

## **Television, Culture and Religion: A Discourse**

**Chukwuma Anyanwu (Phd)**

*Department Of Mass Communication, Faculty Of Social Science, Delta State University, Abraka*

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**Abstract:** *This paper focuses on the relationship between television, culture and religion. It explores how television can be of benefit to culture and religion as well as how culture and religion can be gainfully utilized by television. It also shows how the three entities, television, culture and religion can be mutually harmful to one another. It concludes on the position that the benefits and or harm accruable to each of the entities from one another are dependent on the ability of those who use them to employ them to such ends. It then makes recommendations that the government at all levels should be more proactive when issues of religion, culture and television are brought before them. That the three entities and their proponents should ensure that what goes on air is what would not hurt the society and that the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) should employ its telescopic lens when dealing with cultural and religious matters that appear on television, among others.*

**Keywords:** *Television, Culture, Religion, Violence, Broadcasting.*

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### **I. Introduction**

Television is one of the earliest electronic/broadcast media invented by man. Coming just behind radio and entering Nigeria on October, 1959, it is no longer a novelty. Seen by McLuhan as “the timid giant, and as a highly involving medium, demanding strong participation,” (Berry, 1971: 53/64); and as a family medium, Ekwuazi (1991:1); as “merely wires and lights in a box,” by Murrow cited in Brown and Quaah (1998:1) and as “an entertainer, a journalist, a teacher, and a salesman,” (Bielak, 1995:2). Television is all these, and more. It is a product and a process; it is culture; it creates culture thus it not only generates events, it also regenerates both itself and the events it generates. It is also a destroyer and a creator all dependent on the use to which the user puts it. It is a medium of communication whose audio-visual powers give it peculiar advantage over other media. Perched at a corner of the living room or bedroom, it enjoys an intimacy which even the landlord does not enjoy. And from this vantage point, it forces attention on itself, an attention that may be denied the owner of the house by both the members of the house and the guests. Television capitalizes on its merits as already noted to take advantage of the old and the young alike. It has a close affinity with the youth, teaching what the old forbid to be taught; it laughs at the old by making mockery of what they hold sacred and exposes teenagers to worlds that are quite beyond their imagination. Archie Bunker, cited in Campbell, Martin and Fabos (2009:178), once said that, “there’s about three great moments in a man’s life: when he buys a house, and a car, and anew color TV. That’s what America is all about.” Such is television.

**Culture:** The multi-dimensional nature of culture makes it both difficult and complex to define. On the other hand, it also makes it susceptible to a myriad of definitions from the different points of views, which ever definition used therefore, must serve the user’s purpose. However, irrespective of how culture is defined, what stands out is the fact that culture regenerates as well as destroys itself. This is done when people of a particular generation pass on and another takes their place. Sometimes, the generations clash as they must and so we have arguments of culture not being lived or followed. It is the unique attribute of culture that every generation must evolve a culture which is of immediate relevance to it. To make this explanation simple, try to imagine a friendship between a man of eighty years and a boy of twenty. This brings about one generation referring to the other as “Old School.” The problem is simply that one must give way even as the owners of the dying culture struggle to cling to it to the amusement of the younger generation. For instance, the present generation is made up mainly of can best be referred to as the television generation while the tales by moonlight generation is phasing off. There can be hardly a smooth flow of communication between them as each regards the other as some peculiar being.

Adefuye (1992:2) says that “culture is the whole group of characteristics that distinguish the intellectual, artistic, moral and material life of a country or society at a given moment of its history.” For Campbell, Martin and Fabos (2009), culture is made up of both the products that a society fashioned and perhaps more importantly, the processes that forge those products and reflect a culture’s diverse values”. They then go on to define culture as: “the symbols of expression that individuals, groups, and societies use to make sense of daily life and to articulate their values.” (Campbell, Martin and Fabos, 2009: 6). This definition throws

more light on the argument above. It is the inability of the younger generation to make meaning of the life style of the one before it that causes culture clash.

For Kolker (2006:172), “culture can be understood as the text of our lives, the ultimately coherent pattern of beliefs, acts, responses, and artifacts that we produce and comprehend every day. Hall (1973:30) says that “culture hides much more than it reveals and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants.” He says that culture is the silent language” and finally the cultural policy for Nigeria provides this definition of culture by saying that:

Culture is the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenges of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organization thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours. (Bello 1991:189)

The definition goes further to note that “culture comprises material, institutional, philosophical and creative aspect....culture is not merely a return to the customs of the past. It embodies the attitude of a people to the future of their traditional values faced with the demands of modern technology, which is an essential factor of development and progress.”

Following from the foregoing definitions, culture is simply, life; put in another way, culture embodies all that man employs in the course of his earthly sojourn as well as all that he leaves behind. This no doubt includes television. So, as noted earlier, television is culture and culture is television. We shall come back to this.

**Religion:** How does one begin to discuss religion? Is it from one’s personal experience of it? From watching others or try to find out what others have said about it? Perhaps, we should begin from the now axiom position of Karl Marx that religion is the opium of the masses? Or, we should rather take a look at the dictionary and begin from there? Wherever we eventually begin from, religion would still end up as a way of life of a people which reflects their moral codes and system(s) of belief. In other words, somewhere, somehow, wherever religion is mentioned, there must be a reference to a source of belief, a ritual, involving a person’s general attitude to a chosen way of life. The Oxford Dictionary Thesaurus and Wordpower Guide (2000:1088) offers a three pronged definition of religion as follows:

- The belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power especially a personal God or gods.
- A particular system of faith and worship; and
- A pursuit or interest followed with devotion

While discussing religion, Amadi (2005:1), cites Bertrand Russell, when he says: Religion is based, I think, principally and mainly upon fear. It is partly the terror of the unknown and partly, as I have said, the wish to feel that you have a kind of elder brother who will stand by you in all troubles and disputes.

On his part, Soyinka (1991:14) decries the idea of a given religion trying to make or reduce the others into nothingness. He further remarks that “violence appears to be the one constant in the histories of all major religions of the world – a primitive aggressiveness, violence – despite the lip-service which their tenets pay to the need for tolerance, peace and understanding.

When the three key words which form the topic of this paper – Television, Culture and Religion are pooled together, one sees a kind of tripartite intertwining union; a sort of trinity. It is obvious that religion too is life just as culture is life. As for television, being culture, it is also life. This of course is true because the contemporary world of today would amount to nothingness without television. Thus, television, culture and religion are the three entities which give meaning to life and to existence. Without any of them, life would amount to nothingness.

### **Television, Culture and Religion: Points of Mutual Convergence**

Television has been seen as a means or rather, a medium of communication. Its ability to create and recreate illusions of reality has engendered much discourse. Television has such powers that bring about the desire for its control. It is the most visible of the three entities under discourse. It helps to project both culture and religion. Culture and religion provide the fodder for television’s use but television takes their provision a little farther. Religion and culture serve as power bank to television, providing the best and worst of themselves for television’s enrichment. Television adds glamour and spectacle to the drabness of culture and the redundancy of religion.

Not only that, television creates its own culture from the culture that we know as well as creates its own religion. Today, television is a god to some people. It is a trader; marketing the products of culture and the scriptural offerings, of religions of every hue including its own. It is also a foster mother, taking charge of children on behalf of their natural/biological mothers, who may be too busy pursuing careers and challenging the patriarchy of men.

Television exposes peoples of every culture and brings about interaction between people who would otherwise not be aware of the existence of one another. There are today specific programmes on television which cater for the needs of every culture for instance My TV Africa has channels which show only Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa movies. Equally on DSTV, the same situation prevails. There exist African Magic Channels on the three main tribes in Nigeria. Thus, television is not only the window to the rest of the world; it exchanges worlds and brings worlds to worlds. Where the worlds are not real enough, it imposes its own world. In the same vein, there exist exclusive channels for sports and sporting events. Television is the god that football fans worship, lovers of wrestling adore, pool betters glorify and most church owners-pastors and 'men and women' of God live on. Moreover, in contemporary Nigeria, and as comedians would want us to believe, the entire alphabets in the English lexicon are represented in the names of churches. In other words, every alphabet has a name of a church attached to it. This goes to reflect the rate of proliferation of religion in our society.

Today, majority of Nigerian youths especially those in show business are more American than the Americans. They dress, act, behave and speak like Americans. For instance, in a programme which is shown on several television stations in Nigeria including Nigeria Television Authority (NTA), the participants go to America and Europe for their models. The irony is rather striking, the programme which they wrongly captioned "Nigeria Idol" focuses on discovering talents in the music world. Now, there is nothing wrong with talent hunt. But here is the problem: who is the Idol? The young man/woman who is fighting unemployment by adventuring into the programme? Is he/she the idol? Or is the idol the foreign musician (usually American) who they mime his/her song? Why search for Nigeria's idol in American/European music? Whatever happened to Nigeria's/Africa's music industry? No idol there? Even when Charles Oputa (Charly Boy) a known name in Nigeria's music industry, and a one-time president of Performing Musicians Association of Nigeria (PMAN) was present and presiding on the programme? Not a single participant felt it necessary to massage his ego by miming one of his songs. Instead, without exception, they all sing American songs. So the programme should have been captioned "American Idol in Nigeria!"

Africa has the best of musicians – Fela Anikulapo Kuti, Manu D' Bango, Tu-face Idibia, Miriam Makeba (Mama Africa), Onyeka Onwenu, Lucky Dube, Bongos Ikwue, - even Diaspora African musicians – Sade Adu, 50cent, Doctor Alban etc. are not considered by these idols in search of Idols! It makes one wonder and forced to recall the statement to the effect that if one fails to blow one's trumpet, such trumpet would get rusted. This is a self explanatory fact because no American or European would go out of his way to project an African artiste, for the joy of it.

It makes one wonder: what is really the purpose of television in Africa? Why do we have to adopt this foreign medium? Is it so we better ourselves by it or that we help propagate the neocolonialism which is divested of weapons of physical violence? Is it not to adopt the best from other cultures while letting them partake of our best so that there is mutually beneficial cultural exchange? Was it meant for other cultures to swamp our own and in the process make nothingness of it?

Ordinarily, television, which has been called teacher, entertainer, marketer, baby sitter, among other things, can be utilized effectively through conscious programming to realize the much touted re-branding of Nigeria among other noble sentiments. While watching the programme "Nigeria Idol" already mentioned, this writer experienced what Ali Marzuri (1981), meant when he was talking about nostalgia of restoration and of resignation. He particularly wished for the Nigeria of the eighties/nineties which witnessed such native grown programmes as "Mirror in the Sun", "Cockcrow at Dawn," "Second Chance," "The New Masquerade" "Basi and Company," "Behind the Cloud", "Checkmate", among others.

Television is at our service but we appear to be putting ourselves at the service of television. Its power lies mainly in the fact that the viewer sees and hears and as such is a witness to an event. But this power is highly dependent on the mediator, that is, the person who is making the choice of what is to be seen and what is to be heard. Many instances abound when in a live broadcast, especially on an opinion poll interview, where the cameraman or the producer cuts off a person because his views are either offensive or not appropriate. Thus, the programmer has the power to determine what is accessible or inaccessible. He has to utilize this position as gateman effectively, knowing the power of the viewer and the source of his belief which revolves around the audio-visual ability of the medium. He is not being asked to believe what he hears as in Radio but to believe the evidence of his own eyes. With good television, mediation is negated as the viewer has the tendency to deny the medium, substituting himself/herself for the medium via his "participation."

Television has the power to change incidents into events, it does not just exaggerate a story, as do newspapers; it can create one. Its ability to produce self generating news is plain: race riots, student protests and the like have flourished in the rich culture of publicity they have received- Critchley (cited in Berry 1971:126)

It behooves the Nigerian programme producer to harness and take advantages of television to emphasize the positive aspects of our culture and religion. This is necessary given that if they fail to do so and dwell on the so-called reality programmes and movies on account of their cheapness or audience patronage, the television by its nature will tell the stories the producers glossed over or ignored. There is no excuse, therefore,

for Nigerian programme producers who refuse to use television effectively, unless their focus is to further the work of the colonizer. The raw materials are there and so is the finance. All it requires is genuine desire to work hard and the kind of commitment which a dedicated, creatively involved person can command in himself and his staff. It is necessary to do this because the television programme producer is an unsolicited adviser to any government. He achieves this through the choice of programmes he permits to be aired. This goes beyond the theory of who pays the piper and who dictates the tone. If a tone is good, the payer would most likely have danced to the tone before he realizes that he is not the one calling for it! The deregulation of the broadcast media on August 1992 during the military-presidency of retired General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, generated an expectancy in the Nigerian viewing audience of a rich and variety laden local harvest of programmes and programming. But the reverse became the case. Instead of a media environment of programmes reminiscent of the 1980s, what we witnessed was a short court to, and a take-over of the Nigerian small screen by Indian, American, Chinese, Japanese, even Mexican soaps and films, which were probably cheaper to procure.

### **Television, Culture and Religion: A Dichotomous Relationship**

Before we go further in this discourse, it is important to note here that the religion of this subject is not the African traditional religion but the Western version of it, notably, Christianity and Islam. So, in this context television and religion can be said to be the white man, whom Achebe (1958) in *Things Fall Apart* said has put a knife on the things that hold us together, and we have fallen apart.

But, with particular reference to television, it came into Nigeria on the eve of independence, so it played no role in the colonization of Africa. However, it is designed to take up the gauntlet of the colonizer and continue from where he stopped.

It has therefore become the new weapon of imperialism. It has divested us of our culture and plundered our religion, replacing in each instance with the Whiteman's own culture and religion. Today, where our children grope and stutter in their native/mother tongues, they are all fluent in the adopted mother tongue: English language! And the first and deepest cut from both television and religion is directed at culture – the things that hold us together – through the stealing of our language(s)! And the tragedy is that we must accept responsibility for all these. The continued blame placed on the colonizer is trite and uncalled for. It can only be tenable if we say that the Whiteman provided for us the rope with which to hang ourselves. He showed us how to do it and walked away. He is no longer doing it himself, at least, not directly. He has gone underground and indirect, leaving us to finish up the work while still putting the blame on him.

It is so bad that even parents and children from the same culture converse in English at home! Next, our dressing has given way to those of television, hence of America and Europe. And to compound matters, the dresses designed for Western market, meant for their hips so to say, flood our markets and leave our women and daughters nude or semi-nude, and the men and boys are affected too! Nothing can be more disgusting than to see a young gangling youth with nothing to show as rear endowments, sagging his or her trousers and walking like a person whose feet have no heels! Our girls/daughters starve themselves bare of flesh to measure to the Western concept of beauty! One has to be skinny to be considered beautiful, all because it is the vogue. Whose vogue, whose concept of beauty are we projecting?

Where television stops, religion takes up. The violence from religion cuts across all shades and manners of the word. In a given home one could get as many as three-four different religious sects. Each pastor, each prophet or seer sees members of a given family belonging to a different religious sect as the demons, the witches and wizards that must be cast out with flaming Holy Ghost fire! Religion has now joined ranks with football and politics as the entities which break up the African/Nigerian family structure! This happens when members of a given family, whether extended or not, belong to different religious sects; different football clubs and different political parties! These are, needless to say, all inventions of the White man and each in one way or the other help to further the imperialist agenda. One is yet to hear of a foreign/Western fan club of an African Football team. Still, whenever European League Season is on, there is always an African casualty when a given European club side wins or loses a match.

Recently in a homily delivered at the St. Paul's Catholic Chapel, Delta State University, Abraka, on Sunday, the 12<sup>th</sup> of February, 2012, at the 8.00am Mass by Rev. Fr. (Dr.) J. M. Ikeke, he declared that "there are many things fundamentally wrong with African culture... It is barbaric... when a man dies, they force the wife to drink the water used to bathe his body... they engage in female genital mutilation..." among other things.

Yet he had begun by making reference to the fact that the Jews of old were discriminatory of women. In fact, they regarded women as sub-humans, as the weaker sex." The point here is that religion and television project a one-sided view most of the time. Just as advertisers present a one sided view of their products, even so do religion and television present a one sided view of their messages without balancing the argument.

The Reverend gentleman did not tell his congregation the reason(s) for such actions as he mentioned, nor that they are being phased out where they still obtain. He failed to recognize that there was Europe/America that burned people at the stake on allegations of witchcraft. He did not take consideration of the barbaric manner

and crude method of hanging a man on the cross and watching him to die; and setting guards on his tomb! Above all, even the most civilized society in the world today began in crude, uncultured way. In other words, from its primordial origin, every culture is barbaric. In *The Credo of Being and Nothingness*, Soyinka (1991) refers to a passage he had written earlier in his book, *Myth, Literature, and the African World*. According to him:

And our collective strategy must be that wherever any religion parades or enlarges itself through the tactics of denigrating autochthonous values, or indeed, obstructing the very search by others for truth, we then remind the purveyors of such aggressive “truths” of their own historic errors, contradictions, and human diminutions. It is our duty to remind them of the horrors they have inflicted on other peoples, of their costly spasms of intolerance, some of which continue, even till today. Africa must remain the elephant of history; her memory should be accounted legendary because she has much to remember. Her scars are not just part of her general history; each scar is labeled, catalogued, and visible ( Soyinka, 1991:19).

Soyinka goes further to say “let all religions therefore call their proselytizers to order, or, we, whose temper of piety is by nature the most quiescent, will call them on this continent to strict accounting.”

The above submission is insightful. The determination of the reverend gentlemen, pastors and priests alike to run down and subjugate African culture is unfortunate. One would expect that they should focus on the need to extract the good in our culture and mix it with the good in other cultures. Or, at least, encourage the modification of certain aspects of our culture since not all in it is bad.

Again, where religion stops, television takes up. Television is even worse since it helps religion to further its course by tormenting us right inside our homes. The irony of it all is that those aspects of the western culture like kissing, necking, exposure of vital parts or near nudity which some parents prohibit their children from doing, are brought into the home by the same parents via Television. Thus, the effect of television on culture is far worse than that of religion even though both are in fact aspects of neocolonialism. It is as a consequence of television’s pervasiveness in projecting the good and the bad that care must be taken in packaging its programmes.

It is important that broadcasters collectively address their role in furtherance to national goals and development within the context of a vibrant industry considering the evolving nature of broadcasting in terms of style and technology. (Kareen, 2006:16).

Both television and religion are aspects of culture even if by mere association. By virtue of acculturation and social interaction, television and religion form part of a people’s culture. So, when we say culture is dynamic, it is this dynamism that has enabled it to assimilate these foreign innovations. Ironically, it is this liberal nature of culture that has made it prone to attack by television and religion and this does not need to be so.

## **II. Conclusion**

Man’s invention like television is made to serve man. It should be employed for the betterment of society. It then becomes a problem when either out of ignorance or unnecessary desire to imitate and copy alien methods and manners, man fails to utilize his own invention and does not put it to good use. Religion should on its part be a unifying force which its proponents claim it to be. The three entities which form the topic of this discourse can work together. All it needs is the ability of those who use them to employ them accordingly.

For instance, television in all its programmes, whether consciously chosen or not must showcase culture. It becomes an added gain, therefore, when deliberate efforts are made to use it to showcase the positive aspects of a people’s culture. Inasmuch as the need to project reality or the truth or fact should guide the broadcaster, the fact remains that reality, truth or fact are all relative issues in television. It all depends on both the point of view of the programme director/producer and his choice of camera angles/lens. As Head and Sterling (1982:3) have noted while citing Smith, “every society has to reinvent broadcasting in its own image, as a means of containing or suppressing the geographical, political, spiritual and social dilemmas which broadcasting entails.” They added, “Smith speaks of “containing” and “suppressing” because broadcasting can be a very dangerous force, especially to governments that want to control what their citizens hear and see.”

The onus of achieving or realizing this laudable objective lies in the hands of the government, broadcast media owners, policy makers, practitioners and the entire audience. This is not a light issue given the totality of what broadcasting represents in the life of any society. This calls for urgent action from all concerned to ensure that culture where relevant should be protected and preserved before its detractors reduce it to nothingness.

On the other hand, religion, which itself is also an aspect of culture should not be used to castigate culture. If there is an aspect of culture that needs to be refined or discarded, such should be done with good reasons too. In life, there is no culture that began by being sophisticated. If anything, all cultures began by being crude, barbaric and downright unsophisticated. Examples abound in Western culture before it became civilized.

From the ancients to the contemporary times, the examples abound. The ancient Greek worship of Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility is crude, even vulgar. The Roman bullfights were barbaric; the medieval era of burning witches on the stake was obnoxious. So, there is nothing criminal in the African culture of female genital mutilation for example. What needs to be said is that such aspects of culture which are bad and which are still in practice should be discarded or modified. The essence of civilization and indeed, the major feature of any cultural growth and development is change. This is why it is said that the only thing in life that is constant is change.

But to condemn an entire culture as a result of one or two instances amounts to throwing away the child with the bath water. Thus, every stake holder in the industry – television, culture and religion, for they are all industries, should be involved in the projection of what is good in our culture first; then and only then can they remould or refine what can be refined and discard what can be discarded, while embracing the good in other cultures. The society would be better for it when we learn to be proud of what we have, prefer it to others and find joy in it because it is ours.

### **III. Recommendations**

From the foregoing discussion, it goes without saying that there is a big challenge facing the stake holders in the three industries in contention because that is what they all are. So long as they are sources of and means of livelihood as well as necessary to life, there is need to accord them a mutuality of dignity and coeval respect by all stake holders. And that is all of humanity. Following from all that has been said, it is clear that the three entities, culture, television and religion enjoy an interactive relationship that is mutually beneficial to all and sundry. The recommendations made below are designed to further enhance this interaction and benefit humanity at large.

- The various ministries and departments of culture must liaise with the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), to ensure that care is taken to screen all aspects of culture which are aired on television.
- Priests, pastors, imams, traditional spiritualists and others in the religion industry must be involved in self censorship to avoid passing incorrect information to their followers.
- All the entities discussed here have their various shades of touchiness and sensitivity; care must be taken in how they are handled by all parties.
- Television should be utilized by its owners to project what is best in the religion and culture industries for the overall well being of the society.
- The government at the various levels, local, state and national should show more interest in the activities of these industries in order to make them more societal friendly.

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### **About the Author**

**Chukwuma Anyanwu (PhD)** is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Mass Communication of the Delta State University, Abraka. His research interest covers Media and Film Studies, Public Relations and Advertising as well as Dramatic Literature and Creative Writing. He is a well rounded scholar whose academic pursuit and interest bifurcates the disciplines of Mass Communication and Theatre Arts. He has published widely in reputable academic journals across the globe as well as contributed chapters in books. He has also published in all the literary genres and his plays are being performed in University Theatres across the country.