

CULTURE: PROMOTING CREATIVITY, UNITY AND IDENTITY

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Abstract

Culture is one of the phenomenal premise and foundation upon which a well-grounded creativity, unity and identity of a people could be built. This paper takes a cursory look at what culture is all about and then delves into how it can veritably serve as a fulcrum for the promotion of the way of life of a people. The paper avows that since the world is now a global village, it is nearly impossible for us to remain uninfluenced by other cultures. It therefore advocates that we should strive towards learning the positive aspect of other people's culture and domesticate them to suit our needs and purposes.

Keywords: Culture, Promoting creativity, Unity and Identity.

Introduction

Culture can be regarded as a recognizable pattern of living, which include physical/ material and mental practice and expressions by/of a group of people that distinguishes them from other peoples, societies or nations. Visual arts and other forms of arts (non-visual arts) which have evolved from activities of mankind are veritable avenues for fostering culture as a phenomenon towards promoting creativity, unity, and identity, particularly in Nigeria. This paper discusses culture and its influences on visual arts and other creative activities of man, such as writing, music, dance and others, in relation to the symbiotic relationship between culture and the arts. This paper also asserts the fact that arts in their various forms draw their strength from culture, while the former serve as veritable agents of projecting the latter. Suggestions for the effective promotion of creativity, unity and identity via the vehicle of culture are also articulated.

What is Culture?

It is pertinent to clearly understand some of the keywords in this paper before we delve into the crux of the matter. Culture as a phenomenon has been defined by several writers. Its Latin origin connects it with "cultura" or "colere", the past participle of a cult which means "cultivate or

“inhabit”. Culture according to The New Webster’s Dictionary, includes “...the social and religious structures and intellectual and artistic manifestation, etc.

Outhwaite (in Orifa, 2003) shared his perception of the meaning of culture thus: “His cultural inheritance is the natural world plus what he has made of it by its material creations, his arts, science, ideas, and philosophies.” Culture is therefore informed by the creative processes employed by man in evolving a unique pattern of doing things shared by a particular society.

An average traditional African setting is an embodiment of cultural and aesthetic panorama that could be tangible or non-tangible; these include artefacts, costume, language, religion, marriage rites, burial rites, birth rites, greetings, folktales, and folklores, which are transmitted from generation to generation amongst a people or nation. There are major cultural legacies that shape people’s worldviews and identities. The cultural practices of a people influence the direction of the form and content of their art. In the same breath, the creative outputs, such as art objects, songs, moral/creative values and so on, play a crucial role in the projection and sustenance of culture and values. The symbols with which the artist works are framed by the prevailing visual and oral cultural elements in society.

Our Warped Cultural Perception and Western Indoctrination

Culture will remain powerful and continue to make an impact as much as the people make it so. Unfortunately, some Africans continue to look down on their culture, while looking up to the foreign ones for inspiration and validation. Falola (2020) argues that scholars and policy makers are of the opinion that Africans should throw away their traditions in favour of Western ideologies. This development has profoundly warped African cultural perception, thereby distancing themselves from anything that connect with their culture. Rather than throw away the baby with the bath water, it will be more beneficial for us as a people to seek ways of adapting the inherent positive values in our culture to suit our current realities.

Many Nigerians do not attach a modicum of importance or respect to art objects or cultural practices as they are scornfully perceived and derided as being demonic by some other religious fanatics. People tend to trivialize and devalue what they have in the absence of the right knowledge. Scripture puts it right when it states that “My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6 NIV). We so much despise our culture that we do not want to associate with anything that has a connection with it, to such a ridiculous extent as rejecting our traditional attires! Thus, how will our culture thrive with such behaviour and mindset?

Despite being colonized for 347 years by the British Empire, yet 80% of the Indian population still practice their Hindu culture and other traditional religions (Shyllon, 2023). Similar resistance against cultural subjugation by the West was demonstrated by the Japanese. They vehemently rejected the imposition of Western religion and cultural dictates on their people and by so doing, Japan was able to save her people from foreign religious indoctrination and total colonization agenda.

How Culture Promotes Creativity

“Creativity is the quality that enables us to generate novel approaches to situations and to discover new and improved solutions to problems” (Vogel, 2014). Creativity in relation to visual arts and other creative endeavours draws its strength from culture. Emifoniye (2003) insist that “Visual art is an activity of man that has evolved from a cultural process.” This aforementioned assertion also apply to other creative fields.

Culture as a phenomenon usually manifests itself in tangibly expressive objects that can be referred to as material culture or cultural objects (Orifa, 2003). This assertion indicates that the total sum of the aggregates of both tangible and none tangible materials in a society serves as resources for the creatives in that environment. This stance is corroborated by Heidegger in Hainic (2010), when he declared that an artist’s production is an embodiment of the materials (tangible or non-tangible) available to the artist. Thus, the creative minds in a given society, regardless of the genre, are usually inspired by the prevailing cultural values. We can then infer that creative icons such as artists, musicians and writers, which include Yusuf Grillo (1934-2021), Bruce Onabrakpeya (b.1932), Fela Anikulapo (1938-1997), Wole Soyinka (b.1934), Chinua Achebe (1930-2013), Harrie Bazunu (b.1966), Nelson Edewor (b.1970), Chimamanda Adichie (b.1977) and others are profoundly influenced by their immediate culture.

Nigeria with its cultural diversity has the capacity to effectively foster creativity amongst the youth. This is informed by the fact that when people from different cultural backgrounds and experiences converge, myriads of creative thinking can be stimulated. Elements of culture, such as the visual arts and the non-visual arts (literature, dance, music and so on), can inspire creative activities because when pupils are exposed to various forms of creative expression, new ideas are possible.



Figure 1: Harrie Bazunu, 2007, *Wekobetcha* (You’re Welcome).

Installation: Terra Cotta, Old Naira-Notes, and Coins. Source: Bazunu (2023) p. 34

The Niger Delta experiences, and some culture-specific elements are often projected in the visual expressions of Bruce Onobrakpeya. Such titles as *Martyrdom of the Ogoni Nine*, *Smoke from the Broken Pipe series*, *Akporode*, *Mamiwata*, and *Emuobonuvie* are a few examples. Bazunu (2023), in his 2007 sculpture, *Wekobetcha* (you’re welcome), highlighted the traditional hospitality of Kola nuts presentation to a guest, amongst the Urhobo, Isoko, and Ijo people. The theme of protest, oil

exploitation, and its negative effects on the environment and people of the oil-rich Niger Delta are visually constructed in Edewor's sculptures (Bazunu, 2023, Ophori 2024). Edewor employed visual elements from *Ivwri* (figures of personal and communal aggression), common to the Urhobo, Isoko and Ijo people to pen down his narrative.



Figure 2: Nelson Edewor, 1997, *Burden is Our Reward*. Mortar/Concrete, 79 x 137 x 97cm, University of Benin, Ekehuan Campus, Benin City. Source: Bazunu (2023: 32).

Culture can also promote creativity when collaboration and teamwork are encouraged among pupils. This is due to the fact that sharing ideas and building upon each other's strengths can lead to unique discoveries and solutions as well as widen perspectives. It is noteworthy that when there is freedom of expression as we have in our country, individuals with unique and creative ideas will be encouraged to articulate their creative perspective knowing fully well that there would not be unpleasant consequences.

It is pertinent for us to know that a culture such as ours that encourages the acquisition of education and skill development opportunities will certainly inspire creativity. With the right education which happens to be the foundation of knowledge acquisition, individuals, especially, the youth will possess the ability to unleash their creative potentials effectively and rooted in their culture.

How Culture Promotes Unity

Cultural unity implies oneness which can be fostered by language. Obialo (2018) acknowledges that Language is a powerful unifier in any culture because "... language conveys the meaning of concepts or experiences of a particular people". One of the ways of brainwashing people to hate themselves is by taking away their language. It is a sad commentary that most parents cannot communicate effectively in their respective indigenous languages. Our various indigenous languages have become vernacular, thus, going into extinction.

In the process of building the tower of Babel (from Biblical narratives), in order to deter the people from realizing their ambition, God disunited them through a lack of effective (language) communication. This is an indicator that language is a powerful tool for communication,

interaction, and the promotion of unity and cohesion in any society. If we truly crave unity, then our youths need to embrace our indigenous language; at least, they have the capacity to be multilingual. Through sharing the same cultural values and beliefs, people can be brought together as a way of establishing common ground to foster unity and understanding. Since Nigeria is a culturally diverse entity, by embracing and appreciating these diverse cultural backgrounds, unity can be fostered.

Another avenue through which culture can promote unity is through cultural exchange and integration. Cultural events and activities such as festivals, ceremonies, carnivals, art exhibitions, trade fairs or food fairs, usually serve as opportunities for people to have cross-cultural interactions. The participants in such activities can learn from one another, thereby, promoting social connections, unity and understanding. Since culture provides a framework for communication amongst people, cultural events and activities can facilitate meaningful conversations through which conflicts can be resolved for fostering unity and cohesion.

Also, cultural activities such as often observed on School's Cultural Day's celebrations can serve as an avenue through which the culture and heritage of minority groups can be showcased. This can aid cultural expression that is capable of fostering unity and inclusiveness where everyone feels appreciated and accepted.

How Culture Promotes Identity

Culture is a profound agent in shaping and promoting individual and collective identity. This is due to the fact that shared beliefs and values, norms, and traditions are transmitted from generation to generation. By involving in cultural practices and embracing cultural values by the youths, a sense of belonging and identification with their community or group can be developed.

The embedded cultural rituals and traditions serve as symbolic acts that are entrenched in a community's history and values. By participating in these activities, individuals can connect with their cultural heritage, this helps to reinforce a state of identity and creates a sense of belonging. In addition, cultural symbols, icons and artefacts, such as national flags, historical landmarks, religious symbols, and traditional clothing, are objects of identity. These items, when appreciated by individuals can also serve as their cultural identity and create a sense of pride within their community.

Teaching cultural history, traditions and values in schools and community setting can help youths develop an appreciation for their cultural heritage. This will in turn encourage them to identify and connect with their heritage.

Language is an important part of any culture as it is a means of communication. It is an essential tool for preserving cultural heritage, thus, a sense of belonging and identity within a linguistic community can be fostered if the youths embrace their indigenous language

The feat being wrought in the music industry, globally, by Nigerian Afro musicians is phenomenal. These remarkable achievements by contemporary music artistes such as Asa, 9ice, WizKid, Tiwa Savage, Davido, Burna Boy, Rema, Asake, Flavour, and Phyno, among others, can be attributed to the fact that they infused or adopted their respective indigenous language as a means of communicating their messages. They are able to evolve a unique identity for themselves via their respective language under the umbrella of the Afrobeat genre of music.

Current Reality and Globalization

I quite recognize the pertinent and current trend of the world without borders—globalization, which is fast blurring local and national differences. This is because a culture can hardly improve without the experience of other cultures. Notwithstanding, for an enviable cultural status, Nigeria needs to improve and integrate its social, ethnic, and tribal diversity to evolve peculiar cultural cohesion. This should spur us towards evolving our own unique identity embodied in our culture. According to a Yoruba aphorism, “Odo to ba gbagbe orisun e maa gbe ni” loosely translated, a river that forgets its source will certainly run dry. With this, it is imperative for us to encourage our youth to embrace the positive aspect of our culture. This is because the nations of the world that are prospering are doing that by blending their culture into their national development plan, countries such as China, Japan, and India are good examples. These countries embark on this trajectory because they realized that their culture(s) has the capacity to boost creativity, unity and identity.

Recommendations:

- Efforts should be geared towards the teaching of cultural subjects such as visual arts, dance, music, and drama as a way of exposing the students to their culture and heritage.
- Collaboration is important, as such, students should be encouraged to participate in group assignments in visual arts as a way of fostering creativity.
- The school, being one of the major institutions defining culture and values, has the responsibility to provide the students with the necessary incentive towards cultural appreciation and emancipation. These incentives include: encouraging students to be involved in art-related activities such as sculpting, painting, drawing, drama, dance etc.
- It is also pertinent for stakeholders in Nigeria to exert concerted efforts towards harnessing indigenous knowledge from various cultures and explore their potentials in our current reality. This is necessary because this approach has led to growth and development in other climes.
- Regularly, excursions should be organized for pupils to visit our museums and national cultural heritage sites.
- Musicians, visual artists, filmmakers, and so on, should be encouraged to infuse their productions with cultural content to serve as agents of uniting the people.

Conclusion:

Culture is a universal phenomenon; it is what makes us unique as a people. It bestows us with respect because it encompasses and projects our worldview. Nigeria does not lack in rich cultural heritage but the will and zeal to harness it is poor. It is only a virile culture that can promote and project a nation on a global stage, therefore we need to recognize the fact that our culture, if well-appreciated has the capacity to promote and project our creativity, unity and identity, globally.

Since the world is now a global village, it is nearly impossible for us to remain uninfluenced by other cultures. However, what we should strive towards is to learn the positive aspect of other people and domesticate it to suit our needs and purpose.

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