social justice, tolerance, honesty, hardwork and fair play. The Nigerian National Orientation Agency (N.O.A) has the task of amplifying these values: Nigerians hold these values as necessary for individual and national survival. Any act against such values is regarded as an act of indiscipline or corruption.

#### **CONSOLIDATION OF THE NIGERIAN CULTURE AND NATIONHOOD**

Ruth Benedict has said that the culture pattern of any civilization makes use of a certain segment of the great arc of potential human purposes and motivations. There is obviously the imperative of selection in any cultural system. 'The great arc along which all possible human behaviours are distributed is far too immense and too full of contradictions for any one culture to utilise even any considerable portion of it. Selection is the first requirement' (Benedict 1934.237).

All these traits that have gone into the Nigerian culture were never randomly and haphazardly selected. Selection is made with reference to a set of deep lying assumptions or postulates. There are in the case of Nigeria assumptions about whether things or acts are good and to be sought after or bad and to be rejected. Anthropologists call these normative postulates or values in culture studies. This assumption, and that on the nature of existence - *existential postulates* are the reference points that colour people's view of things, giving them orientation toward the world around them and toward each other. The basic postulates provide the frame of reference for a people's *Weltanschauung* or world view (Hoebel, 1958:159). Thus the nature of the Nigerian culture is based on the system of enculturation of the diverse people that make up the Nigeria nation. The nation is peaceful mainly because of this system of enculturation.

#### SUMMARY

It is therefore obvious that the Nigerian culture is not born of the culture of any ethnic group or adopted from outside the entity called Nigeria. It is a culture that emanated from the perceived cultural diversity of over two hundred and fifty ethnic groups that found themselves thrust together as a post-colonial nation. Such a culture born of such circumstances can therefore not fail to promote orderly development as it has all the ingredients to do so; and in fact its components have been made to do so; little wonder that civil war and serious political rifts could not split the nation because of this unique cultural foundation of Nigeria.

#### CONCLUSION

The paper has tried to prove that Nigeria has a culture which is different from the cultures of different Nigerian peoples becoming a nation, before working as a nation. The different prime values, like social justice and fair play, or the different federal trappings like quota system, legal systems have inbuilt progressive strands in them and have helped in no small measure to create the Nigerian culture.

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