

The Relevance of the Culture of Origin to Nation Building in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT Nigeria is a multi – ethnic country. Each ethnic group and sub –group has its tradition of origin which tends to emphasize ethnic individualism in the country and thus the impossibility of building Nigeria into a united country. This work has recognized the culture of tracing origin in Nigeria and its divisive impact. It says that inspite of their individualism, a more careful examination of the traditions will reveal the existence of links among the ethnic groups. It is the contention of the work that such links can be highlighted in many ways, in drama, educational policy etc for the successful building of a united Nigerian state.

Nigeria, a country of about 470 (Agaba 2006) ethnic groups has a common culture of tracing historical origin. In the era before the European intervention in the politics of the kingdoms and empires that occupied what is today known as Nigeria, the different major cultural groups have had their traditions of origin. The different segments of these major groups have had their traditions which have combined with the origins of the major groups to play a dual role of integration and disintegration among the people of Nigeria. This has constituted a major challenge to the Nation building process in modern Nigeria. It is the intention of this work to examine some of these traditions of origin and later bring out the positive elements in them that can be exploited for the unity of our country Nigeria. Only four of these shall be examined and they are those among the major ethnic groups of Edo, Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa. It might be necessary to refer to other traditions among the sub-groups as we carry out analyses of the relations between them and the major groups.

The Edo, among whom the Benin people were the most prominent, has their traditions of origin woven around the kingdom. These traditions of the kingdom according to Alan Ryder (1977) are lost in myth and antiquity, but from them survived only a tradition of migration from the east (Afigbo 1999) - Egypt. Some versions of this tradition claim that the Benin occupied the site of Ife before the coming of the Yoruba; that there was a period of common sojourning in Ife area before the Bini migrated to Beninland after a band of hunters sent to inspect the place reported positively about the richness of the land (Egharevba 1968).

Egharevba claims that at the time of moving into the present abode of Benin there were already people living in the place and the people were said to have been Nupe and Sudanese (Egharevba 1968). This tradition eventually links the present dynasty – the Eweka dynasty in Benin with the Yoruba in Ife. This is said to have come about when the Ogo dynasty came to an end following some kind of dispute as to how the succession was to be arranged. While some of the chiefs were quite content with the status quo, others insisted on getting a prince to rule over them. To this end, they sent to the Ooni of Ife for a prince. The traditions say that this prince was Oranmiyan. This tradition is found in both Benin and Ife.

Although this tradition can be interpreted in various ways including seeing it as a piece of culture capture designed to relate the Benin dynasty to the prestigious Ife royal line, (Ryder 1980), it seems to point more to a blood relationship which alone can justify the lack of fear of losing sovereignty on the part of Benin by sending for a ruler from a neighbouring powerful state. The Late R.E. Bradbury (1973) states that Oranmiyan on arrival in Benin found that it was difficult for a non-Bini to rule Benin, given his inability to speak the language. He therefore returned to Ife, having first impregnated the daughter of a village chief who, he said later bore him a son that would become king. This son, fostered and instructed by the followers his father left behind for the purpose, eventually became the Oba Eweka 1. Bradbury goes on to say; “that this dynasty is derived from Ife is beyond reasonable doubt”; and he gives as his reasons

for this statement the fact that the insignia of office used to be sent from Ife only when the Ooni had approved the successor to the Benin throne; that the remains of a Benin Oba used to be sent to Ife for burial. We see that between Benin and the Yoruba three possible levels of relationships had developed even as early as the tail end of the Ogoiso era and these are, brotherhood relationship, neighbourly relationship and relationship from derivation of the Eweka dynasty from the Yoruba. The first and the third are powerful links that can be exploited for the purpose of nation building in Nigeria.

Among the Yoruba, one of the largest groups in Nigeria, there are two traditions which place their historical consciousness in Ile-Ife (Akinjogbin and Ayandele 1999). One version of this relates that the Yoruba originally came from the North-eastern area of Africa, which has been variously supposed to be Egypt, Yemen or Arabia. The tradition says they settled at Ile-Ife. In the process of the journey from the so called Egypt, Yemen or Arabia to Ile-Ife they left colonies of themselves on their way, one of whom the Gogobir (Gobir) of present Northern Nigeria, are still remembered and often cited by the Yoruba and Gogobiri themselves. The tradition continues that the party that eventually got to Ife was led by Oduduwa who established a flourishing Kingdom and later sent his sons and grand sons to found the various Yoruba kingdoms (Akinjogbin and Ayandele 1999). At present many of them claim direct descent from Oduduwa (Akinjogbia 1967; Gazette 1903).

The second version of the Yoruba tradition of origin which is more popular than the first talks about a period when the whole earth was covered with water and God sent messengers to go and create farmland out of the liquid mass. The tradition names those who made up this party as Obatala, variously also referred to as Orisa-Nla or Orise Alase, as leader, and sixteen Oye (immortals). According to the tradition they were given five pieces of iron, a lump of earth or sand tied in a piece of cloth (a version says put in a snail shell), and a cockrel. Some where, as they journeyed to the world, Obatala got drunk with palm wine and Oduduwa seized the paraphernalia of authority from him and eventually led the party to the world. They landed at a place in Ife called Oke Oramfe. There the five pieces of iron were set down and the lump of earth or sand placed on them and the cockrel made to scatter or spread

the sand or earth with its toes. The tradition then concludes that farm land then appeared. The name Ile-Ife, which means the house of spreading, derives from this tradition (Akinjogbin and Ayandele 1999). This tradition also concludes that at a time Oduduwa became old and blind and he called his children to go and found their kingdoms giving each a royal symbol. The background of this instruction by Oduduwa was a drought that was said to have hit Ile-Ife for a long time causing famine and decimation. A babalawo (Soothsayer) was consulted and he prescribed emigration. It is possible that Oduduwa sent his sons to lead the migration from Ife in obedience to the soothsayer's prescription.

A third variant of the tradition of origin of the Yoruba places their origin at the Niger Benue confluence. The importance of this tradition lies in the fact that it creates a greater link between the Yoruba, the Igbo, the Hausa, the Edo and all the Kwa speaking groups of Nigeria, almost all of whom have groups claiming origin from the Niger Benue confluence (Ikime 1982: 1-33)

The tradition of origin among the Hausa of northern Nigeria says that very long time ago, a certain Bayajidda fled from the 'east' to Kanem – Borno, already an important state in the Chad basin. There the Mai of Borno gave him his daughter in marriage but deprived him of his followers. This and subsequent events caused Bayajidda to flee the state with his wife. Travelling westwards, Bayajidda left his wife at Biram ta – Gabas to bear him a son. He came to a place called Gaya where he met some blacksmiths who made him a knife according to his specification. As he continued his journey he came to a town whose inhabitants were deprived of water from a well by a sacred snake called Sarki or King. Bayajidda killed the snake and in gratitude Daura, the queen of the town married him and also gave him a Gwari concubine. By Daura, Bayajidda had a son, Bawo.

Various accounts exist as to what happened after this, but one of them states that Bawo had seven sons who became founders of the seven legitimate Hausa (Bakwai) states of Daura, Kano, Rano, Zazzau (Zaria) Gobir, Katsina and Birani. The tradition continues that from the Gwari concubine Bayajidda also had sons who became the progenitors of the Bansa Bakwai (illegitimate Hausa states). These are usually referred to as Zamfara, Kebbi, Nupe, Gwari, Yauri, Yoruba and Kororofa.

As for the Igbo a number of claims have been

made some referring to their place of origin as Egypt, Isreal, Benin etc. But Afigbo's elaborate study on the origin of the Igbo has identified the Nri – Awka – Orlu complex as the most likely earliest center of Igbo settlement in southern Nigeria and that it was from here that waves and waves of migrations set out to occupy the other portions of present day Igboland (Afigbo 1999). Both Talbot and Jones have the same view, thus debunking the Hamitic hypothetical view of migration from Egypt, and others.

A variant of Igbo origin legend asserts that the Igala and some Igbo groups descended from the same parent-stock in the Anambra valley. Igala or Idah is said to have migrated from the Niger Benue confluence area. Some extant traditions among some Igbo groups also speak of migration from the Igala area. According to Isichei (1976), "A whole chain of Niger Igbo towns claim Igala origins, or have quarters which trace their descent front Igala". Some of such towns are Oko, Odekpe, Illah and Ossomari.

Some of these Igala settlements would appear to have begun as trading and fishing posts, especially around the lower Niger basin. They were possibly absorbed by older Igbo settlements at Illah, Okpanam, Asaba, Abala, Okwe, Ossomari and Oko through trade, marriage and migration. Available evidence also suggests that new Igala settlements absorbed Igbo migrants (Onwuejeogwu 1987). It seems certain that the Niger-Benue confluence area holds the key to the cradle land of many kwa-speaking groups in Nigeria, including Igbo. In an earlier work, Afigbo (1981) had supported this view when he said "the Igbo like their immediate Kwa-speaking groups, probably started from around the region of the Niger-Benue confluence".

The above various traditions have created the impression of relationships of various types between peoples of Nigeria in the past. The analyses of these traditions will not be allowed to detain us here because quite a lot have been written about them in various historical literatures authored by renowned scholars. What concerns us here is how these traditions have connected the peoples of Nigeria even in the pre-colonial times and how this can be exploited for the purpose of nation building in Nigeria today. Within the four major groups whose traditions of origin have been examined, there are as many traditions of affinity with their nucleus states as there are lineages in the ethnic groups. Within the Edo

speaking groups for instance, the Esan, Etsako, Owan, the Itsekiri, Urhobo and others have various historical traditions that link them up with the metropolitan Benin, thus establishing a type of blood relationship through some eponymous ancestors. Both the Yoruba, Igbo and the Hausa traditions also play this role within their ethnic groups. By this means therefore as a people whose early history is based not on any written evidence but predominantly on such traditions as discussed above, one could justifiably claim a blood relationship for the Nigerian peoples and groups. No matter from what angle these traditions among the sub-groups or among the inter-groups are viewed, the fact is there that there existed an affinity of some sort among the people of Nigeria in the very early times.

A look at the traditions again shows that each of them flowed into the other, thus showing group identities and inter-group relationships. The Edo tradition not only creates a link among the sub-groups and with their Delta neighbours and the Nupe who were said to be living there before but also creates a link with the Yoruba, through Oduduwa or his son Oramiyan who was said to have fathered the first ruler of the present dynasty – the Ewaka dynasty. The Hausa tradition establishes a link among all the present Hausa states as well as some Yoruba states in present Kogi and Kwara states. The Yoruba tradition apart from linking all Yoruba states to Ile-Ife as their ancestral home also links up three major groups – the Yoruba, the Edo (Benin) and Hausa (Gobirawa). Whatever the interpretation of these links-political (conquest) economic or social, they remain a situation that can be further exploited for the unity of Nigeria. Even if blood relationship cannot be established from these traditions (and I think it can), the fact of interaction at these various very early stages of evolution can be established. That is to say that the ethnic groups in Nigeria have interacted with each other at the very early stages of state formation or development to the extent that every group had a name for the other. The Etsako people call the Yoruba, Iyagi, the Hausa, Izanama, Igbo, Ilaya etc. The Igbo called the Benin, Idu and the Yoruba, Ndi Obakpa, the Urhobo referred to the Benin as Aka, the Benin called the Hausas, Igabayi and Ife, Uhe etc. The interactions and interconnection were such that there was no group in Nigeria that was completely alien to the other in the pre-colonial times.

Whatever the nature of the interaction, they might have played a great role in the shaping of modern Nigeria. Obaro Ikime (1980) says, "it is not just enough to say that our people traded together and that they intermarried, they did more. The kingdoms and empire, through conquest, assimilation and other processes brought Nigerian peoples together, albeit in different geographical locations. The Benin Empire had within it in addition to areas of Edo speaking groups, the Igbo, the Igala and Nupe while the Old Oyo Empire had within it a number of Yoruba groups which would have been independent and it also had fairly close dealings with many groups of the middle belt. The Nupe had the same. Warfare between the Hausa States and Borno and the middle belt led not only to the mixing of peoples, but to permanent settlement of Hausa in the middle belt and the emergence of new ethnic groups. This mix up is in every state of Nigeria". Having been so mixed up in populations of the different states by some type of pre-colonial interaction or contacts or relationships or the other, clothed in these traditions we must forge tighter relationships that should bring greater opportunities for national development. For instance the idea of Unity Schools which were initiated in the 1970s should be re-enforced, expanded and made less elitist to achieve this purpose. The admission policy of the school system could be re-examined to ensure that as much as practicable, Nigerians from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds have the opportunity to socialize under a school unit (SO Ajayi 1998). More programmes of the like of the National Youth Service should be developed for the unity of the Nigerian state.

One aspect that can be inferred from these traditions and can be used for the nation building in Nigeria is languages. All the languages spoken in Nigeria are said to belong to the Niger-Congo group of Negro languages. Almost half or three-quarters of the languages belong to a sub-group of the Niger-Congo group referred to as the 'Kwa'. On the basis of glotto-chronological evidence, scholars have come to the conclusion that languages in the Kwa sub-group must have started diverging or assuming their distinctive and individual forms at least 6000 years ago (Armstrong 1964). That is to say that at a point in the history of the people of this nation, one language had been spoken which has now diverged and re-diverged due to migrations and

interactions with alien forces to what we presently have. These alien forces may not necessarily be groups outside the geographical area of Nigeria. A proof of this view is the presence of a dialect called 'Olukumi' in Western Igboland spoken by the Ubulubu, Ukwunzu, Onicha – Ukwu, Obomkpa, Ugbodu, and it is a mixture of Yoruba, Igala and Ebu (Nwaokocha 2008). With time and further interactions, this dialect will develop into something different that the people of that period will no longer regard them as western Igbo even if they make such claim.

The fact, therefore of the divergence of the Nigeria languages from the original group should be regarded less in our inter-states and inter-ethnic relationships. Rather the fact of the common origin of the different languages should be emphasized for our national unity.

Even in this diverged form a unity can be forged through Formal Education. This is one of the most promising ways of promoting ethnic understanding, tolerance, and creating a shared sense of responsibility which transcends ethnicity (Ajayi 1998). In this regard, government policy on education which emphasizes the teaching of the major languages in the school syllabuses should be sustained. Also, a policy that encourages or even requires all federal career officers to attain a degree of fluency in at least one of the three national languages that should be so adopted – Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba – other than the one they speak naturally, should be adopted. Local governments in the country should be encouraged to set up centres for the teaching of at least one of the national languages other than the one predominant in their respective areas of origin. Finally, encouragement should be given for wider circulation of Newspapers, printed in the three suggested national languages, throughout the country.

These different traditions of origin can also be a tool for our national unity in another way. In this area the different Theatre Arts Departments in our various universities and the various theatre groups in Nigeria are most relevant. Through great imaginative thoughts they can provide the missing links in these traditions of origin re-write them and act them. It is a well known fact that where an article talking about the origin of the Nigeria peoples cannot reach, a dramatized or acted history of the origin of Nigerian people on television screens will reach. It is easier to keep memory of stories dramatised or acted on stage

than stories told on pages of journals and books accessible to only a few. With such dramas given a unique place in the Nigerian television programmes, they will achieve their objective of uniting the people.

There is no doubting the fact that the traditions of origin of the various people of Nigeria have played very outstanding roles in nurturing ethnicity and ethnic sentiments in the history of the country. But a more careful examination of these traditions can reveal some areas of cohesion, which can be exploited to the benefit of the nation building process in the country. All that is needed is a more beneficial appraisal of these traditions and more dedicated attention to them for the purpose of bringing out from them, hidden materials that can be used to achieve the objective of unity in the Nigerian state.

NOTE

At the end of the 18th century, fourteen kingdoms were said to have been all founded by sons of Oduduwa. In 1903, the Oni, Olubuse named twenty-one kingdoms, excluding Ife which derived their crowns from Ife. See A.I. Akinjogbin Dahomey and Its Neighbour, Cambridge: 1967 p. 9 and Gazette Extraordinary, Lagos: 1903, p.2.

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