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Conflict of Cultures and the Need to Check Negative Cultural Dynamism in Nigeria

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Abstract

Colonialism provided the West the opportunity to introduce their culture into Africa. In Nigeria, the British introduced their culture through education and religion. The resultant interplay between the existing Nigerian indigenous culture and the British imposed Western culture is what is referred to as the conflict of cultures. The culture of a people lives with the people. Like every living thing, culture changes. The changing of culture or cultural dynamism is either negative or positive. Nigerian culture faces negative dynamism in many spheres of life. Using analytic and hermeneutic methods, this paper stressed the need to check negative cultural dynamism in Nigeria. The thesis of this paper is that not only has it become fashionable in Nigeria to do things the European or American way, but worse still, it has become fashionable not to do things the African way. The paper concluded that Africans or Nigerians should retain aspects of their culture that are good and change only those aspects that are bad. In other words, they should imbibe the spirit of positive cultural dynamism and eschew the negative.

Introduction

Prior to colonialism, Africans had been governing themselves. The various ethnic nationalities, which made up what is today known as Nigeria, had organized themselves

through one form of leadership or the other. These ethnic nationalities had lived politically and geographically separate from one another and in some cases, linguistically and culturally different (Awolowo 1947, pp.47-48). They include: the Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani, Tiy, Nupe, Igala, Gwani, Ijo, Itsekiri, Efik, Ibibio, Annang, Eket, Oron, Mbembe, Efut, Ekoi, Qua and Yako (Chukwu, 2007:55). The three major ethnic groups, however, were the Igbo, the Hausa and the Yoruba. The Hausa and the Yoruba practiced a loyalist system of governance where the dictates of the royal personalities (the Emir for the Hausa and the Oba for the Yoruba) were seen as sacrosanct. Hence, they were obeyed with total submissiveness. On the other hand, the Igbo practiced the republican system in which rulership authority lay with the masses of the different local communities and villages who assembled whenever occasion demanded and, under the moderation of the Obi or Eze or some titled elder, reached a consensus, which was necessarily implemented.

In November 1884 through January 1885, the Berlin West African Conference held at the instance of the German Chancellor, Otto Von Bismark (Chukwu, 2007, p. 85). Following decisions reached at the conference, which gave official sanctions for the colonization of Africa, the processes for the scramble and partition of Africa began. European countries such as Britain, France, Portugal, Spain and Belgium began to scramble for African nations. Nigeria was conquered and dominated by Britain (Rodney, 1972). The principal reason for this military conquest, according to Michael Crowder, was to enable Britain amalgamate the hitherto independent Nigerian communities into a modern political unit that would be capable of providing market for her manufactured goods and the purchase of Nigerian raw materials for her factories (Crowther, 1978, p. 190). Nigeria actually came into existence on January 1, 1914, when the British amalgamated the Northern and Southern protectorates. The word "Nigeria" is an English coinage suggested by Flora Shaw (who later became Lady Lord Lugard) to describe the various British protectorates in the Niger area (Crowther 1978, p. 190).

After colonizing Nigeria, the British government introduced the 'indirect rule' which was a colonial system of local administration whereby the British ruled Nigerians through their own traditional rulers and institutions. The system was most successful in the Northern part of Nigeria where the emirs, acting as agents of the British officials, were used to rule the people. The indirect rule system was also successful in most parts of Western Nigeria, with the use of the institution of the Obaship. However, in the Eastern part of Nigeria, especially the Igbo-speaking area where the traditional institution of chiefdom was not well rooted in the people's culture, the system failed. The British, therefore, resorted to some other ways, such as the "warrant chief" system, to effect control in the area. Thus, colonialism gained ground in Nigeria.

Colonialism provided the British the opportunity to introduce their culture into Nigeria through Education and Religion. Hence, they introduced into Nigeria ideas and ways of life that are typical of Western Europe. The resultant interplay between the existing Nigerian indigenous culture and the imposed British culture is what is referred to as the conflict of cultures. In the conflict, British culture (embodied in their Religion, Education and Technology) was aided by the British colonial authority which promoted it at the expense of the indigenous culture. A lot of obnoxious impressions were created about the Nigerian culture. Virtually everything about it was erroneously depicted as fetish or bad. This contributed a lot to the suppression of Nigerian culture (Rodney, 1972).

Moreover, the British culture was accompanied and backed up by the tantalizing products of advanced Science and Technology. Most European-made goods and equipment were seen to

be better than the locally made ones. The preference for these European products by most people led to an increase in the demand for them among the populace. With the increasing influence of British Education and Religion Technology, the inclination towards British culture generally kept rising. With time, it became fashionable to use British products and to do things the British way. This phenomenon has persisted over the years, to the effect that today those who observe or identify with any aspect of the Nigerian traditional culture are often seen by some Eurocentric thinkers as being uncivilized or unchristian.

Owing to the foregoing, Nigeria began to experience cultural dynamism. Naturally, when there is a conflict between the culture of a conquest government and that of the conquered, it is the culture of the conquered indigenous people that begins to lose its identity. The Nigerian case was not an exception. Other colonized countries had similar experiences. In Franco-phone countries of West Africa, the French had aimed at assimilating the people into French people. It was against the background of this French colonial policy of assimilation that Leopold Sedar Senghor developed his philosophy of "Negritude".

Cultural dynamism can be positive or negative. An aspect of culture is said to record positive cultural dynamism if positive changes take place in it - either by good objects (ideas or practices) being introduced into it or by bad objects being removed from it. On the other hand, an aspect of culture experiences negative cultural dynamism if negative changes take place in it - either that good objects are being removed from it or that bad things or ideas or practices are introduced into it from an alien culture.

There are two major processes through which objects of one culture can be transferred into another. They are: - Planned process and unplanned process. In the case of a planned process, the cultural intruders actually nurse the intention to introduce their culture into an area. Hence, they plan for it (budget money for it, arrange personnel, etc) and then execute it. On the other hand, the unplanned transfer of the objects of culture takes place without a deliberate attempt by those whose culture is being transferred. In this case, one or two persons just begin to adopt a practice or an idea which belongs to another culture. It could be by imitating a prominent personality of another culture who they see as a sort of model. With time, the practice spreads and eventually becomes part of the people's culture. For example, it is of common knowledge that it is not fashionable today for someone to put on suit and a pair of slippers. But if the president of America is seen appearing that way on television, the following day one or two students will emulate him and appear like that on campus. The next day, more students will appear that way. Before you know it, because of the high level of iconaclastism in Nigeria, it may gradually (ailbeit how long) become part of the Nigerian culture.

Considering the importance of culture and since cultural dynamism can be positive or negative, there is the need for every society to ensure that its cultural dynamism is properly directed. Culture is defined as the totality of a people's way of life. This includes their customary practices, dressing pattern and language. As such, culture is an important issue in human life. It was in recognition of this fact that the United Nations Organization (U.N.O) set aside May 21st every year to mark World Culture Day. It is the culture of a people that gives them their identity as a people. It is a people's culture that distinguishes them from the rest of humanity. A people's culture lives with them and, as such, influences them. It also influences the future generations of the people because it is what constitutes their culture that they inculcate into their young, and this is what is, in turn, passed on to future generations. The implication, therefore, is that whatever that finds its way into a people's culture also becomes

part of this influence, hence, the need for every society to guard against negative cultural dynamism.

Areas of Negative Cultural Dynamism in Nigeria, and the Way Forward

No doubt, there are many aspects of culture where positive dynamism is seen in Nigeria. In other words, the changes which European culture brought about in these areas are welcome. These include the areas of communication, transport, medicine, sports, agriculture, literacy, clothing and religion. Owing to the advanced science and technology which accompanied most of these aspects of culture, a lot of improvement in their levels of efficiency has been recorded over the years. In the case of religion, Christianity which was introduced into Nigeria by the West was the source of the knowledge of Jesus Christ as the only Son of God and the true way to the Almighty God. Another element of positive cultural dynamism in Nigeria is the expunging of certain unreasonable practices from the traditional culture. An example is the stoppage of the killing of twins in Nigeria by Lady Slessor, a foreigner who lived all her life in Calabar.

However, there are some aspects of culture where negative cultural dynamism is being experienced in Nigeria. They include: socio-economic living, customary practices, feeding system, language and wise-sayings.

Socio-Economic Living

The Nigerian traditional socio-economic setting, as was the case in the whole of Africa generally, was communalistic and egalitarian. There was little or no room for individualism. Land and other means of production belonged to the community. Everybody contributed to the production of food and everybody partook in the consumption of the products of labour. The guiding principle in socio-economic living was: 'From each according to his ability and to each according to his needs'. What any man could not afford immediately, he simply borrowed from his neighbour. In the traditional Igbo society, for instance, things were owned collectively. Nothing belonged to any particular person *per se,* not even children. A child was a child of all. Parents were only immediate custodians of the children they produced. For this reason, every adult saw it as a social responsibility to caution or discipline any child or adolescent he saw going astray. All these immensely helped to keep the traditional society morally intact.

Today, it is a different story. Western capitalism and its concomitant individualism have made it such that people must always 'mind their own businesses'. A child now belongs to his parents and none other. If an adult sees a child or an adolescent doing the wrong thing, he would look the other way as it is none of the person's business. Even when he decides to punish such a child, he may incur the wrath of his parents. This has contributed immensely to the difficulty associated with the checking of indiscipline among children and youths of today. In truth, this problem is complicated by the fact that the increasing level of envy nowadays has made it such that some horrible parents go out of their way to scold, punish, castigate or even try to tarnish the image of, other people's children for no just cause.

In any case, the way forward here is that we should try to revive that spirit of communalism which formed the basis of African traditional socio-economic living. Nigerians should operate with a mind-set that is directed towards a socio-economic transformation that is geared towards communalism and egalitarianism. The ever-increasing level of individualism in our society must be checked. Only through this can we achieve a retreat to that true spirit of 'brotherhood', 'Ujamaa' in Nyerere's language, for which traditional Africa is known

(Nyerere, 1970). Individualism, which accompanied Western Capitalism, hampers any form of social living.

It was in the light of the foregoing that the foremost patriots of African nationalism rejected capitalism. They include: Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria. Nkrumah, for instance, sees capitalism as a refined form of feudalism, and feudalism as a refined form of slavery (Nkrumah, 1974). Senghor rejected it in his philosophy of *Negritude* (Senghor, 1975). Nyerere also rejected it in his "Ujamaa" philosophy (Nyerere, 1970). Azikiwe, on his own part, did not advocate a total rejection of capitalism but only the bad elements therein, of which individualism is one (Azikiwe, 1979).

Customary Practices

There is the wrong impression among some Nigerians that whatever is customary is also uncivilized or even fetish. For this reason, some interesting aspects of the Nigerian culture which are not really bad are treated with levity. These include our traditional dances and the masquerade system.

It is admissible, however, that some masquerade groups, especially in the olden days, mixed their activities with idolatory; but that was due to the traditional religion practiced then. Most modern masquerade groups do not get involved in idolatory. It is acceptable that some nonentities sometimes hide under the cloak of masquerade group to unleash violence on some people. But legislation can take care of the situation. After all, our democracy in Nigeria has remained nascent for many years now, and yet we are still managing it.

The way forward here is that there should be a new orientation about our customary practices. It is wrong to believe that everything about our culture is bad. This is tantamount to throwing away the baby with the birth water. Traditional dances and masquerades are cultural instruments of entertainment and amusement. However, such practices as getting involved in idolatory, excesses in playing the masquerade and other evil practices should be discouraged. A situation where everything about Nigerian culture is sacrificed on the altar of Western culture is unacceptable. Lamenting a similar situation is his ageless book, *Thing Fall Apart,* Achebe (1958) quotes from "The Second Coming" by W.B. Yeats:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre, The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
>
> Things fall part, the centre cannot hold;
>
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

Feeding System

In the olden days, the feeding system was such that the traditional dishes were very rich in protein and other essential nutrients. Most importantly, our fore-fathers ate a lot of fruits and vegetables. Basically, our foods and drinks were natural. But in the wake of European civilization, most Nigerians abandoned the traditional feeding system. Rice is now the staple diet. Fried and baked foods are now the vogue. Smoked meat and fish are no more commonplace.

However, recent findings in food science and technology have revealed that there is an urgent need to revert to the Nigerian traditional feeding system. Experts in the field have

increasingly warned that the current feeding pattern plays a prominent role in the ever increasing health problems and high mortality rate recorded of late.

The way forward here, therefore, is that all have to answer to this clarion call by experts, and try as much as possible to revert to the traditional feeding style.

Language

Language is the means of human communication and a very important aspect of culture. It is estimated that Nigeria is composed of about 250 ethno-linguistic groups (Chukwu, 2007, p. 55). Rodney (1972) reported that during colonialism, African culture was immensely suppressed. Nigerian culture was not an exception. Being part of culture, language was also affected. The English language was deliberately promoted at the expense of the indigenous languages. This development is a minus for the British education because the promotion of a people's language should be one of the top priorities of any genuine education. Ejiofor (1998) anticipated this author on this view in Ezeani (2005): "As language is a crucial aspect of the people's culture, a prime index of their identity, education's one major role is therefore to preserve and promote the people's language" (p. 23).

The bad situation was made worse by the fact that the British people transliterated the words of Nigerian languages into the English language. In Igboland, for instance, this phenomenon is responsible for those words whose spellings run contrary to the rules of the language. For example, 'Awka' should be 'Oka', 'Offor' should be 'Ofo', 'Okafor' should be 'Okafo', etc. Such experiences as these have adverse effects on many Nigerian languages.

Part of the blame for the dying of Nigerian languages has also been apportioned to our early indigenous educators who either misinterpreted or simply failed to apply the dictate of the National Policy on Education as regards the language of instruction at the primary school level. Section 3, paragraph 4 of the National Policy on Education states: "Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother-tongue or language of immediate community and at a later stage, English" (NPE, 1981, p.13). But this has not been observed in the primary education system in Nigeria. In many Nigerian primary schools, especially those in the South-Eastern part of the country, it is not only that pupils are not taught in their mother-tongue but they are even punished for daring to speak it. This attitude is usually accompanied by the wrong impression that speaking vernacular hampers learning. This is manifested in the first reason given by Ogbonmwan (2001) in Ezeani (2005, p. 48) for parents' hesitancy in bringing up their children in vernacular. He stated, "… parents don't want their children to speak vernacular because they want them to be very good in their studies."

There is also the problem of iconoclastic attitude. Some people have the tendency to go for new things and disregard the old. There is iconoclastic flavor in the second reason given by Ogbonmwan (2001) in Ezeani (2005): "… many parents…fail to bring up their children in the mother tongue because they think it is not civilized (p. 48). Today, the vogue for parents is to have their children begin to speak English at a very early age. It is not intrinsically bad for children to begin to speak English at an early age; after all, English is the lingua franca in Nigeria. What is wrong, however, is that corresponding efforts are not made to ensure that the children in question also achieve a corresponding improvement in their proficiency in speaking and writing their mother-tongue.

Considering the importance of culture and the fact that language is a very crucial index of culture, this negative cultural dynamism must be checked. As a way forward, Nigerians need

a re-orientation with regards to language. They have to refrain from the act of, metaphorically, sacrificing the indigenous languages on the altar of the English language. There should be a rekindled interest in these indigenous languages, especially the three major ones-Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa-which form the linguistic tripod on which the nation rests.

Genuine attempt should be made by the government and Education stakeholders to address the issue of transliterated words and find a way of having their actual spellings in the respective Nigerian languages reverted to. This issue of the NPE dictate should be readdressed. State governments and well-to-do individuals in the society should offer scholarships at different academic levels to willing students to study the native languages. Above all, Nigerians should be oriented on the need to sustain the native languages.

Wise Sayings

Before Western Education, there had existed men of great wisdom in the various ethnic communities that made up the Nigeria of today, just as they existed all over Africa. These sages contributed to the wise-sayings in their communities. These wise sayings constituted the philosophy and ideology of the Nigerian traditional society and were inculcated into their young and, in turn, passed from generation to generation. That these men could not read or write had nothing to do with the wisdom they possessed. After all, the great ancient philosopher, Socrates, did not put down his ideas in writing, yet that has not denied him his place in the history of philosophy in particular and the history of the world in general.

With European Education, Nigerians were exposed to the wise-sayings of great men of history such as Jean-Jack Rousseau, John Kennedy, Fidel Castro, Adolph Hitler, Martin Luther King, Mahatma Ghandi, Abraham Lincoln and Shakespeare. Quotes from these people reveal a great deal of wisdom.

However, there is also great wisdom in the wise-sayings found in the various ethnic languages in Nigeria. The current situation where some people cannot express just few wise-sayings from their native/indigenous linguistic background is not a welcome development. It tends towards negative cultural dynamism.

The way forward here, therefore, is that much more attention has to be given to the indigenous wise-sayings. These native wise-sayings add a lot of beauty to the local languages. Above all, they mark out those who are versed in them as typical products of their origin, which is a thing of great pride.

Conclusion

The attempt here is not to suggest the extrication of Nigerian culture from the British or European culture. Such a task will not only be erroneous, it will also be impossible. The focus here is simply to encourage positive cultural dynamism and to discourage negative cultural dynamism.

It should, however, be noted that the term, 'Nigerian culture', as referred to here, is not the culture of any particular ethnic group of Nigeria, but the totality of the indigenous cultures in Nigeria. Even though there are areas of slight differences amongst them, they are bound by some kind of uniqueness which marks them out as a collectivity and distinguishes them from Western culture.

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