

CULTURE, CREATIVITY AND THE NIGERIAN YOUTH

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Abstract

The Nigerian economy first experienced a downturn in the early 1980s, when the oil boom became more of a curse. Since then, the Nigerian youth have not come to terms with the need to make legitimate living outside white collar jobs. Incidentally, it is practically impossible for government to provide jobs for the teeming unemployed graduates. This paper highlights the potential of culture and creativity in meaningfully engaging the Nigerian youth. It submits, through an analytical approach, that culture provides a veritable means of providing job security for the Nigerian youth; and that the imperative is for them to come to terms with the stark realities on ground, adopt entrepreneurship, and depend on the immense cultural resources that abound in different parts of the country.

Introduction

The mention of culture brings to mind such words like, *fetish, barbaric, uncivilised, primitive* ways of a people. In actual fact, culture goes beyond such base terminologies. It goes beyond uncultured ways of life; it goes beyond crude ways of life; and it goes beyond ancient ways of life. The *Cultural Policy for Nigeria* adopts Edward B. Tylor's definition of culture as,

the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenge of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organisation thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours (3).

Basically, there are two components of culture: *tangible* and *intangible*. The tangible components of culture have to do with things that you can *see, touch* and *feel*. The intangible component deals with things that you *cannot really touch and feel*; but they are there and are part of the daily existence of a people. For instance, farming tools, food items, cooking utensils, clothing, mats, musical instruments, masks, canoes, medicines, houses, and so on, are things that we see and feel; they are not abstract. On the other hand, beliefs, traditions, values, festivals, gods, and so on, are not things that are seen and touched; but they remain part of the cultural heritage of a people.

It is pertinent to state that by cultural heritage, we are referring to the cultural practices, cultural resources, cultural industries, people and places, cultural festivals, food culture, dress culture, music, dances, building culture, farming culture, marriage culture, chieftaincy institution, language and the general belief system of a people, among others. These make up the totality of various human organisations, as they battle to control their physical and social environment. Also, they emerge over time as shared historical experiences of given societies, which are continuous and ever-changing and developing; and they give groups of people their distinct identities.

It is in the light of the foregoing that the *Cultural Policy for Nigeria* states that culture comprises *material, institutional, philosophical* and *creative* aspects. It is necessary to expatiate on these four aspects of culture for better understanding of the concept in human organisations.

Material: This aspect, as noted earlier, has to do with the artefacts of a people, namely, tools, clothing, food, medicine, utensils, housing, and so on. For instance, if you see a man wearing *babanrigo*, you associate him with the Northern part of Nigeria; if you see a woman wearing *aso-oke*, you associate her with the South-Western part of the country; and if you see a man wearing a bowler hat, you see him as hailing from the Niger Delta. Similarly, a food item like *tuwo shinkafa* is associated with the North; *amala* and *ewedu* with the South-West; *akpu*, *ishi-ewu* and bitter-leaf soup with the South-East; just as *edikai-ekong*, *afang*, as well as starch and *banga* soup are associated with the Niger Delta.

Institutional: This deals with the political, social, legal and economic structures erected by a people to help them achieve material and spiritual objectives. Our political culture and educational system are quite different from what obtains in Europe or America because of our peculiar way of life and worldview.

Philosophical: This has to do with ideas, beliefs and values a people have cultivated over time. Our traditional and religious beliefs in Nigeria are diverse. Our attitude to life and death differ from one ethnic or religious group to another. Our marriage and burial traditions differ from one place to the other. Specifically, in the South-East and South-South, the burial of the dead could be one year after or more. This is followed by annual memorial services as far as the money is there. In fact, burials are now taken as business ventures, as invitation cards and envelopes are sent to people soliciting for financial donations.

Creative: This pertains the body of literature (oral or written), including the language of expression, the visual and performing arts (music, dances, dramatic performance), which has been developed by a people over time and which helps to mould other aspects of the culture of the people. Every writer draws from his/her cultural background. Ola Rotimi's *The gods are not to blame* is based on a Greek play, *Oedipus Rex*, by Sophocles. Rotimi skilfully adapted that classical play to the Yoruba setting.

Catherine Acholonu, in contributing to the conceptual framework on culture, states that, “the difference between man and animal is culture. Man is always trying to improve himself and the weapon through which he improves himself is culture” (6). This is in tandem with what the French philosopher, Albert Camus, had opined, when he observed that, “without culture and the relative freedom it implies, society, even when perfect, is but a jungle” (<http://madisonian.net>).

However, culture is always in motion; it is never static; it is ever adapting to changes. This explains why the dresses worn about 20 (or even 10) years ago are out of fashion now. The trousers and shirts that dominated the fashion scene in the 1990s are not what we have today. The same applies to the various hairdos, skirts, blouses and facial makeup that were in vogue years ago. This underscores the postulation that, *culture is dynamic*. Thus, it should be understood that culture is not merely the upholding of the ancient customs and traditions handed down from the past to the present generation. It encapsulates the attitude and world view of a people; it embodies their commitment and identity with the future of their values, norms and mores, which are faced with the demands of modern developments.

On the Concept of Creativity

Creativity, as a concept, could be looked at from the perspective of being ingenious. Thus, to be creative implies having the quality or power of creating or being imaginative. It is the ability to adroitly do certain things in ways that may be actually unimaginable. This ability could be innate (inborn) in a person; or it could be cultivated (developed) through constant and consistent practice.

The *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* states that the word, *creative*, means, “producing or using original and unusual ideas: a creative person, artist, designer, programmer, creative talents, powers, abilities and creative thinking”; and that *creativity* means the “ingenuity and flair” in a person or people. To the *Business Dictionary*, it is the “mental characteristic that allows a person to think outside of the box, which results in innovative or different approaches to a particular task” (<http://www.businessdictionary.com>). In the context of this paper, therefore, creativity means doing those things which are entrepreneurial in nature and have the potential of the Nigerian youth exploiting certain opportunities *legitimately* for a living and possibly for financial gains.

The emphasis on legitimacy needs to be given a little attention here. This is in the sense that if the creative ability of a person is not put into good use, then that person becomes a deviant in the society. In other words, it is not all about the innate ability a youth possesses; it is the use to which he/she puts that ability. The so-called “Yahoo Boys” we hear about on the news media everyday are young boys who have raw talents as regards information communication technology (ICT). Unfortunately, instead of using their God-given creative ability to do things to improve their living conditions and, by extension, the Nigerian nation, they are using that gift the wrong way thus giving the country a negative image internationally.

Let me quickly point out two unique cases of creative ingenuity recently displayed by two young Nigerians. The videos went viral on social media; but we are yet

to get news of any positive development on both inventions. The first case is one who has produced a *toy* airplane, which he remotely controls by starting the engine; then he controls it to taxi, take off, and glide in the air (may be about 1,000 feet above mid-sea level, as long as possible, before he controls it to land safely. The implication is that such a young Nigerian could possibly design and produce drones and airplanes if he has the necessary support. A second case is a young man who has designed what could be described as a *triple-system car*, which could drive on land, on water, and even fly as an airplane. He drove the car from Lagos to Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory and displayed pictures of the car on water and in the sky. This is a rare exploit, reminiscent of cars driven by James Bond of the popular *007 Series*, based on novels by Ian Fleming. According to the young man, his invention dates back to the administration of Gen. Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (IBB). Unarguably, these are young inventors that would have been quickly encouraged by government and even philanthropists, in other climes.

The Nigerian Youth

Curiously, an acceptable definition of the term, *youth*, has been very elusive. Even the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) understood this in its definition of the term. In defining the concept, UNESCO says, “*Youth* is best understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood’s independence and awareness of our interdependence as members of a community”. It expatiates thus:

However, age is the easiest way to define this group, particularly in relation to education and employment. Therefore “youth” is often indicated as a person between the age where he/she may leave compulsory education, and the age at which he/she finds his/her first employment. This latter age limit has been increasing, as higher levels of unemployment and the cost of setting up an independent household puts many young people into a prolonged period of dependency (<http://www.unesco.org>).

The uncertainty is further explicated by UNESCO, noting that when carrying out its Youth Strategy, it uses different definitions of *youth* depending on the context.

For activities at international or at regional level, such as the African Youth Forum, UNESCO uses the United Nations’ universal definition. The UN, for statistical consistency across regions, defines ‘youth’, as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, without prejudice to other definitions by Member States (<http://www.unesco.org>).

Incidentally, the confusion in the concept of *who is a youth* is further seen in the position taken by UNESCO thus:

For activities at the national level, for example when implementing a local community youth programme, “youth” may be understood in a more flexible

manner. UNESCO will then adopt the definition of “youth” as used by a particular Member State. It can be based for instance on the definition given in the African Youth Charter where “youth” means “every person between the ages of 15 and 35 years (<http://www.unesco.org>).

From the above, it is generally clear that placing the age of the youth at 40 years and below is an absurdity. More laughable are situations where youth leaders in present day political parties in Nigeria, for instance, are as old as **50** years or more. Somehow, this abnormality is arrantly defended with the saying that, one could be *a youth at heart*; or that *you are as young as what you feel in your heart*.

Generally, the youth are supposed to be the future leaders (leaders of tomorrow); they are the future directors-general of government Parastatals; they are the future vice chairmen and chairmen of local government councils; they are the future professors and vice chancellors in our citadels of learning; they are the future honourable members of the states’ houses of assembly; they are the future deputy governors and governors of our states; they are the future ministers; and they are the future vice presidents and presidents of our dear nation.

Furthermore, the Nigerian youth we are looking at are those who are self-reliant. They are honest and ready to use their hands to work and earn decent living. They are those who would not engage in internet fraud and other **419**-related criminal activities. They are those who would not engage in unwholesome practices like kidnapping, armed robbery, militancy or terrorism; they are those who will not readily offer themselves as ready tools for thuggery, ballot box snatching, assassinations and such other political criminal acts.

In summary, the ideal Nigerian youth are below **30** years old. They are hardworking, diligent, dependable and altruistic. They have the fear of God and would always want to be their brothers’ keepers. We shall now examine how the Nigerian youth can be self-reliant, even in the face of the current harsh economic conditions.

Exploiting the Potential of the Creative Industry

The creative industry is synonymous with the cultural industry. By this, we are referring to jobs that the Nigerian youth can readily engage in using their entrepreneurial skills. But then, many the Nigerian youth appear not to know what to do. This brings to mind the song of the celebrated late singer, Sonny Okosun, when he sang:

Which way Nigeria? (2ice)
Which way to go?
Which way to go?
I love my fatherland
Oh yes
I want to know o
Yes, I want to know
Which way Nigeria
Is heading to? (Chorus of “Which Way Nigeria”)

There is no gainsaying that the vocations available are diverse, just as the Nigerian people. Specifically, some of them include, but not limited to: photography, digital/screen printing, filmmaking, music, modern dance, drama/cultural troupe, stand-up comedy, painting, carving/sculpting, carpentry, fashion design, barbing/hairdressing, make-up, tie-and-dye, bead-making, shoe-making, catering services and local beverages, among others. Since the list is by no means definitive, we shall limit our discourse to just eighteen (18) aspects of the creative industry. This number is significant, as it marks the adolescent or voting age of the Nigerian youth.

- 1) *Photography*: The art of photography has become a very vibrant profession, most especially as practitioners do not require a long period of training. Little wonder then that some enterprising youth have taken to it and they flood public events to snap pictures of guests, even unsolicited. With developments in ICT and digital technology, they are quick to print the photographs with their mobile printers in just a few minutes just like the days of the Polaroid camera (wait and take). Nonetheless, if well pursued, this is one profession that can put food on the table for Nigerian youth.
- 2) *Digital/Screen Printing*: This is also an area that is yet to be given serious attention. There is no arguing the fact that, as one of the *happiest people in the world*, Nigerians like celebrating: wedding parties, graduation ceremonies, chieftaincy installations, political campaigns, product launchings, funerals, remembrance services, and so on. These and many other occasions require printing of various materials. Thus, if one is well-grounded in digital and screen printing technology, one would have more than what one could chew.
- 3) *Filmmaking*: The Nigerian film industry, (popularly called, Nollywood, and other emerging “Woods”), is gradually becoming a global brand. The industry has been adjudged by United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as the second largest film industry in the world, after the Indian film industry (Bollywood), in terms of production quantity. Producing about 100 movies a week (about 500,000 movies per annum) currently and providing close to 500,000 direct and indirect jobs, as at 2014, the film industry was said to have contributed about 1.4% to the GDP of the country. The implication is that Nollywood is a gold mine yawning to be tapped by my government.

Also, worth noting here is the fact that a movie production engages various personnel like script writers, script editors, actors, costumiers, make-up artists, production assistants, location managers, soundmen, light/set designers, continuity, photographers, film camera assistants, directors of photography, production managers, assistant producers, producers, assistant directors, artistic directors, directors and executive producers (EPs). The production crew

highlighted above is in addition to those who provide ancillary (support) services like transport, accommodation and welfare, among others.

As a point of fact, filmmaking offers several windows of opportunity for the Nigerian youth to eke out decent living. The opportunities abound in front of the camera and behind the camera. However, experience has shown that many youth prefer opting for acting, which will supposedly offer them opportunity to movie stars. Ironically, that does not come easy because of the stiff competition in the industry. In this light, the professional advice we always proffer to such persons is: *Go for behind the camera jobs, work diligently, pray and wait for an opening. A time will come fortuitously for you to avail yourself of the opportunity to act.*

- 4) *Painting*: We know that one does not need to go to an art school to be a good painter. It is possible for one to have the talent to paint; and to develop that talent, one has to work at it as a vocation. Thus, there is need for those who have the flair for painting to practice the art. Once you have a very good collection, the next thing is to mount an exhibition for members of the public to see your works and possibly purchase. There are many companies, especially hotels that acquire good paintings to provide the right ambience in their interiors.
- 5) *Carving/Sculpting*: The mention of carving here may be misconstrued to mean a local carver of masquerades and other such artefacts. By this, we mean production of art pieces that could be used as souvenirs. They could be on wood, plastic, or other such media. Can we readily pick gift items at the motor parks, supermarkets, the airport, and other such places that could remind us of this visit to Kwara state? We are sure the answer would not be in the affirmative.
- 6) *Carpentry*: Like the one who paints, one does not have to go school to become a good carpenter. The basic requirement is the flair for the profession and a little apprenticeship. Secondly, the carpentry we have in mind is not the *cut and nail* type but one who can design various types of upholstery and cabinets. Once you have good quality products, dealers will always patronise you. In fact, furniture shops would buy you works to display in their showrooms.
- 7) *Music*: There is no arguing the fact that Nigerians have dominated the African music landscape. Incidentally, like painting, one does not have to study the art of music production before venturing into it. Once the inspiration is there, one can make an impact. There are many popular musicians in the country, including school dropouts, who have changed the fortunes of their families through music. Also, one could go into classical and choral music as a performer or an instructor.
- 8) *Dance*: Some Nigerians are also currently making a living through dance and choreography. There are people who are dance instructors, teaching young children the art of dance. Furthermore, the horizon has been broadened with the

introduction of calisthenics into major state events. Abuja Carnival, Calabar Christmas Carnival

- 9) *Stand-up Comedy*: This is an aspect of the creative industry, where Nigerians have also made great impact. It is also vocation, where one does not have to go to school to perfect it. Interestingly, only very few of the stand-up comedians making waves in Nigeria actually went to the university. Furthermore, out of those who went to the university, only a negligible number studied theatre arts. While stand-up comedians like Ayo Makun, AY, Julius Agwu, Basorge Tariah and Francis Duru, Michael Ogbolosingha and Gee Bonz read theatre arts, popular comedians like Ali Baba, Okey Bakassi, Basket Mouth, I Go Dye, Gordons, Dan d'Humorous, Omobaba, MC Miracle, Lepacious Bose and Princess, among others, had nothing to do with theatre arts before venturing into stand-up comedy industry.
- 10) *Theatre/Drama*: The theatre also offers a legitimate means of livelihood. One could run a vibrant theatre troupe to the extent that one could be on demand at various public events. There are private theatre troupes like Crown Troupe in Lagos, Jos Repertory Theatre, Arojah Royal Theatre in Abuja, and a host of others that are doing theatre and surviving very well. The artists running the aforementioned theatres are not working for any person – they are on their own.
- 11) *Fashion Design*: Nigerians, in recent years, have taken the global fashion scene by storm. Many reputable fashion houses have emerged, with their fashion brands and ambassadors. They feature in different fashion shows around the world. The secret is coming out with unique designs that make significant fashion statements. Some top fashion designers in Nigeria include Yemi Osunkoya, Duro Olowu, Folake Folarin-Coker, Lisa Folawiyo, Frank Oshodi, Ade Bakare, Deola Sagoe, and Lanre Da-Silva Ajayi (*Web*).
- 12) *Hairdressing/Barbing Salons*: This is also an area that is gaining ground. With the social media craze, we see various fashions, regarding hairdos, manicure and pedicure. Of recent, we have seen various designs regarding hairdos. Young men now use various designs on their heads or even design their faces on the back of their heads. Furthermore, some use the art of tying scarf, *igele*, as a special brand. Since there is hardly any weekend that passes without a party, some youths help party goes to tie their *igele* or pre-tied *igele* for hire. Of course, it stands to reason that the neater the tied *igele*, the higher the patronage.
- 13) *Make-up*: Bridal make up is now a job that enterprising youths creatively engage in. This is because people get married every week, which means the services of make-up artists are needed every week. Tara House of Beauty and a host of other agencies provide professional training in this respect. Also, once one is proficient, he/she could easily join any of the film production hubs in the

Nigerian movie industry: Nollywood, Kannywood, Yoriwood, Biniwood, Callywood, Igalawood, and any of the “woods”.

- 14) *Tie-and-Dye*: The *adire* and *aso-oke* are unique fabrics that stakeholders in the creative industry have not capitalised on. The opportunities are there for these fabrics to be exploited for us to derive economic benefits.
- 15) *Shoemaking*: This is an entrepreneurial skill that is in search of the Nigerian youth. We are talking about design of shoes that can stand the test of time. Though there is craze for Italian or Spanish shoes, such shoes are not specially designed for our weather and environmental conditions. The shoe you can use for five years in London, Paris or New York, cannot survive two years in Nigeria because of our muddy roads.
- 16) *Bead making*: Unlike gold, silver and bronze, beads are gradually being patronised as adornments in dressing, as they are affordable. Coral beads, for instance, have a way of enhancing the beauty or appearance of whoever adorns them.
- 17) *Catering*: Food is a basic necessity in life. There are various snacks or small chops that people do not prepare at home. Where such items are on offering anywhere, the patronage is always on the high side. Today, in Nigeria, we have several eateries and outdoor catering services. While Mr. Bigg’s, KFC and Chinese Restaurants were favourite brands in those days, they have since been overshadowed by local brands like *Tasty Fries*, *Chicken Republic*, *Tantalizers*, *Genesis*, *Jevenic*, *Mama Cass*, *Calabar Kitchen*, and so on. One unique approach among the Nigerian brands is the addition of African pot, that is, local delicacies.
- 18) *Local Beverages*: This is a business that would always attract clients. We are not giving attention to the production of local drinks like *kunu*, *fura*, *zobo*, and *soya* milk, among others. These are local drinks that do not have additives; they do not contain genetically modified organisms – they are direct from the source and are nutritious.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to highlight the nexus between culture, creativity and the Nigerian youth. We have enumerated the various creative enterprises that the Nigerian youth could venture into. The point is that, how the youth approach such creative ventures would determine how they could fare in life.

In considering the foregoing, the Nigerian youth have to appreciate the fact that government cannot provide jobs for everyone. The implication is that they have to strive to make legitimate living through the diverse opportunities offered by the creative industries, some of which have been delineated above. Also, the organised private sector (OPS) can reduce the teeming number of unemployed youths by creating more jobs.

Many may have ideas but do not have the platforms to realise such ideas in practical terms.

However, it is imperative that government at the levels, federal, states and local governments, be committed to ameliorating the situation by providing more conducive environment for the creative enterprises to thrive. In all of this, one advice to the Nigerian youth is critical. *They should start from where they are; start with what they have; and start now before it is too late.*

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