

Unpopular Essays

RASSEY EKPO BASSEY



THE mind boggles at the extent of abuse to which the word, **CULTURE**, has been put in Nigeria. Confused with "tradition", it has served as a cover for exuberant frivolities.

In fact, more than any other variable, it stands as a lasting indictment to the "military" regime of General Yakubu Gowon.

The practice of drafting naked girls to swing in amusement to the country's spoilt elite, of camping school pupils endlessly away from school in "culture camps", has lent credence to the definition of culture as what "the poor do to amuse the rich".

But culture in its true sense, is a lot more than that. Professor Abraham calls it "the whole knowledge, art, science, technology, religion, morality, ritual, politics, sports, literature, language, even etiquette and fashions... of a people".

In other words, culture is the way of life of a people. And Nigerian culture (if there is any such thing) can only be explained in terms of mass poverty, a non-existent technology and tribalism, not in "festivals of traditional dances."

Perhaps, nowhere is the abuse to which culture has been put, better dramatised than in Nigeria's South-Eastern State. Work is nearing completion on a multi million naira cultural centre that will employ a director for ₦6,895 per annum!

Many people are being trained at London's Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts to enable them contribute towards developing NIGERIAN culture in the South-East. Anxious workers who cannot easily get a bus ride to work, watch helplessly as virtually empty buses marked "SOUTH-EAST CULTURE" streak past in the mornings.

And in Lagos last year, at the opening

ceremony of the first national sports festival, the South-East contingent caused a stir when they appeared in wrappers, barefooted at the march-past.

So serious is the business of "culture" that in Oron (a town with little or no amenities), the local development union has

This Culture Nonsense

committed itself to building a ₦17,000 cultural centre!

The ousted governor of the state, Brigadier U. J. Esuene, encouraged by his state's performance at the national competition for Gowon's gold gong is reported to have donated a silver cup for "cultural competitions" in the state. (He did not say how you could make one cultural form compete with another).

Fittingly, his last official tour of Kwara State was filled with "cultural" shows. Reflecting on his happy moments in Kwara, the ex-governor was reported to have told reporters, that "from all the things he had seen in that state, it was evident that the state would give the South-East a favourable competition during the next festival of arts and traditional dances for the head of state's gold gong."

And in a glowing tribute to the governor, his cultural commissioner, Chief J. D. Esemu held him up as "one of the few Nigerians who are convinced that the political philosophy of any nation is intricately tied up with its culture." "We are," he continued, "particularly lucky at this stage of our cultural development to have a leader of his calibre".

True, to Esuene as well as other members of the Gowon brigade, culture was competition. It was at once a pastime and an industry.

The attempt at re-

viving our "culture" dates back to the colonial era. Because colonial domination was as spiritual as it was material, there was a programmed action to make colonial subjects look down on things African. (Up till today a "made in England" tag in Nigeria is regarded as an automatic guarantee for

quality).

A professor of history at Oxford University went ahead to articulate the mood of the colonialists towards their colonies when he said that Africans had no culture. That all civilisation started with the coming of the white man.

This statement underscored the colonial aspiration to "civilise" their subjects by introducing them to the marvels of the west. They even went as far as replacing the various African religions with theirs.

There was at this time, a feeble African nationalist resistance to this tendency. The nationalists did their damnest to prove that there was, in fact, an African civilization, separate from their colonial experience.

Because the colonial challenge was continental, the African response was correspondingly continental. Then, it was legitimate to talk about African culture.

But with the emergence of autonomous African states the need for culture revival ought to be localised.

Sadly, apart from Tanzania and a few others, independent African states still indulge in the contradiction of trying to promote "African culture," rather than build their own national cultures. New situations require new responses.

To build a Nigerian national culture is to execute a programme

of action aimed at welding our various peoples together, improve their standards of living and lead them to spectacular achievements in the arts, sciences and technology.

A cultural revolution should give a new orientation to the Nigerian people by educating them away from

the acquisitive propensity that is fast ebbing the country.

One of the contradictions of the Gowon era was identifiable in the way performance never matched promise. For its cultural goal, the regime committed itself to building "a just and egalitarian society".

An egalitarian society is not realisable where access to education is basically uneven. In the South-East, Esuene's government put up a show of taking over education as a means of equalising opportunities for every child.

At the same time, the government tolerated private kindergarten schools which, by the very fees they charged, are exclusive to an infinitesimal section of the community. It also permitted an Abak-based school to be turned into a nunnery by a church organisation, when available schools cannot even cope with the teeming thousands who want to learn.

That private agencies should be capable of detracting from the cultural goals of the former military regime (so easily) is inexplicable in terms of the agencies' own strength. It can only be understood in terms of the inner degeneration into which the regime in question had fallen. Such a government does not have any right whatsoever to talk about cultural revival.

The story is told that in the old Oyo empire the Oba ruled

with the help of a council of chiefs, that membership in that council was elective. That when the people were thoroughly dissatisfied with the Oba, they passed a parrot's egg to him, indicating that he should take his life.

Put in other words, power belonged to the people. An honest attempt at cultural revival should endeavour to create a political system that will invest the people of this country with power to take political decisions for themselves or through their elected representatives in parliament.

Rather than hold traditional dance festivals, cadres should be sent round the country to educate the people on their rights, what the political system expects from them, what demands they can legitimately make of the system, and how.

Once in a while, our leaders indulge in some glib talk of enforcing "national" dresses and making a lingua franca out of one of the Nigerian languages. The argument is that, for as long as we speak English and dress in suits we can never be respected in the international community.

To make too much fuss about the so-called national dress and developing a local Nigerian lingua franca is to miss the point... entirely.

The fact that an American dress is the same as an English man and speaks English does not deny him an international presence that is separate from that of the English man. It does not subtract from the respect we accord him as member of a nation that has, through science and technology, immensely contributed towards making the world a better place to live in.

Similarly the Japanese culture impresses the world with electronics, not dressing, language or festivals. The point is therefore made, that Nigeria's culture will be better enhanced if all the rumoured ₦500,000,000 that was to be spent on the projected World Black and African Festival of the Arts and Culture is sunk into research into our traditional medicine (for example).

Afterall, China's cultural revolution of the 1980's revived acupuncture, an ancient Chinese medical science. And today, the western world is going there to learn.