CULTURE AND THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY IN NORTHERN NIGERIA: AN OVERVIEW OF THE GRAY AREAS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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KEYWORDS

ABSTRACT

The history of human existence revealed that, culture is an integral part of human endeavor. To every community/group of people, there is a cultural identity that binds them together at different levels of cultural practices. In Northern Nigeria, cultural practices and its sustainability among non-Hausas is perceived an uncommon trait. Since some writers assumed that the history of Northern Nigerian culture is the history of the Hausa culture. This paper argues that there exist in the North other ethnic groups whose cultural structure has the capacity of meeting the expectations of its adherents, but cultural suppression, domination and subjugation threatens the smooth practices of cultural heritage of most of these non-Hausa ethnic nationalities cohabiting the Northern part of Nigeria. The ebbs and flows of cultural practices among non-Hausa cultures was factored by European cultural imperialism in the 19th century, colonial degradation in the 20th century, self-vilification of culture by its adherents, globalization among others. The work used a multi-disciplinary approach in data collation and analysis. Finally, the work suggests viable ways toward restoring the lost glory of cultural heritage and how cultural values and practices among non-Hausa communities could be resuscitated in Northern Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

All through history, Nigeria is known to have built itself along cultural lines. It is important to note that, this cultural variation has no iota of threat to the peaceful coexistence of the people. However, the western infiltration (imperialism) to Africa and the industrial revolution that took place in the 19th century changed the nature of cultural relations in Africa generally.[i] Western culture was implanted and the perceived primacy of European superiority outshined the African race and racial classification of Africa polarized the citizens (Pygmies, Bushmen, Hottentots, Hamites Negroes, Bantus and Arabs took dominance as popular races in Africa).[ii]

Africa in the colonial era operated within the context of myths than scientific realism, the political framework of the ruler and the ruled was caught up within the ideological relationship of masters and servant,[iii] acceptance of the myth that descent is divine and superintending role of the god(s) commanded the disposition of an unflinching obedience to the dictates of the ruler became a mandatory practice.[iv] To most races in the world, divine kinship is not new in places where monarchical practices is in place, for instance, England and Netherland among others. However, what distinguishes most parts of Africa and other parts of the world where divine kingship produces monarchs is, in Africa, Africans attach some forms of myths in the belief that the divine kinship of a monarch descent is supernatural. This state of affairs has successfully turned most monarchs who were the custodians of the people's culture and tradition into dictators, a situation that became a threat and a basis of oppression to the most ethnic minorities in the north. At this point, cultural subjugation, oppression and domination have become the bye-product of European legacy. At present, it has transmitted to mean denial of rights to express those values that are tested and identified as the people's way of life over time by the so-called superior culture. In Mutua, Okoli maintained that the centrality of African state built intolerance of opposition and multiparty-ism, one-party legislation, bullying of the legislature and judiciary, internal accumulation and repatriation of the national wealth by the ruling groups, assassination of potential alternative leaders, all these are the inherent vices of the post-colonial African states "inherited" from the colonial "culture".[v] Unfortunately, it is arguably incorrect to attribute the wanton and insensible killings of innocent people in Yobe, Madagali, Southern Kaduna, Katari, Riyom, Barkin-Ladi, Benue State, among others as part of colonial legacy.

Unfortunately, before African independence and the early years of post-independence, African leaders who resisted the imposition of imperial cultures were faced with problem of denial of the rights and opportunities of coming to power. For example, the radial leaders of Mau-Mau in Kenya were either killed or denied access to power. Within the same era, African leaders were forcibly made to undermine the social principle in favor of the west. For instance, Kwame Nkrumah was only allowed to lead Ghana to independence when he dropped his radical tendencies and accepted supremacy of the British imperial ideology. Same trend and principles were imposed and made applicable to Jomo Kenyatta who was forced to moderate his stiff Afro-cultural principles. Those who held tenaciously to the home-grown national cultures and tradition of afro-cultural tenets were skillfully eliminated, this can be seen in the likes of Thomas Sankara of Burkina-Faso who was assassinated by his own closest friend and Murtala Mohammed whose policies where termed Afro-centric, radical, and indigenous based.

To buttress the above, cultural and political discourse on Nigeria largely takes into account the leading "geo-cultural" factor of the people among other factors. Essentially, ethnic polities cohabiting the riverine areas for example: the Ibibio, ijo, Urhobo, Itekiritend to share cultural similarities. Those of the forest zone of the defunct Eastern Region also had their cultural peculiarities, so also the south-western region.

In the north, there are also multi-cultural affinities that classified the numerous ethnic nationalities that were coerced into larger northern Nigeria as a result of the 1804 Danfodio Jihad. To this, many writers emphasize Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba languages in Nigeria. But language is very unsatisfactory factor of classification of Nigerian identity because it is so imprecise.[vi] For one thing, the Hausa and Fulani are culturally linked, not in dialect but in cultural practices. One will be tempted to agree with the fact that, the speakers of Gworok and Ikulu for example are culturally mixed than language simile. Taking from the above, culture in Nigeria

is multi-ethnic and more closely linked than separated. In other words, Nigeria is not culturally divergent like in linguistic terms.

However, the slightest variations in cultural disparities are so sharp than none. These sharp variations however, form the basis for cultural uniqueness of each ethnic polity. Since cultural pre-judices, inferiority and backwardness had erroneously dominated facets of British discourse on Nigeria towards the end of the nineteenth century, Fredrick Lugard in his work "the dual mandate in tropical Africa" and "the political memoranda" maintained that Africa is categorized into three main categories. These categories He said were: Advanced African Society, primitive African society, and European civilized African society.[vii] In his analogy, Lugard regarded the caliphate institution as advanced since it has a well-defined political structure as against other non-Hausa communities in central Nigeria. In the central Nigeria, formal political administrative institutions were segmented into village state structures which cut across all independent communities that formed the identity of such polity within the bother lines of the ethnic groups prior to the Fulani invasion had a well-defined self-actualized culture that had survived with them overtime.[viii]

Since culture among dispersed people in Nigeria is closely linked than language, in the 21st century today, the most vulnerable minority cultures are faced with threat of extinction by the most "superior culture(s)" in Nigeria. There are quite number of factors that necessitated the decline of these cultures in Nigeria, thus: European cultural imperialism in the 19th century, colonial legacy in the twentieth century, self-vilification of cultures, globalization, just to discourse but few.

European Cultural Imperialism in the 19th Century

It is not just enough to say that history tells us when Africans in the Neolithic age passed from hunting to agriculture, and to the discovery of how grains could be sown to add to the spontaneous growth of more grains. But history also tells us about the rapid and more widely industrial revolution that changed the economic form and moral superstructure of Nigeria and northern life to be specific in the 19th century, able men and women vacated their villages where cultural authority and unity is assertive, to work as hired servants in factories bunt to exploit their labour.[ix] In central Nigeria, the complexity of machine based economy turned most vices to virtues; children were no longer regarded as assets, early marriage became outdated virtue pre-marital continence turned difficult to maintain since the poor wages could not sustain livelihood in the city, marriage was not encouraging among youths while the society provided every stimulus and facility for sex, within the same conduit, women were "emancipated" and contraceptives enabled them to separate intercourse from pregnancy.[x] Culture as a guide to societal values in northern Nigeria lost its favor. The rebellious youth was no longer constrained by the surveillance of culture prejudices in their community; they could hide their moral bankruptcy in the protective anonymity of the city crowd. Western civilization began to raise authority of the industrial machines and the bourgeois directives over the scold-finger of parents, western education spread cultural doubts. Culture and indigenous moral conducts lost more of its supernatural supports.

By the end of the 19th century, after the partitioning of Africa by the European powers, northern Nigeria was already a theatre of cultural superiority displayed by the Hausa ruling Oligarchy. Western cultures went hand in hand with the Hausa culture at the detriment of the cultures of ethnic minorities in the middle-belt. Since the British colonial interest was already heightened, the conspiracy of the dominant culture to dominate the other culture became an option for the Hausas to ally with the British for an indirect rule arrangement. This was brought in colonial regime in northern Nigeria.

Colonial Legacy in the 20th Century

In northern Nigeria, colonialism did not just end in 1960 with the formal handing over of political power to northern aristocrats, but it left the north with the steam of socio-cultural imbalances. The lopsidedness in power sharing on the eve of independence placed the Hausa culture at vantage pendulum of inequality, leaving the minority ethnic elements in the north in situation of perpetual cultural quack mare. The Maguzawa in Kano, the Yandang in Adamawa, the Angas in Plateau, the Adara in Kaduna, the Egede in Benue, the Jarawa and

Warjawa in Bauchi, the Bura and Bade in Yobe, the Alargo in Nasarawa, the Babur in Borno, the Zuru in Kebbi among others all caught up in the nest of cultural subjugation by their immediate dominant culture within their areas.

Since indirect rule institutionalized inferiority complex among the citizenry to favor the dominant group, the chiefs who are the custodians of the minority peoples culture are not only suppressed into forfeiting some privileges of heading the ceremonial council of chiefs in their respective states, but in most instances faced with threat of dethroning from their royal stool and if not risk of conspiracy of assassination by the power that be in the state.[xi]

Even in resource allocation through federal character system, the minorities are not favored, the strongest would always dominate the space and utilize every opportunity that comes with Socio-cultural and political advantage suppression and domination has become a culture at some level of the northern endeavor. At this point, minorities are undoubtedly denied some fair opportunities or access to employment into juicy positions, political offices, and other opportunities that allow citizens to optimally exercise their legitimate rights as citizens. For example, though politics is considered to be a game of numbers, however election into sensitive positions are considered as the birth right of some particular ethnic groups in the north, not mindful of the consequence of some parochial interest that are inimical to the development of the state.

Self-Vilification of Culture

Culture is aimed at sustaining the people's heritage and to also maintain the sanctity of the people tradition. Unfortunately, most of these ethnic nationalities instead of inculcating the habit of cultural sustainability amongst their kin and kindred, they end up vilifying some basic practices that form the rudiment of their cultural heritage. The most occupants of traditional titles holders among non-Hausas in the north, instead of promoting the usage of indigenous titles that has functional meaning in their native dialect, most times ended up bearing foreign or borrowed titles that are rooted from their oppressor cultural background.[xii] Some of the cultural practices in the traditional chieftaincy institutions among the non-Hausas cultures are not indigenous. For instance, removal of shoes in palace of a traditional ruler is a borrowed culture from the Islamic background. Turban is not indigenous to most of these ethnic elements. However, situations of cultural similarities among traditional institutional practices cannot be discounted. For instance all cultural and traditional institutions have stages of a well-defined hierarchy from the paramount ruler to the subject.

Parents vilify their culture through unscrupulous names given to children at birth. Most of these names are colossal mockery to the cultural identity of the people. Most of the names are names of oppressors or names given to showcase inferiority status of the individual or group of individuals. This has contributed to the declined nature of the people's culture. In recent time, the Fulani people in Kajuru in Kaduna state in an effort to win his good will crowned the chairman of the local government with a tittle JAE. Jae was an invader of Kajuru during the wars of conquest that followed the 1804 Dan fodio Jihad.[xiii] Unfortunately, the recipient of the tittle on unscrupulously felt honored by the Fulani community and celebrated a derogatory, most uncomplimentary and Machiavellian title.

Language is an important means of human communication. As such it is a symbolic maker of cultural identity of a people.[xiv] Some of these ethnic nationalities in northern Nigeria have failed in sustaining and inculcating the habit of communication using their indigenous languages. They have neglected their indigenous dialect for alien languages such as Hausa and English. Adopting the alien languages as common medium of communicating amongst them has stunted and derailed the growth and sustenance of these cultures in the northern Nigeria. This situation seems to be worsened with the attempt of globalization era, children cannot speak their native dialect proficiently, and even if they try they end up borrowing over 70% of the words from the dominant language (Hausa).[xv]

GLOBALISATION

The interconnectedness that midwifed globalisation brought in different societies and cultures into the conformity, with the strongest cultures dominating the weaker. Perhaps, the thought of cultural interconnectedness that has engulfed and transforming the world into becoming a global village, where socio-cultural

and politico-economic walls are broken must have preempt Ashafa to have quoted Fukuyama saying "globalisation spread a common human frame of action across the world societies, a frame of action which has been evolving since the beginning of the sixteenth century."[xvi] This meant that irrespective of physical boundary, societies across the globe are mutually connected in virtually all spheres of human endeavors. This state of affair has orchestrated compromise in cultural affinities of most polities in northern Nigeria. In the north, where cultural precepts of a minority culture turned repugnant to the larger Hausa culture, the cultural supremacy of the Hausa culture prevails. Indeed, this cultural inequality is not new in the contemporary global arena. However, depending on the continent but western culture apparently dominates its former colonies in Africa. Needless to say, globalization has gradually eroded the cultural fervor of most non-Hausa cultures in northern Nigeria. In other words, globalization has sent some cultures to extinction.

Conclusion

Having examined the garment of cultural degradation in northern Nigeria in the 21st century, the imbalance in colonial structure and its legacy that followed the post-independence era, self-vilification by the custodians of culture among people concerned, globalization among others. This paper asserts that cultural sustainability can be achieved through concerted effort by the natives in creating awareness and reorganizing cultural events to showcase the richness of the people's culture. Furthermore, policies must be formulated by the government to protect the institution that gives incentives to cultural sustainability in Northern Nigeria.

ENDNOTES

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