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Cultural Resuscitation and Nation-Building: An Examination of Ughievwen Clan of Western Delta, Nigeria up to 1960

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Abstract

Nation-building as a process is historically contingent. The formation, growth and demise of nations involve myriad of crises that need to be solved in order to attain a stable polity. The subtle neglect of most aspect of Nigerian culture in favour of western practices appear to be one of the core areas Nigeria's attempt at nation-building seems to have faltered. This paper examines the culture of the Ughievwen of Western Delta, Nigeria and posits that the pre-colonial period of the people's past was intact and cohesive because of the importance attached to cultural values. However, the introduction of the colonial rule in the nineteenth century and the sentimental attachment to western values seem to be eroding Nigerian cultural values even in the post colonial period. This unfortunate development is a serious challenge to efforts geared towards nation-building. In the concluding section of this paper, it was suggested that efforts must be made to halt this development if nation-building strides are to yield results.

Key words: Cultural Resuscitation, Nation-building, Nigeria and Ughievwen

Introduction

The task of nation-building has been argued to be historically contingent due to the fact that the process is inextricably tied to the formation, growth and demise of nations as well as factors that influence the process (Oghi & Ajayi, 2011, p. 196). The attempt at integrating the diverse elements in a country in order to promote a sense of belonging among people is also part of nation-building process (Wallenstein, 1961: 88). Nation building therefore, involves not only the implementation of political and economic policies that will improve the lives of the citizenry, but also a recognition of values and other aspects of the state that would act as a national catalyst to bind the people together (Elaigwu, 1983). Culture, which is the totality of a people's way of life, is crucial to nation-building because its non-recognition could promote fissiparous tendencies among the citizenry. Culture acts as a 'bond' amongst people because in it, the sense of oneness is strongly tied. However, colonial Nigeria appeared to have neglected this vital element as foreign elements instead, gradually diminished the vitality of Nigerian cultural practices and usages. Globalization rather has begun to take its toll negatively on Nigerian culture. Globalization, no doubt, has its merits but these should not be at the detriment of African, nay, Nigerian culture.

Globalization, argues Oamen (2014), is "the integration of all human activities, corporations, organisations, agencies irrespective of nationalities which include culture". But it is important to note that the concept is not new. As a scholar put it:

Just about a decade ago, the term globalization was relatively unknown; though the process of globalization has actually been going on for centuries. For example, the diffusion of world religion, the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the European colonization of many parts of the world, including the African continent are manifestations of incipient globalization. Thus, the process it describes is old. (Shettima, 2010, p. 104)

The only new thing about globalization, continues Oamen (2014), is that "it is now channelled through information and communication technologies among others with the force of colonisation". This, in itself, would imply that globalization is a form of neo-colonization.

This paper therefore, examines the need for cultural resuscitation of the Nigeria Nation-state. It discusses aspects of the culture of Ughievwen clan of Western Delta, Nigeria during the first decades of the twentieth century especially marriages, healing practices, dances and burial rites of the people albeit stressing the influences that came to bear on them. It concludes that resuscitating the aforementioned aspects of the peoples' culture could help to promote nation-building. It also recommends ways by which this could be achieved.

Methodology

The primary source of information for this paper was oral interviews conducted with highly placed community leaders in Ughievwen clan. The data collected was corroborated with materials from secondary sources and archival information, all of which were critically assessed and evaluated before use. This study adopted the historical method of inquiry. Information got from secondary sources such as the few written works confirmed the information provided by the interviewees.

Geographical Setting and Early History of Ughievwen Clan

Ughievwen clan is one of the twenty-two clans in the Urhobo area of the Niger-Delta, Nigeria (Hubbard, 1952, p.145). It is made up of thirty-two villages and towns with its headquarters at Otughievwen (Otujeremi) covering a total land area of 275 square kilometres. It is bounded on the South by the Forcados River, on the East by Olomu, on the West by Udu and on the North by Agbarho and Ughelli (Darah, 2011, p. 285). The creation of new Local Government Area in 1991 made it possible for Otughievwen to become the headquarters of Ughelli South Local Government Area consisting Arhavwarien, Eghwu, Ephronto, Okparabe, Olomu and Ughievwen. Nukueye adds that the immediate neighbours of the Ughievwen include: Udu, Olomu, Eghwu, Agbarho, Ughelli and Uvwie, while the distant neighbours are: Isoko, Agbon, Okpe, Ibo and Benin (Nukueye, 2003, p.24).

Pre-colonial Ughievwen clan was and is still divided into four sub-clans; namely, Orhowe, Owahwa, UkpEDI and Uvburie in order of seniority (Okotete, 2010). The main occupations of the Ughievwen people were: fishing, farming, indigenous gin production, petty trading, palm oil production, pottery work and mat making that was done by women. The clan, like most pre-colonial economies of other West African societies, was not entirely subsistent, but had a diversified economy in which the barter system featured prominently. Places like Okwagbe, Ekakpamre, Okpare and Warri were outlets where products were sold, even when legitimate trade became the vogue, migrations which was essentially adaptation to the new economic system, some of the people went to far-flunged areas like Ikale land in present day Ondo State and parts of Edo State (Otite, 2006, pp.556-563).

The natural vegetation of Ughievwen clan and the sub-groups is rainforest with swamp forest occurring in flat-flooded valley and adjoining low lying area that are seasonally or permanently water-logged (Pippah, 1999). Like other part of Urhobo land the soil is predominantly sandy and poorly aggregated (Aweto, 2005: 684-686), hence following the heavy rainfall that occurs in the area, the soils are intensely leached. There are however, patches of clayey soil derived from shale

(Pippah, 1999). Ughievwen clan, by nature of its geography had timbers with Raffia palm and rivulets.

The entire Ughievwen area is said to have been occupied by four main families that sprang from the four children of Ughievwen, the eponymous founder. They are: Orhowe, Owahwa, UkpEDI and Uvburie. Even though there is dearth of written works on the early history of the Ughievwen people, recent research have suggested that the area could have been occupied by them within the beginning of the eighteenth century (Oghi, 2013). Upon arrival, the people had their distinct culture that distinguished them from their neighbours. Aspects of this culture were: marriages, healing, dances and burial rites. The introduction of colonial rule in the twentieth century appeared to have eroded these cultural values even up to the post-colonial period.

Aspects of Ughievwen Culture before Colonialism

Culture remains and will continue to be the cornerstone of the past of people in any society. The reason for this is not far-fetched because it entails the custom, arts and social institutions of a particular group or nation and thus the totality of the people's way of life (Maigoro, 2011: 62). Pre-colonial Ughievwen society as earlier stated had a lot of cultural practices that seem to have faded into extinction.

Marriages

Pre-colonial Ughievwen marriage system was regulated by custom. Marriages that fell short of the traditionally accepted standards was customarily frowned at, and socially stigmatized by the people (Okpohie, 2008). Such marriages were expected to be contracted between opposite sex (male and female) and not persons of the same sex. Privileges were accorded to the parties that satisfied the customs. For instance, males were regarded as son-in-law to parents of the wife; allowed to perform traditional burial rites if either parents of the wife died and the women that were rightly married commanded respect unlike their counterparts that could not satisfy the traditional norms that were called *Osen* (a concubine) or treated as prostitute (*Opharien*). Traditionally recognised marriage in Ughievwen land was conducted in six stages. These were the courtship stage, introduction/acceptance, *Oko* (bride wealth), *Udi-Eghiekhotor* which preceded the payment of dowry, *Emuebro*, the payment of *Igho-Oyanvwen* (money for circumcision) and the stage of *Aje-Esuo*, escortion of the bride (Oghi, 2014).

The central issue in marriage in pre-colonial Ughievwen society was essentially procedural. The aforementioned stages must be fulfilled. The last stage, which was called *Aje-Esuo* (escortion), took place only on certain days of week known as *Omamede* and *Edebi* (Koyor, 2009). These days according to tradition, was to avoid other fresh and protracted arrangement. These aforesaid days was the period

when the family of the bride (*Opha*) delegated two or more responsible married ladies, joined by two or more ladies sent by the bridegroom, both of whom teamed up to bring the bride home in a colourful ceremony.

Healing Practices

Before the introduction of colonial rule, Ughievwen clan had therapeutic methods used in traditional healing. These methods included: use of herbs, massaging, hydrotherapy, fasting, cupping or blood-letting, heat therapy, surgery, faith healing and divination. Herbs were prepared in the form of *Ifue* (antitode), *Umu-Use* which could be directed telepathically to summon a mission person and *Ekpofia* which was used to divert bullets from target persons or spot (Okpohie, 2008). Massaging, which was traditionally called *Oma-Eghworo* was used for ailment of the nervous, muscular and osseous system. It was a method that involved physical manipulation of the muscles, joints and veins on the nude skin in a technical manner (Okpohie, 2008). This treatment was believed to aid stimulation of muscles and allowed circulation of blood.

Hydrotherapy, also known as *Ame vwo nyoma*, made use of cold, hot, compressed and steam vapours baths. Whereas the cold and hot water baths fused with herbs was believed to be cure for fever, headache, rheumatism and general pains, hot water bath was believed to make the skin capillaries to relax and increased the activities of the sweat glands (Okpohie, 2008). In the pre-colonial period therefore, ailments like pains, soreness, inflammation, rheumatic pains and swellings were treated with the aid of hydrotherapy. Even traditional midwives employed this method.

Other methods as earlier mentioned, include: fasting, cupping, surgery and divination. Fasting, referred to, by the people as *Ohwevwechiro*, was used for the treatment of constipation (*evurokere*), obesity (*ekpevu*) as well as spiritual disease (Igun, 2011). Cupping on the other hand, called *Ubo-Emuo* or *Egho* involved the abstraction of impure blood with the use of horns or cups. The method was commonly used in the Northern part of Nigeria and it is most probable that the Ughievwen people could have learnt it from the Hausas commonly found in the area (Johnson, 1932). The efficacy of cupping had long been recognised during the Victorian age (Youngson, 1979, p.6).

The responses of interviewees about traditional healing practices in pre-colonial Ughievwen society also suggest that there was the use of heat therapy. Referred to as *Oma evuvwo* in Ughievwen land, the therapy was done by preparing fire with logs and as soon as the smoke had reduced and the charcoal burnt brightly, the patient was asked to expose the affected part of the body to the direct rays of the fire. In some situation, clothing materials were removed from the body and the patient

asked to stay beside the fire (Igun, 2011). This therapy was believed to help calm the nerves and regulate muscular contractions and circulation of blood. This method differed from the native surgery, called *Omaebere*. The latter was an operation used to extract bullets and poisonous noxious tissues from the body. By this method, the part of the body that was operated was stitched together by technical application of pieces of calabash on the operated part and a herbal concoction called *Uhuvwun edri* was applied until the sore healed (Igun, 2011).

Another important aspect of the culture of the Ughievwen people in the pre-colonial period was divination. From my interview with notable elders of Ughievwen communities, there seemed to be common practices on divination between the Ughievwen people and their neighbours of Edo State. The methods of divination were similar; namely, the use of seeded string of cowries and bones, bones and pebbles and the use of pieces of kolanuts and mirror (Erhagbe and Ehiabhi, 2011: 121). Just like what obtained in Ishan, the commonest and most popular was the use of strings of cowries in Ughievwen land. This method was traditionally known as *epha*, but was called *Oguega* in Ishan (Erhagbe and Ehiabhi, 2011: 125). Among the Ughievwen people, by this method, the person seeking divination touched his mouth with the cowries and returned it to the diviner, who thereafter threw the seeded strings of cowries on the pieces of mat specially prepared for the purpose and interprets the message revealed. Findings at this stage determined whether the healing was curative or preventive or both.

It is important to note that healing in pre-colonial Ughievwen society was either by curative means or preventive means. Curative healing required the use of magical charms or performance of rituals depending on the findings of the diviner. Where it was a curative medicine, the patient was told to bring some materials to prepare a herbal concoction and as soon as they were provided, prescription was given on how it was to be administered (Okpohie, 2008). However, where rituals were required to be performed, the items required were named and later used to appease the ancestors or the gods. Failure to do this, it was traditionally believed, elicited the wrath of the ancestors or gods (Okpohie, 2008).

Dances

Pre-colonial Ughievwen society had dances that portrayed their rich culture. The popular ones were: Udje, Ikenike, Overen and Gbogoniyen. Apart from Udje dance which has been researched into, (Darah, 1982) not much is known about others such as Ikenike, Ovenren, Egbada and Gbogoniyen. Even though the origin of these dances seems not clear, they expressed individual and collective feeling of the people. As Miller put it:

African dance has traditionally played an essential role in the culture of the tribes. Much more than entertainment, dance communicates emotions, celebrates rites of passage and helps strengthen the bonds between members of the tribe as a whole. (Miller, 2000, p.40)

The origin of Ikenike dance for example, is fairly remembered (Yavwaru, 2011). It was a still dance in which the performer had his feet tied to a pair of stills and with the assistance of colleagues stood up to walk and danced stylishly to the rhythm of drums (Yavwaru, 2011). The performer bent his body and exhibited all sort of styles to entertain spectators. By this method, he could also choose to dance on a rope or even on top of any object. Performers were believed to have been taught the secrets and expertise by the gods (Okpohie, 2008). Though the truth of this claim appears doubtful, the agility and the possibility of a person being able to dance on stills may lend credence to the mystical nature of the dance.

There was also Ovenren dance that was peculiar to Ughievwen and Udu people. Information as to which of these groups first practised it is not forthcoming, because in the course of my interaction with elders of both sides, each lay claim to being the first to practise it. However, for the Ughievwen, it is said to have been invented by a group of young men and women (Okpohie, 2008). Its main purpose was to entertain members of the public during festivals and important occasion. Few existing literature lend support to this claim. Ovenren dance, remarked Nukueye, "...is the fastest and most vigorous traditional dance in Ughievwen. This was why membership of this cultural troupe was restricted, only to very agile and able-bodied young men and women" (Nukueye, 2003, p. 47). Like the Ikenike dance, Ovenren was highly diabolical and spiritual. A cult was dedicated to the performance of the dance. Rituals were made that bound members initiated into the cult (Okpohie, 2008). As a result of the diabolical bond of inseparability among members of the cult, in later years, the troupe, could not pale into oblivion. For example, it was claimed that members of the troupe became so infatuated with each other that the ladies among them could not break the spiritual bond with men of their choice outside the group (Nukueye, 2003, p. 47). Those who dared were forced back by the diabolical powers of the Ovenren cult. The issue of freedom of choice of men notwithstanding, the group helped to portray the culture of the Ughievwen people and membership of such group was even a way of promoting fidelity.

As earlier mentioned, there was also Gbogoniyán and Egbada dance. Gbogoniyán dance was said to have been introduced into Ughievwen land by few individuals who travelled out to other lands from where they copied it (Nukueye, 2003, p. 48). It was a type of dance in which men wore attires of women, improvised breasts, put on earrings, lipsticks, wigs, skirts and blouses. However, since the 1980's, there has been no performance of the dance (Koyor, 2009). Egbada dance, on

the otherhand, was a solemn traditional dance that was performed to celebrate three basic occasions in Ughievwen land, namely; burial ceremonies, festivals to the gods and wars (Nukueye, 2003, p.49). Its performance over the years has gradually declined due largely to influence of foreign values that seem to have overshadowed it.

Burial Rites

Traditional burial rites were compulsory in Ughievwen world view. Burial rites were performed to ensure a departed father, mother or relative took their place in the spirit world (Oghi & Omonigho, 2014). It was believed by the Ughievwen that without befitting burial rites, the deceased remained a wretch in the spirit world. These rites occurred in five stages, namely; the building of booths, wake-keep (*Igbehonke*), the interment (*Orimwin-esho*), traditional rites (*Orimwin erhuere*) and the cleansing rituals (Oghi & Omonigho, 2014). It was much the case that where the children of the deceased had the financial strength to perform this and they refused, it could lead to death of one of them, suffering and different type of temptations in life. Thus, performance of these rites in pre-colonial Ughievwen society was considered a great feat and was in fact, a status symbol as it elicited respect and honour.

Westernization and Ughievwen Culture

The introduction of colonial rule to Ughievwen land seemed to have affected the key areas of the people's culture. This development is unfortunate because there is no way society can progress without memory of the past. A major agent in the subtle neglect of the people's culture has been the Christian religion. Its reception by the people has paled their traditional customs to insignificance. Wanton neglect of a people's culture could be detrimental to the proper upbringing of children and by extension, thwart efforts at nation building. As Akenzua put it:

... that all the anti-social activities we are witnessing today stems from the fact that the so-called western education has led our society to throw overboard our customs and traditions ...young men nowadays believe that these are now things of the past and that they have no effect..." (Akenzua, 2013, pp. 26-27)

For Ughievwen society, the neglect of the ethos attached to traditional marriages, indigenous healing practices, dances and traditional burial rites in preference to western practices could be calamitous. The tenets of traditional marriage fostered fidelity unlike the western practice that at the slightest provocation, parties seek divorce.

In the area of dance, the Ughievwen society stands the risk of allowing its cherished traditional practices pale into extinction. Apart from the general purpose of

entertainment which dances served, there were other occasions such as marriages, circumcision rites and even death, where dances like Ovenren, Ikenike, Gbogoniyen and Egbada are needed. Besides, “dances are forms of language through which people share each other’s pain and accomplishments” (Nasser, 1993, p. 6). Dances represented and will continue to be pointer to the culture of the Ughievwen people and efforts at nation-building must recognise this vital element.

On the other hand, the neglect that seems to have characterised the observance of traditional burial rites is not for the good of the people. Two cultures could co-exist without necessarily de-emphasizing the other. In the words of Gusfield,

the ability of old and new cultures and structures to exist without conflict and even with mutual adaptation is a frequent phenomenon of social change, the old is not necessarily replaced by the new. The acceptance of a new product; a new religion, a new mode of decision making does not necessarily lead to the disappearance of the older form. (Gusfield, 1971, p.19)

It is important to bear in mind that the so-called western practices that seem to dissuade modern day recipients has not prevented the same set of people from not inheriting properties left behind by their parents for whom burial rites ought to be performed. To deny one’s parents traditional respect in the form of burial rites on the basis of religious persuasion or any other reason(s), while at the same time inheriting their property amount to hypocrisy.

Again, the healing practices of the people may be condemned for lack of scientific proof. However, it is important to note that not all ailments can be proven scientifically, yet, cures exist for such ailments. No matter how negative and fetish the practice of divination may connote, its use has been in existence for ages such that even the Israelites had resort to it. (1 Samuel 28:8-25)

Suggestions and Conclusion

Nation-building involves efforts at keeping people together politically, economically and socially with the ultimate goal of improving the well-being of the citizenry. To achieve this goal, all aspect of the lives of citizens ought to be considered. Cultural resuscitation could be one sure way of achieving this task. In the light of this, it is held in this paper that for the Ughievwen people, a lot need to be done to revive their culture. This will involve:

- (i) The leadership of the umbrella body of the Urhobo, Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU) and the Government of Delta State should evolve ways of preserving the culture of the Ughievwen nation and cultures of other ethnic groups in Delta State in whatever form as it could influence development;

- (ii) Research efforts should be intensified by scholars on the cultures of most communities in Nigeria and fashion out ways of preserving these cultures;
- (iii) Scholars and bodies involved in cultural practices such as ceramics should help to project the importance of traditional symbols with a view to creating a unique cultural identity for Nigerian peoples which could overall, enhance the basis of livelihoods and thereby increase the number of enterprises that create employment;
- (iv) A good number of communities in pre-colonial Nigeria had ethos that helped to cushion the occurrence of crises and checked insecurity. An illuminating case is that of the Bassa People of Nassarawa State (Mayaki, 2014). This cultural practice is of relevance to present day Nigeria, where Nigerians in the North-east region live in perpetual feat of “Boko-Haram” attacks;
- (v) Above all, Nigeria mass media, in an era of globalization in which we presently live, should intensify its role by helping to project the cultures of Nigerian communities by disseminating what is desirable, needful and acceptable concerning Nigerian culture and not allowing it to be manipulated.

In the final analysis, culture remains the cornerstone of the past of people in any society. To denigrate it would amount to destroying the fabric on which society is built.

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Interviews

Interview with Madam Usen Okpohie, traditional healer, 110years, Okpako Ewheya, Owahwa Village, 14/5/2008.

Interview with Solomon Koyor, 58years, the *Ogbirhue* of Ughievwen Kingdom, Eyara Village, 14/11/2009.

Interview with Tarheyeren Yavwaru, 64years, trader, Owbrode Town, Udu Local Government Area, 14/2/2010.

Interview with HRH Thomas Okotete, Traditional Ruler, 74years, Otujeremi Royal Palace, 28/9/2010.

Interview with Pa Oghenevbede Igun, 74years, Eyara Village, 16/3/2011.