



## **Culture and Cross-Cultural Understanding: A Panacea for Peaceful Coexistence among Ethnic Groups in Nigeria.**

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**Abstract.** Culture is a human legacy bequeathed through interaction with nature. It is the capacity of man to express and act within specific environmental contingencies and also the totality of man represented in the phenomena of knowledge, arts, morals, law, and custom as acquired by man in his society. On the other hand peaceful coexistence is a desirable human experience, an inescapable fact situated at the fulcrum of man's survival in the universe. Hence, Nigeria as a nation is a culturally diverse society whose history had witnessed lots of uprising from ethnic disagreements and rivalries even up till the present time. This paper not only sets out to show periodization of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria nor entertain the most celebrated evidences to back up the debates about universalism and relativism in cultural polemics about the nation called Nigeria, but to argue how cross-cultural understanding can veritably bridge the perceived lacuna and tension arising from cultural differences. The paper notes that cross-cultural understanding is open-minded and seeks an understanding of relation that sees the world from others perspectives. It is also an understanding that is dialectic, self-reflexive and able to engage and integrate positive and progressive aspects of cultures

for a harmonious peaceful co-existence of all the ethnic groups in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Culture, Cross-cultural Understanding, Peaceful Co-existence

### **1. The Concept of Culture**

Culture is one concept that is extremely difficult to fathom and perhaps this is due to the fact that it can represent a number of values and norms that influence our perception about reality. Sometimes we do not cogitate much on our culture because we are so engrossed with elements therein to the extent that we take them for granted without interrogating some questionable categories that is part of our culture, may be because they have permeated into our very being. But, observing other people with different beliefs and value system then we begin to ask questions on what prompted the observed similarities and differences in customs and values. In effect therefore, we may not realize that some of our feelings, attitudes, and values are cultural if we did not see others doing things differently from our own Carol and Melvin contends:

We would not realize that our belief in germs was cultural if we were not aware that

people in some societies think that illness is caused by witchcraft or evil spirits. We could not become aware that it is our custom to sleep on beds if we were not aware that people in many societies sleep on the floor or on the ground (Carol and Melvin, 1999).

Whichever way the above is assessed the important thing here is that as long as there are human beings, culture may engender disparities since 'one man's meat is another man's poison'. A leap into another cultural environment and one observes a striking fact of cultural variation that deeply affects human behavior. Culture from the foregoing becomes a way of life and the totality of what is to be learnt by all members of a society. It is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, arts, morals, law, custom, any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Vide: Burrige K, 1997: 57). What is noticeable from this view is a philosophical underpinning of a symmetrical concept of 'man' and 'society'. Each of these concepts cannot be without the other if we must talk about the idea of culture. Individual as a member of the society acquires and learns from others fantastically and hence the reason that culture cannot be learnt in isolation outside society and in this way the social dimension to culture cannot be overemphasized since culture diffuses from one generation to the other. Man and society are central in cultural issues, without a society or organized group, culture may be impossible because it is only the society that sustains a culture.

Culture as it were, is a pattern of action that is either implicit or explicit in which a certain pattern of life style is abstracted, acquired and transmitted within a human group or community. It is the aggregate of expressions of behaviours and elements historically derived from tradition that

endured in time. Kroebe and Kluckhohn argue that "culture is an abstract description of trends towards uniformity in the words, acts, and artifacts of human groups" (vide: R. E. Sykes, 1963, 256). That is, the reality of human culture is represented in its cultural constituent. Even though these constituents are not in themselves 'the culture' however, the inferences abstracted from them constitute cultural patterns of the people. It is clear then that all cultures are marked by certain patterns of behaviour which are acquired and transmitted to other generations. R.E. Sykes sees it thus;

Culture is a pattern of constructs of modes of meanings, values and ideas about acting, inferred from non-instinctive human behaviours. Behaviour is human action and the products of action... culture is the meanings, values and ideas about action which are in the minds of the members of a society (Ibid, 258).

What is evident from the foregoing is that people's way of life can be describable from the view point of a cultural pattern and this pattern defines and designs the meanings and values accorded the entire sphere of life of the people through the medium of social interaction. This position is a manifestation of the fact that effective interpretation of aspects of cultural engagement of a people cannot be done without recourse to the value – belief systems of the people. The earliest philosophers and anthropologists scrambling for Africa were led to this kind of mistakes in the past. Parimal argues that values may be defined as a "conception of standard by which feelings, ideas, actions, qualities, objects, persons, groups, goals, means etc. are evaluated as desirable or undesirable, more meritorious or less, more correct or less" (B.K. Parimal; 1990, 47). Here, values become those attitudes or characters that dominate the entire universe of cultural

environment which may result from long year of philosophical or practical reflection of the people. He further stressed; When we speak of the spirit of Indian culture or the Indian way of life, we actually mean the values which permeate the Indian society and regulate the thinking and behaviour of Indians in general. Values are generally arranged in a hierarchical order—some dominant, some less dominant and still some others secondary (Ibid).

The intention of this argument demonstrates that values and beliefs are culturally bounded, motivated and therefore the difficulty of ever hypothesizing a universal value or standard of rationality by which judgments are invoked may be impossible, then, the more reason we can speak as noted by Parimal “Indian way of life” just as we can talk of ‘American’ ‘way of life’ or ‘African way of life’ and by extension ‘Nigerian way of life’, which is a product of long years of interactive relationship. As a result, Nigeria as a nation is home to more than three hundred ethnic groups and tribes corresponding to varieties of culture within the country. These ethnic groups can further be subsumed under major tribes namely; Yoruba, Ibo, Hausa-Fulani and the minority tribes. However, despite existence as a country, the unity of this existence is daily been threatened through incessant violence arising from the practice of religion, political inequality and most importantly in recent times, the secessionist outcry from the South East by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB).

## **2. Brief History of Ethnic Conflicts in Nigeria**

The amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorates made up of many ethnic groups with different languages and cultures was clearly a mistake which is still

bedeviling Nigeria till the present time. Modern Nigeria was a product of deliberate merging of two British colonial territories in 1914. The amalgamation was convoked for administrative convenience to enable the British colonizers pontificate over the northern and the southern protectorates. They were however incompatible in terms of culture and religion. While the south is predominantly Christian and traditional religious adherents, the north is dominated by Muslim faithfuls. These disparities in culture and religion have been the root cause of political disagreements between the two protectorates from time past, as a result there is polarization of the nation along tribal sentiments generating hatred and violence between the two zones causing debate and discussion on the issue that has to do with peaceful coexistence of the various ethnic groups.

The colonial policy of the time was autocratic and the people were stripped of the right of participation in their own affairs and were denied basic needs, equality and social well-being (Ikechukwu; 2012:14). This policy of colonial amalgamation deliberately designed to lead to growing ethnocentrism which has witnessed to serve as a foundation for future unending conflict among the colonized entities even up till the present time. The “indirect rule” system of administration introduced by Lord Fredrick Lugard was a bad mechanism intended to enhance tribal hatred which is so incongruous to the procedure of crises management in the country.

Some intellectuals have argued that the system had some premeditated ulterior motives aimed at disrupting the unity of the ethnic groups thereby complicating “the task of welding diverse elements into a Nigerian nation” (Coleman, 1958:194). However, Ugorji examines and differentiates between two meanings of the word “amalgamation”. For him, the word

could be understood as a uniting or combining action by somebody or an agency on two or more separate, dissimilar entities or groups. That is, it is the action, process, or result of merging, combining or uniting two or more separate, autonomous groups, entities, ethnicities, regions, or nations into one “Nation” (Ugorji, 2016:25). He argued further that the word could be in two forms namely: consented amalgamation and forced amalgamation.

Consented amalgamation implies that the groups, regions or nations were given an opportunity to freely decide whether or not they would like to merge with other(s) in a united nation while that of force amalgamation is a situation where different groups, entities, regions, ethnicities or nationalities are coerced or compelled to unite as one nation without prior information, contact with each other, and against their will (Ibid). This last form of amalgamation is what has dealt a devastating blow to the unity of Nigeria since 1914 because it was a forced, illegal and unconsented amalgam. Considering this fact, Nigerian Nationalist leaders after few years of independence came together to examine the effect of arbitrary colonial unification that is manifesting in some irreconcilable differences in issues of national interest. These irreconcilable antagonisms forced the Nigerian Nationalists to make utterances such as Nigeria, “the mistake of 1914” or Nigeria “a mere geographic expression”. It is this uneasiness between the Northern and Southern blocs that led to the post-independence era characterized by massive violence culminating into civil war and unrest from 1966 up to the present period in Nigerian history. The era is marked by fierce violence resulting into coup d’etat, autocratic rule, ethno-religions unrest, military dictatorship, clashes between and

among ethnic groups and recently religious extremists in the North culminating in the rise of the deadly movement called Boko Haram and some regional pressure groups such as; Oduduwa People’s Congress (OPC), in the South-Western, Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) in the North, Ohaneze Ndigbo in the South-East.

All these are ethnic groups formed to agitate for the interest of their zones. Therefore, the unity of the nation from time past has been threatened by the desire to ensure that one’s region has access to the largest share of national cake. But the question is; how can this perennial conflict be resolved and prevented so that Nigerians can live in peace with one another? Many attempts have been made by government and corporate organisations to bridge the lacuna between the ethnicities in the country. Some of the attempts are the inauguration of National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), National Orientation Agency (NOA), and a host of other attempts even the establishment of a National Character Commission. However, these attempts have achieved a lot but they are not enough to finally exterminate religious, ethnic and socio-political conflicts in Nigeria. The desire of this work is to affirm that the solutions to continued and renewed hostilities in Nigeria is to look inward our cultures and seek a cross-cultural understanding. After all, much as we are diverse in terms of culture, we also share similarities which can form the basis of inter-ethnic relationship. This cross-cultural dialogue shall be the subject of discussion in the next section for peaceful coexistence to be achieved in Nigeria.

### **3. Understanding Cross-Cultural Dialogue**

A lot of scholars have written volumes on the importance of cross-cultural understanding or inter-ethnic dialogue. This

is because its understanding is a product of open-mindedness. It is an “understanding of relations that draws on the relations between different disciplines in order to position the observer “to see” and thus be in a position “to understand” the world from the perspective of the other” (Bitting P.E; 2003, 51). It entails understanding that other cultures are significant and instead of relishing one’s cultural beliefs in a romantic relativistic glorification, we should employ dialogical method of rationality which is not only self-reflexive but also able to engage itself with varieties of different cultural perspectives so that the “other” can be accommodated in the scheme of things in Nigeria. We are implying here that despite our diversity, common grounds can be constructed through a dialogical process in which all tribes critically engage in a conscious manner the positive aspects of their cultures that can strengthen national unity and progress. The truth here is that no culture in Nigeria is absolutely independent without external influences. There are traces of one in the other. A lot of values are in fact true and right for most ethnics groups in the country and these truth and values can be established to translate as the basis of our understanding and dialogue where it is possible to generate specific cross-cultural agreement. It is not within the scope of this discourse to itemize such list of values but they are a possibility which can be adapted into the national code of ethics.

An important aspect of this discourse is the need for a constructive moral dialogue in all spheres of life in Nigeria to enhance cultural understanding. Morality is a phenomenon of man in the society where he lives. Each tribe lives by certain moral life that forms the basis of its tradition. While it is true we may observe some similarities and differences in morality of ethnic groups there has to be a general moral dialogue imbued with the intention to examine common moral norms

and values shared by all. Dialogue here involves a situation whereby people are consciously involved in the attempt to go into the analysis of what is to be moral rights or wrongs that bind the entire life of the people. That is, Nigerians have to be united perhaps to take an inventory of shared values that will form their guide to life and not just what is given or dictated to them by specific sets of people.

Nigeria today is bewitched by serious moral malaise and there is a growing concern about widespread moral predicament which has its root in the uncritical assimilation of alien values of individualism as against communalism which underlies the basis of African culture, corruption, materialism in socio-political and economic life (Iheoma E.O., 2006). The traditional ethos of giving considerations to the community before self interest has gone comatose, giving way to the capitalist individualistic spirit of modern society. No wonder in most African states, corruption has become the order of the day because of the desire for material acquisition in order to assert oneself socio-politically. Ultimately, we know Nigeria is immersed in the mud of moral problems but this cannot be solved through gathering specific interest to represent the collective interest. We must look inward to our culture for a possible bail out of the logjam. The solution is not in a “negotiated settlements” but as Etzioni observes:

Society needs shared formulation of the good, and cannot function only on the basis of negotiated settlements of differences between individuals and subgroup formations of the good. And it assumes that the processes that lead to such shared formulations entails dialogues that concern values and not merely deliberations over empirical facts or logically derived notions. They are merely a matter of reasonable

people coming to terms, but people of divergent convictions findings a common normative ground (A. Etzioni; 1997, 183).

Therefore, it seems dialogue is key to bridging the inherent diversities in the culture of Nigeria, whether in terms of moral or otherwise, though this is an onerous task but nevertheless it is achievable if we seek to advance common progressive norms and values identifiable within and across our tribal cultures in Nigeria for peaceful existence. Wittgenstein gives a symmetrical analogy of culture in his famous notion of family resemblance in which he holds there is no single essential property which is shared by all things that we refer to as a game. They are “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing” (Wittgenstein 1968:84). Culture, viewed this way, is a comprehensive entity that is capable of overlapping with other cultures and therefore the observed similarities evident in culture is to articulate the understanding among other cultures so that all can be at peace with one another for development.

#### **4. Enhancing Cross-Cultural Understanding for Peaceful Co-Existence in Nigeria**

Nigeria is a culturally diverse nation that has experienced ethnic uprising arising from such diversity. There is a way one can even state that each of the tribes belong to difference races and institutions to the extent that there are different approaches to how social stability and order are maintained most importantly in traditional periods in history. Of course, the task of doing this lies in the hands of the traditional rulers and their chiefs where the subjects must respect with unquestionable obedience to orders from above. But in the modern time such authoritarian approach can no longer be

acceptable but “social cohesion and social order could only be maintained by the presence of normative consensus among the population” (Patrick, A. Edewor et al; 2014, 70) which started from the amalgamation of 1914 and which created cultural diversity and tension that is being experienced till today in all spheres of life in Nigeria.

It is only natural that the multiplier effect of a nation of cultural diversity like Nigeria is showing some tension created by such diversity. The question that has agitated many minds since independence is how can the citizens of this nation state live peacefully with one another without much emphasis on cultural diversity? How can inequalities be reduced within the polity where majority and minority groups are given equal opportunity to realize their specific objectives.

Apart from the socio-political and economic solutions that had been proffered to the inequalities within the zones in Nigeria, so far, which has also failed to yield the desired objectives, it may be necessary to look inward through a conscious attempt at examining progressive aspect of our cultures with national import. Implied in this position are such cultural categories indigenous to all the ethnic groups in Nigeria that can be advanced as a cross-cultural solution to the perennial conflicts within the regions. Therefore, it may be proposed that Nigeria has to her credit such values like communalism which tend to see collective interest to be more important than the individual. Of course, individualistic ethos are foreign to the culture of the people. Besides, indigenous to Nigeria just like many African states is the fact that one is a member of an ever expanding family. One Yoruba adage says *Ojumerin lo bi omo, igbaojuni woo* (it takes a couple to bring forth a child but it lies in the society to train

the child. That is, the individual is not seen and perceived as an end in itself but in relation to the society. Thus, all obligations and duties are first and foremost to the society. Apart from this, there is the value for sanctity of life and the traditional family system to mention but a few. All these are cultural features indigenous to virtually all ethnic groups in Nigeria when advanced it could constitute what other scholars call “public culture” (Ibid, 75), cross-cultural understanding that may apparently stamp out rivalry and particularistic or relativistic tendencies of ethnic groups.

### 5. Conclusion

Culture is a human legacy and through it man asserts and defines himself. It defines the reality of man in his environment Nigeria, is not only a geographical reality but it is also a nation with immense cultural diversity brought together by colonial imperialistic interest which is the root of incessant regional conflict up to the present time.

However, cross-cultural understanding among the ethnic groups can be achieved if we look inward to our traditional cultures. The reason is, embedded in our cultures are values and norms that can be advanced cross-culturally to strengthen National unity and integration.

It must also be noted that in our traditional culture, is the concept of understanding, respect and tolerance which are ingredients for mutual cooperation and a catalyst for development. These cultural features can be carefully and consciously selected and enlisted into what may be called “public culture” in furtherance of peaceful co-existence in Nigeria.

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