

Literacy, The Reading Culture and National Development: Lessons For Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

Reading is an important aspect of nation building but the reading culture of any society depends on the level of literacy of the people. Where illiteracy is on the high side among the people, the orientation of the people to reading will be negative. This accounts for the non-reading culture of Nigerians. It is essential to increase the level of literacy of Nigerians, so as to pave the way for a positive orientation to reading. A positive orientation to reading among Nigerians is necessary for national development because reading equips one with leadership skills and enables the followers to be able to positively challenge their leaders.

Introduction

Reading entails the ability to decipher letters and its intricate structures to make meaningful wholes. Wilson and Charmers - Neubauer (1988) opined that reading entails the processing of information in written and printed materials to be able to make meaning out of the printed materials. To Unoh (1991), reading is a complex language processing behaviour that entails interpreting or getting meaning from written or printed materials. Jegede (1991) was of the view that the relationship between reading and thinking for the non-literate is either non-existent or not a reality. Reading is thus intricately woven to the literacy level of any group of individuals.

Any discourse on the reading culture of Nigerians cannot be much divorced from the literacy level of the people. Literacy has been defined as the ability to read, write and compute, and as the technology that holds the key to other technologies (Ahmed, 1992). To Laubach (1961), literacy is a set of reading and writing skills which facilitate material and spiritual development for individuals and their communities. Simply defined, literacy is the ability to read and write in any given language. Where majority of a nation's citizens cannot read or write, there cannot be much development both at the personal and national levels.

The level of literacy of any nation is closely associated with the economic power of the people involved. In Nigeria, the illiteracy level is predominantly high compared to other nations of the world. The highest rate of illiteracy is attributed to Africa with 54% illiterate adults; as compared to 30% in Asia and 17% in Latin America (Oni, 1992). Many developed nations of the world have been known to have close to one hundred percent level of literacy.

Akinpeleu (1992) observed that in Nigeria, 50% - 70% of the people are illiterate in a nation whose population is estimated at 100 million. This means, in effect that not less than 60 million of the citizens can not read nor write.

At the conference of Education Ministers in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1982, the need for African States to wipe out illiteracy in two decades was made to be a policy statement for the nations. Yet, in Nigeria, school enrolment dropped from 16.15 million in 1983 to 13.76 million in 1991. Indeed, the situation could be likened to Allagoa's (1994) description of a man who builds a monumental structure over the years, and every five or six years destroys all or essential parts of the structure to begin from the foundation. Instead of moving forward, literacy-wise, Nigeria seems to be moving backward. With about five years to go to the year 2,000 AD, what would bring the dream of Chief Eke, (the Chairman of Nigeria's National Commission for Mass Literacy that Nigeria will be free from the shackles of illiteracy that year to fruition, is yet to be known. This is a pointer that where development is concerned, Nigeria is yet to want to take-off.

This is in an age where people put less emphasis on reading and writing peers as the components of literacy, but now talk in terms of enlightenment of the mind and computer literacy. Getting to the promised land looks like a Herculean task for the nation. Yet, the development of any nation is closely related to the level of literacy of the citizens. And the literacy situation of the Nigeria people accounts for why in 34 years of independence, Nigeria has nothing cheering in her political, social, technological or economic life. The developed nations of the world place premium on literacy for their technological advancement and high level of development.

The Reading Culture Of Nigerians

A people's culture is the way of life of the people. It is a way of living, a way of doing things. It is that which people in any given society have evolved through a period of time. The high illiteracy level in the country has not made for a positive attitude among the citizens to a reading culture. When you cannot decipher a letter from another, a reading culture cannot be possible. That unfortunately is the problem facing at least half of the Nigerian population.

Moreover, among the literate population, reading is yet to attain a recreational status. To many Nigerians, reading is for those who have the time to waste. In a description of the reading culture of Nigerians, Akinlolu (1993) recalled the experience of a professor who relayed his experience abroad a plane to the effect that while all other airlines were teaching one back or the other, his fellow Nigerian

average literate Nigerian reads what he/she is 'forced' to read. He/she may try to read newspapers and magazines to know what is happening around the world. He/she may be "forced" to read papers as part of professional day to day activity. For many, anything outside the professional area will not be touched. Even students who are supposed to be widely-read may read when the exam is close and for many, the textbooks may be the beginning and the end of reading. It is not out of place to find University graduates confessing hardly reading novels for leisure. Most newspapers are like a taboo to some. Many Nigerians are therefore literate but uneducated in many respects. It is equally not out of place to find many Nigerians the few who may always find something to read. 'Bookworm', and others are the common disparaging appellation for these. Farther than find time to read, spending their leisure hours talking nonsense for hours on end in a bar or "spraying" naira notes senselessly on the head of a praise singing juju musician. But then, in a society where majority are illiterate and the "in-thing" is making money by all means, the situation cannot but be so. For, to let the people know they have "arrived" is to flaunt the money that you have and to get hailed for it. That is the culture that has evolved over the years in Nigeria. Unoh (1991) was therefore of the opinion that reading is yet to be firmly established in Nigeria. It is mainly seen as means of obtaining certificates.

Another factor for the non-reading culture of Nigerians is the high poverty level in the country, and the struggle to make ends meet. To a man or woman who is struggling to survive and get his/her basic needs met, reading for leisure cannot be part of his fundamental desires.

The poverty level of Nigerians is so high that many can barely afford their children's school fees. Such parents cannot think of buying leisure books for their wards or for themselves, since the thinking would be that such money can be for something more useful to the family. To compound the problem, all books, either school-prescribed or recreational, are on the expensive side, to make the already "reading-shy" Nigerian have a perfect excuse for not bothering himself. Thus, what one finds is that reading is for the privileged few Nigerians with money to expend, and who have interest in it. Thus, it can be said that where poverty pervades the citizens, illiteracy and a non-reading culture are inevitable.

Another factor for the non-reading culture among literate Nigerians is sheer laziness. Nigeria is a country where the people spend virtually all their time lazing about. Nigeria is a country where the people have resorted to their experience abroad a

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universities do not have well-equipped libraries or book shops. Yet, many like Akinpelu (1992) noted that development embraces all the aspirations, dreams and goals of peoples, nations and government, and that to a developing nation like Nigeria, development is expected to be transformative. He went further to note that a developed nation is one in which the citizens experience a measure of self-fulfilment, and happiness, and in which they can realistically hope and work for a better tomorrow... He also opined that if modernization of the economy and democratization of the political culture are to be meaningful, sustainable and permanent, literacy is the key. He believed that without mass literacy, the future will be worse than the present or the past for Nigeria, as the key to peace on the political and social scene is literacy. In other words, no nation can develop beyond the level of literacy of its citizens.

National Development

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Adesiesia (in Akinpelu, 1992) noted that countries which UNESCO identified as accounting for 75.25% of world's illiterates are also the poorest countries in the world, and Nigeria ranks fifty of the last nine countries. This shows that there is a correlation between poverty, literacy and level of development. For development to be a result of intellectual work and an easy facilitator of intellectual development, reading, especially at childhood.

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It is also true that the regions of mass illiteracy in the world are equally most of the regions of civil unrest, social underdevelopment, and also economic and political under-development.

In addition, illiterates find it difficult to participate meaningfully in the political, economic, social and technological advancement of their countries. Laubach (1964) was of the opinion that illiteracy is the cause of backwardness of nations and that poverty and exploitation are caused by illiteracy. It is true that nations that have had despotic leaders in times of peace have been nations with high level of illiteracy. (War period may give room for despotic leaders to cause of the peculiar situations of war). There is no doubt that literacy equips people with required skills to function effectively in their particular society and advance it forward.

Development cannot be in a literate society, for it allows people to challenge their oppressive structures and gives them ability to sustain such challenges. But where a society is illiteracy-ridden, people become helpless in the face of all odds. Literacy can be a mediating factor for the enlightenment that comes with literacy allows for development to take place in the different sectors of any society. Literacy and enlightenment make transfer of learning possible and allow for people to advance it forward.

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argued that reading serves to enlighten man intellectually, socially, aesthetically, and helps to make the unfamiliar familiar. Jenkins (1964) submitted that reading not only gives people better understanding of their culture and persons, not that it also allows for sharper listening skills in people.

Wallen (1985) believed that the goals of reading lies at the cognitive and affective levels. And, from the cognitive point of view, it is hoped that skilled readers will be encouraged to search for information would be formed while at an effective level, reading will become a tool for accomplishing ends. Emetan (1991) also was of the opinion that reading provides a bank of information which reduces ignorance thus empowering and promoting literacy and communication. He went further to elucidate that it increases vocabulary which enhances communicative skills. Reading sharpens thinking and creative imagination, expands one's scope of experience all of which enable one to be knowledgeable about other environments that one has not been to and to know others were able to develop themselves. Life histories of great leaders like J.F. Kennedy, who were able to inspire their country men /women to lofty heights revealed that reading was like their second nature and this does not allow mental poverty but paves way for a scientific mind. That therefore which people developed nations equipped themselves with, that enabled them to move nations is essentially that which Nigeria and her people lack. Reading enables leaders to help in patterning societal goals and objectives, and teach them to turn objectives into realities.

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