



The Conceptualisation of Culture and Its Manifestations in the Nigerian Communities

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Abstract

Review Article

The concept of culture is a key term in several fields such as social sciences, humanities, biology, management, and medicine, with different meanings in both academic and popular practice. Although, in general, anthropologists and sociologists consider culture as a methodological concept to understand human meaning-making and social organization, it is a space by which identity is negotiated and social cohesion is preserved. The paper provides some of the key definitions of culture, outlines the material and non-material aspects of culture, and evaluates the different methods of studying culture. It contextualizes such theoretical views in the Nigerian context, emphasizing cultural manifestations of key ethnic groups, including the Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, and so on. The paper addresses the problem of ethnocentrism and examines some of the major cultural activities, festival, folktales, marriage systems, and administration of justice as well as artistic traditions. Finally it contends that culture is an essential process of generating and negotiating identity, behaviour and social cohesion within the pluralistic society of Nigeria.

Keywords: Culture, Ethnocentrism, Identity, Nigerian Ethnic Groups, Social Cohesion.

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1. Introduction

Culture is an analytic basic category in a variety of disciplines, including social sciences and humanities, as well as biology, management studies, and medicine. Beyond the scholarly use of the terms, they are also evaluative and affective and take on their own meanings in everyday speech, in which a person can be described as "cultured" or "uncultured" in relation to perceived social conformity, refinement, or deviance. Within the fields of anthropology and sociology, however, culture is less commonly used as a moral term and more commonly as a conceptual tool for

understanding how humans create meaning in their lives, organize their social life, and transmit learned patterns of behaviour. It is also at the centre of comparative analysis, which allows scholars to explain variation both within and across societies.

Against this background, the paper synthesizes some of the major definitions of culture, defines its major constituents in terms of material and non-material dimensions, and reviews some of the dominant approaches to its study. It then places these debates in the Nigerian context by looking at the extent of cultural expression in major ethnic formations, such as the Yoruba,



Hausa, Igbo, Tiv, Kanuri, Fulani, Nupe, Angas, Mumuye, Chamba, Ekoi, Efik, Ijaw, Ogoni, Itsekiri, Isoko, Edo and Urhobo, as well as many smaller groups. Substantively, the discussion concentrates on the issue of ethnocentrism and selected areas of cultural practice, including festivals, folktales, marriage institutions, systems of administration of justice, and artistic traditions. Overall, the paper argues that culture is a critical framework through which identity is produced and negotiated, behaviour is patterned and social cohesion maintained within the plural social order in Nigeria.

2. Definitions of Culture

Scholars have long made forward multiple and, at times, competing definitions of culture. Among the early formulations, the one by Tylor (1871, as cited in Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952) is considered to be one of the most influential as he defines culture as a complex whole comprising of knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and other capabilities and habits that a person has acquired as a member of the society. This definition is important for its focus on the idea of culture as learned, rather than innate; it draws a distinction between socially acquired competencies and dispositions, on the one hand, and biological instinct, on the other. It also includes both the tangible and intangible in the form of artifacts, ideas, technical knowledge, values, patterned conduct, and socialization processes by which they are reproduced.

Relatedly, Ngwa, F. (2023) defines culture as that part of human action and its product that is transmitted socially as opposed to genetically. This framing brings culture into the foreground as an intergenerational inheritance sustained in such institutions of socialization as the family, schools, religious organizations, and networks of peers. Within the scope of Africanist scholarship Letseka (2015, as cited in Cultural Evolution Society, 2024) perceived a wider scope of the concept by defining culture as the whole composition of the material and non-material expressions of people, along with the processes by which the expressions are communicated. In this conception, the concept of culture comprises

forms and practices of social, ethical, intellectual, scientific, artistic, and technological character, which are usually common to people associated by a shared identity and perpetuated in certain socio-spatial contexts and passed down to future generations by recognized mechanisms of continuity. Taken together, these definitions lead to a few key characteristics of culture. First, culture is collective in the sense that it is shared, often unevenly, by members of a given community or society. Second, culture is learned and not genetically inherited and acquired through socialization. Third, it is history and is reproduced over generations. Fourth, the culture is actively produced and modified by human adaptation to social and environmental conditions. Fifth, culture is universal in that every human society shows the existence of culturally patterned life. Finally, culture is not static: it doesn't stay the same but it changes over time in response to internal innovation and external influences.

Beyond the debates about definitions of culture, culture serves also as an interpretive framework with which human life becomes intelligible. It affects the formation of personality, influences attitudes, social relations, and patterned interaction in groups. In this regard, Geertz (1973, as cited in Ortner, 1999) argues that the absence of cultural patterns, seen as organized systems of significant symbols, would result in human conduct that is extremely unregulated and would tend to devolve into incoherent and purposeful action and making experience effectively formless.

3. Constituents of Culture

Culture comprises the wide range of human life and practice including patterns of economic and social organization, technological activities, religious systems, language, and political institutions. In much of the scholarly literature, an analytic approach to culture involves two dimensions: material and non-material culture; the two are interrelated. Material culture is the material products of human creativity and labour that contribute to survival and organise social life

especially the tools, crafts, artistic products, and other artifacts (Ross, 2024).

Non-material, or idealist, culture consists of the intangible elements, through which meaning is generated and behaviours regulated e.g. values, beliefs, philosophical orientations, norms, rituals and ceremonies, music, dance, drama, festivals, religion, folklore and literature (Ortner, 2022). Distinguishing these dimensions is analytically useful in that it liberates culture as both a set of things and practices that are made observable, and the symbolic and normative systems in which this is meaningfully interpreted, conducted and perpetrated as a source of collective identity.

4. Approaches to the Study of Culture

Two general modes of analysis are usually recognized by scholars in the study of culture. The all-inclusive approach of culture as an integrated whole by looking at the material and non-material dimensions in relation to each other, is particularly influential in the social sciences, particularly anthropology and sociology (Mama, 2021). In contrast, the sectional approach focuses on specific cultural domains or units of analysis such as language, art, religion or ritual, coming much closer to the orientation of humanities-based scholarship (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Both approaches are legitimately methodological. Their suitability is best evaluated in terms of the theoretical commitments of the researcher, the level of analysis taken and the specific aims and scope of the inquiry.

5. Nigerian Cultural Endowment

Nigeria is rich in cultural diversity despite the colonial influences and foreign cultural superimposition. Autochthonous cultures exist, especially in the rural areas, where they display in tools, crafts, arts, artifacts, music, festivals, dance, drama, religion, myths, rituals, language, greetings, and dressing across ethnic groups. Nigeria is a cultural pluralism with the major cultural groups being Yoruba (Ogun, Ondo, Oyo, Osun, Lagos, Bendel, Kwara), Hausa (Sokoto,

Kebbi, Kano, Kaduna, Katsina, Bauchi), Igbo (Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Imo), Tiv (Plateau, Benue), Kanuri (Yobe, Borno), Fulani (Kano, Sokoto, Kebbi, Bauchi), Nupe (Niger), Angas (Plateau), Mumuye and Chamba (former Many micro-groups also add to this diversity (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

6. Ethnocentrism

Individuals frequently identify with their cultural group and feel a sense of identity and belonging to it. Under some circumstances, this identification can result in the belief that one's own cultural practices are of superior quality and other groups have inferior practices. Such an orientation is often called ethnocentrism (Sumner, 1906, as cited in Bizumic & Duckitt, 2020). Ethnocentric tendencies may be especially high in relatively isolated societies with few long-term sustained contacts outside of their immediate social environment. However, studies have shown that ethnocentrism does not disappear with the modernization. Even in industrial societies where we have formal education and a huge amount of mass media, it is possible for ethnocentric dispositions to remain, though sometimes in less obvious ways ((Sumner, 1906, as cited in Bizumic & Duckitt, 2020). In the multiple ethnic setting of Nigeria, ethnocentrism may take the form of mundane assessment of cultural practices, e.g., claims that the ways of greeting, dress, music and dance, festivals, religion or marriage of one group is the most refined, moral or socially proper. In some cases, groups can frame their moral codes or ideals of attractiveness and propriety as universally correct, rather than cultural norms ((Sumner, 1906, as cited in Bizumic & Duckitt, 2020).

7. Festivals in Nigeria

Festivals are not the same in Nigeria in the ethnic groups and are a perceptible manifestation of the cultural diversity in Nigeria. They often act as mechanisms for the reassertion of a group identity, for the maintenance of historical memory and for reinforcing social cohesion by means of shared participation and performance.

For example, the communities in Yoruba celebrate the culture's Olojo Festival and many Igbo communities celebrate an agricultural cycle and community regeneration with the New Yam Festival (Iri Ji). The Argungu Fishing Festival is often related to Hausa-speaking communities, and is popularly known for the fishing competitions and public festivities held in the festival. Among the Nupe, the Pategi Regatta characterised by boat and canoe displays with accompanying music and dance has been a common frame of reference for promoting unity and peaceful coexistence (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

8. Folktales in Nigeria

Folktales are also different from one Nigerian culture to the other and serve important roles in socialization. They are normally used to communicate shared values and to clarify the expectations of the community for the benefit of reinforcing moral lessons to generations. In this sense, folktales act as informal educational resources by means of which societies communicate certain norms concerning appropriate conduct, responsibility and social obligation (Ngwa, 2023).

9. Marriage Systems in Nigeria

Marriage systems in Nigeria are also diverse and are determined by some cultural prescriptions as well as religion commitments. Marriage ceremonies could be of indigenous form or in state institutions, churches or mosques, it all depends on the family preferences and religious affiliation. Cultural rules, often, are used as a means of organizing courtship, betrothal, and requirements of marriage. Among the Yoruba, for example, the marriage negotiations can include numerous culturally defined payments and ceremonial. In Tiv communities' marriage has historically been conducted with exchange arrangements where marriage families could exchange daughters where marriage takes place instead of the focussing on a monetary bride price. In some Igbo settings, betrothal practices has included the early arrangements as well as

the symbolic giving of gifts and then the cohabitation comes upon maturity. In parts of northern Nigeria marriage sometimes occurs at quite an early age and courting rituals may be associated with local festivals in exchange of gifts. In Fulani contexts, for example, rites such as Sharo have been characterised as public demonstrations of courage in the context of marital readiness and cattle are often the bride-wealth. Collectively, these examples illustrate how practices of this process of marriage represent social institutions that are controlled by society to reflect more general cultural values related to kinship patterns, gender roles, and social continuity (Mncwango et al., 2025).

10. System of Administration of Justice in Nigeria

Before the consolidation of the modern structures of the state institutions, which the indigenous units of justice were in place in many Nigerian societies, prescribe sanctions for offences committed such as homicide and adultery. Historical accounts describe the application of different forms of punishment depending on the group involved and was often administered through local government or through communal forms of governance. For example, some traditions had very serious punishments (including execution in some cases) for committing murder and adultery, while other environments were more focused on restitution, fines, or ritualized conflict resolution. Contemporary Nigeria has a legally plural system in which the customary law (based on indigenous norms), Sharia (applied in several states of the North) and English derived statutory law (a legacy of colonial rule) co-exists and determine the administration of law (Falola & Heaton, 2008). This pluralism emphasizes the continuation of interaction between inherited cultural institutions and formal government of the state.

11. Art in Nigeria

Nigeria is popularly known to have its rich artistic traditions that reflect in sculpture,

metalwork, ceramics and other forms of material culture. The Edo people is known for bronze pieces like human head sculptures, the Nok tradition is associated with the terracotta piece. Artistic contributions of the Ikom and Oron people's as well as the international acclaimed bronzes of Ife and the artistic heritage of Owo, are among the further evidences of the diversity and sophistication of Nigerian cultural production. A few stories relate that art techniques, as well as production processes, have been kept within families and generations, with specialization knowledge passed on through close apprenticeship and kept secrets (Ezeagwula, 2023 , as cited in Falola & Heaton, 2008)

Conclusion

In conclusion, culture has been a subject of interest, as a fundamental type of analysis within various fields, including the social sciences and humanities, biology and management studies and certain fields of medicine. In popular usage, the term culture is usually employed in an evaluative form in which people can be described as cultured or uncultured with respect to refinement, conformity, or deviance, whereas in anthropological and sociological literature, the term culture, in most occasions, is used as an explication. Here, culture is a starting point of examining the way human beings generate meaning and order social life along with the reproduction of learnt dispositions and practices over time in this disciplinary sense. It is also the foundation of comparative inquiry since it provides the capability to analyse systematically variation within and between societies. This paper not only synthesised influential definitions of culture, but also shed light on material and non-material aspects of culture and examined two key approaches to cultural analysis. It then contextualized these theoretical arguments within the Nigerian context by considering the variety of cultural expression of the major ethnicities like the Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Tiv, Kanuri, Fulani, Nupe, Angas, Mumuye, Chamba, Ekoi, Efik, Ijaw, Ogoni, Itsekiri, Isoko, Edo and Urhobo, and the many minor groups. Substantively, it addressed the issue of

ethnocentrism and comparatively limited domains of cultural practice, such as festivals, folktales, marriage institutions, justice administration systems, and artistic traditions.

In general, the discussion indicates that culture is the key framework in which identities are constructed and struggles waged, behavioural patterns and rules are reproduced and social cohesion is recreated in the plural social order of Nigeria. When the context of continuity and change is very heterogeneous, the cultural study outlines the continuity and change and assists in comprehending how the collective meanings are preserved and renegotiated in a shifting political, economic and social setting. It is however posited here that subsequent studies should further explore the mechanisms of reconfiguration of Nigerian cultural forms and institutions to globalisation, urbanisation and technological change and their impact on belonging, inter-group relations and the future of social integration.

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