

# **Winning their Minds: The United States Information Service and the Development of Nigeria – American Relations, 1958-1988**

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## **Abstract**

Before 1960, it was difficult for the United States Government to officially implement the contents of its cultural diplomacy programme in Nigeria. This was because of the quite display of anti-American posture of the colonial government in Nigeria. However, the tide of events began to change after 1960 when Nigeria achieved political independence from Great Britain. This paper highlights and discusses the role of the defunct United States Information Service (U.S.I.S.) to the development of Nigeria-US cultural relations from 1958 through 1988.

## **Introduction**

In the fast changing world of today, the importance of information can not be overemphasised because, first, it is an important determinant of events in any political, socio-cultural and economic system; secondly, it reveals the long range aspirations as well as immediate needs of a people and finally, “it includes knowledge of the means by which objectives may be achieved and of the ways in which other actors may behave in response to one’s actions or in pursuit of their own independent objectives” (USIS, 1986:2). With these factors behind our minds, at this point, the focus of discussion shall be the contributions of the United States Information Service (USIS) in Nigeria to the consolidation of cultural relations between Nigeria and the United States of America. This is because both countries recognized that cultural relations serves as aid for conventional diplomacy which also helps in breaking down stereotypes; thus, facilitating peaceful interactions and the advancement of international understanding.

## **In Search of a Foothold: What Hope for the USIS in Nigeria?**

It is not a disputable fact that the USIS was the main agent of diffusion of United States official cultural diplomacy programme not only in Nigeria but in other countries of the West African sub-region during the period under consideration and the events in 1958 were indicative of the growing and stronger relationship between the United States and Nigeria such that American universities and colleges had a total of two hundred and fifty eight Nigerian students enrolled for various courses. In that year also, due to improved relations between Nigeria and the United States, the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs visited Nigeria with a team of American scientists, technologists, and trade negotiators from the private and public sectors. The primary aim of the delegation was to explore and where possible, establish trade, scientific and technological relations with Nigerians (USIA, 1985: 1). However, with Nigeria already under the firm grip of the British, the

situation left the Americans with very little room to operate politically and economically.

It will be recalled that after the Second World War and at the onset of the Cold War, it became apparent that the defunct U.S.S.R. would probably overrun certain areas across the globe which might reduce the sphere of influence of the United States, hence there was the urgent need to match words with action on the side of the Americans who quickly launched the Marshall Aid Plan which was intended to assist Western European economies and thus indirectly helping some of them like the British did to help her colonies (Fubank, K., 1978: 287). With this situation, the United States Government was left with no choice than to penetrate Nigeria through education and a review of available literature has indicated that the United States deliberately and consciously made use of schools and institutions as instruments of winning the minds of Nigerians and spreading American education in particular and American culture in general. Thus, cultural and educational exchanges between Nigeria and the United States began to receive attention at top governmental levels.

What is more, the United States Government viewed the various exchanges as an extension of its cultural diplomacy programme to an emerging African power. Perhaps, this thought might have prompted the United States International Cooperation Administration (USICA) – a United States Federal Government agency responsible for aid administration, to contract Ohio State University in 1958 to send educators on a three year programme to Western Nigeria (USIA, 1985:2).

The question now is why were these educators sent to Western Nigeria? The answer is not far-fetched. First, Nwafor Orizu's American Council on African Education had succeeded in exposing many Nigerians youths particularly those from the Eastern part of the country to American universities and colleges, and of course the personality and progressive activities of the late Nnamdi Azikiwe – a United States trained Nigerian also contributed to the acceptance of American education in the Eastern section of the country; hence, the United States Government thought it fit to concentrate on other parts of the country that were yet to accept the concept of American education fully.

Perhaps, another reason that can be advanced for the choice of Western Nigeria by the United States Government was the fact that aside from the colonial government in Nigeria, the most vociferous group that were unimpressed by American education in Nigeria came mainly from the British educated Yoruba of Western Nigeria who incidentally also controlled the print media especially in Lagos during the 1940s and 1950s. Thus, the United States Government in its wisdom decided to spread American culture through the school system in Western Nigeria because the American educators were expected to teach in the various schools and where possible live and interact freely with the people.

Although, some might argue that the above situation was intended to promote mutual understanding, tolerance and international peace, the fact remains that the ultimate aim of the American motive was to spread and inculcate American culture in Nigeria. This is important because Nigeria was an intellectual battle ground that needed to be conquered during the decades immediately preceding, and after independence.

### **USIS: Its Mandate and Programmes**

At this point, our attention shall be focused on programmes designed by the United States Government to promote and sustain educational exchanges between Nigeria and the United

States of America. Hence, the activities of the United States Information Service in Lagos shall be brought under focus because it is at the centre of the various cultural programmes between Nigeria and the United States. This is so because a primary function of the agency is “to inform foreign nations about U.S. policies and society and to provide opportunities for U.S. citizens and citizens of other countries to learn about each other” (Northerdge, K., 1973: 85). In discharging its duties, the organisation employs the use of personal contacts, publications, broadcasts by the Voice of America, libraries and exhibitions to realize its mandate in Nigeria.

With the assistance of many co-operating bodies, the United States Information Service in Lagos handles the cultural exchange programmes. Here, the activities of the Whitney Young Library of the U.S.I.S., Lagos and the Educational and Cultural Affairs Offices shall be brought under focus because of their contributions to the promotion and sustenance of educational exchanges between Nigeria and the United States of America. The Whitney Young Library has been playing a major role in the promotion of educational exchanges between Nigeria and the United States since it was opened in Lagos in 1974 (Henderson, J. W., 1969: 62 – 89). Before 1974, the library was known as the USIS Library Lagos with branch network across the Federation. It was only in 1974 that the library became known as the Whitney Young Library (Henderson, J. W., 1969: 62 – 89). Among other goals, the library is expected to provide the latest and most accurate information on the United States Government and its policies, provide in-depth information about American values, history and culture, adequate funding, training and policy orientation to enable library staff members to effectively maintain and promote the collection and provide high quality reference and outreach services, ensure that the physical facility is attractive, and appropriate to its national environment, and ensure that no patron with serious interest in the United States should be denied access to the library. (Henderson, J. W., 1969: 129)

To achieve the goals set above, the Whitney Young Library serves mainly as a reference library and a major resource centre for students, intellectuals, writers, journalists, educators and researchers. The library holds a large stock of books, journals, microfilms, and periodicals mainly in the fields of American politics, government, history, culture, economics, foreign policy, democracy, and education, to mention but a few. The Whitney Young Library also engages in inter-library book exchange programme with the Library of Congress and other research centres and institutions in the United States. Furthermore, the library also engages in book donations to institutions and research centres in Nigeria. For example, since its inception, the Nigeria Institute of International Affairs has benefited in cash and kind from the U.S.I.S. The United States Government through the U.S.I.S. made available the sum of USD 280,000.00 which was used to establish the institute’s library. Furthermore, the first two librarians of the Nigeria Institute of International Affairs (N.I.I.A.) were funded by the Ford Foundation for training in the United States (USIA, 1997).

Thus, with the aims and responsibilities of the Whitney Young Library in Nigeria, it will not be wrong to argue that the library has been serving as a strong pillar in the popularization and consolidation of educational exchanges between Nigeria and United States. This is because without the library and its services in Nigeria it would have been very difficult if not virtually impossible to conduct extensive research on American related issues and topics in Nigeria, except the researcher is financially well endowed as to be

able to undertake research trips to the United States. What is more, the library also offers research support to the Federal, States and Local Government personnel in Nigeria. Its services are also extended to Nigerian journalists who occupy a unique position in the struggle to consolidate educational exchange programmes between Nigeria and the United States (LaRay Denzer: 4 – 6).

In recognition of the potent power of the press and the unique position which the Fourth Estate occupies in any society, the United States Information Agency designed some fellowship programmes for the enhancement of journalists all over the world. These fellowship programmes are very competitive in nature and the U.S.I.S. serves as the coordinating agency in Nigeria. The thinking in official circles in the United States is that if journalists from other parts of the world are brought to the United States for short training and other fellowship programmes, the United States stands to gain more due to the multiplier effect such an action is bound to produce.

It is believed that on returning home, such a journalist would be in a better position to explain the policies and actions of the United States better to his audience thereby making it possible for more people to think positively about America. Relating this to our situation in Nigeria and other countries of the West African sub-Region, it is hoped that through a press that is favourably disposed to the aims and aspirations of the United States it becomes easier for the proponents of American education and culture to speak out their minds, and also have a press that will engage in beating the drums for the support of America's policies in Nigeria, and the other countries. This was actually the situation experienced in Nigeria when the debate for a shift of education policy from the British oriented to the American oriented policy was re-opened a decade after the achievement of independence in Nigeria. Furthermore, the adoption of the American system of government during the Second Republic (1979 – 1983) in Nigeria was also a direct result of the various educational exchanges that took place between Nigeria and the United States.

The United States has made it possible for some Nigerian journalists to participate in the Alfred Friendly Press Fellowship. A working visit of six months in the United States is provided to a journalist under this fellowship. While in the United States, the journalist is made to participate in an orientation seminar in Washington D.C. during which training sessions are provided on the functions of the American press, the legal aspects of press freedom, the political and socio-economic structure of the United States, and the problems and prospects of the media in America.

Above all, the primary objective of the seminar is to enable the participants to adjust easily "... to a new cultural environment and to familiarize the fellows with media technology and journalistic practices in the United States" (USIS, 1986: 8). After the orientation, the schedule of the journalist includes a study and working tour of the United States Congress, the State Department, the White House and some selected media houses. Professional appointments and socialization are also included in the programme (USIS, 1986: 9).

Another programme available to Nigerian journalists is the American Society of Newspaper Editors Fellowship. The American Society of Newspaper Editors is a society of editors of daily newspapers published in the United States and Canada, which was established in 1922 with the primary objective "to serve as a medium for exchange of ideas and the professional growth and development of its members; (it) campaigns against

secrecy in government and (tries) to open channels of official information at federal, state and local levels” (Hansen, A. C., 1996: 120). With this, it becomes evident that any journalist who is awarded a fellowship by the society will definitely return to his country with new ideas, orientation, and knowledge of the responsibility of government to its citizens.

The society’s fellowship comes in form of an exchange programme which is administered by the Edward R. Murrow Centre at the Fletcher School, Tufts University, U.S.A. Among other reasons, the exchange programme was instituted to provide professional journalists from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Central and Latin American, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East with a short but intensive exposure to journalistic techniques and practices in the United States, and provide understanding of the importance and functioning mode in communications between American journalists and their foreign counterparts. (Hansen, A. C., 1996: 122)

Above all, the programme allows the participating journalists to familiarize themselves with the working environment and the daily operations of the American press. Again, it must be stated that the ultimate goal of these press fellowships is to create in any participating nation corps of journalists who would be American oriented in thinking and hence become favourably disposed towards issues relating to the United States in their home country. The Educational Services Department of the U.S.I.S. has been involved in the counselling of students who intend to study in the United States. At the head of this department is an Educational Counsellor, and some of the responsibilities of the department include the provision of information on: the physical characteristics of United States colleges and universities, the organization and administration of the United States institutions.

The United States minimum academic standards required for admission into a college or university, financial aid, scholarship procedure, and pre-registration conditions including tuition fees, housing, feeding medical, insurance, living expenses, etc. The duties of the foreign student advisor who is a source of comprehensive information on numerous subjects such as United States Government regulations, university regulations, visa applications, and working permits. Class size in United States colleges and universities, duration of lectures, number of lectures for graduate courses per week, a semester and in some cases in a degree programme. Library organization, the course unit system, and the role of the professor and student in and outside the classroom. Average seasonal temperatures in the United States, standard reference sources, and publications containing information on scholarships, fellowships and loans. How to handle acceptance offers, how to secure visa, transfer of money and types of clothes to buy before the student leaves for the United States. The state of education and educational institutions in the United States through the organization of lectures and seminars. (USIS, 1986: 1 – 3)

From the analysis above, it can be seen that the Educational Services Department of U.S.I.S. has been contributing positively to the growth and consolidation of educational exchanges between Nigeria and the United States because it has been involved in the dispensation of accurate and adequate information about the educational, social and cultural environment of the United States to Nigerians thereby helping to spread American cultural influences in Nigeria.

Like other departmental programmes of the U.S.I.S., it is intended that the existence of a viable and functional educational services department will not only assist in the creation

of awareness among Nigerian youths of the advantages of American culture, but this will also have a multiplier effect because the more Nigerians leave to study in the United States, the more American culture becomes consolidated in Nigeria as these students are expected to return and share their experiences with fellow Nigerians. What is more, some of the qualified persons returning from the United States are most likely to assume leadership positions either in the public or private sector sooner or later, and it is expected that they should be able to influence government policies and decisions to lean towards the United States.

At the heart of all cultural and educational exchange programmes of the U.S.I.S. is the Cultural Affairs Officer who leads the team at the Cultural Affairs Department. Educational exchange programmes, administered by this department can be classified into two viz: fully academic oriented programmes, and non-academic programmes that are tailored to increase the participants' level of understanding of the United States. Programmes in this category shall be brought under focus at this point of our discussion.

The International Visitors' Programme was initiated by the U.S.I.A. to expand U.S. cultural influence in other countries of the world. The programme started in December 1940 when about forty persons per year began coming to the U.S. from Latin America for 60-day visits. This was an effort aimed at promoting inter-American solidarity. From inception, the programme had multiple designations; it was only in 1965 that the State Department chose the title "International Visitor" to describe the entire programme designations.

The programme was highly significant because the participants were basically a corps of individuals who would soon assume leadership role in their chosen careers. This has made the programme to be described as being directed to "the moulders of thought and opinion" (USIA, 1995: 10). Any keen follower of United States diplomacy will not be surprised by this comment because the United States Government is always interested in investing to educate future leaders who would not only be favourably disposed towards the United States and its policies but would also contribute to international peace and understanding.

Initially, the programme was directed at bringing people from the developed countries to the United States but with the passage of the International Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948 otherwise known as the Smith-Mundt Act, the post war person-to-person exchange programme became a significant worldwide effort. Essentially, the International Visitor Programme is directed towards the creation of links between the American society and other countries by putting persons with similar interests in touch with each other. Also, it is the intention of the organizers of the programme that the participants will learn more about the United States and its people, its character, and its institutions, and they have a chance to explain something about their countries to their American hosts. Each year, about thirty Nigerian leaders from all sectors of the economy are chosen to participate in the programme that is jointly sponsored by the U.S.I.A. and several private groups in the United States (USIA, 1995:11).

Each International Visitor Programme is tailored to meet the participants' needs either to increase or update his level of understanding of the United States. Hence, the programme content is usually very rigorous and highly academic in nature, with visits to libraries, museums, research centres, universities and high schools; home hospitality, cultural and sporting appointments are also part of the schedule of any participant in the

programme. It is important to mention that due to the dynamic nature of international diplomacy, the International Visitors' Programme has being re-designated International Visitors' Leadership Programme. This is why the programme involves work by U.S. embassy officials, U.S.I.A. headquarters, private sector educational and cultural exchange agencies, and the staff and volunteers of community-based organizations generally referred to as Councils for International Visitors (C.I.V.).

On the other hand, the Voluntary Visitors Programme brings to the United States, persons whose expenses are wholly or mostly funded from non-United States government sources. A voluntary visitor visits the United States for his professional interest or reasons and such a visitor is offered the assistance of the U.S.I.A. for two days to two weeks of his stay. A voluntary visitor must meet the same leadership criteria for the programme like a fully funded United States Government international visitor participant (USIA, 1995: 12 – 13). On the whole, the international and voluntary visitors programmes have contributed and will continue to contribute to the growth and development of American culture and education in Nigeria because majority of Nigerians who have benefited from these programmes are usually drawn from the educational sector and they return home to share with their colleagues their newly acquired knowledge of the United State (Interview: Shola Ogungbe).

The United States Peace Corps project though not exclusively directed towards Nigeria nevertheless had its own impact on the growth and consolidation of Nigeria-U.S. relations. This is so because the participants who were mainly teachers helped in raising the level of awareness of their host communities about the potentials that exist in the United States. Founded in 1961 by R. Sargent Shriver, the most conspicuous goal of the project was “to see people as people - to come to terms with human beings as persons apart from qualifying adjectives” (Sargent, R. S., 1961: 1 – 2). The programme was also an attempt to make people discover their elusive roots. It was the hope of the founders of the Peace Corp that by recruiting blacks to serve in the programme because the possibilities were high for some of them to discover their roots; hence, the “mad” drive to recruit black-youth volunteers to serve in Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and other African countries. According to Shriver, “injustice is done when men place high priority on race or class rather than the personality (Jonathan, Z., 1995).” Thus, it was no surprise to find most of the Peace Corp volunteers engaged in selfless service for the upliftment of the human race. This has made some authors to argued that the programme is an instrument for the promotion of humanism and cultural relations, and as Cain (Cain, W. E., 1993: 127 – 140) has rightly observed: “the fact that you meet and made contacts with new people, a new language, a new culture, and the fact that you create ... real understanding among people - you are no longer an American, you're ..., a human being.

Perhaps, it is worthy of mention at this point that the operation of the United State Peace Corps in Africa attracted a lot of criticism from within and outside the United States. First, African-Americans demonstrated a nonchalant attitude towards the scheme which they argued was a colossal waste of energy, time and resources. They argued that it was better working for their people in their own way rather than going across the ocean. Hence the question they frequently asked was why volunteer work abroad when there was “enough work to be done at home?” (Jonathan, Z., 1995: 1026)

In response to the above question, the United State Government and the promoters of

the Peace Corps project maintained that “in serving overseas they are serving their own country – the United States” (Jonathan, Z., 1995: 1026). Despite the stand of the United States Government, events in the U.S. cast a shadow of doubt on the actual aims of the Peace Corps. For instance, the existence of racial prejudices and the emergence of Civil Rights Movements in the United States and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. led to demonstrations across the African continent. In Nigeria, as in many other African countries, the Peace Corps became the focus of attack by demonstrators, one handbill distributed by the demonstrators read “Yankee Peace Corps go home and promote peace.” When and Where?

Worthy of mention also was the fact that during his visit to Nigeria in 1964, Malcolm X told his audience that “Peace Corps Volunteers were spies subjugating Africa in the guise of assisting it” (Bruce, P. M., 1991: 38) This made many African countries that were just emerging from the shackles of colonialism to see the United States foreign aid organization - The Peace Corps, as an organization which drove a wedge between Africans by seducing them with American opulence, values, and ideas and at the same time spying on their host. Little wonder that the programme was abruptly terminated in many African countries including Nigeria in the early 1970s.

At the inception of the Peace Corps programme, it was difficult finding black youths for the groups of volunteer teachers bound for Nigeria and other West African nations due to the reasons mentioned above. However, in 1961 a group of one hundred teachers arrived the shores of Nigeria and by the time the programme was brought to an end in 1971 more than two thousand American youths had served in Nigeria. These youths, aside from performing their primary assignment as teachers also participated in agriculture and rural community development projects (Brent, A. K., 1971: 257).

In conclusion, though short-lived, the Peace Corps volunteers in Nigeria contributed their own quota to the growth of American values and ideas in Nigeria because they were able to demonstrate to their host communities that academic pursuits and accomplishments must be marched with vocational education and selfless service to the development of humanity.

Closely related to the International Visitors Leadership Programme and the United States Peace Corps project is the Operation Crossroads Africa that was instituted in 1964 by the United States Government. The programme was designed to give Africans the opportunity to travel to the United States for six weeks to gather first hand knowledge about American culture. Also, the programme was also aimed at making Africans meet their professional colleagues with similar interest in the United States (USIS, 1985: 47 – 50). Since the programme was designed to expose the participants to America culturally, it was only youth leaders and educators that were selected for participation because of the multiplier effect that would accompany their visit when they return home.

In spite of the emphasis placed on the professional content of this programme, it must be mentioned that it also contributed to the enhancement of cultural relations between Nigeria and the United States. The programme content was fashioned to include discussion topics in agriculture, education, economics, African studies, science, technology, law, and university administration. Other programmes included in the schedule of participants were, visits to film houses, museums, national parks, to mention but a few. Again, like other fellowship programmes handled by the U.S.I.S., it has been impossible to know the



actual number of Nigerians who participated in this programme due to lack of statistical data.

The introduction of the John F. Kennedy Memorial Essay contest increased the awareness of Nigerian students to American culture. Introduced in 1965 and sponsored by the United States Information Service in Lagos, in cooperation with the Federal Ministry of Education in Nigeria and the JFK Essay Contest National Committee – a group of distinguished Americans and Nigerians, the competition played a vital role in promoting and activating the intellectual resources of the Nigerian youth as well as reinforcing the ideals and goals of straightening and enhancing peace and international understanding. These were the principles which President John F. Kennedy cherished and fought to sustain during his life-time (USIA, 1985: 24 – 25).

There were three levels of competition for prizes – the school, zonal, and national level. Introduced with the objective of stimulating national recognition of the individual winner and an awareness of the dedication of the Nigerian youth, “the national winner received complete three year scholarships to study in any Nigerian university, in later years of the contest, the national award winners were eligible to compete for a scholarship to study at a United State graduate school (USIA, 1985: 25).

Before the contest was suspended in 1981, about thirty six Nigerian high school students emerged as winners at the three levels of the competition. However, the competition was re-introduced in 1991 at the tertiary level only, and it was co-sponsored by the American Studies Association of Nigeria (ASAN) and the United States Information Service, Lagos. The Competition was suspended again in 1995 due to the inability of ASAN and USIS to hold the annual American Studies conference in Nigeria. On the whole, not only has the JFK Essay Contest succeeded in promoting a healthy intellectual competition among Nigerian students, it also contributed to the popularity of American studies in Nigeria.

## **Conclusion**

To some extent the United States has succeeded in winning the minds of Nigerians especially the ruling and elite class. Through the various exchange programmes, many Nigerians were, and are still being sent to the United States through programmes administered by the U.S.I.S. (now known as the Public Affair Department), most of the programmes discussed above were designed to give the beneficiaries first hand knowledge about the American people, society, and system of government.

In the final analysis one can safely say that in international politics and cultural projection, the question of influence is fundamental. Most countries are interested in projecting their influence for both political and economic reasons, and as such the protection of one particular nation’s interest in another, ensuring the safety of their investments, or lending political support to a way of life that a particular power is interested in have all become basic ingredients of cultural diplomacy used to secure influence by super-powers over small nations. There is no doubt that cultural relations have become a means for nations to achieve their national interests in other nations, thus one can argue that it has gradually evolved into a strategy for defending national interest.

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