

# HIGHLIGHTS OF THE NIGERIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE



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CULTURE: ITS MEANING, THEORY AND CHARACTERISTICS

Peter A. Essoh

Introduction

Despite cultural plurality, heterogeneity and complexity, the peoples, societies and cultural giving of Nigeria, share common heritage. The apparent oneness of the country like other complex societies, nations or states are inherent in the common characteristics of its people

These characteristics, which in themselves, are age-long cultural traits, tend to unite rather than disintegrate them. The existence of common cultural traits, in the words of two national anthems of Nigeria.

*Nigeria, we 'Hail Thee' and Arise o Compatriots,  
Nigeria's call Obey;*

for example, tend to enhance a peaceful cum-harmonious co-existence among the various peoples of Nigeria who, by factor of geography and environment, historical evolution, tradition of migration and settlement, religion and artifacts which, like Western cultural heritage, are among the most complex and diverse in today's world. These natural features make the Nigerian national identity a derivation of the people's cultural heritage peculiar. It is peculiar because it distinguishes us from other world civilizations.

This chapter is saddled with the task of taking a world view of culture. It examines the utility of cultural heritage in promoting common identity, brotherliness, national integration as well as peaceful co-existence not forgetting the factor, where necessary, that have enhanced cultural survival in spite of serious threats occasioned by modernization, occidental and oriental influences and globalization.

Meaning of culture

Edward Tylor in his *Primitive Culture* (1871) had set the tone in defining culture as

*"that complex whole or civilization which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs and other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society"*

Ralph Linton (1945) adds credence to this when he says *"The culture of a society is the way of life of its members, the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation."*

Culture is the complex system of meaning and behaviour that defines the way of life for a given group or society. It includes beliefs, values, knowledge, art, morals, laws, customs, habits, language, ideas, philosophy and dress among others. Culture includes ways of thinking as well as patterns of behaviour.

Observing culture involves studying what people think, how they interact and the objects they make and use.

Wuthnow and Witten (1988:50) both sociologists opine that

*"Culture appears to be built into all social relations, constituting the underlying assumptions and expectations on which social interaction depends."*

In any society, Nigeria inclusive or cultural groupings within Nigeria and other world civilizations, culture defines what is perceived as beautiful and ugly, right and wrong, good and bad. Culture helps hold society together. It gives people a sense of belonging, instructs them on how to behave and tells them what to think in particular situations. Culture gives meaning to society. Arising from this, it becomes readily discernible to carry Tylor's thought and appreciate culture as the way of life of people. This way of life of people is reflected in their beliefs, religion and behaviour involving language, dressing, dancing, music, food. The learning of culture is along term affair. It is passed from one generation to another generation.

As man grows and develops, he learns the norms of this society and is expected to behave accordingly for him to be accepted in the society. For instance, a child born and bred in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria more so in the riverine areas of Ijaw, Kalbari, Brass, Member, Opobo, Ikot Abasi, Uruan, Warri, Sapele, Uta Ewa, Okorette, Ibak, Creek Town (Obio Oko), Ikot Offiong Oku Iboku, Ibeno, Iking, Ikoneto, etc. learns and masters early in life, the art of swimming, diving, fishing, canoeing and interpreting the heavenly signs and rhythms of the rise and ebbing of the tide, when to go a-fishing and when not. So also is the desert Fulani child in the Sahel Savanah of the North East, North West and the far north of Nigeria as well as the Arab child of North Africa and the Middle East. These, notwithstanding, culture is not Static but Dynamic meaning it grows and changes over and with time.

In a society as complex, diverse and heterogeneous as ours, people may share the same culture. This means such people identify with each other in language, dancing and dressing hence they share the same identity while some groups of people may have different ways of life.

As noted earlier, different cultures exist among the people of Nigeria. Since this is so, there often and in most cases, arises the need to bring together (through what Sociologists and Political Scientists call the process of *integration*) the different cultures of the people in order to exist and function as a most. This makes political culture taught in the Departments of sociology and Political Science in not Universities of great relevance in creating systems awareness through culture. In an integrated society, the people must share basic beliefs and values so as to ensure peaceful co-existence, cultural sustainability and continuity.

### The Contents of Culture

These spans through the seen and ideational base of culture. It is in most cases referred in the literature as the Material and Non-

### Material aspects of culture.

Material Culture consists of the objects created in a given society its buildings as depicted in the conical type structure among the grassland areas of Northern Nigeria and the flat top and cylindrical structures characteristic of the Guinea Mangrove Forest areas of Southern Nigeria; arts as could be seen in the arts works of Ikot Ekpene; Oshogbo and the Fulani as well as the famous Nok culture and Benin arts which Anselem Nyah (2006) refers in his chapter, toys, tools, prints and broadcast media and other tangible objects such as hairstyles for males and females, dressing, food habits, our gaits, greetings, speech habits, family and marriage systems with associated tangible ceremonies and socio-cultural displays like Ekpe, Ekpo, Ekong, Ebre, Folk-lores, Moonlight plays and Tales Eyo in Lagos, Egwugu and Argungu Festivals in Kebbi; (NTI, 2006:23-27).

In the commonsensical world, material artifacts constitute aspects of culture because they can be collected in museums or archives and analysed for what they represent as depicted in Oron, Jos, Lagos, Umuahia, Aba, etc. Such objects are significant because of the meaning they are given. For example, a Temple in India (Asia), Uyo or the Shrine in Okija (Nigeria) is not merely a building or a place of worship. It form presentation signify the religious meaning system of the faithful.

Conversely, Non-Material culture are the Norms, Laws, Customs, Ideas and Beliefs of a group of people, Non-material culture is less tangible than material culture but has strong presence in social behaviour that help in engendering public order, natural cultural homogeneity in the face of cultural diversity. A good example of this aspect of our studies in Non-Material culture comes from reports following the earthquake in Kobe, Japan in 1995 Margaret Andersen (2002:60).

In that disaster, many nations of the world and philanthropic organizations sent relief materials to Japan. The Japanese, in the

*Culture: Its Meaning, Theory And Characteristics*

midst of great need, refused to accept most of these donations. As a Social Scientist, imbued with Political Economy and Development Studies, the answer one hazards on this cultural behaviour of the Japanese, lies in the cultural beliefs of the Japanese people, in which accepting the help would have created a sense of **OBLIGATION**, thus violating **NATIONAL PRIDE** and cultural beliefs in **SELF-RELIANCE**. To have refused the Relief materials sounded incomprehensible to outside nations and organizations but within Japanese culture, the behaviour made perfect sense. And this brings to mind the Japanese show of bravado in national pride and altruism during the Second World War resulting in what is now popularly known as the Harakiri suicide. Their refusal to admit western or allied nations' superior fire power precipitated the inevitable bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the Americans to force the war to an end. The polar opposite of the Japanese are the situations in Chad, Niger, Sudan especially Darfur region, Iraq after Saddam Hussein and Avian Flu, where these nations readily accepted and welcome Relief materials sent in response to the differing dimensions of catastrophes that beset their societies. Need one mention the recent response by the Muslim communities worldwide occasioned by the cartoon in Denmark (2005) portraying Prophet Muhammad as a terrorist. The spill over effect of this in Africa was the spate of killings, destruction of Church buildings and maiming of men and materials in Maiduguri and Bauchi in Nigeria in 2006 and for which due to the Nigerian cultural givings were culturally nibbed in the bud to restore public order and feelings of brotherly co-existence. These are a few instances of the Non-material aspects of culture as portrayed in this chapter.

### Elements of Culture

Sociologists, Anthropologists and Students in the Liberal arts have identified a number of issues that constitute the essentials or elements of culture. Of particular interest in Sociological work are Language, Norms, Beliefs and Values which we now turn attention.

### Language:

Oluwabamide (2003:27-45); Urua (2003), Willic (2004:27-47) and Cole (1988) all agree that language is a set of symbols and rules which, put together in a meaningful way, provides a complex communication

The formation of culture among human kind is made possible by Language. Learning the language of a culture (people) is necessary to becoming part of a society. One of the first things our children learn in their process to grow and get adapted to their environment or cultural milieu is Language and until our children acquire at least rudimentary or elementary command of language, they seem most unable to acquire other skills. "Life without Jesus is vanity upon vanity," so would a Christians chorus in their songspiration. In the same manner Culturologists would hold that Language is so important to human interaction and as element of culture that it is difficult to think of life without it (i.e. Language). In fact, Tannen (1990:13) feels so much for this element of culture that she was moved into commenting that life is lived as a series of conversation. Consider the experience of being or becoming a member and part of a social group. On becoming or entering such group, one has to learn its language to become integrated. This includes not only learning the spoken language of the overall society or group but also any special terms of reference used by the group or society in question. Entering any profession requires an understanding of the "terms of the trade." For instance, Medical Doctors, Lawyers and Sociologists have their own vocabularies and their own ways of constructing sentence.

Anyone who is not an adept in the language of Medicine, Law or Sociology in reading and writing it is mostly likely to be at a disadvantage in the midst of these peoples.

Becoming therefore part of a social group a friendship circle, fraternity, professional body involves learning the language the group uses. Those who do not share the language of a group cannot participate fully in its culture. This implies also that language systems are fluid and dynamic and language evolves in response to social change. Language is an important component of culture for

which the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis lends credence.

Language breeds social inequality among the various classes of people, ethnic groups and races of the world. It is important in how we see our society, group, church, colour, race, discriminate and what Sociologists refer to as cultural relativism.

## 2. Norms

Social Norms are important feature of Cultural heritage for a Society. Norms are specific cultural expectations on how to behave in a given situation and society. Norms govern every situation. With Norms, people know how to act and this makes social interactions to be consistent, predictable and learnable. Norms are often times implicit i.e. they need to be spelt out for people to understand what they are e.g. when entering a line you are not expected to shunt or jump queues and when this happens, negative response would follow. Implicit Norms may be learned through instructions or observations of the culture. There are also Explicit Norms. This exists when rules governing social behaviour are written down. When Explicit Norms are violated, sanctions normally accompany same in a formal sense.

In the early years of the last century, William Graham Sumner (1873-1956) identified two types of Norms Folkways and Mores. Folkways portray the general standard of behaviour which a group or a people adheres to e.g. the ways people greet each other, decorate their homes and prepare their food.

Folkways may be loosely defined but the structure group customs and behaviour

Mores (pronounced More-ays) on the other hand, are strict norms that control moral and ethical behaviour. Andersen et al (2002;68) agree no less and goes further to note that Mores provide strict codes of behaviour such as injunctions, legal and religious against murder and adultery. The Mores are often upheld through Rules or Laws the written set of guidelines that define right and wrong in society. Fundamentally, laws are formalized Mores and to violate Mores in civilized societies where laws are codified can have serious repercussions.

## 3. Beliefs

The Beliefs of people in society like Language and Norms, are very important. Beliefs are shared ideas held collectively by people within a given culture. Shared Beliefs are part of what binds people together in society. Beliefs serve as the basis of some of the Norms and values of a given culture. For example, in the USA and much of the Western World, there is a great belief in the principles and spirit of Democracy, of laissez-faire, competitions, individualism and advanced capitalism. In the same vein, in the Christendom, there is a firm belief in the Holy Trinity as do the Presbyterians and other Orthodox Churches, an unshakable belief in the Apostles' Creed. Among Uruan, Efik and the Ibibio, there is the Belief in the concept.

"Eyen Edi Okot Odubok seeing children as a source of wealth who when grown and active in the economy would reciprocate the kindness and cares done them by their parents. Among these people and in much of traditional Africa, there is the belief in the spirit of the Ancestors which is expressed as "Ekpo Akpa Enyin Edi Ikpaha Uton" Esoh (2004:70) indicating a belief in the immortality of the soul of departed members of their families through Death.

Those who believe in reincarnation may seem irrational to those who think life ends at death. So also in the belief in the existence of witchcraft and water spirit which belief are widespread in Africa. Whatever the beliefs, they orient people to the commonsensical world world of everyday life as expressed in man's perception of his world in his environment or cultural milieu. The Beliefs provide answers to otherwise imponderable questions about the meaning of existence. Beliefs, scholars and cultural givings agree, provide a meaning system around which culture is organized. Whether it stems from religion, myth, folklore or science, a Belief shapes what people take to be possible and true. Although a given Belief may not be easy to proof or sounds logically impossible such as the entrance of a bat into a couple's parlour, hitting of the left toe while in motion or crossing of the cobwebs on the face or forehead among the Ibibio

of Akwa Ibom to portray the signs of evil omen. Beliefs nonetheless guide people through their lives.

#### 4. Values

A fourth element of culture which is deeply intertwined with Beliefs just discussed are the values which society or culture holds dear. Sociologists see values as the abstract standards in a society or group that tend to define ideal principles. Values define what is desirable and morally correct. Arising from this therefore, values determine what is considered right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, good and bad.

Eventhough this portion sees values as abstract concept, yet they provide a general outline for behaviour. In the US culture, for example, Freedom and Equality are well cherished values. As ideals, values form the abstract standards for group behaviour. Values can serve as the basis for cultural cohesion though they can be a source of conflict. For the Yoruba, prostrating when greeting an elder is a well cherished value. So also feeding on "amala" and "ewedu" just as the reminiscence of Oduduwa as both the cultural hero and progenitor of the Yoruba Ethnic group. In the same vein, pouring libation by the Priest or Elders in Ibibio, Efik and Uruan communities without invoking their deities such as Etefia-Ikono, Afia Etoi, Uduo Oku, Akpasima, Ibesikpo, Anansa Ikot Obutong and Atakpo Ndem Uruan Inyang would amount to desecrating their traditional value system.

It should be noted that just as Language and Norms serve inevitable ends in cultural continuity of a group or society, so do Beliefs and Values guide the behaviour of people in society. It is necessary to understand these elements of culture in operation to be able to understand why people behave as they do.

#### Theory of Culture

Surveying or analyzing culture is within the domain of Sociology & Anthropology, other Social Sciences and the Liberal Arts and it can be studied in a variety of ways. This done by asking a number of questions about the relationship of culture to other social institutions as well as the Role of Culture in modern day life. Infact,

the basis of Science is Culture. For our purpose, we will consider two theories.

1. Theory of culture and Group solidarity and
2. Theory of Culture, Power and social conflict

#### 1. Theory of Culture and Group Solidarity

Studies of culture especially by Sociologists and Anthropologists tend to concentrate on particular forms of culture which provide detailed analysis of the contents of cultural artifacts. Others take a broader interest in analyzing the relationship of culture to other forms of social organizations. Commencing with some of the classical sociological theorists, Sociologists and Anthropologists have studied the relationship of culture to other social institutions. The German Sociologist Max Weber considered the impact of culture on the formation of social and economic institutions. In his classic study of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit Capitalism* (1904, 1905), Weber argued that the protestant faith rested on cultural beliefs that were compatible with the development of modern capitalism.

By promoting a strong work ethic, argues Andersen (2002:82) and Giddens (1971:119-132) and a need to display material success as a sign of religious salvation, the Protestant ethic inevitably promoted the interests of an emerging capitalist economy. This is saying in essence that culture influences other social institutions thus precipitating Group Solidarity.

A sizeable number of Sociologists and Political Scientists have also examined how culture integrates members into society and social groups whereby power and authority relations are promoted. Functionalists, for instance, believe that Norms and Values create social bonds that endear or attach individuals to society thus providing coherence and stability in society of which they are a part.

#### 2. Theory of Culture, Power and Conflict

Conflict theorists have analysed culture as a source of power in society. While Shared Values and Group Solidarity drive one sociology analysis of culture, conflicting values drive another. From a conflict oriented perspective, culture is dominated by economic interests. This school of thought holds that a few powerful groups are

seen to be the main producers and distributors of culture. Conflictologists interested in cultural studies see contemporary culture as produced within institutions that are based on social inequality and capitalist principles. Consequently, the cultural products that are produced and sold promote the economic and political interests of the few, namely those who own or benefit from these cultural industries. Conflict theories conclude that the cultural products most likely to be produced are those that are consistent with the values, needs and interests of the most powerful groups or social class in society.

### **Characteristics of Culture**

Over the years from Edward Tylor's classic definition and others, Sociologist and Anthropologists have noted certain features of culture. And these are couched in the forms of characteristics of culture which are here examined.

#### **1. Culture is Shared**

Culture would have no significance if people did not hold it in common. Culture is not idiosyncratic. It is collectively experienced and collectively agreed upon. The shared nature of culture makes human society possible and thus creates and makes room for public order.

The shared basis of culture may be difficult to see in complex societies where groups have different traditions, perspectives and ways of thinking and behaving. In Nigeria, as well as other African nations, just as in the USA, different ethnic and racial groups have unique histories, languages and beliefs. They have different cultural givings and borrowings. Even among these groups, e.g. the Ibibio of Akwa Ibom, the Igbo of the South East Nigeria, there are diverse cultural traditions. In the face of such diversities, some values and traditions are shared. The different groups making up the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria, for example, share a culture that is shaped by their common experiences as minorities within the Nigerian nation. Within the Nigerian nation,

culture varies by age, region, gender, ethnicity, religion, class and other social divisions. A person who grows up in the south of Nigeria is likely to develop different tastes, modes of speech and cultural interests than a person raised in the West or North. In spite of these differences, life in Nigeria has a common basis.

Certain symbols, language patterns, belief systems and ways of thinking are distinctively Nigerian and it forms a common culture even though great cultural diversity exists e.g. David Eka's Englishes in Nigeria and Though Tribes and Tongues may differ, in Brotherhood we stand Nigeria Philosophy, etc.

#### **2. Culture is Learned**

Cultural beliefs and practices are usually so well learned that they seem perfectly natural. How do some come to prefer some foods to others? How do we acquire musical taste? Sometimes, culture is taught via direct instruction. Children learning song myths and traditions do so via being taught. Much of culture is learned indirectly through observation and imitation e.g. being a man or woman has to be role learned. A person becomes a member of a culture through both Formal and Informal transmission of culture. This process of learning culture referred to as socialization.

#### **3. Culture is Taken for Granted**

Because culture is learned, members of a given society seldom question the culture of which they are a part. Culture binds people together, but lack of communication across cultures can have negative consequences.

#### **4. Culture is symbolic**

The significance of culture lies in the meaning it holds for people. Symbols are things or behaviour to which people give meaning. The meaning is not inherent in a symbol but is bestowed by the meaning people give. The Nigerian or US Flags, for example, are pieces of cloths. Their cultural significance derives not at all from the clothes of which they are made but for their meaning as symbols of freedom and democracy.

Symbols are powerful expressions of human life. Recall for example, the series of protests over the Newspaper cartoon publication in Denmark in year 2005 depicting Prophet Mohammed the Founder of Islam as a Terrorist which symbolically had influenced Arabs and Islamic militants to engage in terrorism. And this protest snowballed into Nigeria. The Moslem community worldwide perceived it as not only derogatory but also extremely insulting, representing gross caricatures of the Islamic traditions.

This protest and such other similar protests which have developed over symbols indicate the enormous influence of cultural symbols on human behaviour.

Symbols can also mean different things in different contexts e.g. a Cross on a Church Altar has a meaning different from a cross burning in someone's front yard. One of the interesting things about culture is the extent to which symbolic attachments guide human behaviour e.g. people stand at attention whenever the Nigerian or any nation's National Anthem is sung, and such people could be emotionally moved by displays of the Flag, Cross or the Star of David (Jews) or Swords of the Crusades or a loin cloth over a sleeve chiefly wear on "Okpomkpom" (traditional tie) in Uruan and Efik lands reminiscent of the exploits of their heroes past.

The significance of the symbolic value of culture can hardly be overestimated. Learning a culture means not just engaging in particular behaviour but also learning their symbolic meanings within the culture

##### 5. Culture Varies Across Time and Place

Culture develops as humans adapt to the physical and social environments around them. Because this environment varies from one society to another and since human beings use their creative imagination to develop cultural solutions to the challenges they face, culture is not fixed from one place to another. In the US and other western nations, for example, there is a strong cultural belief in scientific solutions to human problems of food supply and environmental deterioration can be addressed by scientific breakthroughs. In Nigeria and indeed Africa, other solution may be

preferred e.g. the gods, shrines, etc. are consulted for solutions to problems.

Because culture varies from one setting to another, the meaning systems that develop within a culture must be seen in their cultural context. This is what we in Sociology and Anthropology refer to as Cultural Relativism. It is the idea that something can be understood and judged only in relationship to the cultural context in which it appears. This, of course, does not make every cultural practice morally acceptable but suggests that without knowing the cultural context, understanding why people behave as they do is impossible. To this extent, an understanding of cultural Relativism gives insight into some controversies e.g. the debate about the practice of Clitoridectomy i.e. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) among Uruan, Efik, Quo and Ekoi people of Nigeria and other peoples of East, South and Central Africa as well as some cultures in Asia. To Western Culture, clitoridectomy is an aberration and this scis the Feminists there founded on Gender Equity to fight against Clitoridectoy as harmful cultural practices.

##### Cultural Change

As is known by students of Cultural Studies, culture is a conservative force in society. It tends to be based on tradition and is passed on through generations, conserving and regenerating the values and beliefs of society. Historical examples from the October 1917 Revolution spearheaded by the Bolsheviks in Russia had a cultural change ingredient just as the Mao Tse Tung led Cultural Revolution in the Peoples Republic of China in 1949. The Arusha Declaration by Dr. Julius Nyerere of Tanzania declaring Ujamaa or African Socialism (in Tanzania) and the Aiyetoro experiment in Nigeria all had cultural character which aimed at a change from the old order thus ushering new forms of Social and Public Order and therefore Development.

Culture is also increasingly based on institutions that have an economic interest in maintaining the status quo. Often times, people are resistant to cultural changes because familiar ways and established patterns of doing things are hard to give up. Cultures do



change because it is Dynamic and not Static. Cultures develop as people respond to changes in their physical and social environments as experienced through the 2004 "Tsunamization" of some world communities.

Changes in culture, however, could come through Cultural Lag and Culture Shock. Other sources and causes of cultural change include:

- (a) A Change in the Societal Conditions
- (b) Cultural Diffusion
- (c) Cultural Innovation and
- (d) Imposition of Cultural Change by an outside agency

Each of these require elaborate and differing degrees of analysis but would not be for our present purpose. But it should be noted that each of the African countries and other world civilizations had at one time or the other passed through and experienced each of the four phenomena above.

#### Conclusion

This chapter attempts a view of culture as a complex and elaborate system of meaning and behaviour that define the way of life of a people, group, nation or society. It is shared, learned, taken for granted, symbolic and varied. Its elements consist of Language, Norms, Beliefs and Values all of which, shape human perception of reality and direction. Theories and changes in culture render it an ever dynamic and ever living concept to respect.

It need be noted that our task in this book has been to see culture as concrete as one can observe cultural object and practices that define human experience. We can say also that it is abstract in that it is a way of thinking, feeling, believing and behaving. Culture links the past and the present because it is the knowledge that makes people part of human groups. Culture gives shape to human experience and existence.

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