

## CULTURAL RESILIENCE AND FILIEL RESPONSIBILITY AMONG AFRICAN DIASPORA: TO BE OR TO BELONG

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### **Abstract**

*Throughout the world, scholars of history and allied disciplines continue to reminisce on the impact of the slave trade. This inhuman activity which lasted for centuries, forcefully ensured that young Africans of working age were bundled out of their natural environment and transplanted to different locations. Their culture, self-worth and dignity were denied them as they were barely seen as good working tools. Among the slaves, issues of identity, cultural reconstruction and human dignity were some of the challenges which confronted them. The study noted that whether at home or in the diaspora, every dark coloured person is an African. This paper focused on the identification and practice of some African cultures outside the shores of Africa. It examined the factors which influenced their migration and how they survived in their new found land. The work identified how African diaspora applied their rich African Heritage to establish their route. To facilitate the discussion, this paper applied the symbolic interactionism theory by Carter and Foller (2015) as the lens. The paper adopted the ethnographic and phenomenological methods of data collection in the discussion. It observed that among African diaspora, the resilience of African culture contributed to establish the unique identity of the Africans. It concluded that every individual or group, should strive to identify what makes them different from others and amplify it.*

**Keywords:** Culture, Africa, Diaspora,, Interaction, Symbol

### **Introduction**

Throughout the world, scholars of history and allied discipline continue to reminisce on the impact of the slave trade, especially on the African continent

and its people. According to historians like Afigbo, Alagoa, and Buah, able bodied men and women of African origin were turned to commodity of trade and carried to the new world as if they have no future or any relevance for themselves. First of all, the trans-Atlantic slave trade started as what was called the trans Saharan trade in the 5<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> century. Although it was the European countries that made the trade popular in the effort to secure and sustain their economic interests.

Spain, Portugal and many others, contributed strongly to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In the view of Rodney (1977), while the trans-Saharan trade was not publicly approved but conducted in secrecy, some Europeans who bought slaves realised the huge investment potential which the new world offered, noted that, they needed more hands to create real estate. Premised on the above, they decided to take up the slave trade directly, not willing to pass through the middle men.

This paper focused on the identification and practice of some African cultures outside the shores of Africa. It examined the factors which influenced their migration and how they survived in their new found land. The work identified how African diaspora applied their rich African Heritage to establish their route. To facilitate discussion, the symbolic interactionism theory of Carter and Foller (2015) served as the lens. The paper adopted the ethnographic and phenomenological methods of data collection in the discussion. It observed that among African diaspora, the resilience of African culture helped to establish the unique identity of the Africans. It concluded that every individual or group, should strive to identify what makes them different from others and amplify it.

**Some keywords: Culture, resilience, Africanness, diaspora and filial.**

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical lens of this study is the symbolic interactionism of Carter and Foller (2015). symbolic interactionism is a theoretical discourse which attempts to explain the relationship between humans and the society where they find themselves. The principal assumption which underlies the theory of symbolic interactionism is that human action and interaction are better appreciated only through the exchange of meaning, communication and/or symbols. Here, humans are presented as cuing instead of being acted upon. The principles of symbolic interactionism hinges on three basic assumptions:

1. Human beings act towards things on the basis of the meaning such things have for them.
2. These meaning arise out of social interaction.
3. Social action resorts from a lifting of individual lines of action.

Based on the presupposition above, symbolic interactionism theory is of the view that people respond to element of their environment according to the meanings they attach to them. In this wise, such meanings are nonetheless, being created and modified through social interaction involving symbolic communication with other people.

Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical framework in sociology that describes how societies are created and maintained through the replicated actions of individuals (Carter and Foller, 2015). In a nut shell, people in society understand their social world through communication and exchange of meaning through language and symbols instead of addressing how individuals define and impact on other individuals subjective view point and they make sense of the world from their own perspective (Carter and Foller, 2015).

The objective structure of a society is less important in the symbolic interactionist view than how subjective repeated and meaningful interactions between individuals create society. Thus, society is thought to be a social construct through human interpretation. According to this theory, humans are distinct from other primates because these non-human organisms, ordinarily respond to their environment in an entirely different way. For instance, a stimulus evokes a response, where as humans have the ability to interpret events around them. As it were, the non-human organisms, are not able to conceive of alternative response to gesture on their own volition. However, this is not indicative that homes never behave in a strict stimulus-response fashion. What obtains is that humans have the capability of responding in a different way and do so much of the time.

According to symbolic interactionism, the objective world has no reality for humans, only subjectively defined objects have. There is no single objective 'reality' instead, there are only (probable principles, possibly conflicting) interpretations of a situation. Therefore, meanings are not automatically bestowed on human rather, their actions and behaviours are learned by habitation. In this regard, meanings can be altered through the creative

capabilities of humans and individual may influence the many meanings that form their society. In the light of the above, this theory concludes that Human society is a social creation.

The relevance of this theory to the position of this work, is that Africans in the diaspora, tried to create a new society for themselves based on their practical experience. Thus, forming a link between their past and their present reality, as the succeeding discussion shall show.

### **The concept of Africanness**

In many circles, to be an African is to be black. To others, it is to reside in Africa while to some others more, it is to have an African heritage. In simple term, African indigenous religious tradition is not a credal religion. It has no scripture. In view of the above, Mbiti (1969) contends that its tenets are preserved and communicated in songs, myths, music, festivals, symbols, folktales, dance ceremonies, rituals, customs among others. Corroborating the position conversed by Mbiti above, Idowu (1973), Ikenga-metuh (1987) Dopamu and Awolalu (1979), Tasie and Olumati (2013) and Kalu (2015) argued that African indigenous religious tradition is not a missionary religion. To these scholars, the tenets of African traditional religion are preserved and communicated in rituals, customs and traditions. Idowu (1973, Danfulani, (2012) added that anyone who wishes to study African traditional religion has to apply the culture area approach for effective coverage and verifiability.

Different cultures have different means of explaining their existence and continuity. They also have different layers of beings starting with the supreme being which is at the apex although projected in different ways according to tradition. Some culture recognises and associate the supreme being with their economic activities. Some believed that the Supreme being reside in the sky, others that he resides in the earth while some others conclude that he dwells in the water (Obodoegbulam, 2019) There also exist the divinities or deities, spirits forces, ancestors as-well-as magic and medicinemen. In west Africa, there are five classes of spirit beings where as in east and central Africa, they have four (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987).

Without mincing word, religion and culture in Africa are like two sides of the same calabash. In an effort to define culture, Eze, Don (2014) holds that it is the way of life of a particular group of people expressed in their history, language, art, religion, philosophy, economics, music, food and dressing. Put in another

way, culture includes knowledge, beliefs, values, customs, cuisine, and skills displayed by members of any society. Hence, Mbiti (1969) as quoted by Kanu (2015) sees African culture as the rhythm of the African life.

This suggests that Africans carry their culture to wherever they go. The culture of the Africans is eternalised and not written in a book to be studied. Furthermore, Owete and Iheanacho (2013) assert that culture has a global scope, this means that culture can evolve as people migrate from one location to the other. Although the cultures that are transferred from one location to the other and from one people to other nation may not be completely original, but it still helps to identify the people.

Obiegwu, Ifeyinwa (2016) assert that language and culture are indisputably symbiotic. Language serves as an expression of culture without being entirely synonymous with it. In most cases, a language forms the bases for ethnic, regional, national or international identity. Without over stating the obvious, language remains an indispensable factor of integration among any people. Language is an indispensable tool to connect different people irrespective of time and space (Okafore and Emeka, 2012, Davis, 2015). It has the potential to create peace and harmony.

Language and cuisine. Prior to colonial destabilization of the culture of the African people, the value for indigenous delicacies and language were predominant. It was a mark of identity of a distinct people to communicate in their local dialect known as mother tongue. Thus, the people of Nigeria like other Africans, appreciated their diversity as food and language defined their cultural boundaries. Every indigenous group was uniquely known for their special dialect as well as food. Just as the Ogba people in the northern Niger Delta speak Ogba language and has delicacies like (Mnoku Oha, mnoku ulugbu, mnoku ede, mnoku nkpreku among others. The Igbos in the south-east, speak Igbo language and their food delicacies range from eat *Ofe oha, Apu and Ofensala, Isiewu, Ofe Onubu*, etc. The Yoruba people who occupy the south-west, speak the Yoruba language while their delicacies include *Amala and Ewedu, Elubo and Gbegiri, efo riro* etc. The Hausa people who are in the northern part of Nigeria, speak Hausa with food like *Tuo shinkafi, Tuo Masala, kilishi, kunu, nunu* etc. Other minority tribes had their language and delicacies, *Banga soup, Ofor soup Afam soup, edikiko, editan* and other too numerous to mention.

Some smaller cultures considered as minority and thereby submerge in the larger ethnic groups are *Ijaw, Abua, Ikwerre, Ekpeye, Ibibio Efik, Ogoni, Andoni, tiv Nupe, Igala* etc, equally have their distinct language and food that are special to them. Whereas, the local delicacies as mentioned above have gain global recognition especially in the different part of the world where Africans are found.

In view of the fact that African religion is not a religion of the books, the people take it along with them wherever they go. This aptly corresponds with what Leonard in Ejizu (1986) observed when he wrote that Africans eat religiously, dress religiously, dance religiously and die religiously. Despite the hardship which confronted the Africans in the new world, Africans in the Americas still maintain their cooking recipe and this fascinated a lot of the white folk especially their African jollof rice. This special feature of African women has allowed for employment as cooks as some of the white folk love their recipe and are pleased for them to cook in their houses. It is important to note that most white folks do not subscribe to cooking, staying near the fire and combining ingredients was equally a challenge so they employ the blacks to cook for them and these African women are not paid for their labour. At the same time, these cuisines contain African crops that are new to the whites and they wish to enjoy these recipes with them.

The time and energy an African woman spend arranging her kitchen and cooking ingredients makes their cook special. Rather than grinding, they would pound, they go to the farm, harvest fresh crops and vegetables for delicious meal and the white cherish this a lot.

Above all, their climate is similar to that of west Africa. They also planted some tropical crops like yam, cocoyam, water-yam, Okro, Pepper, Pumpkin, Bitter leaf etc. By so doing they preserve their culture.

While examining the pattern of cultural migration among the blacks in the diaspora, Diakete (2015) observed that in the diaspora Africans travel with their religion. Because it is not a creedal tradition. Every tradition, custom, or ritual is preserved and communicated from one generation to another through folktales, music, dance etc.

When Africans saw themselves in the new world, they continued to reminiscent on the African heritage. Sometime, when they are given a day off and taken to

church, they dance as if in honour of saint Mary; where as they in their inner most mind, were dancing in honour of their deities.

The challenge posed by the movement of Africans to the New world, compelled them to look inward to identify what makes them different from the place of their abode and how their uniqueness can be sustained.

In order to destroy everything that will remind the African slaves of their Africaness, they were separated to different state, island or city on their arrival in the new world. This made it very difficult for members of one ethnic group to interface or preserve their culture in its original form. To effectively ensure a disintegration of the black community, slaves from different parts of Africa were confined in an environment because the slave masters feared that they may plot a cop and take over them, so some slaves from Ghana, Benin, Nigeria, Congo, Angola and Cameroon were not ordinarily permitted to associate with anyone who speaks the same language. This made it very difficult for the Africans to commune with their kinsfolk. Nevertheless, they never forgot some African liturgies, relics and rituals which survived in their memories.

What exists today as the African religion in the Americas in the view of Der Meer (2015) are simple facets of the Africanness in the memories of the slaves of which when they are given any little opportunity to worship with their masters, they recall African liturgies and apply them to their worship. The ingredients of African religion practiced in the Americas made the slaves unique and help to perpetuate their culture.

In the Americas some African cults were still operational but the liturgies they used in the cults are different from the originals for instance the kumina cult originated from Akan region in Ghana with the original name as kum-akan but the name has been creolized. Yet the cult still represents what it is meant to represent in the African case.

Somehow, the cults help the adherent to remember the ancestors of Africa and in one of the African cults it is believed that when they die, they would return to their land in Africa. One of their tenets was that God is black and Satan is white. Africans also believe in reincarnation and retributive justice. Therefore, in the next world, all the whites will go to hell while all the blacks will go to paradise.

### **Music and Dance Societies**

According to Ogumbile (2015) One of the renowned societies in the Americas is the Ekpe society. This society is a creolized form of the elders' council in the present day Akwa-Ibom and cross river state of Nigeria. This is an elders' guild which has similar characteristics with the Ogboni fraternity of western Nigeria. Here, the elders listen to reports and adjudicate on issues brought before them as a means of maintaining society in equilibrium. The music and dance steps of this society was not done as the original version.

### **Folklores/myth**

Africans still maintain their folklores and mythologies as medium of transmitting values, ethics, morals and precepts to the younger generation. They teach the children African tales, still observe the myths and encourage themselves through their folklores and by this means, they transmit values, morals and the core essence of the African communal life-style. They speak of African tales, totems, taboos and ancient African stories. They endeavour not to violate these observances, not minding that they are not in Africa. They see maintaining these precepts as filial responsibilities which they owe their ancestors and the generation yet unborn. Owing to the unbroken chain which binds all, Africans do not negate the possibilities of the outcome of these myths. For example, an Afro-American movie "palm trees in the snow" portrayed how blacks of Guinea republic still believe in oath taken in the midst of their white counterparts as an authentic means of dispute resolution or resource control.

Similarly, the older women became baby sitters for the younger women while they did so, African tenets were communicated. They sang African songs to them, told them folktales etc. even as they take their day off to ease off stress, ready for work the next day, they organized festivals, told stories together (not minding that the whites may be mocking them as they sing and dance) but in essence, they were preserving and transmitting their culture. Considering the mode of production, Africans work tirelessly unlike the whites in order to achieve their aim. They work without looking at the time.

Africans are recognised as a result of their unique characteristics such as hair style and clothing. In the western world, most whites now adopt African dress code. African male adults tie wrappers, wear kaftan, dashiki or dasiki, turbans, workor, etibo etc while the ladies use beads on their hands, necks, waist and feet. Similarly, they are known for their braided hairstyles against the whites who go on peming their hair.

These exceptional qualities demonstrate the negritude of the Africans in the diaspora. They use these ingredients as a way of preserving their cultural heritage. They could be considered to an extent creolized yet they still maintain aspects of their culture

### **Concluding Discussion**

The trend of globalization has severely and hugely impacted on the culture of the indigenous people of Africa. For instance, wherever they find themselves, their dialect is often spoken, while their local delicacies are consumed. In recent time, some part of America, Asia and Europe have added Nigeria's cultural festival like Osun Oshogbo fishing festival, Orisa and *Ogun* of the Yoruba people, and new yam festival (*Ohaji*) of the Igbos to their mirage of diverse entertainments. This active influence of the global relevance of the African languages and food, gives the people in Diaspora a sense of identity.

The cultural displays have become a tool for unity and favourable co-existence of Africans in other countries of the world. An example of cultural pride and unification of the Nigerians expressing the values of their culture in the Diaspora are the activities of the indigenous people of Biafra (IPOB), Movement for the survival of the Ogoni people (MOSOP) and the Oodua people congress (OPC) of both Igbo's, Ogoni and Yoruba's all over the world.

The local dialect spoken by the indigenous people of Africa in the Diaspora has facilitated their identity and respect by other nations of the world. Today, indigenous Nigerian delicacies are globally sought as a result of the presence of Africans in many parts of the globe. Many restaurants in the world refers to local delicacies like *Afam* soup, *Edikaiko*, *Banga*, *Nkwobi*, *Isiewu*, *Amala*, *Tuw*, *Ataka* etc. As it were, these African oriented delicacies are now consumed in many parts of the world.

These local foods that have found their way into foreign countries have become a very big boost to African economy through export revenues. On this basis, it is significant to observe that in order to satisfy different customers from Africa especially Nigeria, food restaurants prepare local food in foreign countries with local spices to give indigenous taste. They bring African heritage to the blacks in the diaspora.

It is equally significant to remark that Nigerian languages like Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Ogba, Abua, Ekpeye, Egeni, Ikwerre, Ijaw, Ogoni, Edo, Ibibio, Effik, Ngwa, etc spoken in foreign land gives the people of Nigeria and by extension Africa, a sense of unity and comfort. In this wise, there has been cultural heritage program in places like London, California, Texas, Berlin, Philippines, etc were only local ethnic languages that are indigenous to the African are used as the means of communication and interaction.

Hence, when Africans in the Diaspora speak their language, it becomes a veritable means of propagation and promotion of their culture. Since language is an integral part of culture. This art is capable of strengthening their individual international identity. This also agrees with the Nigerian local adage that African kolanut understands only the local dialect.

Thus, before one can enjoy Nigerian local food, one must understand the local dialect and communicate with the food through it, since the local food understand only indigenous languages. It is very important to note that all local food have their indigenous names.

In order to blend their African beliefs with the new Gods which their masters want to impose on them, some of the Christians saints were syncretized as the Africans called their gods the names of saints. While the Africans remember their gods as Ogun, Yemoja, Oshun, they creolised the original name for instance Ogun was called Oxun in the Americas, Yemoja because of the type of gods she is in Africa, was referred to as "our lady". Another important point is that the function of the gods in Africa was still the same in the Americas but there were slight differences. For instances Ogun the god of war and iron was used by the Americas to consult for arsenal and in war times. This helped to keep the tradition that is African heritage though in diaspora.

The scenario above, best portrays a typical African as catholic in the morning, Pentecostal in the afternoon and African traditional Religionist in the evening. Edowu 1964 describe Africans as those singing in the church "other gods I know not" but under their armpit is a charm tied to their body. According to Leonard Baratute "the white man has succeeded in taking over the bodies of the blacks but they cannot take away the worldview of Africans that is conceived in his soul.

## **Recommendations**

The way forward: In view of the arguments espoused in this work, the following shall serve as the way forward.

- (i) Those African cultures that are making waves in the new world such as festivals, traditional medicine and marriage should be sustained.
- (ii) African cuisine should be included in the teaching curriculum of schools in the black dominated area and countries in the Americas.
- (iii) African names should be given to children by parents as a way of perpetuating African culture.
- (iv) The Africans in the new world should see themselves as ambassadors of the African continent.
- (v) Africans in the new world should try to interface with the people back here in Africa in order to update the practice of African religion as a world religion.
- (vi) The world black and African festival of arts and culture should be revived to refresh the memories of all that Africa is rich in tradition and culture.

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