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Reconciling Ethnic Differences in Nigeria through Literature education: Implications for Peace and Security

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Abstract

Nigeria is a country united in diversity. It is composed of diverse ethnic nationalities all trying to assert their cultural identities. The social and political developments of recent years have succeeded in creating a big hiatus in the relationship among the various nationalities. This is manifested in the spates of altercations that have been witnessed among various ethnic groups in recent times. In the face of this dwindling unity, myriads of measures put in place by the government could not achieve much. The ignorance of another culture creates fear, distrust, animosity and a disconnection between cultures in today's society. As always, to be educated about a culture different from one's own is the key to combatting this ignorance, bridge the gap and erase the fear and disconnection in order to start the reconciliation process. It is, therefore, believed that using the option of literature education could bridge cultural gaps among the ethnic groups and thereby reduce conflicts to its barest minimum. Exposing students to literary works from different ethnic cultures has the ability to nurture respect, empathy and acceptance among all groups. The paper also highlights the implications of this for peace and security in Nigeria.

Keywords: Ethnic differences, Literature education, Peace and Security

Introduction

Nigeria is a multilingual/multicultural entity with diverse ethnic nationalities. The struggle for attention and recognition by various groups has led to spates of conflicts and tension among different groups. Although the successive governments have made efforts to promote national unity and cohesion through adoption of federal character and quota system among others, no visible progress seems to have been made in the area of achieving peace and security. Hence, the

corporate existence of Nigeria is constantly under threats. Given the seeming failure of various measures put in place by government, this paper reasons that adoption of literature education could foster mutual respect among various ethnic groups and thereby reduce tension and conflict leading to sustainable peace and security.

Literature is the foundation of life. It places an emphasis on many topics from human tragedies to tales of the ever-popular search for love. While it is physically written in words, these words come alive in the imagination of the mind, and its ability to comprehend the complexity or simplicity of the text. Literature enables people to see through the lenses of others, and sometimes even inanimate objects; therefore, it becomes a looking glass into the world as others view it. It is a journey that is inscribed in pages, and powered by the imagination of the reader. Ultimately, as concluded by Landt (2006), literature has provided a gateway to teach the reader about life experiences from even the saddest stories to the most joyful ones that will touch their hearts.

From a very young age, many are exposed to literature in the most stripped down form: picture books and simple texts that are mainly for the sole purpose of teaching the alphabet etc. Although these are not nearly as complex as an 800-page sci-fi novel, it is the first step that many take towards the literary world. Progressively, as people grow older, they explore other genres of books, ones that propel them towards curiosity of the subject, and the overall book. Reading and being given the keys to the literature world prepares individuals from an early age to discover the true importance of literature: being able to comprehend and understand situations from many perspectives (Amokeodo,2012).

Physically speaking, it is impossible to be someone else. It is impossible to switch bodies with another human being, and it is impossible to completely understand the complexity of their world. Literature, as an alternative, is the closest thing the world has to being able to understand another person whole-heartedly. For instance, a novel about a treacherous war, written in the perspective of a soldier, allows the reader to envision their memories, their pain, and their emotions without actually being that person (Evans,2010).

Consequently, literature can act as a time machine, enabling individuals to go into a specific time period of the story, into the mind and soul of the protagonist.

With the ability to see the world with a pair of fresh eyes, it triggers the reader to reflect upon their own lives. Reading a material that is relatable to the reader may teach them morals and encourage them to practice good judgement. This can be proven through public school systems, where the books that are emphasized the most tend to have a moral-teaching purpose behind the story. An example would be William Shakespeare's stories, where each one is meant to be reflective of human nature – both the good and bad. Consequently, this can promote better judgement of situations, so the reader does not find themselves in the same circumstances as perhaps those in the fiction world. Henceforth, literature is proven to not only be reflective of life, but it can also be used as a guide for the reader to follow and practice good judgement from (Steiner, Nash and Chase, 2008).

The world today is ever-changing. Never before has life been so chaotic and challenging for all. Literature is of great importance and is studied so as to provide the ability to connect human relationships, and define what is right and what is wrong. Therefore, words are alive more than ever before (Evans, 2010).

Literature is a vital instrument for moral, social and intellectual development of the individual and society. It is a very useful tool for entertainment, relaxation and education. It is taught in Nigerian schools as Literature-in-English. Literature-in-English is one of the subjects that have helped in the actualisation of the following Nigerian philosophy of education: (a) To live in unity and harmony as one indivisible, indissoluble, democratic and sovereign nation founded on the principles of freedom and justice, and (b) To promote inter-African solidarity and world peace through understanding. (FRN, 2004; Section 1 paragraph 2). It helps students to embrace their culture and appreciate those of others. Amuta (2014) states that instruction in Literature-in-English in the secondary school system in Nigeria not only helps to know more about diversity of human cultures, it also helps to understand human nature itself. This is because the scope of the recommended texts

studied in the subject often covers works of art from different parts of Nigeria, Africa, and other Non-African countries, enabling students to get acquainted with the lifestyles, customs and cultural practices of peoples from a wide spectrum of societies.

Therefore, the study of Literature-in-English in schools offers advantages such as building social tolerance through exposure to different cultures and values across the globe. Such exposures and contacts could benefit learners by helping them to develop interest in and appreciate other people's lifestyles, customs and cultures. These, according to Ogunyinka (2011) and Amokeodo (2012), foster understanding and tolerance among peoples of different tribes, tongues and nationalities, leading to a better world and peace.

However, Nigeria remains handicapped by political and economic contradictions, social inequality and a considerable potential for violence due to the politicisation of identity (International Crisis Group, 2006) characterized by religious, ethnic and communal conflicts, insecurity, organized crime, human rights violations among others. Between 1999 till date, Nigeria experienced critical events that undermined her coexistence. Among the various ethnic groups and religions in Nigeria have arisen distrust and lack of confidence. According to Hazen & Horner (2007), Saruq (2007) and Igubor (2011), ethno-religious conflict is a major source of insecurity in Nigeria. Frequent and persistent ethnic conflicts and religious clashes between the two dominant religions (Islam and Christianity) present the country with a major security challenge. In every part of Nigeria, there exists ethno-religious conflict which according to Igubor (2011) have arisen as a result of new and particularistic forms of political consciousness and identity often associated with ethno-religious identities. As Amuta (2014) have noted, claim over scarce resources, power, land, chieftaincy, local government council, control of markets and sharia among other trivial issues have resulted in large scale killings and violence among groups in Nigeria.

The term security has been used to mean protection against or safety from a future risk of severe deprivation, injury or death and requires rules, order and impartial adjudication and application. Security

according to Achumba, Ighomereho & Akpo-Robaro (2013) refers to a situation that exists as a result of the establishment of measure for the protecting of persons, information and property against hostile persons, influences and actions. It is the existence of conditions within which people in a society can go about their normal daily activities without any threat to their lives or properties. It embraces all measures designed to protect and safeguard the citizenry and the resources of individuals, groups, businesses and the nation against sabotage or violent occurrence (Achumba et al, 2013). Security is the protection against all forms of harm whether physical, economic or psychological. It is however argued that security may not be absence of threats or security issues but the ability to rise to the challenges posed by threats with expediency and expertise. There cannot therefore be security without provision for national security.

The power of literary texts to construct sociocultural images and reflect different ways of experiencing the world has been widely acknowledged. The use of literary texts can promote reflection on cultural differences, develop understanding of the home culture, and consequently enhance more tolerant and open attitudes towards other cultures. Some authors point out the potential of fictional texts to develop critical self-awareness by engaging both students' cognitive and affective dimensions, which paves the way to intercultural awareness and understanding (Phipps and González 2004; Zacharias 2005). Such texts not only provide opportunities for developing our students' capacity for critical analysis of foreign cultures, but also for affective response when learners vicariously experience other attitudes and values. Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004), for instance, claim that cultural awareness may be achieved through experiencing the culture, either directly through visiting a culture, or indirectly through films, music or literature.

According to Thanasoulas (2010), exposure to literary texts not only helps students increase their language competence, but also helps them define and redefine their own cultural values by exploring and interpreting the assumptions and beliefs of the target culture. Furthermore, Bredella (2003: 230) contends that art contributes to self-

reflection and imaginative immersion in otherness thus fostering intercultural skills. In the same vein, Corbett (2010: 6-7) highlights the importance of using literary works and other cultural forms of expression as effective ways of enhancing tolerance for diversity and empathy; while Ghosn (2002) remarks on the potential of literature as a change agent since good literature contributes to the emotional development of the student by nurturing interpersonal and intercultural attitudes.

Although the potential of literary texts has been underestimated in the past, present methodologies have started to appreciate the advantages of using them not only promoting intercultural competence for communicative purposes but for developing cultural understanding as well to promote peaceful coexistence of various ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. Fiction would meet intercultural objectives as long as analytical and creative tasks were designed to enable students to explore different cultural perspectives and compare these to their own. In this sense, literary texts are authentic materials which may help discover culture-dependent beliefs, opinions, habits and viewpoints. Since there are many English language cultures, Pulverness (2004) strongly recommends teachers to use texts and materials which relate to more than one English-speaking culture and to avoid conveying the impression that they are focusing only on British or American culture. While Cai (2002) proposes different views on how to use multicultural literature to help students to vicariously experience crossing cultural borders, some research have proven that multicultural stories induce empathetic responses to the experiences of the story characters (Hägglblom 2006).

Multicultural literature can then provide a wide variety of values, beliefs and different perspectives which can enrich and enlarge our students' viewpoints. Thus, the use of literary texts avoids superficial, simplified, impersonal, or artificial ways of presenting cultural content in textbooks. Literature could then replace course-book cultural materials since it is proven to be more representative of the multilingual diversity of English language and culture. Furthermore, literary texts can be used in conjunction with new methodological

innovations to facilitate intercultural learning processes within different contexts, as well as to complement other sources of information.

Literary experiences can foster peace. Students are introduced to critical thinking, problem solving and peace making strategies. It aids them in developing a range of skills, including research, mapping, dialogue, debate, role playing, creative writing and informed analysis. A variety of strategies like role-playing, story-telling, game playing, humour, mnemonics and metaphors are encouraged. Aesthetic literary programmes, interdisciplinary experiences, social\effective education, ecological and social responsibility, literary ,cultural contents for learning are appreciated.

The need to employ sustainable practices which emphasise self-awareness, awareness of others, conflict resolution, problem-solving, global awareness and appreciation of arts of science are stressed. Skills and strategies of problem solving, conflict resolution and peace making can be learnt through well-organised and frequent exposure to literature. Solving problems peacefully through the use of activities such as roleplaying, modeling, reading, writing, publishing stories with conflict and peace themes, brain storming, doing group projects with peace themes and group discussions are appreciated(Steiner, Nash and Chase,2008).

Peace education is enhanced by a comfortable stress free classroom environment and by literature – based, creative-arts, compassion-building and conflict resolution. The teacher is the key element in creating the environment and modeling. Displaying posters, conducting project works, expanding children's global awareness, teaching conflict resolution, modeling how to use it when a problem becomes evident, clipping articles from the newspapers are all advisable. Setting up solidarity camps that brings together children of different cultural groups for recreational activities, sports activities that build character and promote a spirit of teamwork, cooperation and sportsmanship, media awareness to reduce violence and increase the peace – content in radio and television programmes, magazines focusing on peace themes, using dance, drama ,songs to educate the community on peace values puppetry and animation to popularize the values of fairness, non-

violence and social harmony, participation in role plays, dramas ,composing peace poems, peace songs, participation in various days observed internationally such as Human Rights Day, United Nations Day, Environment Day etc. are to be promoted.

Literature serves as a powerful tool in enabling students to gain a better understanding of both their own culture and the cultures of others. Through this deeper knowledge, relationships can be strengthened, bridging the gap between students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Hseu & Hetzel, 2000). As students of the 21st century are global participants, it is important that they possess cultural sensitivity. Through extensive research, Norton (2009) discovered that when students can relate global events to the themes, conflicts and characterisations found in multicultural literature, it helps them to better understand current world issues. Students therefore develop greater cognitive skills as they learn to engage with and critically evaluate the texts that they read.

Evans (2010) conducted a research using a range of multicultural picture books. Her aim was to determine whether student perspectives on diversity and the acceptance of others altered once they were exposed to multicultural texts. Evans concluded that exposure to multicultural literature increased students' awareness of the various social practices, values and belief systems of other cultures. Literature fosters positive self-esteem and prevents students from feeling isolated. It has the ability to nurture respect, empathy and acceptance among all students (Steiner et al, 2008). *Whoever You Are* is an older publication that illustrates perfectly how literature can promote unity among different cultures. The story highlights the fact that all children feel the same emotions no matter where they live in the world, what language they speak, or how they look. It suggests that although people have many differences, there are common traits that unite them.

Literature promotes the interaction of children across differing ethnic backgrounds (Steiner et al., 2008). Stories portraying cultural diversity can foster the belief that race is not a barrier, but rather a contribution to the beauty of our multicultural world. This ideal is portrayed in Kobald's *My Two Blankets* (2014). A young girl named

Cartwheel relocates to a westernised country to escape the war that is occurring in her homeland. She feels lost and lonely until she meets a young girl in the park. Over time their friendship develops and the young girl helps Cartwheel to understand her new world.

Literature can help students develop global awareness by introducing them to current cultural issues. When students vicariously experience the feelings and emotions of others through literature, they are encouraged to look critically at the world and gain a greater understanding of the global community (Monobe & Son, 2014).

Literature reveals the hardships that refugees often experience when seeking a place of safety. They allow students to reflect upon and critically analyse the issue of asylum seekers and the idea of a fairer community. John Marsden portrays the above issues in a unique and thought-provoking manner in his book *Home and Away* (2008). This compelling story is about a typical Australian family who must flee their country when it is ravaged by war. This story presents a complete role reversal, as it is Australians who are being displaced. This text forces students to think critically and consider global issues from a different perspective. It encourages identity formation. Multicultural literature can also assist students with their identity formation (Hseu & Hetzel, 2000). Identity formation is important in the social development of all children, as it gives them a sense of belonging and acceptance in society. When students see themselves reflected in the pages of literature, they are more likely to engage with a text. Familiar concepts in multicultural literature help to build security, familiarity, and confidence, which can lead to an improvement in student's learning (Agosto, 2007).

Conclusion and Recommendation

It has been established in this paper that the ignorance of another culture creates fear, distrust, animosity and a disconnection between cultures in today's society. As always, to be educated about a culture different from one's own is the key to combatting this ignorance, bridge the gap and erase the fear and disconnection in order to start the reconciliation process. It is, therefore, believed that using the option of

literature education could bridge cultural gaps among the ethnic groups and thereby reduce conflicts to its barest minimum. Exposing students to literary works from different ethnic cultures has the ability to nurture respect, empathy and acceptance among all groups. Consequently, irrespective of career orientation, Nigerian students should be made to read novels from diverse cultural backgrounds as a way of promoting their intercultural competence and peaceful coexistence among different ethnic groups in the country.

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