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## The Place of Television Drama in Promoting National Identity in Nigeria

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### Abstract

*National identity is generally understood to be the shared identity of the naturalized inhabitants of a particular nation. These include traditions, culture, language and politics that can be learned subconsciously. While the idea of national identity maybe commonplace, the many perspectives of acquiring it may not be as obvious. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore the place of television drama in enhancing these aspects of learning through television drama performances. Using the social identity theory by John Turner and Henri Tajfel that, "a person's sense of who they are depends on the groups to which they belong", the paper qualitatively examines five (5) Nigerian television drama programmes for their unique indigenous contents. The findings reveal that television drama, indeed plays crucial roles in the promotion of national identity in Nigeria especially in terms of tradition, culture, language and politics. We conclude that television drama should be highly embraced by theatre and media practitioners as one of the major ways of promoting national identity.*

**Keywords:** Nigeria, National identity, Television drama, Tradition and culture, language, politics and social comparism.

### Introduction

Television drama is often considered as an essential part in the promotion of national identity. Benedict Anderson in his concept of imagined community states that:

The nation is an imagined community and national identity a construction assembled through symbols and rituals in relation to territorial and administrative categories. National

identities are intrinsically connected to, and constituted by, forms communication (1).

An imagined community such as a nation, according to Anderson, intrinsically connected to communication processes. Thus, it was the mechanized production and commodification of books and newspapers, the rise of print capitalism that allowed vernacular languages to be standardized and disseminated. This provided the conditions for the creation of a national consciousness. The mechanization of printing and its commercial dissemination fixes a vernacular language as the national language and in so doing made a new imagined national community possible. Communication facilitates not just the construction of a common language but also a common recognition of time.

Over the years, television drama has played a crucial role in the cultural life of nations the world over, and the way in which it depicts national identities merit scholarly exploration. In United States of America (USA) for instance, television drama has clearly worked and still working with some very specific cultural-historical reference points that are unique to the USA; and of course each successive drama further reinforces the sense of that material as indigenous and distinctive (Andrew Higson, 358). On the other hand, a British television drama seems British because it works with distinctively British material that is; it reproduces what we already recognize as British cultural traditions. British television drama seems British drama because it is not French, Irish or America, since it is different from television drama from other national dramas (Higson, 358).

Since “the birth of the Nigerian state in 1914” (Kirk-Greene, 1973), the question of forging a national identity among the over Two Hundred and Fifty (250) ethnic groups that make up the state has engaged Nigerians. Television drama has remained an integral part of national identity. The concept of national identity is seriously manifesting through television drama’s relationship with indigenous languages, traditions, politics, and cultural identity. The focus of this paper, therefore, is on how television drama contributes to the development and reshaping of such identity with particular reference to selected Nigerian television drama.

### **What is National Identity?**

The term national identity has been defined in various ways. National identity is about belonging to a community, a place, a homeland as well as recognizing as familiar the established indigenous cultural traditions of that homeland and community. According to Wikipedia Encyclopedia, national identity is a person’s identity or sense of belonging to one state or to one nation as a cohesive whole, as represented by distinctive traditions, culture, language and politics (en.m.wikipedia.org.). Rupert Emerson in his book, *From Empire to Nation* (1960) defines national identity as “a body of people who feel that they are a nation” (7). It is bound up in a process of inclusion and exclusion-who is to be included as Nigerian and who is to be excluded as not Nigerian.

To Anthony D. Smith, national identity refers to a person's identity and sense of belonging to one state or the nation; a feeling one shares with a group of people, regardless of one's citizenship status (1). On his part, M. Guibernaum describes national identity as a collective sentiment among certain people derived from the belief of belonging to the same nation and of sharing most of the attributes unique to the nation. Smith further proposes three functions of national identity which includes:

- National identity provides a satisfying answer to the fear of personal oblivion, through identification with a nation.
- National identity offers personal renewal and dignity by becoming part of a political "super family"
- National identity enables the realization of feeling of fraternity, especially through the use of symbols and ceremony (7).
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In addition, one other important way in which national identity is imagined is in terms of difference. The national identity of the subjects of a particular nation are at this level understood not in terms of their own internal history, but in terms of their difference from others, outside the national borders.

#### **What is Television drama?**

Television drama is any content produced for broadcast via over-the-air, satellite, cable, or internet and typically viewed on a television set, excluding breaking news, advertisements, or trailers that are typically placed between shows. (www.bbc.co.uk). It is a live drama performance broadcast from the television studio or, later, put on the tape. Lanre Bamidele defines television drama as "visual literature for which corresponding standard and evaluation from the sphere of literary and theatre studies are being applied (40). Similarly, Richard Peterson opines, "television drama has been seen as both a mirror and a window to the society it represents in all its diversity (136). Therefore, television drama can be seen as a movie that has theatrical elements and is filmed especially to be shown on television with a view of solving specific problems or issues. One of such issues is the promotion of national identity. In other words, television drama is seen as an image language that can exert influence on the promotion of national identity.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is anchored on the Social Identity theory originated by British Social psychologists John Turner and Henri Tajfel in 1979. The theory proposes that "a people's sense of who they are depends on the groups to which they belong". That the groups (family, social class or nation), which people belonged to were an important source of pride and self-esteem. Invariably, groups give a sense of social identity to members, a sense of belonging to a social world. Most times, in order to enhance self-image, people increase the status of the group to which they belong. This also goes to say that individuals can also increase self-image by discriminating and holding prejudiced views against the 'out group' (the

group they do not belong to). Therefore, the world is divided broadly between “them” and “us”, based on the process of social categorization, also known as the “in- group” (us) and the “out-group” (them). The social identification theory states that, the in- group will discriminate against the out-group to enhance the self-image. The central thesis of this theory is that, group members of an in-group will seek to find negative aspects of an out-group, thus enhancing their perception. In line with this theory, if the media keeps making suggestion of “in-group” or “out-group” inclinations in their reports, documentaries and presentations, the questing steering national identity by the media will remain a wish.

### **Nigerian National Identity**

National identity is different from both ethnicity and nationality and could be based on many things including, for example, culture, language or ancestry or family history. Therefore, national identity reflects how an individual chooses to classify himself. Thus, one can easily identify himself/herself with other proud Nigerians abroad.

As a collective phenomenon, national identity can arise as a direct result of the presence of elements from the common points in people’s daily lives. In Nigeria, apart from the National Anthem and National Pledge which all citizens must respect by standing at attention when singing and reciting them in any occasion, there are others national identity elements such as national symbols like (the coat of arms), and then languages, the nation’s history, national consciousness, and cultural artifacts. These symbols and elements prove that members of the Nigerian society belong together. Undoubtedly, television drama facilitates these togetherness to the fullest. This is attributed to Television’s powerful roles of education, information and of course entertainment.

### **Television Drama and National Identity**

It is a truism that television drama and national identity are closely related. Television drama plays a major role in influencing the culture and society, as it serves as a primary source of information, entertainment and education. In most African countries, television drama acts as an instrument for transmitting cultural values and shaping public opinion. In the words of Collins, “television drama is seen as a very powerful way of framing and encouraging nations of national identity and therefore, national political identity (2002). Television drama is usually created to reflect various aspect of culture such as language, history, traditions, politics, music, dance, food, arts, craft, religion, and politics. Late Jamaican reggae legend, Bob Marley in his music *Buffalo Soldier* puts it this way, “if you know your history, you will know where you are coming from”. An example of television drama based on history is South African *Shaka Zulu*, written by William Faure and Joshua Sinclair in 10 Episodes for the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) in 1986 about the warrior- King Shaka of the Zulu people of South Africa. Another South African television series, *Queen Sono*, which was commissioned on April 28, 2020 addresses

contemporary apartheid and crime problems in Africa. Other television dramas titled, *Generations* and *The Legacy*, created and produced by Mfundu Vundlain South African advertising industry follow the passing down of wealth and knowledge from generation to generation in a South African family, rife with intrigue, betrayal, strife and family conflicts.

In Kenya, the *MTV Shuga*, a television series, was on broadcast from 2019 as an initiative by the Kenyan government and the USA's PERPFAR to address young people's sexual and reproductive lifestyles, especially the spread of HIV in Kenya. The episodes were written in English, and also translated in Kenyan indigenous languages. On African Magic television, *Tinsel*, with over 1000 episodes, written by two Nollywood writers- Victor Olaitan and Odyssey has been one of the most popular and successful television drama based on African cultures in the recent times. Coming back home, Wale Adenuga's *Super Story* television drama, first aired on WAP TV in 2001, still remains a family favourite. Episodes tell different stories that end with a moral lesson and apart from WAP TV, the drama can also be watched on Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), and YouTube. *Super Story* promotes Nigerian historical background, culture, traditions, moral values, Pidgin English and indigenous languages, amongst others.

In Africa, the past six decades has recorded an accelerated use of Pidgin English and other indigenous languages in the broadcast media of which television drama is not an exemption. This is done deliberately since the media have institutional power to use and promote indigenous languages within their environment of operation. Adedigba Mukaila and Shehu Haruna have noted that: "The use of Hausa as a language of national and international broadcast has positively affected its prestige, growth and development and the loyalty given it" (32). Similarly Ben Elugbe observes that "the use of nine major Nigerian major languages such as Edo, Efik, Fulfulde, Hausa Igbo, Izo, Kanuri, Tiv and Yoruba in the national broadcast media led to the development of such languages by the Federal Ministry of Education" (41). These are few examples of showing the place of the media in the development of indigenous languages to promote national identity. Undoubtedly, the use of the above mentioned languages is prominent in contemporary Nollywood, thus, enhancing the Nigerian national identity. National identity in the views of Mavesera is "The ability of indigenous languages to express knowledge and technology beyond their traditional socio-geographic boundaries". (2011). Language use in Nigerian television drama has indeed turned around the fortunes of indigenous languages.

### **Nigerian Television Drama and National Identity**

The main focus of this study is the relationship between television drama and national identity, with particular emphasis on one of the most popular black African nations, Nigeria. Like any other nation, Nigerian television drama has constantly played significant roles in forming and consolidating ethnic and national identity. It helps viewers to know their cultural origin. Below are some

of the Nigerian television drama series that have promoted national identity since the inception of television in Nigeria to contemporary era:

### **Tales by Moonlight**

Tales by Moonlight created by Victoria Eze-Okoli first made its debut on the NTA in 1983 and it is still being produced on NTA. It is a 30 minutes children's television drama that showcases traditional African folklore such as proverbs, myths, stories, and riddles. African fables play an essential role in instilling character and values such as integrity, honesty, and courage in children and young people. The television drama is meant to ensure our nation unique cultural identity is not lost. Tales by Moonlight which encompasses elements such as humour, mysteries, games, illustrations, animations, demonstrations, amongst others, represents actual traditional diverse Nigerian cultures such as: Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Tiv, Izon, Efik, Kanuri, etc, and the drama is based on different ethnic groups in Nigeria. In those days, *Tales by Moonlight* was superior to every other programme on TV, especially among children viewers. During the good old days, and even in the contemporary, after dinner, the little children gather around the elders to hear some of the stories about legends, kings, gods and goddesses. Tales by Moon light aired every 6:30PM on Sundays on NTA is a replica of the traditional way of storytelling. In Nigeria society, tales always generate understanding and harmonious co-existence among groups.

Jacob Ioraa clarifies the organic process that typifies this unique programme:

In Tales by Moonlight, stories are carefully selected and dramatized in such a way that they provide not only entertainment but moral education of the Nigerian children...The presentation of Tales by Moonlight is basically in three stages. The first stage is the story telling session where we find the narrator (Auntie) and the children sitting cross-legged on semi-circle. Their ages range from 5-15, singing in Yoruba folksong. The auntie may ask any child to narrate the story The illusion created here is the tradition African open fair storytelling, story session under the moonlight....The second stage is the dramatization of the story....The third and final stage is the evaluation stage. The narrator (Teacher)ask participating children questions and positive responses are usually given (pp. 178-179).

Episodes of Tales by Moonlight have featured on NTA since 1983. Some of the dramas include: Why the Tortoise Has No Hair, Vegetable Child, The Proud Beauty, Feminine in the Animal Kingdom, The Stubborn Child, The Dog and the Tortoise, The Grateful Stranger, The Missing Necklace, Chinda, Omoike and the Animals, The Two Wives of Piakum, The Covetous King, The Disobedience Child, The Braggart, Chika the Orphan, The Impatient Wife and Bayo, and The Greedy Man. Others include The Blessed Child, The Coni-Man, The Broken Promise, Too Old to Rule, The Soft Spoken Girl, The Proud Asari, The Selfish Old Woman, Udi Made a Wrong Choice, The Wise Discovery, and The Lucky Hunter.

Tales by Moonlight is children folkloric drama programme that narrates traditional African folkloric. Just like other African dramas, Tales by Moonlight dwells on so many themes. For instance, the theme of *Why the Tortoise Has No Hair*, is "greed". It stresses that where there is greed, one is bound to land himself/herself to dangerous consequences. In the drama titled, *Vegetable Child*, the theme centers on "anger" and "pride"; that anger can sometimes make us do some careless things and that pride may often lead us into serious trouble. *The Proud Beauty* also based its theme on "pride"- that where there is pride, there will always be a fall. In *Famine in the Animal Kingdom*, "greediness" is the theme- that Tortoise is greedy as he does not want to share what he has with someone else. The theme of *The Stubborn Child* is "Stubbornness", and in *The Dog and the Tortoise*, the theme is that- it pays to be wise. The moral themes and lessons of *Tales by Moonlight* on NTA gives moral lessons to the participants. This, to some extent has promoted culture and traditions of the Nigeria national identity.

### **The Village Headmaster**

*The Village Headmaster* is another Nigerian Television series created by Olusegun Olusola and produced by Chief Dejumolu Lewis. The TV drama series was Nigeria's longest running television drama on NTA from 1968 to 1984. It was a 45 minutes Episodic TV drama presented in English, Yoruba and Nigerian Pidgin. The second series of TV drama ran from 1985 to 1991. The drama stars Justus Esiri and Femi Robinson often spoke proverbs and crack jokes while telling their stories mostly folklore. The Village Headmaster was set in the fictitious Yoruba village of Oja, with plot lines dealing with social problems and effect of government policies in Oja. The music of the TV drama was composed by Kehinde Okusanya, and was done with a Gong and several Talking Drums. It became a tool for social engineering and societal building. The TV drama reflected our Nigeria traditions, values, and ethics. The village Headmaster was not just a mere TV drama series, but an engineering force that was used as a tool to criticise political mismanagement, comment on social problems, question culture, debate religious matters, examine economic society, assist educational programmes, assist health efforts, raise people awareness about conservation, and help solve traditions, values, and ethics.

*The Village Headmaster* TV drama did not only focus on the Nigerian culture, the drama was on a mission to help develop Nigerian languages and communication skills. It encouraged children to cooperate and helped the young to understand the world around them. One of the TV drama Series titled, *No Vacuum*, and many others projected Nigeria national identity, be it culture, language, tradition, politics, religion, amongst others. The Village Headmaster ruled the nation's airwaves for more than two decades, promoting national unity and through its diverse characters, proffered many solutions to educational, social, and political solutions. The TV drama is responsible for coining several terms now part of Nigerian culture. For instance, "Amebo" which is used to refer to rumormongers, "Gorimapa" which is a common name for follicly-challenged

men, and "Okoro" used to describe Igbo stereotypes. *The Village Headmaster* happened to be one of the longest series to run on Nigerian Television.

### **New Masquerade (Zebrudaya)**

The *New Masquerade* is an offshoot of *Masquerade* initially done on radio before moving to TV. *New Masquerade* happened to be one of the most iconic TV shows in Nigerian history. It was then, famously known as Chief Zebrudaya, alias 4:30. Chief Zebrudaya played prominent role in the popular sitcom comedy based on the Nigerian cultural values, languages, storytelling, and political ideologies. Late James Iroha (Giringori Akabogu), who also acted in the drama was the creator and writer of the TV series drama. The TV drama was taken beyond the shore of Nigeria such as: Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cameroon, America, London, England. The *Masquerade* or *New Masquerade* was a TV drama with unique identity and it is a replica of the Nigerian Society. According to Richard Ajah:

The episodic representations, although full of caricatures and facial qualities, express serious disillusionment, becoming an indictment of the post-colonial Nigeria. The sense and science of humour in *The New Masquerade* are informed by its post-colonial linguistic appropriation. The language of the soap is full of heterolinguistic permutations, modifications, transfigurations and total transgressions of conventional English structures, recreated and manipulated with local parlances and dialects as raw material for the service of the viewing masses (1).

It becomes crystal clear that, Chief Zebrudaya English is not a sign of destruction of the original Standard English language as critics' purport, rather a deconstruction that produces a post-colonial linguistics particularly that oscillates between Standard English, Nigerian Pidgin and Igbo dialect.

### **Jagua**

Jagua is another comic TV series on NTA in the 1980's. Afolabi Afolayan was the creator of the TV drama, and became popular for his role as TV drama star, Jagua. During the introduction of the drama, they usually sing this song:

My Bele O!, My Head O!  
My Belle O!, My Head O!  
My Belle O!, My Head O!

The Jagua TV drama promoted Nigerian cultural heritage through storytelling, language, and use of songs. One of Jagua's most popular TV drama was "Bobo", a comedy that featured Clarus, Giringori, Porinpopo, Jide Kosoko and some other clowns in it. One interesting episode in that drama is where Jaguar stole some money and the money had a spell to it and his hands got glued together and the money was blown under the bed by wind. The owner of the money then asked for the money:



**Mr. A:** Jaguar wa de moni  
**Jaguar:** Look am for ground  
**Mr. A:** Jaguar I saywa de moni  
**Jagua:** Look am for ground

And it went on and on till the end. Undoubtedly, the TV drama portrays elements of Nigerian national identity, be it songs, spoken Pidgin and vernacular, storytelling among others.

### **Papa Ajasco and Company**

Papa Ajasco was created by Wale Adenuga in 1996. It was one of the popular drama programmes on NTA, in those days. Popular characters in the drama include Papa Ajasco, Mama Ajasco, Boy Alinco, Pa James, and Miss Pepeye. The drama was a re-enactment of some aspects of Nigerian traditions, culture like use of language, proverbs, cultural values, religion, and moral values, amongst other. Wale Adenuga owned TV- *Ojigbijigbi!* The theme song lyrics for *Papa Ajasco* TV drama goes like this:

Papa Ajasco and company,  
Manufactured by Wale Adenuga production  
Nigeria's number one  
Humour merchant is the best medicine.

The story revolves around Ajasco family and their comedic interpretations to major societal issues in Nigeria.

Based on the theme song, it can be deduced that, Papa Ajasco is TV drama meant for the Nigerian viewers. Elements of cultural/national identity is captured in the use of dress. In Papa Ajasco, TV drama, dedication to music and cultural growth is quite pronounced. Many followers or viewers of Papa Ajasco TV drama describe him as a typical Nigerian humorous actor and musician. His contribution towards Nigeria national identity is enormous.

### **Super Story**

Super Story is another of Wale Adenuga's TV drama production. Like Papa Ajasco and Company, the drama projects culture and moral values aimed at proffering solutions to social issues. The theme song lyrics goes like this:

It is a Super Story, a life of strife and sorrows  
It is a Super Story of good food and houses  
Where the fish drown or even die of thirst  
It is a Super Story, a life of precious stones and good taste  
It's a Super Story, this is Super Story! This is Super Story!

Elements of national identity are seen clearly in Super Story's TV drama like: *Evil Genius*, *More than a Friend*, *Because you Loved me*, and *Nnenna*. The use of Pidgin English and occasional use of Nigerian languages, use of costumes of

different ethnicity, storytelling, and emphasis on songs, are some of the aspects of Nigerian national identity.

### **What Part Do Television Drama Play in Promoting Particular Ideas of National Identity?**

Based on our discussion of some Nigerian television drama and national identity, it is crystal clear that television drama can play a significant role in enhancing national identity by showcasing the rich cultural heritage of Nigeria. This can help to strengthen a sense of national pride and identity, especially in a country such as ours with diverse cultures and population. In other words, TV drama can serve as a powerful tool for promoting understanding and tolerance of different cultures. Television drama has the ability to reach a large audience and present different cultures in positive light. Television drama can promote indigenous languages and culture through the production and broadcast of cultural programmes in local languages. For instance, the popular Yoruba language soap opera *Ireti* produced by Wale Adenuga production has been on air since 2005 and has gained a vast audience across Nigeria and beyond. Similarly, the Hausa language TV drama programme *Dadin Kowe* produced by NTA has become a favourite among Hausa speakers and has been praised for its ability to promote the Hausa language and culture. Television has also been used to promote indigenous music, dance and drama. An example of this is the popular music talent show "Project Fame" produced by Ultima Limited has become a platform for young Nigerians singers to showcase their talents while promoting Nigerian music and culture. Television drama played a significant role in promoting and preservation of indigenous languages.

### **What Part Do Television Drama Play in Helping us to Learn How to be Nigerians?**

The Nigerian television drama has its roots in traditional storytelling, music and dance, reflecting the country's cultural heritage. Learning through television is not just limited to news broadcast, but also through other social and cultural programmes such as drama, music and dance. Nigeria is a country that is rich in culture which are scattered over its landscapes. From its numerous languages, music types, unique dress styles, to marriage rites, artefacts and cultural monuments, the country has been blessed with culture. These cultural manifestations have, however, come under threat from foreign television programmes, exerting great pressure on the cultural appreciation of people in the society. Culture is of vital essence to any human society in the sense that it conveys the extent at which certain ways of doing things have come to stabilize over a period of time. The need to promote, protect, and sustain the country's indigenous cultural values are of great importance if Nigeria hopes to prevent them from being washed away. The future of Nigeria based on the promotion of national identity depends much on television drama. Much of the Nigerian culture and other aspects of national identity over the years are learned through television drama.

### **What Part Do Television Drama Play in Developing of Nationality?**

Television drama like other entertainment industry such as film, music has contributed significantly in the development of nationality especially in terms of economic contribution. Here are some of the major economic contributions of television drama to Nigerian nationality:

- (i) Television drama has created direct and indirect employment opportunities to millions of Nigerians.
- (ii) Television drama has made significant contributions to the economy of Nigeria.
- (iii) Television drama has diversified its genre, producing programmes that tell Nigerian stories and provide commentary on social issues and politics.
- (iv) Television drama has been a traditional form of entertainment, it has now evolved to include digital broadcasting. It is growing rapidly, with more youths becoming interested in it.

### **Conclusion**

In the era of globalization in which much emphasis is being paid on national identity and cultural sustainability the world over, all hands must be on deck to enhance this possibility. Undoubtedly, television drama has played and continue to play significant roles in the promotion of national identity in Nigeria. If we believe in John Turner and Henri Tajfel Social Identification Theory, we then accept the need why, as citizens of the Nigeria community, we must embrace television drama's educative, informative and entertainment powerful roles in the promotion of national identity. Nigeria national identity and culture must not be abandoned.

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