

PARENTING AND CHILD UPBRINGING IN YORUBA CULTURE

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Introduction

Yoruba people predominantly belong to the Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Ekiti and Lagos States. They are more than 50% of Kwara state and 20 - 30% of Kogi State (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979), and Some parts of Republic of Benin and Togo. The question of their origin is debatable and in the present state of knowledge, not much is categorically known about it (Idowu, 1986). However, two different answers are found in oral traditions. The first holds that their founding fathers were immigrants from a northern source variously identified as Egypt, Meroe, or Arabia while it is claimed in the second body of traditions that Ile-Ife was the first habitable place created on earth, from which all earthly creation began (Familusi, 2012). For this reason, Ile-Ife is referred to as the cradle of the Yoruba race (Akintoye, 2004). The crux of this paper is on the Yoruba people of Nigeria, with particular emphasis on parenting and child upbringing among the Yoruba speaking people. As would be seen later in our discussion, Yoruba tradition stresses that parents are the first teachers of their children, instructing them in the "proper" way of relating to their elders and people of the same age group. More so, it would not be overstatement to say that Yoruba culture places extremely high value on children. In fact, it is safe to say that children are the *Summum bonum* (the highest good) of the Yoruba.

The Concept of Culture

In the ordinary, everyday usage according to Adedokun (1990), the concept of culture is used to refer to the "finer things of life", to denote such things as good taste, refined manner, class, achievement in and appreciation of fine art, music or literature. In a

word, culture is meant to indicate the level of sophistication of the individual. In this sense, a person who does the right things in the right (perfect) ways is referred to as "Cultured man". Conversely, somebody whose behavior is deemed to be at a level of crudity is regarded as un-refined, "Un-cultured. Adedokun however, was quick to point out that the definition of culture in this sense is very narrow and inappropriate, because, culture cannot be defined in terms of one person possessing it and another lacking it, for it is inconceivable to have a human being who lacks culture.

None the less, the Anthropological or sociological definition of culture appropriate and relevant. Here, culture refers to all the things which human beings do but which have no biological basis, i.e. all non-biological actions and behaviours of man are product of his culture. For example, the functioning of eye is biologically determined. However, the usage of the eyes in winking to communicate appreciation or social disapproval is culturally (not biologically) determined; and is learned.

Such behaviours as greeting, shaking of hands and interacting are all learnt by human beings who need to learn and invent new ways of doing things which are modified from time to time and passed from generation to generation as the culture of the people. Culture, therefore, according to Adedokun (1990), refers to the total way of life of a given people. Thus, it includes any piece or pattern of behavior, the attitude, norms, values, objects, skills, belief system, and world out-look which human beings learn and adopt as members of a given human group or society. Culture, according to Akinjogbin (2002), consists of all the items in the life of a group of human beings which make them feel belonging to one another and distinct from any other around them. It comprises of their social system, economic system and their dresses and so on. According to Taylor (1958), culture refers to that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, custom and capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

From these definition, it is important to know that not only is culture an all-embracing of human social life, it is learned or acquired. In other words, culture is not determined by genetic, biological or instinctual factors. It is in this sense that culture is used as a general, universal concept or phenomenon which is common to all mankind. Thus, culture marks the dividing line between human beings and animals. While the behaviours of animals are determined by instinct and are typical, those of human beings are influenced by the culture of their society and are varied. Thus, every society has its own culture which may differ in some significant ways from that of other societies.

It is against this backdrop that the culture of the Yoruba people vis-à-vis the position of parents as the guardians and protectors of children and how children, as the future leaders of the society, are brought up are examined in this paper with a view to projecting this culture of parenting and child up-bringing in Yoruba land to the outside world.

Parenting and Yoruba Culture

As earlier mentioned, Yoruba tradition stresses that the parents are the first teachers of their children, from the beginning, children are made to believe in reward and punishment and accordingly, in the potency of blessings and the efficiency of curses of spiritual beings. Parents' role in training is reflected in the verse from the Ifa divinatory corpus (*odu*):

If one trains one's children,

They will be perfectly wise
As Ire, the daughter of *Olokun*

If one does not train one's children,

They will be stupid and foolish

Like *Ibawini*, the son of *Otu Ife* (Adewale, 1986).

Parents also must love their children and not be harsh to them or selfish. The lesson of generosity towards children is expressed in the following verses:

An elder who consumes everything without
Leaving a remnant will himself carry his calabash
Home. The dove cats and leaves a remnant for
The pigeon, the green wild pigeon cats and
Leaves a remnant for the mocking bird. I will

Leave a remnant for my children when I eat (Adewale 1986).

These verses pertaining to child training and child feeding and care have divergent implications for teaching the modern concepts of child stimulation and nutrition. While perception of the need for the special training of child on traditional culture, the fact that children need special feeding to development - rather than mere "remnants" from the adult meal is a new concept

Parents are the primary agents in the socialization of children. Hence, the importance of guidance and counseling from parents to children cannot be overemphasized. As the child grows into adulthood, which involved the total attempt to adjust to new socio-psychological conditions, the absence of adequate guidance and counseling could be disastrous. Inappropriate counseling could lead to fatal destruction of a child's life that no one could be able to rectify again. In a general sense, one could say that since charity begins at home, home sets the pattern for the attitude of children towards people, things and instructions.

The on Yoruba have great qualities on how to raise their children. These principles according to Odejebi (2012) include: The child having some one he/she sees as enforcer (Oniberu) because according to Babatunde (1992), when Yoruba children fail they are often logged, emphasize on respect for elders, the belief that to raise a

child to the function of everybody in the community and the importance of education. In training the children, the Yoruba want their children to be upright, honest, kind and helpful to others (Awodele, 2006). The saying, "spare the rod and spoil the child", is very much relative in Yoruba Culture. Parents prefer to remain childless rather than to have children who will bring shame and dishonor to the family. Hence, severe physical punishments e.g. spanking is generally meted out to younger offenders in the hope that it will serve as a deterrent to others. According to Babatunde (1992), the flogging or spanking is seen as an act of kindness aimed at preventing the child from becoming a difficult person, or at protecting them from true danger. This attitude is expressed in the proverb: "*omo o gbon à ni ko má kú, ki ní n pa omo bí ko se ago*". "(When the child behaves foolishly, one prays that he should not die; but what kills more quicker than foolishness?)". Parenting in Yoruba culture according to Odejobi (2012) also includes parents deliberately putting temptation in the way of the child to test honesty, perseverance and truthfulness to mention but few. If any child falls into trap, severe punishment is meted out to him/her. These type of training given to children, they believe, was functional and relevant to the needs of their society.

Parents especially the father, pursues the desire with single-mindedness that his own father or grand-father married several wives who will produce many children to help him out at the farm. Hence, a farmer's son from the age of six up to marriage assist their father in productive operations on the farm; girls on the other hand assist their mothers at whatever occupation they do (Fadipe, 1970) This is to stimulate them to industry. In fact, a father allots a small part of the family land to a son while he is still young to work on during his spare time. It is after a son is married that his father allots him sufficient land for the need of his own Family.

For effective training, parents always apprenticed their children to the relatives, friends or competent craftsman or mistress, if girls, to learn one form of trade or another since they are free to choose trade on their own. The psychological reasons for sending children to be trained by other hands are: (i) to avoid sentiment in the training of the children and (ii) to employ sterner measures to make the children more serious on their job (Fafunwa, 1974). It was observed that those children who are trained by other people, different from their parents did better and it was therefore regarded as the most successful form of education. In Yoruba culture, children remind parents of their lost opportunities. Hence, they see in their children the chances to relive their lives by ensuring that their children better their achievement (Obiagwu, 1977).

Problem of unemployment did not arise in Yoruba land. This is because there was no question of existence without means of subsistence. Practically, everyone was engaged in agriculture. Even Craftsmen, who were first and foremost townsmen, had farms tended by slaves, peons, and their sons as well. The Yoruba were not left out of the Western Civilization. They send their children to school and when they come back, they run errand for their parents. It is not easy to dissociate completely from one's culture. Children were never regarded as parents mere properties in Yoruba Culture as Fawole (2003) points out, but they are cherished and given the best of training that could make them functional themselves and in the society at large.

Yoruba Culture and Child Upbringing

Mbiti (1979) documented that in African societies, particularly among the Yorubas, the birth of a child is a process which begins long before the child's arrival in this world and continues long thereafter. It is not just a single event which can be recorded on a particular date. Nature brings the child in to the world, but society creates the child into a social being, a corporate person, for it is he community which

must protect the child, feed it, bring it up, educate it and in many other ways incorporate it into the wider community. Children are the buds of society, and every birth is the arrival of 'spring' when life shoots out and the community thrives.

The birth of child is, therefore, the concern not only of the parents but of many relatives including the living and the departed. Kinship plays an important role here, so that a child cannot be exclusively "my child" but only "our child"

According to McGehee (1984), discovering and becoming concerned with behaviours termed abusive of children is a function of how people understand the nature of children in the parent-child relationship, the goals and values of the society and the condition under which that society has to live. The African people especially the Yoruba have their own views about existence, social arrangements, political values and judgments within the context of which their actions are taken. Therefore the kind of education given to the children in Yoruba culture is an immediate induction into the social and preparation for adulthood. This showed that Africa education emphasizes social responsibility, job orientation, political participation, spiritual and moral values (Fafunwa, 1974). As the first teachers of their children parents are expected to instruct them in the proper way of relating to their elders and people of the same age group.

A young child is expected to obey the orders of his elders as soon as he or she has past the infant stage. There is the practice of handling of whip to the older and instructing him or her to use it on his or her younger one whenever the latter first becomes offensive and insubordinate towards him/her to instill the lesson of respect and obedience into the heart of a rebellious junior (Odejobi, 2012). In the communal atmosphere of the traditional family, parents of children who behave in approved ways are equally approved as successful. In the same vein, parents whose children misbehave are shamed and advised to put their houses in order (Babatunde, 1992).

Parents as the primary agents in the socialization of children make and enforce rules in the home and made it clear to the children. Children are expected to behave in conformity with these rules. Hence, children are punished appropriately if the rules are violated (Owolabi, 1999). The most usual form of punishment was flogging accompanied by severe warning against recurrence. A recurrence of the offence was sometimes punished by flogging and rubbing of ground pepper into the weal left by the flogging. In some community according to Fadipe (1970), such a child had the back of his/her hand slashed with a knife after which pepper was rubbed into the wound.

Also, Adewale (1986) confirms that parents in Yoruba tradition brought up children ethically and in the knowledge of God. Children are therefore made to believe in reward and punishment, potency of blessing and efficacy of curses of spiritual beings. It then becomes the duty of adults in the society to take that child and create out of him/her a useful social being. The kind of person a child would be is determined by adults' interest and goals especially by parents and other adults in the family and the community. "Thus, parenting in African context is autocracy, not democracy especially during the formative year of a child (Owolabi, 1999).

At the childhood stage, from the first week of any child, the parent enquires about the child (this is otherwise known as "*Ikose waye omo*"). The parent discovers through Ifa oracle all the dos and don'ts of the child together with his or her taboos. These findings guide the parent of the child to know how to handle, train and contribute to the growth and development of the child at every stage of his or her life. For instance, what he or she could eat or forbid eating, his career in life and how to reach the peak of his or her career together with his or her marital and old age life would be revealed. The prospect and failure of the child in life and sacrifices to be offered to avert any evil befalling the child would be revealed. These revelations

would guide the parent of the child as to how to monitor the child's growth and development during his or her childhood. This is similar to what obtains in the Yoruba speaking part of Ilorin where some parents go to local Mallams to check the destiny of the new born baby by consultation otherwise known as *Hisab*.

In addition, the Yoruba parents give their wards at childhood stage necessary home training, particularly, religions and moral teachings. For instance, a child from Ifa oracle background is taught some Odu corpus and the moral teachings attached to such Odu corpus. Basic moral values of respect for elders, honesty, fear of God, cordial inter-personal relationship and hard work are demonstrated to the child for him or her to inculcate in the future. In addition to formal education a child from Yoruba family may be exposed to, it is imperative to learn under the feet of his or her parents some lessons connected with African religion. For instance every Yoruba child with African religion background does not take with levity swearing by Ogun, *Ara* or *Sonponna*, for a child believes that instant judgement from such divinities are calamitous. In another example, any child with the background of *Agemo* worship is rained to keep all the taboos connected with *Agemo* worship. Finally, moral values like truthfulness, honesty, respect for the elders and self discipline are taught to the child especially from childhood age for the development of such a child. The moral and religious teachings are given to the child by the parents while the former teaching and educational development of the child is received from the School he or she attends.

Conclusion

From our discussion so far, the concept of culture has been discussed. This, when linked to the present topic, one would not help but agreed to the fact that parenting and child upbringing is an aspect of Yoruba culture that demands attention, especially when one considers the greater number of lessons derivable from these.

More so, at a time when civilization and Western Education has nearly eroded the past cultural norms and values, many Yoruba children today have dumped their family names given to them and have decided to adopt foreign names that have no bearing to their origin or lineage. Many do not know how to speak or read Yoruba anymore; they have dumped their mother language for the foreign ones.

It is therefore our candid advice for parents to go back to the basis and train their children in the approved Yoruba norms and take up their responsibilities as parents in the way and manner exemplified in this chapter so as to regain their lost glory. For the society to be peaceful, cohesive and standard as we have it in the olden days, it is high time we go back to the grassroots, revive and promote the cultural values such as those that have been brought to the fore in this paper. Hence, it is not an overstatement to say that parenting and child upbringing in Yoruba culture is one of the best that could be emulated the world over.

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