

The Humanities and the Challenges of National Development in Nigeria: A Literary Perspective

Akachi T. Ezeigbo
Department of English
University of Lagos

Abstract

This paper explores and evaluates the challenges that face the humanities in Nigeria from a literary perspective. It highlights the contributions of the humanities, especially literature, to the development of human, socio-cultural and economic resources of Nigeria. It concludes that in view of the fundamental importance and relevance of the humanities to national development, the Nigerian government should fund the humanistic disciplines adequately to equip them well enough to meet the challenges facing them in the 21st century. (Abstracted on www.ajol.org)

The emphasis on Science and Technology and on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) makes it imperative that a new strategy or approach to studying and applying the Humanities must be found for them to continue to be relevant in the 21st century. I begin this essay by examining the derivatives of the word ‘humanity’ (in the plural form ‘humanities’). ‘Humanity’ is derived from the Latin word ‘humanitas’ while ‘human’ is derived from the word ‘humanus’. When we think of ‘humanity’ certain attributes immediately come to mind:

- (a) Humans considered as a group; the human race.
- (b) The condition or quality of being human.
- (c) The quality of being humane; benevolence.
- (d) A humane characteristic, attribute, or act.

(See definition of humanities:

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/humanities>)

It is the concept of 'humanity' that gave rise to the branch of learning known as the humanities. "The humanities are about people: how people create the world they live in; how the world they live in makes them the people they are". In the West, the study of the humanities was first introduced in ancient Greece, as a basis of a broad education for citizens. Then, during the period of Roman Civilization, the idea of the seven liberal arts evolved and was expressed in the teaching of grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. These were the main subjects studied in the medieval period. During the Renaissance, the humanities evolved and became subjects to be studied rather than practised, and emphasis shifted from its traditional conception into new areas such as literature and history. With time, especially in the 20th century, more and more areas have been incorporated into the discipline of the humanities.

Today, the fields include archaeology, anthropology, religion, ethics, history, language and linguistics, literature, fine and applied arts, media arts, music, jurisprudence, philosophy, political science, psychology, etc. The humanities are stories, the ideas and the words that help us make sense of our lives and our world. As fields of study, the humanities privilege analysis and exchange of ideas in contrast to the quantitative explanation that the sciences privilege. Each field of the humanities focuses on a specific area of knowledge. For examples, history, anthropology, archaeology and political science study human social, political, and cultural development. Literature, language and linguistics explore how we communicate, including how our ideas and thoughts on the human experience are expressed and interpreted. Philosophy, ethics and comparative religion consider ideas about the meaning of life (existence) and the reasons for our thoughts and actions. Jurisprudence examines the values and principles which inform our laws while historical, critical and theoretical approaches to the arts reflect upon, and analyze the creative process. Other disciplines in the humanities have their special and indispensable contributions to national development. Indeed, the truth is that without the humanities, it would be impossible to study other subjects.

Development in the sense in which we conceive it in this paper is the gradual growth of a people and a society, so that they become better, more advanced, leading to an unfolding of the potentialities of the individuals in that society. As Steve Ogude (16-17) remarked, there are two factors to be considered when development is being discussed: the human factor and the physical, non-human factor. The non-human factor refers to natural resources (mineral oil, solid mineral, etc.) and infrastructure – the basic systems and structures that a society or country needs in order to work properly, such as roads, communication, power and banking systems. Development can take place when people are in a position to exploit the natural resources they have in order to provide infrastructure. The point is that the human factor is indispensable in development, for a people properly educated and socialized drive development as a matter of course. For a country to develop, the citizens must be ‘equipped’ with a sound, well-grounded and balanced humanities and science education right from the primary to the secondary and tertiary levels, as some of us were fortunate to have had between the 1950s and 1970s before ‘oil’ blighted and doomed our beloved country and our sensibilities. Many people have expressed misgivings as to whether our educational system as it is today is in a position to produce the calibre of manpower required to develop Nigeria. Ayo Banjo rightly observed in a keynote lecture he delivered at the Faculty of Arts Conference at the University of Lagos in 2004 that much criticism has been expressed about the adequacy of the course contents in the various disciplines in our university system – especially in the humanities – and “their efficacy in bringing about the kind of human development that is expected of them” (8). Later in this talk, I will make suggestions as to how the humanities can face the challenge of contributing meaningfully to national development.

With the rise of the natural and physical sciences and the development of technology in the industrialized world and even to some extent in the developing world, the invisibility of the humanities became rather pronounced and its marginalization a fait accompli. In Nigeria, the Humanities are marginalized in

the curriculum. For instance literature is not given prominent focus in the primary or secondary school system, as is done in the United Kingdom. Worse still, history has been totally removed from primary as well as secondary school curriculum in Nigeria. I consider this a misfortune, indeed a disaster! The humanities are not only devalued and starved of funds, but also derided and vilified. I remember clearly, in my secondary school days, in the East, those of us who studied arts subjects at the Higher School level were the butt of cruel jokes made by our science-inclined classmates. We were labelled as “those who studied Igbo/Igbo/BK”. What a calamity: people (young women) deliberately denying their identity by running their own language down – the Igbo language! Without being aware of it, they were denying their identity. Our governments have equally shown little respect for the humanities. There is no endowment for the humanities or the arts. There has been a drastic reduction in the number of candidates admitted in the humanities in favour of science (40% to 60%). Moreover, the Federal Government’s effort to achieve the so-called Transfer of Technology which has been in the pipeline since Adam and Eve contributed to the privileging of science and the downgrading of the humanities; the indigenous languages are neglected and are dying gradually as fewer and fewer people speak or write them nowadays; literature has lost steam as a school subject and our children hardly read anymore. Any wonder the standard of education has fallen drastically and students even in the university can hardly express themselves correctly in English or communicate at all in the language that is supposed to be the lingua franca of Nigeria. This parlous state is experienced in all of the fields in the humanities.

As many humanists lament the huge gap in the attention given to the two fields of knowledge – science and the humanities, some people have tried to justify the unequal treatment by pointing out that the humanities offer little direct benefit to taxpayers. It is often argued that at best humanistic study, on principle, offers diffused or indirect benefits contrary to science whose benefits are so direct and pervasive. No amount of eloquent defenses of the humanities can counter the force of

these and other robust arguments. Generally, the humanities have suffered neglect and even abandonment in Nigeria. Unfortunately, policy makers forget that the humanities, more than the other disciplines, engage fundamental areas of knowledge on which all the other fields of knowledge build or from which they take off. Can one really develop science and technology without building on the foundation laid by the humanities?

The symbiotic relationship between science and the humanities has never been in doubt. The focus of this paper is not to compare the two fields or recount what each owes the other. However, there is no harm in mentioning, in passing, a few ways in which they are mutually dependent. The burgeoning film industry in Nigeria (Nollywood) is a striking illustration of how the humanities and science and technology are engaged in a meaningful partnership. As Emmanuel Babalola reminded us, “The theatre relies on technological apparatus to ensure the production of an evening entertainment for the delight of playgoers; and culture or ‘civilization’ affects, in one way or another, the development of both literature and technology” (13). Today, in the 21st century, great literary works of art are stored in electronic devices rather than on paper alone, just as pedagogy was greatly improved by application of recent scientific and technological inventions like white board, power point gadgets and laptop computers.

Let us refocus on the proper role of the humanities as a discipline. Informing all work in the humanities is the question of the human, as we highlighted earlier in this paper. Without doubt, the proper study of mankind is man; this statement underscores the centrality of the humanities in the curriculum. We look to the humanities to provide knowledge about human culture, human imagination, human capacities, and heritage. It is the duty of humanists to interpret human experience or creative activity. No duty could be more fundamental, especially in a democratic society composed, in principle, of reflective, self-aware citizens capable both of commitment to shared goals and the invaluable activities of dissent and critique. The humanities have a lot to contribute to the process of democratization in a

country. There should be no doubt in our mind or in the mind of our leaders that such a fundamental field of knowledge as the humanities must not be trifled with or taken for granted. The Igbo people say that if a child throws his father up, the loin cloth of his father will cover his eyes. Nigeria stands to reap manifold benefits if the humanities are properly taught and if they are fully exploited for the purpose of national development.

In the remaining pages of this paper, we will do two main things. The first is to examine the past contributions of the humanities to development in Nigeria as well as review the areas in which they have failed to meet the challenges of nation-building and the consequences. Secondly, I will suggest ways through which the Humanities can face squarely the challenges of contributing meaningfully to the development of Nigeria in the 21st century. Since my area of specialization is literature, I should be forgiven for drawing my practical illustrations and theoretical postulations from this field. I have no doubt that other speakers who are experts will engage the historical, religious, philosophical and other perspectives. However, whenever it is necessary, I refer to other disciplines to make enrich the discourse.

When we look at the crop of humanities graduates produced at the University College, Ibadan in the 1950s and 1960s, and their enviable achievements in their chosen fields, we are not in doubt that they received the best liberal arts (humanities) education possible anywhere. Some of them became top literary artists and scholars, historians, philosophers, theologians, etc. These men and women were the products of excellent secondary schools headed by committed humanists and Christian missionaries, and taught by teachers trained in the best tradition of humanist education. The men and women we are referring to here include Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinks, J.P. Clark, Chukwuemeka Ike, Flora Nwapa, Mabel Segun, Ken Saro-Wiwa, John Munonye and Nkem Nwankwo (literary artists) and Kenneth Dike, F. Ade Ajayi, Obaro Ikime (historians) to mention just a few. The landscape of Nigerian literature, for instance, changed with the writing of some of these icons who are yet to be surpassed in excellence by subsequent

generations. The same trend is observable in other disciplines. Some of these people wrote books in their areas of expertise that laid the foundation for the study of the relevant subjects under which they wrote. Wole Soyinka won the Nobel Prize and Achebe is today the best known and most widely read African writer. His *Things Fall Apart*, celebrated all over the world, has been translated into more than fifty world languages and has sold in millions.

But what is the situation today? What is the quality of graduates that the humanities are ‘churning’ out from the numerous universities we have in the country today? The situation is dismal, to say the least. The problems are multiple: the quality of candidates who gain admission to the universities is quite poor (some of the candidates are barely literate); there are few lecturers who can be said to be really qualified or trained well enough to teach at this level; the student population is too large to be controlled for satisfactory instruction; the libraries are poorly equipped and reference books and textbooks are hardly available; the proliferation of sandwich and part-time programmes dilute the quality of education which candidates can receive and also encourage the admission of unqualified candidates simply because they are able to pay the high fees charged for the programmes. Recently, Lanke Odogiyon, the President of Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), lamented the injury the law profession has suffered over the years because of the collapse in standards:

Look at the academia. We found out that some law faculties really do not have genuine business training lawyers. They do not have libraries and where they they do, they have no books. We also have proliferation of law faculties. And those, who during our days would not get admission, are now qualifying as lawyers. (*The Guardian*, 6)

These days, thousands of graduates of English can hardly express themselves in the language. Worse still, they

cannot speak or communicate in the indigenous languages. The result of this depressing scenario is that we end up producing what is often referred to as ‘half-baked’ graduates; people without culture or a sense of purpose or commitment in anything they do. Any wonder that we are now a nation of undisciplined, corrupt and fraudulent individuals, at all levels of our national life, even at the leadership level. Many so-called educated people in the country have no culture. Some of our campuses have beautiful physical structures, but the human products of the system are ugly and uncivilized. Ayo Banjo rightly observed that “Developing physical structures without first developing the individuals is like casting pearls before swine” (14). These people are injected into the public and private sectors of the economy with disastrous consequences. We see their handiwork, experience their lack of discipline and feel the violence they inflict upon us in the rowdiness, the chaos in public places, in our airports and inside aircrafts, in the lack of respect for law and order and elders, in the lack of courtesy one notices everywhere. We observe this evil also in criminal activities which manifest in the sponsoring of ignorant and misinformed individuals who murder in the name of religion. Bereft of all sense of decency, they replicate ugliness around them, perpetuate a culture of mediocrity and run the nation’s economy and utilities down. These are the people who turn cities into slums and highways into death traps in spite of the fact that they travel overseas regularly and see the beauty and order found everywhere in the countries they visit. These people are the products of our educational system; many of them are graduates of the humanities.

The question is how can the humanities turn things around for the better? How can they contribute to the re-education and re-orientation needed to bring about a change? We must begin in the classroom to see that a good humanist and liberal education is entrenched in our educational system, one which brings home to our people early in life the importance of civility, tolerance, accountability, discipline, law and order and temperance. The best form of liberal education the humanities must provide include: a love for beauty and order, a

determination to enthrone truth, honesty and justice above all else and a cultivation of empathy and compassion for others. It is only human beings with these qualities that can develop their country.

Since everyone in the country cannot study the humanities at the tertiary level, it is important that these qualities be inculcated in Nigerian children as early as in the primary and secondary schools. One way to achieve this is by training teachers in the best humanist tradition. The government, working closely with the faculty of humanities in the universities must strengthen the teaching of humanities at all levels of the educational system, provide opportunities to train and re-train teachers through organizing refresher courses, workshops, seminars, symposia and conferences. There is need to establish a national humanities centre – like the one in the USA – as an institute of advanced study in the humanities. Moreover an endowment in the humanities or the arts will go a long way in advancing research in the humanities for the proper development of our cultures, the understanding of our ways of life, our past and our present and future. Such an endowment would support research, education, and the preservation of our monuments and cultural heritage as well as affirm the importance of the humanities in Nigerian society. One sure way of contributing to the development of decent and rational individuals in the country by the humanities is improving teaching and learning in Nigerian history and literature and other aspects of the humanities. This can be done by increasing teacher knowledge, promoting content-specific pedagogy and enriching course content. Good libraries and textbooks must be provided.

The relatively new Nigerian Academy of Letters (NAL), a parallel organization to the Nigerian Academy of Science, should be supported by the Federal and State Governments and by the private sector of the economy in its effort to promote the humanities. The academy's recent publications should be mass reproduced and widely circulated in schools, libraries and other relevant locations for the education and enlightenment of our people. Some of these publications are *Humanity in Context* (2000), *Toward an African renaissance* (2001), *The Nigerian*

Ideal (2003) and *Public Morality and the Nigerian Polity* (2005). Another institution that deserves mention and attention is the National Institute of Nigerian Languages located in Aba. The Federal Government should provide all that the institute needs to be dynamic and effective in the promotion and development of the indigenous languages.

There are other institutions and organizations that can rightly be considered as offshoots or arms of the humanities. These include: museums, craft centres, art galleries, theatre companies and musical centres (like the famous Muson Centre in Lagos), etc. The Faculty of Humanities in Nigerian universities could provide competent human resources needed to run these institutions and organizations. These are areas that could help to generate funds, especially foreign exchange for the country which will be used to develop different sectors. For instance, well equipped and maintained museums will attract foreign visitors. Good museums need good roads and hotels. Though we seem not to be aware of this, culture is big business in many parts of the world; culture is important. It creates employment. Some people think that culture means a group of people dancing, jumping up and down and exposing large parts of their bodies. Of course, there is nothing wrong with dance or showcasing our dances, but culture is a lot more than this.

Tourism and culture are twin money spinners for many countries in the world today. African countries like Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe (especially in the past) and South Africa make a lot of money from tourists. In fact, tourism is big business in these countries. Nigeria could join the club of such tourist friendly countries. And no branch of learning can help project tourism better or create an enabling environment for tourism to flourish better than the humanities working in conjunction with government. We need to have both feet on the ground before reaching for the sky: the idea is to start small. For example, our museums could develop to become a huge tourist attraction. To develop cultural tourism is not expensive. It will be necessary to encourage inter-regional cooperation, develop good road networks. The humanities could spearhead the establishing of centres of excellence in language teaching, for

instance. There is a passionate desire on the part of our Francophone brothers and sisters (who are our neighbours) to learn English and communicate in it fluently, because of the power and influence of America and to some extent the United Kingdom. Nigeria can fill the vacuum in language teaching so that students of these West African countries (of the ECOWAS sub-region) can come and learn English here. Immense benefits could be derived from such a move. Apart from the revenue that would accrue to the country, there would be room for intercultural cooperation, good neighbourliness and great friendship and regional cohesion. Those who come here for such a programme are likely to have better impressions of Nigeria. They could get to know us better and be able to mix with the grassroots or ordinary Nigerians while they are here.

In the same vein, the cultural productions of our writers and musicians and theatre experts, the crafts of our artists, our sculpture and textiles by local producers will form a part of the things that attract tourists. Nigeria should learn from Mexico, a country that resembles Nigeria in many ways – diversity of culture, big land mass with a large population. But that is where the resemblance ends. Mexico's cultural awareness far outstrips Nigeria's. Mexico has a cultural industry that thrives well and attracts a large number of tourists each year. The Faculty of Humanities in Nigerian universities should help to ensure that Nigeria develops new ways of re-packaging and invigorating our traditional art. Many people from different parts of the country are creative, but they need outlets to exploit their creativity and make it known to the world. Our sculptures, carvings, textiles, paintings, music and books need markets inside and outside the country. Our writers are among the best in the world; they are contributing to the growth of literary productions that are changing the face of world literature. Award-winning writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ben Okri, Niyi Osundare, Femi Osofisan, Tanure Ojaide, Zaynab Alkali and Chimamanda Adichie have done the country proud and have put Nigerian literature in the world's literary hall of fame. They are among the

humanities best human ‘products’. They have contributed to Nigeria’s cultural and intellectual development.

Most of these writers use art as a means of effecting revolutionary changes in society. For instance, in *Season of Anomy* and *Madmen and Specialists*, Soyinka creates characters like Ofeyi and Demakin, and Iya Agba and Iya Mate – agents of justice who have the moral and humane spirit lost by the society through the evil machination of two oppressive regimes. The old women and the Aiyero community represent the “morally incorruptible essence from the African past which was destroyed by the intrusion of foreign, excessively materialistic and exploitative ideologies” (Okonkwo, 118). They are closely related to earth and forces of healing and regeneration. It is through them and the forces they represent that Soyinka hopes to restore to his society its moral character and humane sensibility.

The truth is that the writers’ main agenda is to ‘humanize’ a ‘dehumanized’ society. Literature entertains while it instructs. A colleague of mine once observed that “literature does save us” and he was quite right. Literature enriches our lives and enlarges our experience of life by giving us aesthetic pleasure and spiritual inspiration. I can illustrate with Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One hundred Years of Solitude* which fired my imagination and left me breathless. After reading this book and some other equally remarkable books, my life could never be the same.

Indeed, literature (like visual and plastic art) can create a love of beauty and a sense of order in the lives of our people. A work of art is “a thing of beauty” which can inspire us to strive for perfection in all we do. The great Romantic poet, John Keats wrote in Book I of his poem, “Endymion”:

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and a quiet
breathing.

...

All lovely tales that we have heard or read –
An endless fountain or immortal drink,
Pouring unto us from the heaven's brink. (106)

Like literature, other disciplines in the humanities have also produced renowned and creative individuals that have contributed to national development in their fields – music, art, history, law, philosophy, etc. I must confess that the most spiritually uplifting and aesthetically satisfying music I have ever listened to was the one I heard when I was in Inanda, South Africa, at an annual retreat of an indigenous Christian sect (affiliated to the Baptist Church) and founded by a man of God called Shembe. While listening to the music, I felt as if I was in Heaven and I told myself that if this were the kind of music the saints would hear in heaven, then I would love very much to be there to partake fully of it. Sitting in the midst of the great multitude of worshippers – men, women and children – I wondered who the composer was because I could neither see where it was coming from nor who was playing it. No explanation was given; we simply enjoyed the Heavenly music.

Such lovely thoughts and experiences are humanities' heritage; they are the fruit of an excellent liberal education that can last one a lifetime. Unfortunately, such an ennobling state of mind is lacking in the make-up of most of us Nigerians, no matter how highly educated. For, how can we explain the lack of respect our people have for beauty; how can we justify the dirt, the squalor that is found everywhere, especially in most of our cities? How can Nigerians tolerate the mountains of garbage that rise like the Kilimanjaro in all nooks and crannies of some of our cities. How can one explain our people's insensitivity which makes them indifferent to the filth around us – the filth which we created or generated in the first place?

Does it strike you that we are the most well-dressed (or is it over-dressed), flamboyant and extravagant people in Africa? At social gatherings and parties, in public places, at meetings and at our religious ceremonies, we dress elegantly, but many of our homes are filthy, our surroundings are dirty and our streets are choked by refuse. The streets are littered with waste materials

like bottles, cans and polythene bags. The truth is that most of our people lack the liberal education that should teach them the importance of ‘beauty’, the need to appreciate what is decent, beautiful and uplifting to the soul. The humanities can teach us to be decent rather than brutish, to love order rather than chaos, to cultivate good manners rather than repulsive habits. Our dream to become a developed country cannot materialize until we learn to be decent and disciplined, and to cultivate a clean environment.

In conclusion, there can be no end to the ways in which the humanities could contribute to the challenges of national development in the 21st century. The century has only just begun and the future is beckoning to intelligent and rational individuals and groups to come up with innovative ways to create comfort and peace for people and nations in the world. Nigeria must not be left behind in the race for scientific and technological progress. Recently, emphasis has been laid on science, engineering and technology in order to rectify the perceived imbalances of student numbers and manpower in these fields. This, however, should not overshadow the importance of teaching and research programmes in the humanities. There are ample opportunities for the humanities to apply relevant skills and knowledge and make valuable contributions to national development. This is a clarion call to all academics in the various disciplines in the humanities to face these challenges with a spirit of adaptation, adjustment and innovation. The societal and environmental challenges Nigeria faces in the 21st century demand that every field or discipline must reposition itself to meet these challenges. The humanities must stand up to be counted as partners in progress with science and technology. The two disciplines stand to gain from each other. Therefore, the opposition between the humanities and the sciences should fade away; the two should engage in a meaningful dialogue that will lead them to conjugal bliss, nurtured by a harmonious relationship, as they join hands to ‘move the country forward’, to take Nigeria to a higher ground.

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