
SOCIETY, MEDIA AND CHARACTER- FORMATION: A FOCUS ON THE NIGERIAN YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines and categorizes certain influences often encountered by today's Nigerian youths and which have also helped to largely affect their decisions and actions. These youths are logically innocent but also highly impressionable as they readily get excited over experiences that are potentially adventurous. They have an innate desire to explore and conquer challenges, and whatever seems to fascinate them in this regard easily wins them over. The study establishes that the Nigerian youths are victims of circumstances, as they have emerged as products of inimical environmental factors which have wrongly shaped their universal worldview. The study therefore proposes a great and consistent measure of adult supervision over the affairs of the youth. It also recommends governments' censorship of media contents in order to curb the flagrant influence of such, and float programmes which will occupy and or engage the youths in meaningful vocations. Above all, the study submits that the vehicle of the theatre art could also be explored in order to detract and refocus the effort and attention of these young minds.

INTRODUCTION

A great number of factors contribute to many indelible imprints in the lives of today's youth. Foremost, is the fact that human thoughts when not checked become words. Words when not checked become actions and actions if not checked become habits. When habits go unchecked they form character which ultimately results in destiny. The youths tend to have a natural inclination to the quest for knowledge, and fun. They are also vulnerable and highly susceptible to things with potential for adventure. This propensity for adventure inadvertently tends to strengthen their vulnerability, whereby making them easy prey for certain lures. In this essay, effort will be made to try to identify some of those common influences which largely help to shape the universal worldview of the Nigerian youth. Specific examples shall be drawn, on random basis, from African countries and other countries of the world. Lastly, a horde of specific influences which readily appeal to the psyche of an average Nigerian youth shall also be buttressed.

Societal Values and their Impact on the Youth

Habits or lifestyles permitted by a given society usually go a long way towards determining the feedback from the respective class of people within the same society. The youth of today are no different as they helplessly dance to the tune played by their environment. Among prevalent societal cultures in given environments is what one might refer to as the sub-cultures. The youth of every society have their sub-cultures which are attendant reflections of the general potential of that society. Though theirs, many a time, is an exaggerated

version of the existing culture, it no doubt, still portends the basic ingredients of the influence of the mother culture. If today the youths in Iraq are given to suicide bombing and a near-genocide attitude, it will only smack of a society that is perfumed by an unflinching quest for religious violence. If today the youths in the United States of America are given to shooting and killing one another in high schools and colleges, or committing suicide by self-shooting, it will simply lend voice to the general picture of America being a gun-carrying society. And if on the other hand the mention of the youths of Africa readily rakes up the impression of advanced fee fraud (Obtaining By Tricks, found in Section 4, sub-section 19 '419' of the Nigerian Constitution), internet scam, bloated presence of ethnic militia groups, kidnapping, political thuggery, armed-robbery, oil bunkering, hired assassinations and petty thievery, it will only be suggestive of the continent as a chaotic society where perhaps the governments are confused, corrupt and have probably lost control of rulership. When a society upholds lofty values and insists on conformity to those, though it may not go down well with everybody at first, its impact, however, stands to be felt over time. The youths of Africa have mostly been influenced by the trends of indigenous as well as imported cultures. While some may adopt a conservative and patriotic attitude to their cultural influences, most youths of today tend to imbibe the trends of foreign cultures. Nigerian youths, and their counterparts in some other neighbouring African countries, such as South Africa, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Cameroun, and a few others, tend to find more attractive the dictates of the western culture. It is very common today to find African females dress up in tight-fitting trousers or very revealing and sometimes, short dresses and often fleshed out with complimentary inflections, just to impress a false image of a 'been to', a phrase often associated, especially in Nigeria, with people who have been to other countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Their male counterparts also take to smoking and gang lifestyles, which hitherto, were alien to the typical, indigenous African youth culture. On a general scale, however, one will not fail to observe that today's society wields a universal negative influence on the youth and this greatly poses some fear for their future. Matthew Fox argues thus:

I believe that our civilization, far from honoring our youth and celebrating them, consumes and devours them....In this failure to honour our children and the child within lies one of the most critical dangers of our epoch—and, ironically, one of the most powerful sources of global renaissance ((because) in fifteen years... over 50 percent of the human race will be under fifteen years of age (qtd. in Davis 1).

The world need not lose sight of the fact that today's rulers and leaders of various governments of the world were yesterday's youths, so that what we see them manifest today are only tell-tale of the impact of yesterday's society on them. If we are therefore, not impressed by what we see in the general picture, effort should be made to buff up and or impress very positive and noble values in our youths, knowing full well that the holy bible would encourage parents to inculcate noble values in their children so that when they grow up their characters will be consistent with those established standards (Prov. 22:6).

The Poor Influence of the Family on the Youth

Charity they say begins at home. The family is one unit which wields a great amount of influence over a child. Many of the characters displayed by children are often such as were displayed by a child's mother or father, or other siblings. The child is given to imitation even as Aristotle would opine that the same is primordial to man. This therefore, means that the character manifested by a parent before a child can go a very long way in determining their perception to life in general. It also goes to state that the child can be influenced by the level of relationship that exists between his or her parents. If therefore, the parents of any child express much love for each other, it will send a message to the child, the same way as when parents are given to bickering, quarrelling and fighting before their children; that also will automatically inspire them to view such as normal in relationships.

Poor role-Modeling

Ironically many a home today has failed to inspire in the child the ideal relational influence for healthy co-existence in life. This has not only affected the child as a single individual, it has also affected the wider society in a very disturbing manner. A number of youths who smoke today testify that their first cigarette was given to them by their father, and over time they probably graduated from smoking cigarette to smoking something else. The relationship between a number of parents these days is better described as a 'cat-and-mouse' relationship. Such parents fight all the time and often cannot resist the use of abusive language before their children. And this chaotic situation in a number of such marriages leaves them no option but to head for divorce and sad enough majority of such couples have children who stand to be affected, in one way or the other, by the impact of separation.

Child-Abuse

Some children are also victims of incestual relationships from fathers or mothers whose lives have probably been given over to the impairing influence of alcohol and hard drugs. The impact of this usually follows such children through their adult lives and tends to affect their judgment of the opposite sex in a very irrational and often detrimental way. Many end up as psychiatric cases until such a time as they are able to receive assistance through medical or spiritual means.

Use of Abusive Language by some Parents

A number of parents readily use abusive words on their children. Some use such expressions as "You are a blockhead", "You are a never-do-well", "You will never amount to anything good", and so on, when they feel disappointed by their child's behaviour. Some parents go ahead to compare their children to others in the neighbourhood and hardly bother to commend them when they succeed, thereby making them feel that there is nothing new about their achievement. The result of this is a lowering of self-esteem on the part of the children, as they are inclined to see themselves as potential failures in life.

The truth of the matter, therefore, is that the failure of many a youth in the Nigerian society is eloquent of the failure of many Nigerian homes.

Whereas in the Nigerian context, the issue of divorce, use of hard drugs and incestuous relationships may not be as loud amongst couples as it is with their American and other European counterparts. Their major challenge however, usually stems from poverty due to lack of well-paying jobs, this makes it difficult for many homes to afford three good meals in a day, let alone pay their rents, other bills and much less, high fees especially for their children who intend to further their education to tertiary institutions. This automatically leaves many Nigerian homes with children who are semi-literate, and who therefore, cannot afford meaningful employment due to poor academic qualification. The by-product therefore, becomes youth who cannot fend for themselves, but who make every possible effort to survive. They jump at any money-promising opportunity no matter how illegal or life-threatening. They also seize any other opportunity to vent their anger on the society that has denied them some of the basic necessities of life. Craig Higson-Smith observed that "Young people develop many strategies to cope with the pain of their past experiences and the reality of their current situations. Some are effective, and others are ultimately destructive" (*International Perspective on Youth Conflict and Development*. Higson-Smith 189). Violence for many becomes a ready means of expression, that today the world is fighting so hard to grapple with what has been generally tagged "The Youth Crisis" (Davis N. 31).

Unwholesome Treatment of the Youth by Religious Institutions

The Africa of today knows so much proliferation of religion and religious bodies than none other in the history of times. The innumerable presence of these ought to gladden one's heart especially when one considers that the bulk of the teachings and or sermons should be focused on morals. Sadly enough a number of these religions spend so much time trying to assert their superiority over others that they hardly have time for the youth of the society. They only think of them in terms of the lost of the world and do not make much visible effort to promote or better still, moderate their interests. The church for instance, really does not have much room for the youth. Mark H. S. III , a youth minister, writes in his co-authored book *Four Views of Youth Ministry and the Church*, as he recounts a certain experience he had shortly after he was sent to go serve as the minister to the youth wing of a certain church in the Sun Belt. He observes:

The ministry opportunities appeared endless. The resources were plentiful.

Their tradition of youth ministry was well established. But there was something missing. I returned home and agonized over a decision for weeks. I could not put my finger on the missing piece. And it was during a mile-and-a-half walk one Sunday evening, in quiet and prayer, that the missing piece became brilliantly clear. This nationally known church did not see young people as a vital part of the church. Both involve a clash of cultures (ix).

In church circles in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, there is hardly a positive view of the word "Girl friend", and that is because the church has impressed a bias in the minds of most persons that all such levels of interaction or relationship, could never be without some lewd acts or fornication. Some churches would discourage the presence of any youth-populated activity wing such as choir or drama groups; instead it will encourage older ones to constitute

such groups. This sometimes works, and at other times it does not, as such groups would really require a great amount of vigour which the youth are greatly endowed with, in order to succeed. For some other religions the useful vocation they make available to their youths is the fomenting of religious violence. Islam for one has the word "Jihad" which in English is represented by the phrase "Holy war", as its inspiration for religious violence and killings of those classified as infidels. In Iraq, today daily news is filled with incidences of suicide bombings by certain Islamic sects, and the ready tools for these obnoxious violent acts are the youths whose lives, as it were, deserve to be wasted. The same indoctrination was extended to a Nigerian youth Abdul Muttalab, who attempted to bomb a United States-bound aircraft on the 25th day of December, 2009. In his work titled "Towards a political history of youth in Muslim northern Nigeria 1750-2000", Murray L., writing on the segment 'Youth Activism', opined thus:

On at least three occasions ... in what is now northern Nigeria youths have collectively acted as the transformative element in society. I am sure there were earlier occasions, but the evidence is less detailed. There will have been occasions, too, when action by youths was defeated or aborted before it grew powerful; some of these are known but the details remain obscure. The first of these 'power inversions' was the Sokoto *jihad* which was fought across a series of emirates between 1804 and 1808. In this *jihad*, there were two distinct sets of young men involved: those under the spiritual leadership of a Shaikh (the title used for a serious Muslim scholar ca. 40 years old or more); these were mainly his own professional students and young converts to Islam (often runaway slaves) who took refuge around him. Such students were not armed nor trained in weaponry and were meant to be (used for) war, like a 'caste' (qtd. in Abbink 4).

The activities of these youths have not seized as the events in the recent past in Nigeria, which recorded the killings of hundreds of Christians and the burning of churches in Bauchi, Jos, Kaduna, and most recently, Kano, through the blinding zeal of an Islamic sect (popularly referred to as Boko Haram), all portray the fact that these Islamic youths are anything but resting on their oars.

The Overwhelming Influence of the Media on the Nigerian Youth

If there is any aspect of today's society that can boast of a great wealth of influence on the general public, that would be the media. This influence is felt in no greater measure in any other class of the society than among the youth. The youth of Nigeria have so graciously embraced, in a great measure, the alluring fantasies of western media. For the purpose of lucid expression, each of such outstanding influences shall be discussed under certain sub-headings below, and their levels of impact also rated accordingly.

The Television

The overwhelming influence of the television on Africa's youth can never be overstated. The name 'the Devil's box' has actually evolved from attempts by some to find the right phrase to describe its perceived amount of negative influence. From highly suggestive commercials to erotic music, to very violent movies and a lot more other dreadful programmes which daily grace the screen in many unsuspecting homes. Indeed, one of the trademarks of the television for which it is widely criticized is its promotion of highly suggestive commercials, otherwise referred to as advertisements. The common choice for majority of television advertisements are sleek and irresistibly sexy models, whose presence sometimes leaves one wondering at the relationship between the product being advertised and the persons chosen for the advert. It is common knowledge that alcoholic beverages, for instance, are consumed mainly by men. But when one considers the adverts for Star lager beer and Guinness Stout, to mention just a few, by Nigerian breweries, and the level of opposite sex involvement in those adverts, it simply sends the message of elegance and physique than it does that of the quality of the drink itself. Besides the alluring effect created with those models on the opposite sex, it can also, as Victor Strasburger and Barbara W. put it, "temporarily affect self-esteem and even body image, especially among girls who are encouraged to evaluate themselves" (*Children Adolescents and the Media* 60). Hayes, C.D. posits that "Television programming and advertizing in general provide young people with lots of clues about how to be sexy, but they provide little information about how to be sexually responsible" (*Risking the future: Adolescent Sexuality, Pregnancy and Childbearing* 91).

Today, the presence and affordability of satellite television and cable networks have made such music channels as MTV and Channel O on DSTV, Trace Tropical on MY TV Africa, and their like, to be very regular features in most African homes. "And the youths in many such homes may spend as many as 2 hours a day watching it" (Sun, S.W., & Lull, J.115-125).

The swinging hips, the near-nude or skimpy attires, and the generally provoking appearances of the mainly female artistes "displayed as sex objects" (Signorielli, McLeod, and Healy 91-101), usually send very erotic messages to helpless male youths who feel tickled by all the displays and the persuasive power of the images. Some of these youths might be aroused sexually, by the end of the day, and may not resist the temptation to force an opposite sex to bed, especially where the opportunity presents itself. Writing on the subject of 'Sexuality and the Media', Victor Strasburger and Barbara Wilson, observed thus:

Media have become one of the most important sources for sexual information for young people today. Yet what they view on television and in the movies is almost counterproductive to healthy adolescence: frequent premarital sex and sex between unmarried partners, talk about infidelity on talk shows, graphic jokes and innuendos in the movies, rape myths, and sexual violence (187).

Also on the list of achievements of the television, is its recurrent advertisement of violence and or aggressive acts. Dave Grossman and Gloria Degaetano have defined violence as "the intentional use of force to harm a human being or an animal.", "Its outcome" they continued, "is injury—physical or psychological, fatal or non fatal" (*Stop Teaching our Kids to Kill* 121).

Much of television violence comes through movies. A political scientist was once quoted as asserting on a TV programme that "by the age of fourteen, every young North American will have seen at least fourteen thousand killings on screen: by machine guns, bombs, grenades, exploding bridges—this is standard fare for the majority of Hollywood films...." (Boal Augusto 299). In most of such movies violence is usually portrayed as a means of achieving solution to issues or conflicts, and thereby being suggested as "a highly effective form of behaviour" (Cater D. & Strickland S. 29). But the reality of it all is that "any form of aggression on the screen has the potential to make children (or viewers) more aggressive. The more graphic and horrific the violence, the more likely the negative effects..." (Grossman D. and Degaetano G., 122). The impact of violent or aggressive programming on television might not be immediate but when a child continues to view it on a regular basis, such a child will begin to see violent behaviour as very normal in life, and the risk factor in some violent activities begins to be played down upon. In their work titled *Video Violence and Children*, Geoffrey, B. & Alison, H. observe:

Long-term exposure to television violence increases substantially the degree to which adolescent boys engage in serious violence themselves. The serious violence that is increased by television tends to be unskilled and spontaneous in character ...exposure to constant scenes of violence may blunt the emotions and sensibilities of the viewer, so that he comes to accept violence as commonplace' (13).

The point being made, however, is that there is a causal relationship between television violence and real life violence. Many a child or youth tends to be emotionally involved with their television heroes, and that inclination has a tendency to temper one's opinion and judgment, and to therefore make one helplessly perceive and or rationalize in favour of one's television hero's actions, even if violent. And as time goes on they may also in assumed worship, begin to emulate their actions not minding the fact that the act demonstrated on the television screen, was merely a display of some rehearsed and edited events, some of which might have been exaggerated to justify the statement being made with them. Finally, "...the violence that is...revealed over television is not mediated by a mother's voice, is not modified to suit the child, is not governed by any theory of child development. It is there because television requires material that comes in inexhaustible variety. It is also there because television directs everything to everyone at the same time, which is to say, television cannot keep secrets of any kind. This results in the impossibility of protecting children from the fullest and harshest disclosure of unrelenting violence" (Alan E. 222).

The Magazine

The magazine is a seeming innocent form of media but that is only when one successfully resists the temptation to flip through its pages. A good number of magazines today contain images which are better confined to the eyes of adults, but unfortunately majority of them find their way into the hands of the youth. Though the magazine may not be a motion form of medium like the television and some others, the graphic images on the pages of most magazines in recent times speak equal volumes in impact factor.

A number of magazines start their alluring influence from the cover page where they usually have on display, semi-nude pictures of models, and those who regularly fall victim to those obscene photos are male youths, who often begin to fantasize over the images. Persistent viewing of such images wields the ability to make the youth want to practice some of the inspirations suggested in the pages. Also on the other hand, is the fact that there are some magazines that are solely devoted to explicit, obscene and pornographic postures. Many a youth, for fear of public criticism, buy and hide to feed their eyes and fantasies off the pages of such magazines, and there is of course no limiting the extent to which such youths can go to express the fire for sexual gratification usually ignited by those pages. "By age 15, 92% males, 84% females have seen/read *Playgirl/boy* (average age begins 13.5). And about 92% ages 13-15 report having seen X-rated film" (Brown, D. and Bryant, J. 3-24). Days are gone when one has to attain a certain age to have access to certain classified adult information, as the proliferation of the news media has lent great justification to the present period being referred to as 'the information age'.

Violent Video Games

One of the major preoccupations of an average African youth today is the playing of video games. A number of youths hardly find time to engage in constructive mind-building activities such as reading or studying to build up their intellect, but they can spend endless hours playing video games. Some of them can go without food to play these games especially since the games are often very user-friendly and are mostly developed with the youth in mind. "Violent video games are popular with male and female children, adolescents, and adults. They have been successfully marketed to youth and are easily obtained regardless of age" (Gentile et al. 3). The games are usually very realistic and easy to play, often causing a lot of excitement to the players, and that in spite of the fact that majority are shoot-out games enmeshed in deep-seated violence. "We are raising generations of children who learn at a very early age to associate horrific violence with pleasure and excitement –a dangerous association for a civilized society" (qtd. in Grossman and Degaetano 3). One remarkable thing about playing violent video games is that it tends to make an active participant of the player. And "...whereas before the children were just 'passive' receivers of screen violence, with video games they push the button, click the mouse, and pull the trigger to initiate the carnage and killing" (13). Sad enough, a number of parents do not bother to check up on their children, at least to monitor and possibly censor the rating of what they engage in. Some of them see it as being unnecessarily nosy, but unfortunately they are the ones who lose in the end when their children begin to exhibit some of the violent traits they picked up from the games and or constitute a threat to society. Some youths also get emotionally attached to their hero-characters of the games and sometimes go into depression when their characters lose or fail in contests.

The Internet

The internet, which should be a very welcome boost in communication technology, has, among other things, proved to be a great source of concern particularly as it affects the youth of the African society. Because of the huge amount of uncensored information which it

affords, the youths tend to be exposed to some harmful and unhealthy influences which they can quietly source on the computer or secretly browse on their mobile phones. "Search engines, such as Google, allow the user to type in words and word combinations that ask the computer to search for almost any sexual content" (309). All they need do is type in the word or phrase and there it will come just at the snap of the finger. "Most sexually explicit adult sites merely indicate that the site (a) contains sexually explicit pictures, (b) may be offensive to users, and (c) the user must be at least 18 years of age; if not, the user is supposed to exit the site immediately. Needless to say, a high percentage of sexually curious adolescents, and even children, will simply click their mouse and indicate that they are of age and enter the adult site. Once within one of these sites, the user can link into other similar sites offering samples of pictures, text, and video of a 'hard-core' sexual nature" (309). Oftentimes such level of uncensored information proves to be grossly distracting to the youth as it tends to fire up an overdose of fantasy which, if unchecked, can develop into disturbing desires, habits, and unpleasant consequences such as rape, unwanted pregnancies, single parenthood, and so many other unwelcome anti-social developments. The nature and or design of the internet can be said to possess what Cheon, Hongsik John has described as "a double-edged sword characteristic". For, besides the few negative reasons stated above, it is also a source of hate sites, isolation, predators, and commercialism (*Children's exposure to negative Internet content: effects of family context*. Web).

On the positive side of the internet is the fact that whereas one may wish to write it off based on the horde of negative reasons already stated, the internet is highly commendable in its extensive usability as it also provides significant benefits for children, such as research access, socialization, entertainment, and a communication tool with families. It is however, absolutely needful that parents develop interest in their children's use of the internet, and if possible they should also educate them on the dangers and unhealthy potentials of the same in order that they may be fully aware of the implications of browsing certain websites for, 'to be forewarned is to be forearmed'. Finally, it may be true to assume that media violence is not likely to turn an otherwise well-behaved child into a 'violent criminal'. "But just as every cigarette one smokes increases a little bit the likelihood of a lung tumor someday, every violent show one watches increases just a little bit the likelihood of behaving more aggressively in some situation" (qtd. in Strasburger and Wilson 73).

The Theatre as an Alternative Medium for Youth Zest

The vehicle of the theatre could be explored in order to detract and refocus the effort and attention of these young minds. A new form of theatre need be developed which will have the youths as its primary focus; it should be a galvanizing theatre which will be highly interactive and run by the youths themselves, as they try to suggest better alternatives to a number of the issues that directly affect them. In this regard, the theatre of the Brazilian practitioner, August Boal offers an ideal pattern for this kind of theatre; the format of his Forum Theatre is considerably friendly and easily adaptive. The Forum format engages, on an equal note, both performers and audience members in an interactive (theatre) routine primarily aimed at conflict resolution. The youth of Nigeria presently have an image which is

anything but commendable. This medium if embraced could be a welcome alternative to the distracting influence of media, the internet, etcetera, on them. The environment of Forum will create a conducive atmosphere where issues which bother on the youths' lived experiences, could be given critical attention and action sought for immediate remedy. When this theatre is explored and fully harnessed, it surely stands to write a new chapter in the history of the Nigerian youth.

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to examine and categorize certain influences often encountered by today's Nigerian youths and which have also helped to largely affect their decisions and actions. The youths are logically innocent but also highly impressionable as they readily get excited over experiences that are potentially adventurous. They have an innate desire to explore and conquer challenges, and whatever seems to fascinate them in this regard easily wins them over. The study has also been able to establish that the Nigerian youths are victims of circumstances, as they have emerged as products of inimical environmental factors which have wrongly shaped their universal worldview. One would therefore propose a great and consistent dosage of adult supervision over the affairs of the youth. Governments should censor media contents and float programmes which will occupy and or engage the youths in meaningful vocations. Above all, the vehicle of the theatre has been proffered as a possible alternative to the distracting influence of media and the internet, as they have proven to wield a horde of mitigating influences on the youth of the country.

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