



Who Needs Arts and Craft in a Transformation Agenda?

Jerry Buhari

It is not easy to understand the mind of African governments with regard to the existence of a defined (Cultural) policy on the role of craft in development. What is however obvious is the reluctance (or seeming reluctance) of successive African governments to take indigenous craft as an important platform for national development. The government's acquisitions of facilities, furniture, and other goods for official use demonstrate a shameless preference for foreign goods over and above indigenous ones. This is even so where indigenous goods are clearly of higher quality than the imported ones. For example, the current flashy doors and furniture from Dubai and China are preferred to the indigenous stronger and more durable wooden and steel panel doors. Importmania, today in Nigeria and perhaps several African countries remain a major blockage to authentic national development with roots in indigenous cultural heritage. Demas Nwoko (2005), speaking about our obsession with foreign goods, in a conversation with Ikwuemesi and five other members of the Pan-African Circle of Artists (PACA) observed, "As I often pointed out in my writing we became consumers and now we have unwittingly drifted to donating ourselves to slavery again."

What is our understanding of development?

What is our understanding of the development and what are the requirements that are capable of driving the engines for national development? Development is said to have two faces. On the one side, it means the advancement of socio-economic activities that lead to the improvement of the living standards of a people. On the other hand, development can be an abstract phenomenon in which we deal with perceptions that attempt to approximate certain conditions we consider as bringing to us some level of comfort. These perceptions are open to political manipulations which the North always wants to dictate to the South. (Here of course we mean the Developed world versus the developing world.) In the end, we seem to formulate contradictory and incoherent development policies. Unstable governments further complicate this situation. Often the philosophy of governance is to employ the "Clean Broom" approach. This

Jerry Buhari

means that successive governments on assuming office would jettison all programmes and projects of previous ones to be replaced by “our own”.

In Nigeria for example, the lack of continuity in governance is a significant factor in complicating policies and consequences of unfinished projects. This has worked very negatively on development strides in several African countries. Development talks and agendas among ministers and chief executives of agencies have become fashionable and big business today. The institutions create shadow government activities without a real commitment to substance. Today we see ministries; agencies organize projects, retreats, summits, roundtables, and workshops. What is tangible and measurable can be found in their huge budgets. These activities have become sophisticated ways of stealing public funds without the fear of the (EFCC). Many heads of agencies have been indicted for submitting heavy budgets for summits and conferences that were never held.

Another situation that affects real development is the poor or lack of defined relationship between agencies of a federal ministry and how they are supposed to work symbiotically to achieve common goals. For example, the National Gallery of Art and the National Council for Museums and Monuments disagree on who gives the authority for contemporary art to be exported out of the country. This has created unnecessary obstacles in the movement of artworks. What is the relationship between the National Gallery of Art and the Tourism agency or the National Council for Museums and Monuments? Is this relationship ad-hoc or a reality? Is there a forum where from time to time in the period of budgeting the agencies meet to share their projects to define areas of convergence and overlapping to maximize the overall mandate of the federal ministry? Is there any strategic master plan for the Federal Ministry of National Orientation, Culture, and Tourism? The recent call by the current minister of finance that there is a need to rationalize some agencies in the federal ministries for effective performance gives credence to these questions raised. But one may hasten to observe that it may not be the solution to the problem of poor performance or duplication of duties.

The annual outing in the now-famous National Arts Festival (NAFEST) is supposed to be a catalyst for the use of our arts and craft to drive economic development. But the absence of key government personalities in these annual festivals best illustrate the seriousness that governments place on the role of arts and craft in development. In addition, the poor budgets allocated to these agencies reinforce our conviction about

the lack of political will of governments to drive this sector as a major instrument for national development.

In these annual festivals, each state attempts to showcase the best of its arts and craft. The participating states prepare their entries based on what would appear to be a well-articulated theme provided by the Council. The idea is to challenge the states to expose the potential of their arts and crafts for development agendas. Alas! We witness a continuous decline in state government support of the festival and more recently, the politicization of the all-important event.

A brief review of these festivals would show that there has been a gradual decline in the participation of states. In addition, the quality of traditional works has also been on the decline. Unfortunately, these works represent the authentic heritage of the people's ingenuity and foundation for self-reliance and national development.

Several reasons may account for this gradual decline; this may vary from state to state. But two major factors stand out: one, the inconsistency in the commitment of various state governments with every new dispensation. As observed earlier, our governments have a legacy of a Clean-Broom approach to governance. This is a situation where continuing projects initiated by the previous government are seen as evidence of advancing the work of the previous "enemy". Each previous government in the nascent Nigerian democracy is viewed with extreme suspicion by its successor even when its assumption of office might have been facilitated and sponsored by its predecessor. The first step that a new government takes on assuming office can be as pedestrian as removing the furniture in the office. We understand that this may even have some religious connotations. The new government proceeds to suspend old projects and commence new ones. This is done with complete disregard for any merit in the previous projects. This style of governance is retrogressive to national development.

How can Craft reinforce identity?

Craft is synonymous with identity. It is what the people do, and by implication, it is their heritage. Craft is the source of the people's livelihood. It is the core of the people's indigenous pre-colonial economy. In effect, we can say that people's arts and crafts are directly related to their future. It points to where they are coming from. This is the source of any people's heritage, pride, and history. The situation however is that contact with the West and colonialism disoriented and halted the transformation of arts and crafts as viable tools for national development.

Jerry Buhari

Societies like Japan and China were able to transform their arts and craft into modern technology and economic growth. In contrast, many African countries did not only abandon their arts and craft in favour of the West but worked deliberately against any possible relevant role it might play in the future development of the country. Part of the major problem is the opportunity the consumption of foreign goods offers our leaders the channel to siphon our resources out of our national treasury. This has taken a more sophisticated dimension wherein in a third-world country with an eighty per cent poverty state, governments are equating the acquisition of luxury jets as an instrument of efficient governance.

The legacy of craft, which can be considered to be the wheel of progress, rests on stability and continuity. The absence of this cannot provide direction for meaningful development. Unfortunately, the history of African politics is governed by instability, fragmented policies, and an uncoordinated duplicated multiplicity of agencies. So, Identity is directly related to economic conditions.

How can Arts and Craft Renegotiate improvement in the Economic Conditions of Africa?

A few examples of the potency of arts and crafts as agents for improving Africa's economic conditions are worth considering. Evidence abounds today in the textiles. Adire and batik have become symbols of identity and fashion pride in Nigeria. This was made partly because President Obasanjo made them part of his wardrobe. Individual artists and groups have set up small industries of these, and with them, they can shelter, feed, and clothes their families. From their income, some can send their children to school and build their own homes. But perhaps of more importance, some have even been able to offer employment to many.

Bead jewellery making is another emerging art/craft. Many young girls today make bead jewellery and can pay their school fees and support their parents financially. Some have become so successful that a government job is no longer attractive.

In the NAFEST exhibitions, there was furniture made from local materials like raffia, and baobab that were distinctively African and specifically Nigerian. The government spends millions of naira in advertisements with such slogans as "Proudly Nigerian", yet in their offices, one does not find any of this unique and exquisite furniture of raffia or palm. We import our furniture from Italy, China, and Dubai. Nigeria is said to have some of the finest leathers in the world. Yet government imports leather

chairs from foreign countries to furnish public offices and residences. Without due recognition of our arts and craft, it will be difficult to advance an indigenous grass-roots national development that is sustainable.

Robert C. Allen (2010), Professor of Economic History, Department of Economics and Nuffield College Oxford University, in a paper at 'The Kuznets Lecture: Yale University' titled, "Why was the Industrial Revolution British? Observed that the major factor that distinguished the development of craft into industrial prosperity was essential as a result of economic incentives. We have always held the position that if the government and private sectors desire to see authentic national development, there must exist a conducive economic atmosphere that encourages production and consumption.

Many countries not blessed with oil have relied on the elements of tourism to generate revenue for national development. Some of these countries in Africa are Egypt, Kenya, Morocco, and Senegal, to mention but a few. Elsewhere, there are countries like Malaysia, Italy France, Austria, Brazil, China, and the Caribbean Islands, especially Jamaica. These countries generate huge revenue from their tourist industries for national development. Nigeria to UNESCO records has some of the finest tourist sites with the status for inclusion as world heritage sites. Yet the country finds it difficult to provide the most elementary tourist structures. An example of one of the most basic is the provision of road signs and the naming of towns and villages to help citizens and visitors navigate their way. The relationship that should exist between the Tourism agencies of the Federal Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and National Orientation with State and Local Governments appear to be non-existent. There appear to exist a policy crisis in developing a cultural blueprint for development in most African countries and especially Nigeria. Where it exists implementation aspect is sterile.

I searched the web to see if one can find a current development policy and was unable to find one coherent document. The Cultural Policy that was designed to situate culture as a major instrument for development has failed to receive the kind of recognition the written text suggests. To date, the country has no National Museum befitting the rich cultural heritage of Africa's most populous country. It still retains a colonial legacy at Onikan, Lagos; with a political and administrative structure that works against the very mandate of the institution. The National Gallery of Art continues to remain a parastatal without a gallery. Priced artworks collected over a long period that represent the history of the evolution of modern art in Nigeria are destroyed

Jerry Buhari

every day as a result of the absence of basic storage facilities and befitting appropriate galleries.

Identity and Economic Condition

Identity is directly related to our economic condition. If our economic condition is healthy, it enhances our sense of well-being and self-esteem. Identity gives us confidence and the ability to face life's challenges more effectively. Poverty is an enemy of identity. With poverty, it is difficult to hope and believe in one's self. The confidence to dare and aspire to excel in life becomes difficult. All these are components that build identity.

Perhaps our long trauma under military rule may have partly been responsible for the loss of our identity. It accounts for our heavy dependence on government and our inability to think outside government. This mindset also accounts for some of the inherent challenges of our economic quagmire as a country.

The second and perhaps equally important factor is the leadership of cultural ministries. It is generally assumed that the culture ministry is a consolation prize for wounded politicians, in some cases whose usefulness is exhausted but the government does not want to tell them so. Today, a look at all the leadership of culture ministries across the entire country, in many cases, shows personalities who have never had anything to do with the sector are even interested. There is a case in a state in northern Nigeria where somebody was posted to the ministry of culture. He did not even report to his duty post saying that the posting was an insult. He went to his political godfather and today heads one of the "juiciest" parastatals with the biggest budget allocation.

I had earlier observed in another paper that our perception of a culture essentially as dance, and entertainment has acted very negatively on our ability to harness its potential for national development. Yet historical facts abound in the paths that developed worlds took to become world-industrialized economies.

Imported goods mentality and the bondage of post-colonialism

Obsession with imported goods (import mania) has been one of the greatest enemies of self-reliance in most African countries. Indigenous goods are perhaps the worst victims. While even during the era of military regimes some governments attempted a ban on luxury goods, in today's democratic dispensation, particularly since 1999, Nigeria's consumer market has seen indiscriminate importation of everything conceivable and inconceivable, from

a toothpick to packet juice and biscuits. Locally produced goods have aggressively been suppressed with little or no effort to revive them. This is compounded by the near absence of electricity and basic infrastructure that serve as platforms for development. It would seem that eclectic electricity; insecurity and poor leadership suggest the government's hidden conspiracy to ensure the perpetuation of a hopeless future. The situation has often made some of us question the national origin of some of our leaders. In public discourse, they are often regarded as worse than our former colonial masters. In dialogue with my students, I have often regarded them as foreigners. It is difficult for development to occur when for instance, all three tiers of government prefer imported goods over their indigenous products. How can these governments that claim to represent the people refuse to patronize their goods in preference to foreign ones? I once observed in a class that we can best describe our leaders as foreigners. They make us think that we may have been better off under colonial rule.

Our indigenous crafts that should have drawn the attention of our leaders and propelled them towards concrete development policies where indigenous arts and crafts play major roles in setting the path for national development are simply made to reside in the political slogans. This is what our cultural fathers conceived NAFEST to serve. From each annual NAFEST outing, it will be clear that artists and craftsmen and women have always been productive in the things they know best. It is public patronage that will make the difference in placing art and craft on the path of national development as observed by Allen. If works are produced and there is little or poor patronage, the artists and artisans will have to look elsewhere for a source of living. Most works of art and craft are a major source of livelihood for those that make them. By way of extending the argument, this explains the deterioration of our museums. Staff who are custodians of priceless artefacts in this institution are poorly paid and work under the most inhuman conditions. Their state of well-being has made some of them engage in practices that are injurious to the safety and security of the artefacts they oversee.

Conclusion

How can we redress this gradual decline in the sustenance of our craft? First I suggest that those of us who appreciate the exquisite quality of our indigenous craft should set up initiatives that promote them through deliberate and elaborate programmes of publicity campaigns, promotion, sponsorship and usage. This strategy has been the philosophy and practical

Jerry Buhari

approach adopted by the most active members of the Zaria Art Society. Our crafts should be put to use in our activities. A typical example is the use of bone/horn chairs at the Sponsors' Dinner of Life in My City (LIMCAF) recently held in Enugu. These unique chairs drew the admiration of dignitaries and most people at the dinner. The chairs generated discussion about the excellent craft. Many people expressed a lack of knowledge of their existence while others wondered why they couldn't be promoted. Some people wondered how these chairs would be a sense of pride and promotion of indigenous furniture if used in our foreign mission houses.

The next approach is to develop a pressure group that will persuade the government to adopt a policy for use of our art and craft in government spaces, foreign missions and tourism fares. Private institutions that promote the use of indigenous crafts can be given incentives by governments. On an individual level and in groups we can promote them by acquiring them and using them.

References

- Albach P. G. and Hassan S. M. (1996). *The Muse of Modernity: Essays on Culture as Development in Africa*. Africa World Press, Inc.
- Allen R. C. (2010). *The Kuznets Lecture: Yale University* titled, "Why was the Industrial Revolution British?"
<http://www.econ.yale.edu/seminars/kuznet.allen-101007.pdf>.
Retrieved on 21 November 2012.
- Aig-Imoukhuede, F. Ed. (Year not given). *A Handbook of Nigerian Culture*. Publisher (Publisher not given)
- Masakazu, Y. (Sugihara, B. Trans. (2000). *Individualism and the Japanese: An Alternative Approach to Cultural Comparison*. Japan Echo Inc.
- Nwoko, D. (2005). *Creativity and Self Reliance*. Pan-African Circle of Artists.
- Roger G. D. & McEvilley T. (1996). *Capacity: History, The World, and The Self in Contemporary Art and Criticism*. OPA (Overseas Publishers Association) Amsterdam B. V.
- Sachs W. Ed. (1992). *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*. Witwatersrand University Press

Notes:

NAFEST 2012 this year was in Ilorin. The images were taken by the author to illustrate this paper. Insights into the supports that various states received were based on unstructured interview with officials that brought their contingents.

My involvement with the culture industry in Nigeria as consultant has been a privilege and revealed the workings and perceptions of governments on culture. Last year as a co-curator to Nigeria @50 revealed the half-commitment of governments on culture. It would seem that the interest is more in the budget than the result that it should produce.

As an active participant in the Nigerian cultural milieu, I am constantly challenged by the paradox and contradictions of governments' pronouncements on the role of culture in development and the contrary actions they embark all the time.