

YOUTHS AND CREATIVITY IN THE NEXT DECADE: ASABA AS A PARADIGM OF UNESCO CREATIVE CITY

Chika A. ThankGod (PhD)

Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba, Delta State – Nigeria

chikatg@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

The real source of indigenous designs and motifs are our cultural practices. These cannot be extracted without a direct participation and connection with the rudiments of our ethnic expressions. The decline in the alignment of our present day youth from their roots is making this a frustrating venture. Motifs like the indigo dye lines, shapes and geometric forms, the popular western lizard and ethnic facial marks (ila), the uli lines and the nsibidi inscriptions were born out of a creative mingling with the indigenous dimensions that bore them. Hence in celebrating Asaba's inclusion to the UNESCO creative cities, a conscious effort is solicited from capable quarters to 'turn the hearts of the children to the fathers'. This will enable our intrinsic creative qualities to be extracted. Its great value can then be employed in a more competitive and qualitative expression of our uniqueness and creative competence, reflecting our indigenous signature on the global space.

KEY WORDS: Asaba, UNESCO, Youth, Indigenous, Creativity, Next Decade

Introduction

December of the year 2023 saw Asaba's designation as a UNESCO creative city!(Network, 2023). This was a very strategic event in the history of Asaba.



*Figure 2 Official image for Asaba As a UNESCO creative city - Film Category.
(Network, 2023)*

On 27th August, 1991 Delta State was carved out of the former Bendel and Rivers States of Nigeria. It used to be an integral part of the former Mid-Western Region and later the defunct Bendel State. Asaba is the capital city of the Delta State of Nigeria (NigeraGalleria, 2021). It lies strategically along the west bank of the famous River Niger, across the historic Niger Bridge from Onitsha. It is believed to have been founded by Nnebisi in the 19th century. It was once the colonial capital of southern Nigeria and a renowned trade centre that hosted the Royal Niger Company between 1886 – 1900 (Asaba, n.d.). The city which previously had nine quarters ‘Ahabaeboitenani’, made up of settlers from different places was believed to have been eventually founded on the basis of five quarters named after the five grandsons of Nnebisi, namely – Umuezei, Ugbomanta, Umuagu, Umuaji and Umuonaje (Association, n.d.). Asaba has grown steadily in various aspects as a state capital. She has particularly excelled herself in the indigenous film industry, the art on which its designation as a UNESCO city was based. A noble effort has been made in the indigenous film industry in Asaba and equivalent effort is required in complementary areas to ensure a well-rounded creative city and state for National impact.

The youths are an integral part of these efforts to preserve our tomorrow. Our tomorrow also needs to be preserved in a texture that will not make the future generation aliens to the roots that bore them. The indigenous character is the authentic link and identity between the future and the past. Indeed, today is the vital connection between yesterday and tomorrow. Establishing this link appears to be a herculean task, hence – bringing the youths to the table for the next decade.

Obviously, the table is set, the decade is ready to unfold, there are a handful of willing tools to do the bringing but where are our youths? It can be concluded that the table is the mood and circumstance of this present time we live, the decade is the next set of ten years and the BRINGERS are the honest adults who like UNESCO are watching out for willing players acting in the right direction. Those who the pains and joys of their yesteryears are deeply set in the burden of their tomorrow. The big question then is, ‘who are the youth’? Are they merely the young lads or ladies here and there, everywhere in Asaba? Are these young people around Asaba today really our youth, our offspring, our future and our hope?

Do they have the semblance of the things that make Asaba what she really is?

Do they smell the smoke from the rural fireplace? Do they know the taste of roasted oil palm nuts in hot ash? Can they identify the edible forage for our domestic livestock? How many proverbs

can they say much less interpret? Are they competent to start a fire for the evening meal with firewood or capable of going to the neighbour's fireplace to collect glowing embers to make theirs (*'igutaoku'*)? Is the taste of smoke in their meal an embarrassment or a nostalgic relish? Can we pass a sensitive message to them in a coded mother tongue as a safety measure and symbol of a root that can mark them to be spared?

This is not an insult to wearers of baggy drooping trousers or slangs from a language that is alien. It is not a disdain for greetings in a tongue that has no term for the elderly or a poise that clothe you in shame towards that which is the essence of who you are? Priding in the strange sickening declaration that, *'I don't understand Igbo'* or *'I have never been to my village?'*, meanwhile you are ready to kill to obtain a visa and *'japa'*. Shamefully denying or anglicising the rich and meaningful native name you were given for a guy-name that eventually means stone, serpent or absolutely nothing! Who do the owners of the cultural motions you embrace recognise you as? Are you worth anything to them? Our youth might just be getting ready to wake up to a sorry shock that they are just unpaid advertising agents, selling a forced product at the expense of their entire generation at a cheap non-refundable price!

Asaba, Delta and Nigeria youths need to wake up! As fitly put in the local parlance, *'Know thyself no be curse!'* Our youth are in a dangerous stupor and on the verge of losing what matters most to them and to every individual – their heritage. It's time to discover the rich origin and heritage you have, pride in it and sell it as your price and reward for greatness and untold creativity. This is a unique trophy for your act in the scene of life. You are greater than what you are borrowing and priding in. You are worth more than you are being offered, to sell or abandon your birth-right. You were meant to churn your own greatness from your source and origin. Don't demean it. Don't relegate it, don't resent it, don't disappoint it! It's a treasure hid in the bowels of your being.

According to the UNESCO cities network, these were the values Asaba added that qualified them to be designated a creative city:

As a Creative City of Film, Asaba is dedicated:

- To identify and nurture local creative talents, providing them with training opportunities and platforms to showcase their skills within the film industry;
- To foster collaboration and technical exchange within the film industry;
- To create opportunities for continuous growth and development of the creative sector, promoting innovation and expansion of culture; and
- To spread historical awareness and to provide cultural support, ensuring that the rich cultural heritage of Asaba continues to be celebrated and shared.(Network, 2023)

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To identify and nurture local creative talents, providing them with training opportunities and platforms to showcase their skills within the film industry;

This is a laid down plan to bridge generational gaps by ensuring that creativity is groomed from the grassroots. It establishes and ensures that a connection between the past and the present is maintained. There must be a conscious effort to constantly reap and inculcate the indigenous values from identified flag-bearers to the up-coming generation to ensure that indigenes do not turn aliens in the long run. If the human resource deposits in this area are not harnessed they will be harvested by others and brain drain syndrome will apply. Consequently identifying these talents is one thing, grooming them with an adaptation to the unique style and signature they are meant to represent is another. The latter is a vital dimension because it is the ingredient that customises them with the vital indigenous flavour. When a mind is groomed with a healthy disposition to its roots, in the deep moments when creativity is sought and hunted for within, strategic ideas will not fail to well up. This repeats with a transitional ripple effect and every custodian pours into the persons that are being raised under them. This is how cultures are packaged for a systemic global impact

To foster collaboration and technical exchange within the film industry;

When the next man creating sees the others as partners in what he does, the will to work as a team builds up. Collaboration that will challenge towards improvement and excellence in creativity will be the result. Unhealthy competitions will cease and creativity with a common focus (to improve the things that bind us together) will be at the core. Teammates will no longer be the enemy but capacity enablers for a powerful national front that can contend in the global stage. Freedom to enhance by exchanging technical treasures will boost quality and overall outputs across the nation.

To create opportunities for continuous growth and development of the creative sector, promoting innovation and expansion of culture:

The whole essence of this move is to entrench continuity in growth. The positive results of collaborations and technical exchanges will call for a repeat and that will lay a foundation for continuity in growth and much needed development in creativity. This will trigger innovation and compel a cultural expansion beyond boundaries. When the basis for advancing is empowered by retreating, the past becomes a regular meeting spot for the treasure of the future. A constant glance at the past becomes a critical proven routine for engendering collaborations and instigating exchanges which will ensure continued growth and development of cultural innovation. As popularly said, 'a people without a past cannot boast of a future'. This is captured more aptly in this local adage, *'if you don't know where you are coming from how will you know where you are headed?'* or as creatively put in another similar version, *'if you don't know where the rain started wetting you, you cannot tell where it stopped as well'*. This particular value touches on the truth that two heads are better and would yield a better result than one. In this situation, effective collaboration and exchange must be based on the unique elements of the indigenous creativity. This is found no other place than in the past and will be enhanced by no other but the present vision bearers.

To spread historical awareness and to provide cultural support, ensuring that the rich cultural heritage of Asaba continues to be celebrated and shared.

Any culture without the hope of continuity is heading for extinction. The modern instrument for continuity is documentation and records. Culture can be captured in creative expressions of art and

history, then stored for generations unborn to appreciate and learn from. You cannot become or identify with what you don't know or recognise no matter how prestigious it is. Quality value is created and preserved by documenting things that are authentically yours. These documented values are used for awareness and for affirmation. Flaunting it with a persuasive, confident and proud air identifies it on the cultural heritage scale. Its position on this scale improves over time until the culture becomes an authority in the genre it is known for. If Asaba was busy acting Indian and Chinese films they would not have done it better than Indians and the Chinese. They acted what was natural and indigenous to them and it threw them out on the UNESCO spotlight.

A cue can be taken from this template of what put Asaba on the UNESCO stage. The table is set, a modern and fresh example is laid down. How many youths are willing to discover the uniqueness of their roots and turn it to a custom-made instrument for taking over their world? If China, Japan, America and Germany are shamelessly making other nations bow to them though their uncompromising footprints enshrouded in cultural elements. Anyone else who dares to do likewise will certainly get the same attention and results.

Definition of Terms

Ila – Facial markings

Uli – Indigo dye

Nsibidi – Ancient Symbol based writing

Iguta Oku– Fetching fire

Japa – Oversea migration syndrome

Know thyself, no be curse - It is a noble thing to understand your capacity ahead

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