

THE NIGERIAN MEDIA AND THE INSTITUTION OF A CULTURELESS SOCIETY

Elo Ibagere (PhD)

Department of Theatre Arts
FACULTY of Arts
Delta State University

Chukwuma Anyanwu (PhD)

Department of Mass Communication
Faculty of the Social Sciences
Delta State University
Abrak, Delta State

ABSTRACT: *Culture is one of the central forces that help to situate a person or thing within a given milieu. Indeed, culture can be seen as personality designator because it identifies a person and situates him/her on the basis of certain traits he/she exhibits. On the other hand, it is also evidence of education, taste, finesse, and of civilization. A cultured person or people belong to a category of those who stand out as unique in virtually everything. 'Culturelessness', on its part is a term employed to denote the trend whereby a person or people lack culture, making it impossible to identify or situate him/her or them by what he/she does or they do. It is a celebration of abnormality and the opposite of culture as stated above. The media, on their part, are not only culture symbolized, they are also purveyors of culture. This paper examines the role the Nigerian media have played or failed to play in creating and foisting a cultureless society on the Nigerian people. This will be done through the literary/artistic research methodology. It will draw its conclusion on the basis of data analyzed and make recommendations where necessary.*

KEYWORDS: Culture, Society, Mass media

INTRODUCTION

One way to understand the role and impact of the media in our lives is to understand the cultural context in which the media operate. Often, culture is narrowly associated with art, the unique forms of representational expression that give pleasure and set standards about what is true, good and beautiful. Culture, however, can be viewed as a broader category that identifies the ways in which people live and represent themselves at particular historical times. This idea of culture encompasses fashion, sports, architecture, education, religion, and science, as well as mass media (Campbell, Martin & Fabos2009: 6).

The above quotation has been so elaborate because it captures the cultural and theoretical frame on which the above subject is treated. The authors cited above, having noted that culture is made up of the products that a society forges for itself as well as the processes that make those products and reflect culture as diverse, went ahead to define culture as, "the symbols of expression that individuals, groups, and societies use to make sense of daily life and to articulate their values."

From the above definition, one cannot fail to note that the central symbols of expression, be it for the individual, group, or the society at large, are the mass media. Thus, the mass media are not only culture symbolized, they are also, the manifest evidence of culture, as well as carriers of culture. So, when we listen to music, dance, dress, walk, talk, celebrate, read and generally live our lives, we are living culture. This is because our culture is clearly captured in whatever we do and whatever we do communicates who we are and reveals the cultural environment which we represent or come from.

To this end, this paper examines how the Nigerian mass media, themselves being cultural entities, have helped in creating and making our society a cultureless one. Though the emphasis is on the electronic media, reference, where necessary, would be made to the print media. This would be done using the literary research method, also called the analytical method because the writers will analyze issues and events which constitute cultureless behaviour, and which the mass media have handled or failed to treat adequately to the disadvantage of the African/Nigerian culture.

Definition of terms

The central concepts in this paper need not to be clarified in detail. However, it would be imperative to offer one or two definitions of each concept. The media or rather the mass media have been variously defined from different perspectives depending on the specific purpose of the writer.

Basically, the media are systems of mass communication. Some scholars think of communication as a culture. Patrick Williams and Joan Thornto Pearce, for instance, establish that culture is the communication system that enable(s) human beings to act, adapt and transmit survival resources (Ibagere 2009:17).

The mass media in every society are seen and regarded as agents of change. This makes them vital part of culture because culture both adapts and changes. As Graber (1989:3), notes “the media are also behavior models. In the process of image creation the media indicate which attitudes and behaviors are acceptable and even praise worthy in a given society, and which are unacceptable or outside the mainstream.”

Graber’s submission is of particular interest here. This is because the paper is on the role the Nigerian media have played or failed to play in instituting a cultureless society. The media, from the foregoing, are behaviour and attitude determinants. They are also positioned to praise and condemn and to do this, they must be relatively above board in all that they do. It also means that they affect the direction, negative or positive, which a society is expected to follow. To this end, the media cannot be exempted if a society derails; on the other hand, it is to their credit if a society is well organized and ordered. As Ojebuyi (2013:1) has noted, “the mass media play important roles in determining what social issues receive the most attention of mass audience, and which issue will be ignored or given little attention. To a great extent, news media control the social reality the citizens see, when they see it, and how they see such a social reality.”

Ojebuyi (2013:1-2) goes further to say that “the mass media constitute a significant institution of the world’s democracies and social order. They represent an important plan of the dominant means of ideological construction because what they produce is considered the representation and images of the social world.” The implication of the above statement is that the media

invariably affect how human beings act as well as react to the happenings in their society including their response to old and new ideas.

Culture, on its part, has been variously seen. While some see it as the totality of man's achievement on earth. Others regard it as embracing man's material and psychological possessions. Culture is known to be dynamic, evolving and as inevitable as change. It can be claimed that the lack of culture by a people (if such is possible), could be regarded as their culture.

Okoro (2009:116) cites several sources when he says. Culture is the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenge of living in their environment, which gives order meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organization, thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours.

He continues in another definition from his sources thus:

Culture is the complex whole, which include knowledge, belief art, law, morals and any other capabilities man as a member of society , it comprises inherited artifacts, goods, technical processes , ideas, habits and values. Culture includes all characteristic activities and interest of the people. (Okoro,2009:116).

The two definitions of culture above, no doubt are, elaborate enough to make one understand or at least have a fairly good idea of what culture is. It must be understood that culture must be distinct in that certain attributes give it particular character. These attributes are distinct in themselves,-all of which give a particular culture its identity. Also, though none of the definitions specifically mention the mass media as a whole or communication in general, there is clear evidence that the media are captured in them. This is made manifest when social and technical processes including ideas and habits are reflected in the definitions since the media are clearly involved in 'social and technical processes. The way people communicate reveals much about them. Also, the people's media are clear representations of such people. It is even believed in some quarters that no people can rise above their media. Therefore, both media and culture can be said to be two sides of the same coin since none can be adequately addressed without reference to the other.

“Society” on the other hand approximately corresponds to social systems that generally include other structures as systems.” Also “societies are interaction organisms”. (Ibagere2009:13). Ibagere (2009), in his book, *Social Development, Television and politics in Nigeria*, already cited, goes on to say that “society is a potpourri of social relationships which are harmonized to make a big social system.”

The above substantiates the position of Mendelssohn, (1964) when he posits that society cannot exist without communication, communication cannot occur outside a social system.

Nigerian Mass Media and Culture

The way a people communicate, no doubt is, a vital part of their culture since all communication do not mean the same thing to different people or to even the same people. This is because communication operates differently with different people even in the same family or community. For instance, couples may relate with each other differently from how they relate with their children. Elders from a given village or members of a certain age grade

may read the same message/communication differently. This shows that the socialization process differs with individuals and groups. Also, a people's media serve both as their window for other people to see them and appreciate their culture, as well as for them to see other people and their culture, too. Inevitably, then, the media serve as agents of international exchange and again as intermediaries between one culture and another. This way, the media make it possible for people to access cultures they could not have come across otherwise. The media most involved in this exchange are the electronic media comprising the conventional media of radio and television, the new media and the print. On the other hand, the movie or film, even though it is not a news medium per se is, however, one of the greatest media prone to cultural manipulation. Indeed, the film more than any other medium, is a force to be reckoned with in international cultural exchange. Eghagha (2007:73) cites Ekwuazi, when he says that "we live in an age of cultural imperialism whose dimensions are global." He then goes on to submit that:

Africa is at the receiving end of messages values and images packaged in Euro- American countries. In other words, in the prevailing context of the free flow of information, Africa simply cannot find genuine representation: for where it is represented at all, it is represented with a bias that has now become the more invidious for being subtle.

The above is not restricted to the movie alone. If anything, it is more prevalent in the conventional media of television and radio which model and dictate how the people act and behave. They not only bombard their audience with Western oriented values but the local versions are replete with imitations of such Western values- dressing, music, dance, gait, manners of speaking, etc. have more negative impacts than meets the eye since they make the imitators neglect their own. Ugbomah (n/d:17), a concerned filmmaker says:

We must tend to create our own African cinema and use it to talk to the world. The portrayal of Africans by the Western mass media is all negative: Wars, famine, diseases, coups, etc. as if nothing good happens in Africa. We must counteract this by making films depicting the good aspects of ourselves.

Most Nigerians have not had any physical contact with the Western World in anyway whatsoever beyond what they can access either through international/Western and, or local media. For instance, through the media and from them, African youths now think that slimness is the main criterion for female beauty. This totally negates African concept of feminine beauty which expects a woman to be robust and plump, as witnessed in some traditional societies where young women are place in seclusion (fattening room) to make them presentable and appealing before marriage.

Again, television as a medium, and virtually the entire mass media are all products of colonialism, western imperialism and domination but which Africa has since adopted. It is through this medium that most alien cultures are foisted on Africa. An example is the programme, *Big Brother Africa* (BBA), and all its variants, which when critically examined, can be seen to favour and encourage all kinds of moral laxity. This ordinarily, should be condemned without any equivocations, but the Nigerian media have been in the forefront of those pouring encomiums on the producers!

The Nigerian media are expected to take a stand on certain issues by going beyond mere reportage of facts and events in the society. But quite often, what we see is a rehash of societal

occurrences without taking a position. The current issue of lesbian and gay marriages is pertinent here. The President, Dr Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, has signed into law a bill prohibiting it. But the western nations seem to be piqued by this law. The entire African media ought to rally in support of the Nigerian President. But the reverse is the case. The media should have risen in total support because the sovereignty of the Nigerian nation and the nations of Africa has been put to the test.

Television is a cultural icon in any society. Though a colonial medium, it has however, been 'nativized' to the point that it can be used to project and propagate a nation's interest. However, it still furthers imperialist agenda, perhaps, inadvertently. This it does through its programmes, such as the BBA which seeks to install a culture of moral laxity. It can be argued that most of the guns which all sorts of insurgent groups use in the community, that the groups see the prototypes of the guns in Hollywood movies shown on television. Also, the spate of negative behaviours like lesbianism, gay, rape unprovoked violence of sorts are all products of the media.

Writing on "Engendering Childhood: Concerning the Content of South African Television Fiction," Boshott and Prinsloo (2008:10) cite Lemish, who says:

Television introduces children to worlds outside their immediate reality. It expands, interprets, highlights, judges, legitimizes or excludes social phenomena that the viewer encounters in reality and in the other media...

[I] constantly reinforces certain ideological, mythical and factual patterns of thought and so functions to define the world and to legitimize the existing social order.

Thus, television especially in Nigeria exposes children to adulthood sooner than it teaches them good morals and some ethical values. Through television and from it, the children and youths learn foul language; are exposed to sex early in life, see more violence in a day than their entire real life can offer, are inundated by adults in near nude dresses in the name of fashion, among other negative behavior alien to our culture. The media can do better by showing what should be ideal and acceptable.

It is not by keeping silent or maintaining the status quo that the press (media) is seen as the fourth estate. Rather, it is because of their ability to be societal gatekeepers, serving as checks and balance on government at all levels as well as on all aspects of society's life in order to ensure that the people get what is best from those ruling them. On the other hand, the media also guide the society and protect it from itself by prescribing rules of correct behaviour.

The media would have failed in their two principles, if cardinal roles, - of setting societal agenda and providing surveillance, if by their action or inaction, the society becomes worse than it ought to be. It is bad enough when the media project dignitaries of questionable moral character such as politicians, actors/actresses, etc. who dress indecently, exhibit moral ineptitude and act scandalously. The media project a cultureless society when they promote musicians whose music cannot provide inspiration or edification. Some musical videos shown on television and some music played on radio have lyrics which are at variance with what should be projected and yet, the media take joy in putting such music on air.

Culture is present in all we do and no culture is superior to another but, through the agenda setting role of the media, they can actively make a given culture appear to be superior even better than another or others. For instance, the African concept of feminine beauty which is

reflected in robust and almost fat physique is being eroded by the Western concept which portrays a woman as slim as a reed. This has led to many women almost starving themselves in the bid to achieve the slim and trim figure which the West prefers and approves of through their sponsorship of world beauty pageants. To further substantiate the significant role the media play in highlighting issues of prominence, Adesina (1992:175) cited De Fleur, when she says: "The mass media through *selective presentations* and the emphasis of certain themes, create impressions among their audiences that common cultural norms concerning the emphasized topics are structured and defined in some specific ways," [*emphasis adde*

What the Media can do

It is this selective presentation which makes the mass media a most dangerous weapon for propagating negative tendencies. What the filmmaker/movie can do is to use this selective presentation to advantage. This can be done when the moviemaker deliberately and consciously weaves messages of cultural, religious, human, economic and political relevance into his story. Such media fares, be they programmes or film stories, can be used to show respect for old age; dignity in hard work, as well as portray shame in being involved in bad acts like fraud, armed robbery, prostitution, indecent dressing, etc. This is because films are cultural ambassadors which speak on behalf of the nations which produce them; showcasing their people and portraying them in the light which the viewing/receiving country would not have known before. In this way, the people see them in the light of the movie maker's carefully structured story. As Balogun (1992:230) has rightly noted:

Films have greatly enhanced communal and international understanding. As films circulate from community to community, nation to nation and continent to continent, so also do cultures and traditions go round. As we are able to tolerate their behavioural patterns as well as we are aware it is an outgrowth of tradition.

It is this cultural exchange through which the film/movie creates new cultures and which the people tend to incorporate into their own cultural milieu unawares. Overtime, new generations begin to see these new ways of life as better than their own. And this is achieved through the frequency of media use to which the new ways of life are subjected in preference to indigenous ones. Their frequent featuring not only brings them to the consciousness of the audience, but it also makes the audience imbibe them unconsciously, too.

In this way, and through the help of the media, these new ways of life make their appearance so unobtrusively in the life of the people such that when they eventually manifest, there is public outcry. This is the case in the current fashion trend which parades *low waist, Brazilian hair, contact lens, bum-short, leggings*, etc. In the area of music, neither lyrics nor videos tend to elevate the audience. Inasmuch as the purpose of music is mainly entertainment, just like the movie itself, one expects some form of information and education from it. This can be seen from the performer's costumes, make-up, props, among other aesthetic inputs, including their gestures and dance steps. All these willy-nilly, reveal a people's cultural bias. And if properly fused into their movie/story, can show their point of view and what such cultural traits mean to them.

It is in the light of the foregoing that the Nigerian media should help serve as agents of social change by not only disseminating what is desirable, but also condemning what is unacceptable

while prescribing what is needful and acceptable. If the media fail to do this, the society will be the worse for it.

CONCLUSION

The paper has examined culture in the light of its relationship with the mass media. It has been able to prove through observation and analysis, that the media are important cultural determinants. Also, that the mass media are disseminators of culture, they equally serve as cultural ambassadors of sorts. However, it was also discovered that the media, through their willing and or, unwilling participation, serve as agents or pulleys to new attitudes and generally negative tendencies. This is achieved when the media make much of these new ways through constant exposure which brings them to the attention of the public. Ordinarily, and in life, there must be one or two exceptions or rebellious behaviour, but when the media glamourize these, more people become interested bringing about fashion and abuse. When this occurs, there is a clash of interests between communication and society and culture is inevitably affected. When culture is involved, it generates reactions of sorts as in the current issue of gay marriage; lesbianism, and fashion of all kinds, among other alien attitudes which come down to us via the mass media.

REFERENCES

- Adesina, Foluke "Film Contact and Moral Rearmament in Nigeria in H. Ekwuazi and Yakubu Nasidi (Eds.) *Operative Principles of the Film Industry: Towards a Film Policy for Nigeria*. Jos. NFC. 1992 pp. 168-178
- Balogun, Kunle "Towards a Comprehensive Production Infrastructure" in H. Ekwuazi & Y. Nasidi (Eds.) *Operative Principles of the Film Industry: Towards a Film Policy for Nigeria*. Jos. NFC. 1992 pp. 229-237
- Boshoff, Priscillia and Jeanne Pririshoo (2008) "Engendering Childhood: Concerning the Content of South African Television Fiction" Norma Pecora Enyonam Osee-Hwere & Ucca Chilsson (Eds.) *African Media, African Children*, Sweden, Univ of Gothenburg. 2008, pp. 69-82
- Campbell, Richard, Christopher R. Martin & Bettina Fabos. *Media and Culture: an introduction to mass communication, 2009 update*. Boston. Bedford/St. Martins .
- Eghagha, Hope "Magical realism and the 'power' of Nollywood home video films". *Filmint iss 28 vol.5 No.4* pp. 71-76; 2007.
- Grabber. A. Doris, *Mass Media and American Society*, Washington, Congressional Quarterly. (1989)
- Ibagere, Elo, *Social Development, Television and Politics in Nigeria*, Ibadan, Kraft Books, 2009.
- Mendelssohn, Harold (1964) "Sociological perspectives on the study of mass communication," Lewis Anthony Dexter & David Manning White (Eds.) *People, Society & Mass Communication*. New York. The free press, 29-36
- Ojebuyi, Babatunde Rapheal "Listeners' Preference and the Media's Thematic Focus on Public Issues: An Exploration of Agenda-Setting as a Two-way Process". *Journal of Communication and Media Research Vol.5 No2* pp.1-16, 2013

Okoro, Justice C. "The Socio-Developments/Challenges in Nigerian Musical Language and Culture." *Journal of Nigerian Languages and Culture* 11, 1. pp. 115-126 2009.

Ugbomah, Eddie (cited in) *Film & Video* Vol.4. No 2. N/D.