

CRITICAL XENOCENTRIC APPRECIATION OF MY CULTURE

Rev. Fr. Dr. Basil Amarachi Okonkwo, SMMM*

Abstract

People across the globe, whether they belong to the same country, tribe, clan, region, or geographical location, possess a unique history and distinct cultural practices that set them apart from others. This cultural identity serves as a defining characteristic, differentiating them from other societies worldwide. Surprisingly, it has been observed that many Africans do not take pride in their culture and accomplishments, instead showing a preference for foreign cultures. This research aims to emphasize the importance of valuing one's own culture. The data for this study was gathered discreetly from secondary sources such as books, articles published in academic journals, and scholarly websites. The study suggests various recommendations, including the involvement of elders in teaching children about their cultural heritage and fostering a love and practice for their own culture.

Keywords: Culture, pride, xenocentrism, Africa, Igbo

Introduction

Culture is one of the indispensable aspects of human existence. Man is essentially a cultural being; he is born into a particular culture and is a product of culture. The concept of culture, commonly understood, encompasses a comprehensive collection of distinctive qualities and attributes that differentiate one group of people from others or societies. These unique characteristics encompass various aspects such as language, clothing, music, occupations, arts, religion, and dance. Additionally, culture encompasses a group's social norms, taboos, and values. The extensive exploration of culture, in its entirety and diverse dimensions, falls under the field of anthropology. Anthropology focuses on the study of human beings, dedicating time to analysing their traits and their connections to their surroundings.

A man's culture is his identity through which he is known and in some ways, addressed. People are easily identified and recognised through their cultural identity which includes their language, food, dressing, marks, and so on. Our behaviour also, is mostly a reflection of our culture, irrespective of the level of education that we might have attained. Culture grows deep into the bones and dissolves in marrow of a man. It is the major make-up of the content and character of a man. Hence, our culture should be our pride because it is our identity. This characteristic sets us apart from other human communities within the global human family. This research brings attention to the importance of appreciating our cultural heritage, particularly that of Africans. However, to achieve this, it is crucial for us to comprehend the essence and significance of culture. This understanding will enable us to effectively address the topics discussed in this paper.

The Concept and Meaning of Culture

The term "culture" originates from the Latin word *colere*, meaning "to cultivate." It is a widely used term that has been assigned various meanings by scholars throughout history. Currently, there are three main interpretations and uses of the term, as described by Mondin (1985): elitarian, pedagogical, and anthropological.

In the elitarian sense, culture refers to the acquisition of extensive knowledge, whether in a general sense or in specific fields. For instance, when we describe someone as having a broad scientific, philosophical, artistic, or literary culture, or when we refer to someone as "very cultured."

The pedagogical sense of culture pertains to the education, development, and refinement of individuals. It represents the process through which people, including children, young adults, and adults, reach their full potential and actualize their personalities.

In the anthropological sense, culture encompasses the entirety of customs, techniques, and values that differentiate one social group, tribe, people, or nation from another. In simpler terms, it signifies the distinctive way of life within a society. R. B. Tylor, one of the early anthropologists, provided a definition of culture. According to him, culture, in its broad ethnographic sense, encompasses the entire range of knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, and any other skills and habits acquired by individuals as members of a society. Culture serves as a means for humans to comprehend and interpret their environment. For the purpose of this work, the focus is primarily on the third meaning of culture, which emphasizes the anthropological aspect.

Culture in its holistic sense is constituted by a number of features that are both visible and invisible, tangible and intangible, material and non-material in their forms and modes. These features constitute the components of culture. Therefore, culture consists of two fundamental elements. The first component, referred to as non-material culture or symbolic culture, encompasses the values, beliefs, symbols, and language that establish the identity of a society. The second component, known as material culture, encompasses all the tangible objects within a society, such as tools, technology, clothing, utensils, and modes of transportation, among others.

Culture is not a result of natural occurrences but rather a creation of human effort, involving both mental and physical exertion. It encompasses experiences that engage the senses of sight, hearing, touch, and emotion. Culture is not static or complete; it evolves over time, remaining dynamic and receptive to interactions with other cultures. It encourages a genuine willingness to appreciate the positive aspects of other cultures. Ultimately, the core objective of any human culture is the preservation and elevation of human dignity. This is because, culture involves not only behaviour but also the objective spirit of any society. According to Umeh (2017), culture regulates the circumstances of human development both corporally and spiritually. There is no human culture that is absolutely evil and totally bad. Furthermore, culture is super organic. The super organic nature of culture implies that while people come and go, the culture remains. In other words, culture outlives each generation of society even as it passes from one generation to another and the transmission goes on endlessly (Udeji 2015). Also, culture does not exist in isolation neither is it an individual phenomenon, it is a product of society. It is not inherited biologically but a learned behaviour through the interaction with others and is transmitted from one generation to next. It is transmitted not through genes but by means of language. Language is the main vehicle of culture. Culture varies from society to society. Every society has its own culture and way of behaving; it is not uniform and at the same time, no culture is superior to the other.

Culture is also the spiritual form of a society (Ekwuru 2010). According to many cultural anthropologists, culture is a unifying form of all the elements that constitute a society as the highest form of human organisation. According to Modin, B. (2019, 149), culture is beyond being an essential property of man, it is also a factor which distinguishes the various social groups, classifying and specifying them. The qualifications of culture as the Spiritual form of society, means that all the constitutive elements of society, are considered as essential elements of culture. The most outstanding fundamental elements of culture that defines a particular social group includes, mother tongue, custom, technique and values.

My Culture, My Pride

There are many things that we should feel proud of and the foremost among them is our culture, traditions and heritage. It is quite unfortunate that whenever we read about or see the culture or civilization of other countries, we ignore their drawbacks and consider their

positive side only. However, our response is quite different with regard to our own cultural heritage. We focus on the flaws in our culture, leaving the strengths of it. It is important that we also consider the positive aspects of our own culture and heritage when looking at our culture. This will help us appreciate what we inherited from our ancestors. This is in particular reference to Africans. Most times, Africans believe that the products, styles, or ideas of their culture are inferior to those that originate from other foreign countries. For example, Nigerians often assume that European fashion is superior to their own (Udeji 2015). The tendency to do this, is known as "xenocentrism". Xenocentrism is the preference for another culture or other cultures over one's own culture. The xenocentric idolization of other cultures may lead people to a feeling of hostility or resentment toward their own cultures. In fact, xenocentrism can be viewed as a defiant attitude, since it is a departure from social norms and can result in the rejection of one's own nation. Why should we feel proud of other people's achievements but not ours? This is quite appalling. The right thing to do is to be proud of our own achievements and when you do, we wait for other people to appreciate it. Africans should realize that they have all those traditions that have rich cultural values, and these values need to be preserved.

Furthermore, there are various elements of culture which includes; religion, food, dressing, language, marriage, music, norms and values etc. These form the identity of a man. A man's culture is his identity through which he is known and addressed. It is our duty as Africans to keep our identity alive and this should be fulfilled at any cost. We all have the responsibility to propagate our culture and heritage by using different mediums. Sometimes, people dress to portray their cultural identity, while those without a cultural consciousness even change their lifestyle because they are not proud of their culture. We should see our culture as the best and appreciate its rich values. To do this, there is need to promote the food we eat, our language, our cultural norms and values etc, even in the midst of foreigners.

African cultures are adorable with many unique values. African values refer to unwritten moral principles which guide the actions and belief systems of people living within the geographical sphere of the continent. The value manifests over a period of time through shared experiences, environment and social interactions. Sadly, we are losing some of these African cultural values due to westernization. One of them is the respect for elders. Elders are considered important members of the community with a wealth of knowledge and experience to share, hence, it is a taboo to insult or physically abuse an elder. Sequal to this, elders are served first during mealtime, collecting or giving out something to an elder with the left hand is considered disrespectful and elders are greeted with reverence. For Christians, respect for elders is biblical (Exodus 20:12). Interestingly, Africans have been practicing this even before the arrival of Christianity on the continent. Other notable African values include, large family practice, hard work, kindness and hospitality, extended family system, religion, language and many others. Perhaps, the reason why Africans must jealously guard some of their cultures is that they promote morals and respect. Hence, African should realize the beauty of African culture and preserve them.

In the face of globalization and advancements in technology and science, many scholars express concerns about the potential extinction of African values. The esteemed novelist, Professor Chinua Achebe, hints at this sentiment in his book, suggesting that traditional African life is gradually disintegrating. In today's interconnected world often referred to as a "global village," diverse cultures interact continuously, and new ideas are adopted. While it is true that African societies may need to adjust some of their world-views, it is unacceptable to advocate for the abandonment of their cultural heritage and identity.

It is essential to recognize that Africa is not the only continent that has experienced colonization and currently faces the challenges of dealing with colonial and neo-colonial influences. Asian countries such as China, India (1930), and Singapore (1959) were also former colonies at some point in history. Their traditional values have also undergone

changes due to interaction. However, these nations have made special efforts to ensure the survival and relevance of their values on the global stage. They have reverted town names to their original pre-colonial names and have preserved their culture. As a result, Chinese culture is now widely recognized globally, and the Chinese language is one of the official languages used in the United Nations. Their cultural resilience has elevated them beyond the influence of their colonizers, and Africa should learn from their example.

There is undoubtedly a place for African values in the discourse of world economics, but Africans must actively cultivate and nurture these values. While Africa can certainly draw inspiration from other cultures, there is also much that the world can learn from African values. African culture and values will regain relevance when Africans make it their duty to invest in the continent and proudly showcase its rich heritage. It is worth noting that only a few African leaders have spoken their local African languages during international engagements, while countries like Cuba and China actively promote their languages in such functions.

The truth is that those who abandon their culture will be left with meager remnants, akin to vultures scavenging for leftovers. Each culture possesses its own set of values, and embracing one's cultural heritage can bring numerous benefits. Unfortunately, many Africans have forsaken their cultures, and worse still, they are not proud of them. It is disheartening to see an African returning from a brief trip to Dubai with an American accent. This phenomenon highlights the astonishing power of cultural assimilation among average Africans. It is imperative that we closely examine our rich cultural heritage, not only to appreciate them but also to comprehend the profound messages they carry.

Language and Culture: The Igbo Experience

Language remains a unique aspect of man's life and experience. It is one of the fundamental elements of human culture. The capacity for language by which the human being is identified as *homo loquens*, is what distinguishes him from the lower animals. Only human beings have spoken and written languages. Though other animals can communicate through sounds and gestures but the meanings of these signals are fixed and their use limited. According to Mondin, B. (2019: 129), man creates symbolic instruments which he uses to communicate with his fellow human beings and of the symbolic instruments, the most important is language, "which is the totality of written or vocal signs with which man puts himself in communication with his own peers".

Language is such an essential part of man that it is used to identify individuals and groups. A people develop a language appropriate to their needs and also their environment. Such language serves them as a medium of communication, for transmission of knowledge, culture and values, and also for the articulation of their world-view. Igbo language is one of the many languages spoken in Nigeria. It is not only spoken by the Igbo in the South Eastern states, but also spoken by a segment of the people of Rivers and Delta states in the South-South geopolitical zone. Unfortunately, there have been cries by well meaning Igbo people that Igbo language is endangered. It can be stated without fear of contradiction that no other ethnic nationality in Nigeria has done more incalculable harm to their language either by omission, commission or outright negligence than the Igbo people.

Adulteration of the language (mixing it with other languages, especially English Language) has become a normal phenomenon among Igbos. You could hardly get many Igbo people who can speak the language fluently and effectively without adulterating it especially among the youths and children. Even among the educated Igbo, many of them cannot effectively read and write their mother-tongue. It is quite unfortunate that many Igbo parents do not teach their children Igbo language. Some even go to the extent of punishing their kids at home for speaking Igbo language. Some teachers do the same at schools. Consequently, the scanty use of Igbo Language will ultimately lead to its non-development and appreciation. If nothing is

done about this, the future of Igbo language is at stake. Hence, if the Igbos are serious about reviving the language, they should start by teaching and encouraging their children to speak Igbo language.

Some Aspects of Igbo Culture

The Igbo people are renowned for their distinctive culture, which encompasses various significant elements. One crucial aspect of Igbo culture is their strong emphasis on communalism as opposed to individualism. This principle has served as a guiding force for the Igbo community throughout the years. The Igbo people are widely recognized for their unwavering commitment to supporting and looking out for one another, as reflected in the well-known saying among Igbo people, "onyia aghala nwanne ya" (do not abandon your brother). Additionally, they embrace the philosophy of Egalitarianism, encapsulated by the famous maxim "egbe bere, ugo bere, nke si ibe ya ebela, nku kwaa ya" (let the kite perch, let the eagle perch, any one that does not allow the other perch, let its wings break). Essentially, they believe in the principle of "live and let live."

Another notable aspect of Igbo culture is their rich musical heritage. They have distinct types of music for various occasions such as naming ceremonies, marriage ceremonies, burial ceremonies, and the new yam festival, among others. The new yam festival holds great significance in Igbo land as it is a time of expressing gratitude to God for the bountiful agricultural harvest of the year. This festival is characterized by lavish feasting and lively dancing, further exemplifying its importance within Igbo culture. Furthermore, Igbo culture values hard work, respect for elders, justice, decency, and various other principles. These elements collectively contribute to the unique identity and traditions of the Igbo people.

Erosion of Igbo Culture by Forces of Modernism

The cultural contact between the Igbo culture and the western culture has not ultimately favoured the Igbo culture. The rich culture of the Igbo people have seriously been eroded over the years by the western culture. Today, there are Igbos who bear Igbo names but cannot speak or even comprehend the language. It is also unfortunate that the names of some notable towns in Igbo land were bastardized through mis-spelling by the white imperialists, and many years after their departure, no conscious efforts have been made by Igbo people to correct such distortions. Such names include Owerri, Awka, Onitsha among numerous others.

The noble principle of communalism which was a guiding principles of Igbo people has almost given way to individualism which is western-oriented. Today, Igbo are no longer their brother's keeper. Many are stupendously rich while their kits and kins wallow in perpetual poverty. Furthermore, the culture of hard work has been eroded by the unbridled quest for material acquisition. Many young Igbos want to be rich over night without working hard and this has led many into Advanced fee fraud popularly called '419'. Again, the Igbo musical heritage has also been seriously eroded by Western civilization and culture. Many Igbo people today can neither sing nor dance their native songs but are specialists in singing and dancing foreign songs. The Igbo culture of respect for elders has been on a steady decline. Elders are now abused especially by the young ones who are rich. All these and many more point to the fact that the Igbo culture is gradually being eroded and replaced by the Western culture. There is need to look into these areas of shortcomings on the part of Igbos with regards to their culture and put a stop to them and also look for means to promote their culture.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The culture of a people is their identity. Africans should strive to be good ambassadors of their cultural heritage, so as not to loose their identity. They inherited these cultures and traditions from their past generations, they should do their best to preserve, protect and promote them especially the good values therein. The following are therefore recommendations that would help in this regard:

- Anything without strong roots will never stand strong. Children are the best ambassadors of culture. If our children know their heritage, then the fear of losing our root and culture will be no more. It is therefore the duty of the elders to give them a strong foundation; knowledge of and love for their heritage.
- We should promote and embrace the practice of our African culture within our country. It is important to uphold the positive aspects of our culture and pass them on to future generations, while discarding the negative aspects in order to foster a society that is progressive and dynamic.
- As human beings, we tend to value and protect the things we understand. Therefore, our country's education system should incorporate the teaching of students about their cultural heritage. This is crucial because with a deep understanding, students can establish a meaningful connection with and appreciation for their cultural heritage, enabling them to effectively apply its principles to their own lives.
- Children should be encouraged to speak their language correctly, without any form of adulteration. This will help to safeguard the original mother-tongue of a particular African community.

***Rev. Fr. Dr. Basil Amarachi Okonkwo, SMMM**

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria
Email: ba.okonkwo@unizik.edu.ng
Phone: 08033273927

References

- Cf., Azorji E. Eugene. *Faith and Culture in Dialogue (The African Experience): The Recurrent issues of Inculturation*, vol. 1.
- Taylor, E.B. 1871. *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythologies, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom*. 2nd ed. London: John Murray, 1871.
- Udeji, Nixon Chiedozi. *Sociology The Basics*. 2nd ed. Divine Mercy Publishers, 2015.
- Umeh C. Emmanuel. 2002. *The promotion of Human Rights and Social Justice: A call to Liberation Theology for the Church in Nigeria*. Germany: Die Deutsche Bibliothek, 2002.
- Umeh C. Emmanuel. *African Theology of Solidarity in addressing Freedom of Religion in Nigeria*. Aba: Rex Digital press, 2017.
- Emeka George Ekwuru. *Basic Introductory Themes and issues in Philosophical Anthropology*. Owerri: Living Flames Resources, 2010
- Battista Mondin. *Philosophical Anthropology*. Bengaluru: Theological Publications in India. 2019
- Gabriel E. Idang. "African Culture and Values". *Phronimon*. Vol. 16 No.2 (2015). p. 98-111
- The Nation. "My Culture my Pride". Retrieved from <https://thenationonline.ng/my-culture-my-pride/>
- Adereign. "My culture my pride" Retrieved from <https://read.cash/@adereign/my-culture-my-pride-8670c3e4>

Pressbooks. "Elements of culture". Retrieved from
<https://pressbooks.howardcc.edu/soci101/chapter/3-2-the-elements-of-culture/>

Study.com. "What is Xenocentrism?" Retrieved from
<https://study.com/learn/lesson/xenocentrism-concept-examples.html>

Kadealo.com. "10 African cultural values you should know about" Retrieved from
<https://kadealo.com/africa-culture/top-10-african-cultural-values-you-should-know-about/>

African Liberty. "Onuoha Frank: Locating African Values in Twenty-First Century Economics"
<https://www.africanliberty.org/2015/09/09/onuoha-frank-locating-african-values-in-twenty-first-century-economics/>