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Keynote Address: Leadership and Cultural Diplomacy in Nigeria

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In spite of the enormity of the challenges facing research into indigenous knowledge in post-independence Nigeria, the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan is continuing in the search for African alternatives to human-centred development.

Despite the near-futility of relying on hard core, conventional means in the management of conflicts and contradictions among the disparate ethnic entities of the Nigerian state, it is important to recognise the pivotal role of leadership in developing soft power modalities in promoting mutual acceptance of differences and developing overarching national ideologies based on the aggregated cultural values of the federating units.

There is a thin line between cultural influence and cultural diplomacy. Arguably, cultural influence could mean the adoption of certain cultural productions of one group by the others. It could just be the adoption of visual or performing art traditions of one group by another or the transfer of technology developed by a group to another. On the other hand, cultural diplomacy is a

deliberate and conscious effort of one group to, without advertising it, impose its own value system on another group for the purpose of using this to establish a relationship of unequal partnership. Cultural diplomacy is usually an ideological project of power relations to impose hegemony through value change. In this context, the postulations of Michael Foucault on power relations will find ultimate relevance when he argues that it is wrong to consider power as something that institutions possess and use oppressively against individuals or groups. Accordingly, power is not something that can be owned but rather something that acts and manifests itself in a certain way; it is more a strategy than possession. He therefore, posits that:

power must be analysed as something which circulates, or something which only functions in the form of a chain ... Power is employed and exercised through a network organisation . . . Individuals are the vehicles of power and not its point of application.

In agreement with the above and for the purpose of subsequent discussions the term soft power is intended to mean the ability of

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any polity to convince and receive favourable response from others on the reliability, viability and appeal of its own culturally defined values, worldview or even ethos. Cultural ideology is always therefore a strong weapon in the hands of the hegemonic group to affect the mindset of others and to inspire trust. There seems to be no other tool more rational than trust in convincing and attracting others to one's preferred point of view at the least cost.

Cultural diplomacy may also be necessary to isolate the four critical aspects of its cultural context, i.e. settings, values, customs and lifestyles to provide a background necessary for the establishment of a nexus between leadership and cultural diplomacy in Nigeria.

Significant quantity of cultural diplomacy could be seen in pre-colonial. inter-group relations among Nigerian peoples. Nigeria's history is replete with the profundity of cultural intercourse and exchanges among the various ethnic groups that were later constituted into the Nigerian state by force of arms. A few examples will suffice to strengthen the claim that long before the imposition of colonial rule, Nigerian communities and societies had appropriated emerging opportunities to influence and be influenced by progressive values of their neighbours. At various limes and for diverse reasons they had cause to engage in inter-group relations for the purposes of commercial transactions, artistic exchanges, dynastic marriages, warfare and in their agnatic and cognate relationships. There are many studies today about the nature, character, dimensions and ramifications of inter-group relations among the various

Nigerian states, communities and ethno-linguistic groups in pre-colonial times. These studies have conjointly enriched the literature on Nigerian social, political and intellectual history that they provide unassailable justifications for the unity of the Nigerian nation.

However, in spite of the existence of this large body of evidence of profound and inter-penetrating relationships among these diverse groups over a long period, the Nigerian state is still grappling with a national question that is not meaning resolution. The failure of the state to appropriate the evidence of interaction to build a nation out of the polyglot of groups is not unrelated to the absence of a super-arching national cultural ideology which could be used to affect mindsets in earning the trust of the disparate groups and winning their acceptance of the viability and reliability of the new order. This national cultural ideology cannot be developed by the consensus of all. History has demonstrated that it is always the preserve of engaging the elite who live ahead of their time.

For instance, the mythical founder of the Hausa City States succeeded in imposing a superior technology over the erstwhile independent groups by convincing them of the superiority of his own ideas about civil administration and technology. He supplanted an existing ruling class or socio-political order to create what is typically Hausa culture. Tsoede did the same for the Nupe and Igala just as Oduduwa, the eponymous father of all Yoruba, convinced the autochthons of Ile-Ife of the superiority of his own definition of Yoruba civilisation. When this started to wane in the era of party politics in Western Nigeria,

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Chief Awolowo was apt in creating a myth of Oduduwa which was used to galvanise support for his political agenda and party. Later, as a result of bickering within the party, the dominant party in the West equally used cultural ideology to create an impression that it was more prestigious to be identified as Omo Oduduwa than Omo Olofin (Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Chief S.L. Akintola's preferences, respectively). Interestingly, the two names belong to the same person!

Why Cultural Diplomacy Now?

Every society is daily concerned about the continuing relevance of its culture and the protection of the basic set of values that inform its growth, sustain its development and ensure its continuing relevance. Culture and civilisation go hand in hand, and for a group to maintain its corporate identity, it must resist every attempt to be overwhelmed by others. It may be of interest to interrogate the desideratum of cultural diplomacy in a world that is globalising.

However, in spite of the wind of globalisation, which is in itself another wave of cultural imperialism, cultural diplomacy is an idea whose time has come. Recent developments all over the world demonstrate the failure of brute force or the exercise of naked power in moving civilisation further. The failure of socialist-communism and the dismantling of the Soviet bloc in the wake of the 1990's will attest to the limited success of the application of force in changing worldviews and mindset. The demagogic regimes of Europe, from Benito Mussolini's in Italy to Adolf Hitler's in Germany and then Joseph Stalin's in the Soviet Union

crumbled mainly because the myth created around them could not be sustained despite the use of propaganda and indoctrination. Nazi Germany that created a pseudo scientific myth of the superiority of the Aryan Race could not sustain its cultural affirmation despite the fact that the regime massacred more than six million people of Jewish descent. The Soviet ideology only made sense in a situation of continued poverty and state control of the modes of production, pattern of distribution and exchange. The death of this system was only a matter of time because it was repressive and oppressive in its execution.

On the other hand the Western World, including the United States constructed a cultural ideology which privileged Western capitalism of neo-liberal persuasion. The pre-eminence of the West could not have been a result of superior military might, but rather the universality or universal acceptance of its cultural ideology. This is an indication of how the West has been infesting the world with its own civilisation and convincing every society of the superiority of the values inherent in Western civilisation. It is more or less a mantra that to be Western is to be modern and to be modern is to be Western in the four domains of settings, values, customs and lifestyles. That is the power of cultural diplomacy.

In the wake of colonial administration in Nigeria, Britain needed to establish the superiority of its own ideals and arrest the development of what could frontally attack its rule over the so called subject people. It would be remembered that the plough followed the Bible in Nigeria, but at a time

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the Bible was indigenised to the point that it was fast losing its Westernness when African Churches especially the Aladura made their debut in the 1930s. This development must have been responsible in part for the establishment of the British Council with a mandate to popularise wholly British values, traditions and worldviews. Nigerian youths, young men and women were encouraged to visit the facilities of the British Council and be exposed to structured programmes of mind bending experiences. Going to England to study was actively encouraged to the extent that Nigerian families and governments invested heavily in educating their children in the United Kingdom. Those who left, as Nigerians in colour and values, came back as Nigerians only in colour, having lost their cultural identities, values and beliefs.

In the same vein, the United States Information Service was an active arm of the American Embassy in Nigeria. Indeed, during the bitter ideological faceoff between the United States and the Soviet Union, better known as the Cold War era, the USIS was more popular than the Visa or Consular section of the American Embassy. American literature, movies and periodicals were freely distributed to impressionistic youth in schools and institutions as part of a cultural project to promote the acceptance of the American alternative. Today, the awareness has been created and American values accepted as the order of the day to the extent that even condemnable aspects of American junk or popular culture now find expression and acceptance among Nigerians.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that cultural diplomacy which is deeper, more

intellectual and more intense than the badly articulated concept of branding or re-branding has demonstrated limitless capacity to influence, convince and earn the trust of its recipient. It is a more potent, more long lasting, more enduring and cost effective method of conversion. The success of Christianity and Islam has continued to testify to the enormous influence of soft power in affecting worldviews, beliefs and values. Cultural diplomacy has equally assumed centre stage in this era of multi-culturalism and accommodation of the other. The myth of cultural exclusives has been shattered and multi-ethnic nations now consciously develop modalities and mechanisms for the melting of cultures and the emergence of new supra-national identities.

In all of this, leadership not only plays a pivotal role in setting the agenda for cultural diplomacy, it is indeed its paramount agency of actualisation or execution. All leadership theories emphasise residency and exercise of power. Thomas Carlyle, the frontline British historian and biographer, in a work titled, *Heroes and Hero Worship* identifies the talents, skills and physical characteristics of men who had once assumed positions of power to suggest that leadership is always a reserve of men and women of superhuman nature, character and endowments. Situational theorists however believe that history was more than the results of the intervention of great men/women and that the times produce the person and not the other way round. The strength of this theory lies in its assumption that different situations call for different characteristics, hence: 'What an individual actually does when acting as a leader is in large

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part dependent upon the characteristics of the situation in which he functions'. We tend to agree more with Forsyth where he contends that leadership is certainly a form of power although it is not demarcated by power over people. Rather, it is power with the people that exists as a reciprocal relationship between a leader and his/her followers.

In the engagement with cultural diplomacy using Nigeria as a setting, leadership can be explained as an office or position of a leader and in another sense the capacity to lead. This capacity could be further expanded to accommodate the myriad of attributes and features of a leader. These attributes have been succinctly summed up by Sun Tzu, the Chinese political philosopher and thinker, when he said:

Leadership is a matter of intelligence, trustworthiness, humaneness, courage and discipline. Reliance on intelligence alone results in rebelliousness. Exercise of humaneness alone results in weakness. Fixation on trust results in folly. Dependence on strength of courage results in violence. Excessive discipline and sternness in command result in cruelty. When one has all five virtues together, each appropriate to its function, then one can be a leader.

It is important to demonstrate the central role of leadership in cultural diplomacy and its multifarious dimensions, as it is obvious that previous attempts to address the national question failed largely because of the inability of men and women to rise to the demands of the occasion and situations. Leaders did not fully recognise the need to use culture as basis for constructing a pan Nigerian identity which could subsequently serve as basis for political unity of the country. For instance, Chief Obafemi Awolowo once said:

Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are no 'Nigerians' in the same sense as there are 'English', 'Welsh', or 'French'. The word 'Nigerian' is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not.

Saying the same thing differently, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe had cause to remark that:

Since the amalgamation of southern and northern provinces in 1914, Nigeria has existed as one country only on paper; it is still far from being united. Nigerian unity is only a British intention for the country.

And finally, Colonel Odumegwu-Ojukwu believed that:

Nigeria never was and can never be a United Country. The very nature of Nigeria inevitably gave rise to political power groups, goaded by sectional rather than national interests.

The state system in Nigeria was a deliberate creation and a byproduct of British imperialism, which became more politically aggressive by the turn of the 20th century. While British and other European companies and mercantile concerns had begun to show interest in the Niger Delta or Oil River areas as far back as 1851, it was not until the beginning of the 20th century that a formal colonial rule was imposed. As rightly put by Falola, the imposition of colonial rule was meant to provide political muscle for the then on-going process of incorporating the Nigerian economy into the periphery of the international capitalist system. Britain needed Nigeria as a dependent ally in the international market and therefore ensured,

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through political control, the tying of her fledgling economy to the British economic and financial order.

Nigeria is made up of diverse ethnic nationalities with different historical, geographical, political, religious and socio-economic specificities and peculiarities. These diverse ethnic groups at differing levels of sociopolitical and cultural sophistication were forcefully constituted into a country to promote British mercantile interest on the west coast of Africa. The task before leadership in Nigeria is to intellectualise culture, deepen understanding about cultural values and synthesise salient aspects of our culture with a view to recognising and expunging those that are no longer relevant in today's world, but which are still preserved in traditions for the purpose of exploitation. For instance, Nigerian music, performing and creative arts should be further studied to ' understand the histories of their evolution and the amount of sharing, borrowing and adaptation that had gone into them. Gender relation is obviously a matter for concern in Nigeria today, and since the Beijing Conference on Women, there has been a new awareness about the role and place of women in the new society. The elimination of every manifestation of inequality in gender relations must be vigorously pursued and oppressive cultural attitudes to women be expunged from our cultural agenda. A purpose driven cultural leadership could use cultural diplomacy to protect basic human rights and freedoms, adjust patterns of social relations and relax patriarchal exertions on women.

The dynamism of culture, the emergence of a new socially defined world order and the frustration of living in a third world have collectively affected the belief of the younger generation in the relevance and effectiveness of African culture. This is a most depressing development since the future belongs to the younger generation. This loss of faith has manifested in denial and abandonment, especially of cherished aspects of African culture, traditions and values. Nigerian indigenous languages are endangered cultural species close to extinction because the younger generation abhors them and will not use them for communication or in their search for knowledge and wisdom. It is only an engaging leadership that can use the agency of cultural diplomacy to address the issue of inter-generational conflict in cultural orientation. Museums and monuments are important cultural sites as they tell stories more eloquently than the word of mouth. The advantage of an artifact as a repository of the history of its producer is that it could mean different things to different people depending on the context of their respective engagements with it. Leadership is required to manage the repositories of these enduring works of art and to illustrate them as appropriate. Indigenous Nigerian works of art are master pieces in creativity, ingenuity and perfection. They also reflect the depth of the spirituality of their producers and their relationship with or understanding of the mysteries of life. These museum pieces are capable of providing the missing link in the search for a supranational Nigerian identity. The management of the museums must therefore go beyond exhibition for exhibition sake. Rather, our museums must be teaching laboratories capable of telling the history of creativity and

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skills of the various Nigerian ethnic groups. The social relevance of art exhibitions must never be subsumed under financial or monetary considerations.

Furthermore, performing art has a great role in cultural diplomacy. Films and movies produced in Nigeria, popularly and widely known as Nollywood, could be a great asset in deploying cultural diplomacy for unity and progress in Nigeria. Earlier efforts to employ Nollywood in re-branding Nigeria failed because it was inappropriately engaged as an agency for social re-ordering. More often than not, many of these movies are produced to meet the demands of the market and obviously for financial gains. They sometimes don't depict aspects of Nigerian culture that should be celebrated and showcased for global acceptance. Cultural values inherent in traditions and customs are either misrepresented or overshadowed by excessive side attractions. A new cultural industry to tell the Nigerian story must emerge and must be led by cultural enthusiasts with firm commitment to and belief in the Nigerian project.

As observed severally above, no culture is static, every culture is dynamic; influencing and being influenced by others. Every culture must therefore have room for adaptation for it to remain relevant. The task before cultural leadership in Nigeria is therefore, how to accommodate changes without losing the core values of our culture. The question that must be addressed is how best can salient aspects of Nigerian culture be protected against the onslaught of rampaging hegemonic or dominant cultures? There is the need to develop a practical agenda for the intellectualisation of culture and establish a patriotic intellectual vanguard that would ensure that Nigerian cultural activities go beyond mere jamborees and wild gyrations in borrowed costumes.

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