

Reflections on Culture

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"People who do not look to posterity and their ancestors cannot comfortably look forward to prosperity and their children's future" (100 year old man, Ozor Neife Ozoike, from Umana Ndiagu, Nigeria)

1. The debate and confusion around culture

Today we cannot remain unconcerned by the debate that is going on around us on culture, on our cultural heritage; on the church and culture and the adaptation of Christianity to indigenous cultures; on the relationship between religions, cultures and civilizations; on whether or not Christianity as we got it from Europe is trans-culturally viable; on whether or not missionary work as we have known it is still justifiable.

There is a lot of confusion in the present times in our society because of the lack of orientation and certainty as to what constitutes culture or even the concept of the Common Good. This situation mirrors the lack of a definite and sure guide for people's lives, lifestyles and social destiny as to what is useful, correct, ethically imperative, humanly elevating, culturally acceptable and socially unifying. There were times, understood as "in those days" when people were sure of their beliefs and the customs of their ancestors and motherland. The traditional answers in the present times seem redundant. Thorny questions occur with ever increasing frequency. Somehow in many societies, the vocabulary of Right and Wrong, of Duty and Neglect of Duty; of Sin and Shame; of Good and Bad has become difficult to use.

Our age is confronted with decisions which previous generations did not really have to face. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that many people have rejected the traditional sources of ethical illumination. Today, the old certainties are virtually gone. Shame is seemingly gone. Truth is somehow not fashionable. Integrity and credibility are strange words for some. Dignity and decency are no more very clear and living in deceit and debauchery happen to be relatively fashionable, albeit for just a short period because truth and its search is unquenchable in the human soul and psyche, no matter what pretence any person may try to make of it.

2. Culture matters in the realm of meaning

History records show that Culture matters and the relationship and interaction of the world of human beings to transcendence, translates to the search for meaning and happiness which all people seek. It also translates to lasting values which concern God and the metaphysical beyond the physical; the noumenon beyond the phenomenon; the Kairos beyond the Kronos.

Several questions emerge and some people say: Culture is a thing of the past. Yet the question needs to be asked and it is this:

"In the light of the moral diversity and the proliferation of moral languages issuing from our plural and global world, what must remain central to humanity after the fact of relativity is acknowledged. Nothing?, Something? What could it be? Could legislation cover these ambiguities in life? Are any ethical principles universally applicable and what are they? How do we

cope with the contending characteristics of our age? its ethical pluralisms; its rapid social change, its linguistic distrust of centralistic claims?

This is the challenge young people face as they leave home for the first time from their parents in one week or semester in school. They imbibe the new slogans, lose their roots and end up neither being European nor being authentically African, like the bird called "Usu", (Bat). Some join bad company and lose "direction".

3. The philosophical definitions and concept of Culture

Let me begin with some analysis and interpretation of the philosophical hermeneutics concerning the concept of culture. In his "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture", the Nobel-prizewinning poet and literary critic T.S. Eliot asserts that the term culture has three different associations according to whether we have in mind the development of an individual, of a group of class or of a whole society. As my teacher Prof Monsignor Theophilus Okere has written in his book "Culture and Religion" (1974; pp 9ff), "when we talk of culture here, we mean it first and foremost, but not exclusively, in the sense it is understood by cultural anthropologies".

In this meaning, culture is the way of life of a people. It includes the sum total of their mannerisms, beliefs, music, clothing, religions, language, behavioural patterns, food, housing, agricultural methods including their traditional behaviour in a broad sense, including their ideas, arts and artefacts. It is the social heritage which an individual acquires from his or her group and which heritage classifies a people as belonging to a group. Culture makes it possible for us to distinguish between a Chinese, a Briton, a Swede, Russian, American, German, Frenchman, Igbo, Yoruba and Idoma to mention but a few.

Culture "denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitude towards life" (Religion as a cultural system, C. Geertz in *Anthropological approach to the study of religion*, p. 3).

Culture in contra-distinction from nature is that part of his milieu which man himself created. Why we must eat in order to survive, is a question of nature. Why the Igbo fulfils this duty with "Ukwa" and "Okwuru" and the English with "Bread and Tea", is a matter of Culture.

"That man must enter into marriage with woman is altogether natural. But that an Englishman thinks monogamy the only reasonable and normal type of marriage whereas an Igboman thinks polygamy just as reasonable and normal, if not more so this is a matter of culture, which always means: this is the way they have been brought up. Culture is a way of thinking, feeling, believing. It is the accumulated experience, knowledge and lore of social group stored, for future use, in the memories of men, in books, in objects" (Okere, T; Ibid).

Since culture is a way of life, the form in which culture is expressed, its symbols are the objectivities of the life of a people. Though incarnate in symbols and the various elements of culture the very heterogeneous character of these element-social organization, art, religion, ideas, etc, show that the idea of culture is an abstraction, a working hypothesis like evolution or relativity. No one can see them but they help explain observable facts. Culture is therefore a

theory designed to yoke together these heterogeneous elements into one common system, purposely vaguely described as a people's way of life. Culture is distinct from society. It is society's way of life. Hence society can remain when its culture has changed. culture is specifically human. It is learned and not instinctive. It varies from group to group and from one period of time to another within a single group. Customs, beliefs, social structures and institutions can change.

In the functionalist view, all these elements of culture are closely integrated and any change will involve a dislocation of their delicate equilibrium, a modification of the entire culture.

Though cultures are continuously changing, they are essentially conservative. There is no change except on continuity. No African culture has remained totally unaffected by European contact (Bascom and Herskovits: continuity and change in African culture) but there is none which has entirely given way before it. Here in Igbo land, we have incorporated foreign elements like tobacco, cassava and maize, the school, the motor car.

But native law and custom exists side by side with European law, just as European medical practice exists parallel to indigenous medicine. Polygamy is still competing with monogamy and traditional religion coexist with Christianity, often in the same individual but especially in society at large where religious pluralism has emerged as a social novum. These examples show not only that all change is in continuity, but also that most changes are selective.

And rather than substitute a new item for an old one, cultures often prefer to add the new one to the old. Akwete cloth has not been chased out of the market by European made cloths, nor have Awka blacksmith gone out of market because of the influx of European made ironware. Our people reckon their week according to both the European and native calendars (Afor, Nkwo, Eke, Oye) and many of us have learned to enjoy the music of Beethoven without growing any less enthusiastic of Atilogwu, Ijele dance, Egwu Ukwu and Nwokokorobia.

4. Culture and Development

Culture change is a principle of cultural development. For culture, the law also holds that "unless a grain of seed dies, itself remains alone, but if it dies, it generates new life" (Wisdom words of Jesus Christ in the Bible).

Development means self-unfolding of what is contained in germ, and who would deny that some cultures need this development? For too long, African cultures remained alone and isolated, merely identical with themselves, and cut off from the main stream of world cultural development. They could be called culture only in the most general sense of the term, the way of life of a people. Thus invited though without justifying it, is the terrible indictment of Hegel on Africa, the continent, he said, where the spirit has not yet become conscious of itself.

Of Africa, Hegel writes:

"It has no historical interest of its own except that we see man here living in barbarism, in savagery and where he does not yet furnish any ingredient of culture. Africa is, as far back as history goes, separated from the rest of the world."

It is El Dorado closed in upon itself, the land of children, which lying on the antipodes of the daylight of conscious history is hidden in the black colour of the night"

(*Vernunft in der Geschichte*, p. 214).

Here Hegel is of course a philosophical racist but I used this rather brutal example to introduce another meaning of the concept of culture. Here we associate it with conscious development. But to think of culture in terms of development is to think of culture with a richer meaning, beyond the merely descriptive and qualitative neutral "way of life of a people". It is culture in the original sense of culture, colo- colere- colui- cultum to cultivate, to till; to tend from where we have agriculture and horticulture. Culture here involves a conscious effort, a common pursuit, a forwards march towards higher values, towards more refinement. It is this sense that Herbert Marcuse defines culture as:

"A humanizing process, characterized by the collective effort to preserve human life, pacify the struggle for existence of hold it down to controllable limits, secure a productive organization of society, develop the spiritual capabilities of man and minimize and sublimate aggression, brute force and misery". (H. Marcuse: *Kultur Und Gesellschaft II*, p. 148).

Here culture comes very near to being synonymous with civilization. In this sense, culture is guided by development, a conscious collective effort, a productive appropriation of one's social heritage, with a view to refining, to humanizing it.

Culture is a project and as such is not merely what it actually is, a people's way of life, but also what it can become, the level it can attain, its potentialities yet to be developed. To pursue the vocation to culture is to heed the injunction of Goethe:

"Mensch werde was Du schon bist". Man become what you already are! (quoted in M. Heidegger: *Sein und Zeit*, p. 145).

It is in the light of such cultural development that cultural change is understandable and desirable. If it were so understood, there would be less lamentation and wailing as "things fall apart", since this can be prelude to a stronger and higher synthesis.

5. Absence of culture leads to the denial of Truth

In an earlier work I wrote on the theme of "Development is People; Business is Ethics" (Ike/Nnoli 2003, p. 95), I stated that a source of complication in these discussions around culture is the new global and pluralistic environment. We live in a meeting point and global village environment.

As Henry Novak, the American Christian theologian and Founder of the Enterprise Institute has severally written and argued, to undermine culture is to undermine truth and therefore perform the work of tyrants, In his Templeton address Novak argues that the arguments teachers give the young today are completely misleading, such as:

"there is no such thing as truth, they teach even the little children at school. Truth is bondage. Believe what seems right to you. There are many truths as there are individuals. Follow your feelings. Do as you please. Get in touch with yourself. Do what feels comfortable. This is the language of the times and they speak thus who prepare the jails for the young. Even under

conditions of nihilism, Fidelity to Truth is better than cowardice. If we remain faithful to the truth, inner liberty is obtained. Vulgar relativism and its subjective culture so undermines the culture of liberty and knowledge that it is preferable to take a position on an issue than to remain neutral. Even for those unsure whether there is a God or not, a truth is different from a lie".

In conclusion, Novak notes that torturers can twist your mind, even reduce you to a vegetable, but as long as you retain the ability to say yes or no as truth alone commands, they cannot own you. To obey truth is to be free, and in certain extremities, nothing is dearer to the tormented mind, nothing more vital to the survival of self-respect, nothing so important to one's sense of remaining a worthy human being, of being no one's log, part of no one's machine, and register to death against the kingdom of lies – nothing is so dear as to hold to the truth.

These reflections correspond to the philosophical consequences of cultural debates, their denial, acceptance or adherence. It is therefore important for humanity in international dialogue and debates to engage on a dialogue around culture for CULTURE MATTERS.

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