

AFRICAN CULTURE AS AN ANCIENT LANDMARK: CULTURE VERSUS IDENTITY

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Abstract

Culture remains an important theme in discourses as it is necessary for the understanding of human relationships and interactions among peoples. It has attracted the attention of both scholars and non-scholars who have focused on different dimensions of discourses, including the problem of an imprecise definition and the changing nature of culture. However, this paper focuses on the African culture as the ancient African landmark. It begins with an understanding of culture and landmark and spelling out the necessity of the discourse on culture as an ancient landmark. Within this context, it emphasized the relevance of the concept of identity which landmark introduces in the discourse on culture, the necessity for the discourse, symbolic expression of culture, giving particular attention to the Kola Nut and finally the path towards the preservation of the African culture. This piece discovered that culture is indispensable for the definition of the identity of a people. For the purpose of the study, the hermeneutic and phenomenological methods of inquiry were employed.

Keywords: African, Culture, Identity, Landmark, Ancient, Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa

Introduction

Landmark is from two English words: Land and Mark. It was used to describe an object set up to mark the boundaries of a kingdom, estate, etc. From the year 1560 AD, a landmark became a conspicuous object in a landscape. Being the age of exploration, it was a geographic feature used by explorers and others to find their way back or through an area (Online Etymology Dictionary 2016). In modern usage, a landmark includes anything that is easily recognizable, such as a monument, building, or other structures (Kevin 1960). This notwithstanding, in what way does landmark relate to culture? Or, how is culture an ancient landmark? To understand this, there is the need to understand the concept 'culture'.

Culture refers to the sum total of a people's way of life, which embraces their mode of dressing, talking, food, and the way they conceive death and welcome life (Rodney, 1972). Culture is the integral system of learned behavior patterns,

which are the characteristic of the members of society and which is not the result of biological inheritance (Kanu 2010). In other words, culture does not come from human genes, but rather, it is learnt and taught. This bears with the Latin root of the word culture as *cultura*, which means “to cultivate” or “to practice”. This gave rise to *agricultura* (Agriculture) and *Agricola* (Famer). The human person is, therefore, the author and architect of culture (Kanu 2015). Having understood culture, what is the relationship between culture and landmark? How is culture an ancient landmark?

Landmark talks about the identity of a place. Therefore, the idea of landmark within the context of culture emphasizes an important dimension of culture which is identity. It speaks of culture as that which makes a people who they are, thus, differentiating them from other people. No wonder, once you see a Hausa man, his dressing already tells you who he is and where he comes from; the same with the Yoruba, Igbo, Edo, etc. It is within this context that culture is understood as an ancient landmark. It is from the context of this understanding that the other parts of this paper would proceed. However, looming at the horizon is the question of the relevance of this discourse?

Why is this Discussion Relevant at this time?

The encounter between European and African culture can be described as a forced acculturation. It is a word that describes a situation in which a highly developed society imposes certain elements of its culture on the other, thereby, forcing it to derail from its unique path of cultural civilization. Kwame (1981) describes it as an ideology of condemnation, which identified everything “good to be white” and everything “bad to be black”. The basic purpose of condemnation was to create a moral ground for the destruction of the traditional society in its various forms and modes. According to Ekwuru (1999), this was followed concurrently by a process of re-assembly, which involved the reconstruction of the African cultural space in accordance with colonial vision and mentality.

Europeans in general, with some few exceptions, admitted little if any culture of value in Africa, and so:

- Our Traditional Religion was called various derogatory names like- Juju, heathenism, idol worship, primitive, paganism, fetishism, animism, polytheism, savage, ancestor worship, magic, totemism.

- “His mind is far nearer to the animal world than that of the European or Asiatic, and exhibits something of the animal’s placidity” (Lugard 1970).
- Linnaeus (1758), stated that *Africans* are cunning, slow, negligent and ruled by caprice.
- Gobineau (1915), said that Africans were closest to lower animals, in relation to other races.
- Hume said that the Black race is inferior to the whites and that no individual eminent in action or speculation has ever come from people of this kind of complexion.
- Even the missionaries who came to evangelize Africa doubted if we were human beings. No wonder, it is alleged that they baptized Africans conditionally initially.

The Consequence of the Encounter

The consequence of the encounter between European and African culture was that it dealt a *coup de grace* to the African personality, to his *is-ness*, by destroying the African cultural values.

The west looked down on our peculiarities, our languages enriched with traditions of centuries, our parables, our proverbs, our myths, many of them the quintessence of family and national histories; our modes of thought, influenced more or less by local circumstances, our poetry which reveals the profundity of African literary wizardry. Thus, , the African drum was not heard in churches, African languages were not used in liturgy and African names were not used for baptism (Hastings, 1976).

Symbolic Expression of Culture

Of the many cultural symbols in Nigeria, none has received attention like the kola nut. It is very important and central to the life and ceremonies of the Igbo. It is a food that must be eaten with relish; it commands adoration and many accolades and must be attended to with deserving feast. It is a holy communion that unites the living and dead. It symbolizes a feast of togetherness, love and trust. The Kola nut is a symbol of Life *ndu*, this is why the Igbo say: “He that brings kola brings life”, and to share in it is to be part of the project of the preservation of life. It is, therefore, not surprising that the poetry of the Kola breaks the day for the typical Igbo (Nwachukwu 2012 and Kanu 2019).

Every Kola can be broken into lobes, and these lobes signify numbers. And number is very important for the African. Some have 2 lobes, some 3, some 4, some 5 and some 6.

- a. Kola nut with two lobes is a dumb kola and is not eaten because it is understood as the *Kola of the Spirits*.
- b. When it has three lobes, it is called the *Kola of the Valiant*. As a matter of principle it is eaten only by warriors, brave men, the consecrated or ordained.
- c. The Kola with four lobes is the *Kola of Peace and Blessings*. It is a sign of completeness and signifies four market days in Igbo society.
- d. The Kola with five lobes is the *Kola of Procreation, Protection and Good luck*.
- e. The Kola with six lobes is indicative of communion with the ancestors. No wonder the smallest part of it is not eaten but given to the ancestors (Ukaegbu 2012).

The African Philosophy behind the Kola Nut

- **Complementarity:** When these lobes stay together they remain alive, but when they separate they die and dry off. Their togetherness is a symbol of life, and their separation, death. Life in Africa is about being in relation to the other. To be is to belong, and not to belong is to suffer alienation (Kanu 2017 and 2016).
- **Male and Female Lobes:** This notwithstanding, among the lobes, there is always a female and male lobe, whose union brings about life. It simply says that homosexual and lesbian relationships are entirely un-African.
- **World of Probabilities:** You hardly find one lobe in a kola nut. It is either two or three or four or five or six. This is the African universe. An African proverb says: "If a thing remains one, then nothing remains". This is because one is not strong enough to withstand the existential gamble of life; thus the need for an existential backing.
- **Epistemology:** The multiplicity of the lobes and their lying side by side each other as support, points to an African epistemology which is interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary, for a balanced and global perspective (Kanu 2017).

- **Science and Technology:** The multiplicity of the lobes and interaction can be a basis for an African science and technology which believes that it is through the interaction of the forces of nature that reality comes into existence. Instances include:
 - a. *Universal Gravitational Force*- Everything works towards the centre of the earth which points to the African concept of the Complementarity of reality. In spite of the multiplicity of reality, reality is one.
 - b. *Synthesis Theory of Urea*: This theory believes that the synthesis of inanimate things brings about the formation of animate realities. It points to the interconnected of reality.
 - c. *Neutralization Reaction*: It holds that the combination of elements brings about the formation of new ones. For instance, oxygen + hydrogen=water or Acid + Base= salt + water

Conclusion: What we Need to do to Preserve our Culture

The collapse of the African culture during the colonial era and missionary enterprise was captured by Chinua Achebe in the title of his novel: *Things Fall Apart*. To save the African culture and thus identity, Africans need to give a prime of place to her culture.

This needs to begin from the smallest sociological unit: the family. The family is the maternity home, the nursing home and primordial school of society. The family is the birth place of culture, and at the same time where it is nurtured and developed.

One great instrument for cultural renaissance is language. Irrespective of where parents find themselves with their children they should endeavor to teach their children their native language. Language carries with it the culture and worldview of the people who own it.

Learning institutions also have a role to play in this process. It is through education that our values can be restored in the heart of young Africans. For Africans to be Africans they must know what makes them Africans. Our system of education needs to have an African touch. If this is done, the child then grows up to learn the fundamental traditional and cultural values and truth (Adegbola, 2005).

The African law making bodies also have a role to play; if the laws and policies that can safeguard our values are promulgated by the government, the decay of our values will be impeded and their recovery enhanced.

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