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Aspects of Cultural Diplomacy in the Cross River Region

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Abstract

Culture has always been used as a cornerstone to build solid relations by communities all over the world. This goal becomes easier to achieve when the people involved see cultural diversity as a source of strength and adopt same for the purposes of mutual understanding, integration and peace. In the Cross River region, many features of shared cultures tremendously facilitated peaceful co-existence, stability and development of the area. For instance, villages in the region shared and still share republican democratic structure. Some secret societies and their influence such as *ekpe*, *okonko*, *obon*, etc., permeated the region. *Ekpe* influence became so dominant to the extent that the region got the name - "ekpe complex". Traditional ceremonies such as New Yam festival, wrestling competitions, etc., from time to time brought the people from different communities together. The people also share a common food culture, dressing code and cross-cultural marital experience. Evidently, some of these cultural institutions created the platforms for dialogue and the enhancement of socio-economic development, thereby serving as credible cultural diplomatic instruments. However, the advent of modernity has seriously undermined the usefulness of these cultural institutions because attention is now placed more on distinctiveness of the groups in the region. The paper advocates that the footprints of these shared cultural values should be revisited to grow the integration and overall development of the region. It adopts an analytical historical methodology.

Introduction

Culture is the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their efforts to meet the challenge of living in their environment. It refers to the gamut of knowledge, beliefs, customs, traditions and skills that are available to members of a society. It also includes language, song, dance, food

technology, etc. Indeed, culture is essentially dynamic. Though every culture has its distinctive features, such features do not totally hinder external influence. The external forces are engendered through contact with their neighbours.

The pan-culture breeds understanding and engender peace among such peoples. The management of culture for peace and sustainable development falls within the ambience of cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy in this respect could be seen as a course of actions, which utilises the exchange of ideas, values, traditions and other aspects of culture or identity to strengthen relationships and enhance socio-cultural cooperation. As noted by Arndst (2006), "early diplomacy meant relations not between nation-states but between cultures". These communities adopted rules, codified them and turned them into laws designed to minimise disputes and maximise cooperation.

The Cross River region is a vast area covering some states in the Eastern Nigeria and a section of Southern Cameroon. However, this study delineates the present-day Akwa Ibom, Cross River states, parts of Abia, Ebonyi states. Over time, the people of the Cross River region have created, learned, borrowed, adapted, accumulated and added to their culture, their material possessions, their institutions and their ideas. According to Uya (1886), the Cross River, with its major tributaries, has indeed been a highway for cultural interchange between the people of the region. Through interactions, the Cross River Igbo for instance, came to be influenced, by borrowing important cultural traits like secret societies, age sets, etc., historically; the Cross River has remained a major highway of intermingling of the people of the region, with consequent reciprocal influences on their respective cultures. The resultant effect was the existence of a region where similar cultural values prevailed for the good of all.

Culture/Cultural Diplomacy

Social anthropological idea of culture is based on the classical definition of the term by Edward Tylor, who posits that:

Culture or civilisation taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law and custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Cited Antia, 2005: 13-14).

Ayisi, in his analysis of culture, notes that culture embraces everything which contributes to the survival of man and comprises not only physical and sociological factors, but psychological factors such as religious beliefs and rituals. Culture also includes the way people behave, which means the way they do things (Ayisi, 1979).

The cultural policy for Nigeria states that:

Culture is the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenge of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organisation, thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours....Culture comprises material, institutional, philosophical and creative aspects. The material aspect has to do with the artifacts in its broadest form (namely: tools, clothing, food, medicine, utensils, housing etc.); the institutional deals with the political, social, legal and economic structures erected to help achieve material and spiritual objectives; while the philosophical is concerned with ideas, beliefs and values; the creative concerns a people's literature (oral or written) as well as their visual and

performing arts which are normally moulded, as well as help to mould other aspects of culture (Nigerian Cultural Policy, 1988: 1).

According to Ubom (1987), culture originated in the process of man's attempt to live and survive in his natural environment. In this process, man has left behind traces of his achievements at various levels of his development, and the cumulative knowledge of his achievements constitutes what is referred to as culture.

One of the essential elements of culture is its dynamic nature. Though every culture has its distinctive features, these do not insulate it from internal and external factors of change. While the internal forces may take inspiration from indigenous elements, the external forces are brought through contact with neighbours, diplomatic relations, either separately or in various combinations. Consequently, there is hardly any culture which does not show traces of these external influences in the form of language, beliefs, morals, values, music, diet and other social habits. Apparently, the degree of adaptability as well as the extent of assimilation varies from society to society. It is logical to postulate that the vulnerability of a culture to change is a function of the degree of interaction with the neighbouring cultures. As people moved from one place to another and settled in one place or the other, they also borrowed from each other (Apanda, 2006).

Over time, the people of the Cross River region have created, learned, borrowed, adapted, accumulated and added to their culture, their material possessions, their institutions and their ideas.

This position is in line with the assertion that:

Culture...regulates our lives at every turn. From the moment of our birth until we die, there is constant conscious or

unconscious pressure upon us to follow certain types of behaviour that other men have created for us. By more or less adhering to a system of related designs for carrying out all the acts of living, for thinking, believing and feeling, a group of men and women feel themselves linked together by a powerful chain of sentiment (Antia, 2005: 2007).

Antia (2005) agrees that culture is what binds men together. It helps people to admire and possess reason and act reasonably. Indigenous culture served as the basis for formal and informal education, unity, health, wealth, sound government, administration and public security. It was indeed, the peg on which political, economic, social and religious life of the people hung/hang and generally safeguarded their identity and freedom.

Culture provides individuals with a set of common understanding that they employ in fashioning their actions. It enables members of a group to know, in rather broad terms, what they can expect from others and what others can expect from them. It provides a configuration of the do's and don'ts, a complex of patterned mental stop-and-go signs that tell people about the social landscape. By implication, if a people's culture is known – their design for living – one can understand and predict a good deal of their behaviour. In providing common understanding, culture binds the separate lives of individuals into a larger whole, making society possible by providing a common framework of meaning.

Cultural diplomacy as used in this context, therefore, primarily has to do with shared cultural values of the people of the Cross River region through borrowings and linkages which created understanding and reduced disharmony thereby facilitating the integration and overall development of the area. Attention is focused on the fact that diplomacy is a process through the business of state or community is achieved via the application of requisite methods and strategies to achieve set goals and objectives.

These variables which were ingrained in the fabrics of the societies in the Cross River region are viewed as the "cultural diplomatic" ingredients that opened the vistas of understanding and cemented inter-group relations. Put in another way, the peace and stability enjoyed in the region and even the management of occasional conflicts anchored on the above principles.

Cultural Diplomacy in the Cross River Region: The Social Structure

Ubom, (1987), Ntukidem (1990), and Afigbo (1990), assert that the social organisation of the Cross River Basin is similar to what is commonly found in tropical Africa. Throughout the Cross River Basin, the village, comprising a number of extended families, was ruled by a chief or village head. The village remained an all-purpose unit for social organisation. Most of the societies were segmentary and the village remained the largest political unit. The clans and ethnic groups were in most cases cultural group not political unit and there were very few cases of clans or ethnic groups possessing single unified government. In this direction, Afigbo confirms that none of the ethnic groups occupying the Cross River Basin, nor the people bordering them came under one sovereign political authority nor evolve large political institutions. Rather, they were split into numerous small autonomous village states or democracies or in the case of the Ijaw call "city states".

For effective and efficient administration, secret societies played significant role in the affairs of government. Njoku states that the traditional societies in the Cross River region possessed a very stable government and social control mechanism. Government was gerontocratic and democratic. It was also segmentary because centres of political control were diffused. Corroborating the deep process of diffusion of culture in the region, he adds that, while the Cross River Igbo societies exhibited some Igbo norms and ideology, it has borrowed quite significantly some socio-cultural formations from their non-Igbo Cross River neighbours. Thus, the Cross River Igbo culture is an admixture of Igbo and non-Igbo ingredients. To

him. "Cultural exchange among border communities is universal" (Afigbo, 1990; Njoku, 2000).

The Role of Secret Societies

Scholars such as Abasiattai (1990); Afigbo (1991); Ubi (2004) and Akpan (2019) have commented on the role of secret societies as significant cultural diplomatic instruments in the region. They all point out that secret societies were very developed in the region. The Ibibio for instance had *ekpo*, *idong*, *akang* and *obon*; the Ejagham had *ekpe* (ngbe), the Yakurr had *nkpe*, Agwagune had *ebiabu*. Versions of these societies were diffused westwards along the Cross River Igbo and the Ohuhu-Ngwa. The Cross River Igbo, for instance, had *ekpe*, *okonko*, *akang*, etc., while different communities along the Ohuhu-Ngwa had either *akang* or *Okonko* or both.

Antia (2005) states that secret societies provided bonds of unity in the region in that all members of each society saw themselves as one everywhere no matter where they came from. They disciplined the community in that people had to order themselves according to the traditional requirements of the societies. It was their duty to enforce peace and order. People were expected to behave well and avoid quarrellings and fighting during the operative seasons of these societies. They enforced healthy habits by supervising the cleaning of streets, springs, markets etc. Their constant parades saved the communities from havoc of marauders. The administrative set-up and techniques of secret societies provided training facilities in government administration to their members (Antia, 2005).

Another source underscores the significance of secret societies to the integration of the region thus:

...these societies were very useful in promoting relations throughout the entire zone in which they existed. Some of

them established toll stations along the major trade routes. In return for tolls they guaranteed travellers smooth and safe passage. Their members also had easy entry into neighbouring communities. That is to say, a man initiated into *ekpe* would have easy passage into any community, no matter where, that the *ekpe* was active either along the routes or in the village square. For non-members, however, it was a different matter. But usually a long distance trader or other business man would know that the society was dominant along the route of his business, and that the normal code of conduct required him to purchase initiation into such a society, even if it did not exist among his people. Through their "extra-territorial" influence, these societies could also help to arrange restitution inadvertently plundered along the routes of business. They also arrange to collect debts owing to their members, and to settle disputes between communities (Afigbo, 1990: 140-141).

Among the communities in the Cross River region *ekpe* became one of the significant societies that promoted historical linkages and relations was the prevalence of secret societies. *Ekpe*, more than any of the societies mentioned above, had wider spread and formed closer links and inter-group relations among the communities. Indeed, the unifying influence of *ekpe* within the Cross River region is no longer debatable. The origin of *ekpe* is still a subject of heated debate and contention among the communities within the geography of *ekpe* influence in South-Eastern Nigeria. Some scholars claim Ejagham in Cross River State, some claim Ibibio in Akwa Ibom State while some point to Usak Edet region of the Cameroon. (Onor 1994; Anwana 2009; Nsentip, 2020).

According to Atem:

Ekpe...a cultural society of immense importance was an institution with varied functions. It performed political, economic, judicial, social and even religious duties within the community. Politically it was a unifying institution. It brought together into a single disciplined organisation all the leading men in each local community. Communities living apart came to be united under *ekpe*. For example, in Calabar where the house system existed, *ekpe* brought unity to the entire community without abolishing the different houses. This was possible because *ekpe* legislated for the entire community and its laws were commonly applied. Each house, while receiving protection and obeying *ekpe* laws, still retained its autonomy (Atem, 1985: 46-47).

In the economic sphere, *ekpe* was an institution where investments were made in anticipation of profits. *Ekpe* could collect debts; this aspect of its functions encouraged European traders in Calabar to join the society. Through it, they could collect debts from Efik traders. Non-Efik people along the Cross River basin acquired *ekpe* so as to appear credit-worthy in the eyes of the Efik with whom they traded. This economic function of collecting debts by *ekpe* promoted and facilitated the credit trading system that dominated the Calabar trade in the 19th century (Atem, 1985).

In the realm of justice, *ekpe* was the supreme judicial authority with its agents acting as the police force in the enforcement of its laws. *Ekpe* maintained peace by settling disputes among its members and between communities. Offenders were duly punished according to *ekpe* laws. Punishment included imposition of fines, arrest and detention and in serious cases the culprits could be executed.

As a social organisation, *ekpe* provided a domain where people regardless of rank could meet and discuss problems of common interest. For example on the death of a member, all the other members met for a befitting funeral service. The corpse of the deceased was accordingly dressed in a special way required by *ekpe* laws. Thus, members from poor family backgrounds were sure of befitting funerals at their deaths. In order to promote social interaction and understanding among its members, *ekpe* occasionally provided entertainment for its members. Indeed, through inter-community contacts, the people of South-Eastern Nigeria acquired *ekpe*, an institution of immense benefits from their Cameroon neighbours. The functions of *ekpe* society in Cameroon were the same like those in South-Eastern Nigeria.

Indeed, *ekpe* greased the engine of inter-group relations, became the basis of governance for the communities of South Eastern Nigeria and had overwhelming influence over their lives as a whole. In each of these communities, *ekpe* was a widespread, powerful and prestigious institution in the pre-colonial era. Its membership conferred great advantages and immunities on the initiates. For a man to effectively exercise his citizenship rights, he had to be an *ekpe* member and the higher his grade, the greater his authority (Anwana, 2009).

Festivals and Cultural Diplomacy

According to Antia (2005), the influence of traditional festivals was also enormous in the Cross River region. These festivals gave the people the idea of time to perform certain activities, thus providing a kind of calendar for the people. The festivals provided the people the occasions to enjoy themselves and create good mental health. Friends and relations exchanged visits across ethnic frontiers during the traditional festivals. Indeed, such seasons were seasons of re-union which encouraged unity and cooperation among people. This was a symbol of oneness. All the festivals required money and materials and people had to work hard enough to secure the necessary materials.

For instance, the New Yam Festivals required people to have large farms planted with yams so that there might be enough to eat and give out to others during the festival. It was usually shameful for a man to buy yams for his family a few weeks after the New Yam Festival had started. To avoid such reproach, everybody had to have his or her own farm and this helped to check famine in the area.

Another factor which helped in bringing Itu Mbonuso people to closer contacts with their neighbours was wrestling, which was a regular sport in the area. The people were extremely boastful of their wrestling prowess. Occasionally, wrestling competitions were organised and this attracted competitors and spectators from the neighbouring Igbo communities. It resulted in friendship among them and their neighbours (Akpan, 2019).

Traditional Medicine/Oracles/Deities

In the area of religion, the pan religion of the people of the Cross River Basin was African Traditional Religion which primarily revolved on the belief of a Supreme Being, as the core of the religion, belief in divinities and non-human or nature spirits and belief in the existence of the spirit of the death and mystical forces.

According to Njoku (2000), the *dibia* (traditional medical practice) profession, like blacksmithing, was in the past an itinerant phenomenon. Members were habituated to undertaking annual professional tours to various parts of Igbo land and beyond. The Upper and Lower Cross River districts were popular destinations. The *dibia* travelled widely in those days in order to meet the needs of their dispersed clients and patrons. They travelled without molestation in an age when such travels were fraught with danger for other people. This was possible basically because they were believed to possess esoteric and protective powers which they could apply to indict deadly calamities on persons who might try to harm them.

Because of the wide demand for their services, traditional medicine practitioners, especially the renowned ones, were among the wealthiest members of the society. Such *dibia* married many wives often from the places of their sojourn. The peripatetic nature of the *dibia* profession made the practitioners ideal purveyors of trading goods from areas of surplus production (low marginal utility) to those of deficit production (high marginal utility). The point to be noted here is that traditional medicine practitioners from Akwa Ibom area also operated in various parts of Igboland.

According to Essien (1993), *Atakpo* (Uruan deity of a section of Ibibio people) is also venerated in Efik land of Cross River State. This assertion is backed by a tradition which says: *ke ndem Efik Iboku, Atakpo Ndem Uruan etuk*, meaning that (where there is Efik deity, there is also Atakpo Uruan to share with it).

Traditional Dances

Traditional dances, games, sports, music and plays offered the society very interesting sources of entertainment and joy. Spectators from far and near gathered round the players and dancers and cheered them. This created room for good mental health. Each dance, game, sports, music and play has its own rules, moral lessons and ethics which the players and dancers must learn and obey. The idea of carrying games, sports and dances from one community to another created the spirit of oneness and friendship. Traditional dances, games, sports and plays provided the opportunity for people to choose wives and husbands. Ethnic frontiers were easily ignored in a bid to vent these cultural variables, thus helping to create a strong bond or friendship (Akpan, 2019).

Food Culture

The people of the Cross River Basin have common food culture and whatever variations may exist is very negligible. The area happens to be

one of the most blessed by nature in terms of food, vegetables, fruits, meats and drinks of all sorts. The food items found, produced and consumed include yam, cassava, cocoyam, water yam, sweet yam, maize, plantain, banana, etc., diverse types of vegetables in addition to edible fruits such as mango, avocado pear, pawpaw, oranges etc., (Antia, 2005).

It could be argued that the food culture was/is influenced by the agricultural system. The pre-colonial society was pre-dominantly agricultural. Farming activities were undertaken by both men and women. They farmed crops of various types (some of them mentioned above), reared livestock, engaged in fishing and also supplemented these with hunting. These activities created room for cooperative labour, which could be mobilised across ethnic frontier.

Inter-marriages

Inter-ethnic marriages served as another potent cultural diplomatic instrument that forged and sustain inter-group relations in the Cross River region. The Ibibio and the Igbo for instance engaged in inter-marriages right from when both groups settled at Ibom in the Arochukwu region. Afigbo (2000) states that Igbo migrants from Okigwe-Orlu-Umuahia ridge penetrated the Ibom area and made the population complex as a result of inter-marriages. Two Igbo groups, Ada and Ututu, are believed to have inter-married with the Ibibio at Ibom and the union produced a new group referred to as Ada-Ibibio. He adds that Igbo groups of Azumini and Ndoki were said to have been fond of marrying from the Ibibio whose women they termed "made excellent wives".

A section of Annang people of Akwa Ibom State apparently inter-married with the Ukwa (Igbo) their neighbours to a considerable extent that they adopted the customs of both areas. It is believed that the Ika people used the process of inter-marriage to acquire farm land in Ukwa Igbo area. In

addition, Ika men engaged in extensive marriage of Ngwa Igbo women (Akpan, 2019).

Between the Obolo (Andoni) and the Ohafia Igbo, tradition developed and has remained that when an Obolo (Andoni) man was dissatisfied with his marriage, he would go to Umuahia-Ibeku for a wife. Umuahia-Ibeku is believed to be the location where the Ohafia "dumped" Obolo (Andoni) women whom they had abducted from Obolo (Andoni) when they fled the area. The tradition expresses the roots of their relations that span many centuries (Ejituwu, 1991).

Inter-marriages also facilitated the integration of Oron people of Akwa Ibom State into Efik commercial orbit. There were important Efik related communities such as Enwang, Okobo and Idua, permanently settled in Oron. The marriage of elements in the Oron area into some Efik royal families created a lot of goodwill towards Oron. Some Uruan women were married to the Efik while many men from Uruan also married Efik women.

Inter-marriages also took place especially with the Efut of Calabar, who were much fewer than the Efik but largely cut off from their ancestral Balondo land in Cameroon; it is reported that the Efut frequently took wives from Old Town, Henshaw Town, etc. Being closely associated with the Efik, largely isolated from Balondo land, and numerically insignificant, the Efut sooner became closely assimilated into Efik culture. Except the government, *ekpe* secret society and a few tribal titles and personal place names, the Efut became virtually indistinguishable from the Efik people. Abasiattai (1991) notes that although the Efut were originally of completely different origin, generations of close contact have made them in many ways one with the Efik majority, whose language and customs they have entirely adopted.

It is believed that in some cases, after the marriage has been contracted, the wife was made to live among the husband's people for the purpose of generating cultural diffusion, since the wife would introduce some elements of her culture such as language, dances, folklores, world view, dishes, etc. Over the generations and centuries, this kind of links resulted in the cultural transfer and borrowings.

Conclusion

The Cross River has remained a major highway for the intermingling of the people of the region, with consequent reciprocal influences on their respective cultures (Uya, 1986). Culture provides individuals with a set of common understanding. It enables members of a group to know, in rather broad terms, what they can expect from others and what others can expect from them. This is because it defines what is beautiful and ugly, right and wrong, good and bad. It helps hold society together and gives the people a sense of belonging, instructs them on how to behave (Essoh, 2006). Indeed, the deep intermingling of the groups in the Cross River region blended their ways of life into a common pool and created a "culture area".

In spite of the absence of political unity and group consciousness at the ethnic group level, there was an intricate network of relationships among the village republics and city-states in the Cross River region. The extensive cultural borrowings such as secret societies blurred whatever differences that existed into a "culture area" whose boundaries that is even linguistic boundaries, cannot be defined with any precision. These contacts covered all or most of the human areas of human endeavours.

However, the advent of modernity has extensively undermined the usefulness of these pan-cultural institutions vis-à-vis the robust cultural diplomacy of the region because attention is now placed more on the competitiveness of the groups in the region. In most cases neighbouring communities with shared cultural values and norms ignore the variables

that ought to bind them and prefer the path of conflict, which at the end of the day undermine the overall development of the region. There is need to revisit these bold footprints as the compass of integration and development of the region. This is because "tradition lasts longer than city walls".

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