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KNUNUOF THE GBAGYI/GBARIBEYOND THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The essence of *Knunu* ('tradition') among the Gbagyi/Gbari is examined in this work to highlight the argument that the concept transcends the idea of culture. Using the views of anthropologists in the fields of culture and missiology, this writing interacts with the opinions of such anthropologist as Clifford Geertz, Aylward Shorter, Roy Wagner and Paul Hiebert to navigate the discussions on *Knunu*. Thus, asymmetric consideration becomes necessary in our understanding of the concept from cultural perspective. It also uses thematic discussions with focus on culture to navigate engage the views of these scholars, in addition to the use of ethnography and archival materials. The discussion is compact within the entire writing.

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INTRODUCTION

Examining Culture within Knunu Perspective

Clifford Geertz (1926-2007) defines culture as

a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.¹

Geertz's perception of culture as a system of code that symbolizes the tradition of particular communities or groups² is applicable to the understanding of how burial ceremonies among Gbagyi/Gbari continue to reflect their code of tradition. This can be recognized in the central role played by the traditional funeral oration in the burial ceremony among the people, both Christians and adherents to other religions alike. For Gbagyi/Gbari, such continuation with traditional practices in modern terms seems to reflect a pattern of life in relation to the environment rather than rebellion or disloyalty to their new found religious (Christianity and Islam) faith and tradition. Hence, Gbagyi/Gbari continues to hold a strong and sometimes unconscious association between their faith (Christianity and Islam) and *Knunu*. To show how *Knunu* goes beyond a cultural assimilation for example, a number of Gbagyi/Gbari respondents expressed concern as to how they could totally alienate *Knunu* from ceremonies and festivals.

Although they are suspicious of *Knunu* practices in burial ceremony, yet Gbagyi/Gbari are unable to deal with its interminable impact. Indeed, in some respects the impression of *Knunu* confuses the ties between it and culture. As in other parts in which *Knunu* is expressed, the strength of its impulse on the Gbagyi/Gbari demands unadulterated devotion that transcends traditions. Such attitude of the Gbagyi towards *Knunu* echoes in Anthony P. Cohen's (1946-) opinion on personal, social and national identity, when he reiterates that some repetitive consistent viewpoints may profit social actors in communicating meaning either from the side of the individual or group.³

Furthermore, Geertz also observed that embodied symbols, opinions and thoughts are formed and expressed by members of a community in a way that is socially acceptable, through their attitudes and through behaviours which are guided and determined by social structures that produced the culture.⁴ Therefore, it is logical to argue that among the Gbagyi/Gbari, the use of traditional customs and behaviours goes beyond cultural production; rather, they are expressions of *Knunu* necessary for the survival of their communities. For example, the strong belief in ancestors and their power in controlling the activity of the living are embodied in the continual observance of *azabi/bera* ("burial rites") by some among Gbagyi/Gbari. The rites which introduce the grandchildren to the knowledge of their forefathers is reflected in the *amwamwa/kushi* ("masquerade"), a representative of the good spirit meant to guide, supplicate and bless the family. The

1 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 89. 2Ibid., p. 90.

3 Anthony Paul Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (New York: Routledge, 1985), p. 20 f.

4 Geertz, Op. cit., p. 91

field interviews reveal that such practice is still visibly noticed among Gbagyi/Gbari though it is done away from public view. A respondent stated that “both the Christians and Muslims will come secretly because they do not want to be seen.”⁵ IshakuBarajeDiko captures the pervasiveness of Knunu in a Gbagyi proverb, *Fanyikwo ta ma ‘za, wayidagbageowodadan* (“If the Hare gives birth to you, you cannot call an elephant your father”),⁶ to explain that the Gbagyi/Gbari is required in life to hold tenaciously to the persuasion of their forefathers. To deviate from associating with Knunu by Gbagyi/Gbari simply because they have interface with other cultures is regarded as disowning one’s father which has serious consequences. This paper does not encourage the continuation of traditional practices such as *amwamwa/kushi* among Gbagyi/Gbari. However, it argues that the concerns expressed by Gbagyi/Gbari should not be completely ignored; rather it should be addressed from an empirical and scientific pragmatic perspective.

Clifford Geertz, like Levi-Strauss proposed a theory to interpret ethnography. However, he differs from Levi-Strauss by locating his research in the richness of real life situations of a people.⁷ His theory revolves around human beings and the symbolic activities they are involved with. Thus, social actors share meaning through their actions. He drew from Ryle to say cultural systems are ideational; therefore, cultural patterns are things of the world. Cultural and social realms are distinct though interrelated: neither is a mere reflection of the other, each should be considered on its own merit. Geertz considers his view as semiotic and asserts that to study culture is to study shared codes.⁸ Hence, he observes that anthropology is better studied as a matter of interpretation. Drawing a contrast between his work and that of Levi-Strauss, Geertz affirms that interpretation is built in “thick description,” which is embedded in the contextual benevolence of social context or environment.⁹

In addition, Geertz presents his vision and practice of interpretive anthropology in comparison with developments in modern thoughts. He sees interpretive anthropology as a bridge between particularity and generalization: in regard to this paper, this would involve using local constructs such as Knunu as facts, which are brought to bear in interpreting the issue(s) in hand and the Gbagyi/Gbari context in which they emerge. Geertz argues that anthropology should shed itself of positivist, empiricist, and scientific aspirations and see its task as interpretive, reading as text the way other people construct their world and lives.

Roger M. Keesing (1935–1993) observes that Geertz’s approach entails no optimism that a cultural code can be formalized as a grammar, nor does it suffer from a Levi-Straussian glibness at decoding the linguistic structures of a subject group. Instead, for Geertz, the task of interpreting cultural texts is slow and difficult.¹⁰ Keesing, a British social anthropologist whose theory in ethnographic research is

“interpretive and explanatory,” in which he seeks to gain detailed local description and analysis in terms of actors’ own values and forms of expressions and the memories such makes for them.¹¹ Two things preoccupied his thought. First is his insistence on the need to understand the subject of his own research, the Kwaio¹² on their own terms. Second, the need to analyze their history in terms of their resistance to colonialism and its agents, and how the Kwaio reformulated their culture in historical process. Thus, the issue of a native people’s participation which is situated in Keesing’s ethnography is the concern of this paper on the Gbagyi/Gbari. Whereas Keesing argues for language to be infused with cultural meaning and stricter attention given to “surface evidence,”¹³ he fails to appropriate the fact that language in interpretation may be influenced by the interpreter and become prejudiced.

Geertz has further asserted that culture is a practice by which peoples’ behaviour is structured in their thinking, feelings, and actions. Using Gilbert Ryle’s notion of “thick description,”¹⁴ he maintained that human actions are better understood when the process that produced them are examined contextually to the extent that they are able to make meanings to an outsider.¹⁵ Thus, attention is focused on the behaviour; actions, utterances and expressions, of people from close examination. Through fieldwork, this writer observed during the burial of a Gbagyi chief the dual nature of Gbagyi/Gbari adherents of other faiths. One of the respondents told me that “in most cases, the elderly will tell what they want to be done at their death. Such elders must have lived for a long time and earn respect from their family and the community. The elderly have the right to choose how they want to be buried either in a *bokpe* (“round grave”) or *she a shinaboyini* (“normal grave”).”¹⁶ During the funeral ceremony, the researcher noticed the deep influence of Knunu reflected in the attitude of the children of the deceased chief who chose to bury their father, a titled chief, in an ancestral grave.¹⁷ Even though they are converts to one of the world religions as was their dead father, they could not resist Knunu in the burial. Their reason for doing that was to uphold the wish of their father, who had requested that he be gathered with his forebears. Through this act, the children not only expressed a strong impact of ancestral beliefs, but demonstrated that ancestral bonds continue to influence Gbagyi/Gbari adherents of other faiths when they are confronted by existential demand of *azabi/bera*. Accordingly, the action of the deceased children echoes the dilemma that challenges the Gbagyi/Gbari in respect of the overwhelming impact of Knunu.

Stephen Greenblatt (1943–)¹⁸ questioned Geertz’s use of interpretive strategies as a means for understanding complex

⁵ Respondent 4A.

⁶ IshakuBarajeDiko, *GbagyiAnyibesisi Vol. 1* (Minna: Ajiboye Printers Ltd, 1997), p. 66.

⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 6 f.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29, 36.

¹⁰ Roger M. Keesing, *Cultural Anthropology: A Contemporary Perspective* 3 ed. (Forth Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998 (1976)), pp. 18, 32–33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 7 & 44.

¹² The Kwaio were a group of people of the Solomon Islands whom Keesing studied throughout his life career.

¹³ Roger M. Keesing, “Exotic Readings of Cultural Texts,” *Current Anthropology* Vol. 30. No. 4 (August – October, 1989), pp. 459 – 479. 462.

¹⁴ This concept has been described earlier in Chapter two.

¹⁵ Geertz, *Op cit.*, p. 6.

¹⁶ Respondent 6A re-echo the importance of the rights the elders have to choose where they are to be buried as a strong Knunu opinion which has been exhibited by the titled Baptist convert.

¹⁷ See Report on the Burial Ceremony held in Tawali – Yelwa in Nasarawa State on 28th December, 2011.

¹⁸ Stephen Greenblatt is considered as one of the founders of the New Historicism, a method combining a strict systematic study of the nature of literature through

symbolic systems and life pattern of people and societies.¹⁹ He is critical of Geertz residual allegiance to structuralism and thus asks whether a culture or method could ever be rendered satisfyingly systematically.²⁰ In addition, Lawrence Rosen²¹ outlines some dilemmas with regard to Geertz's idea of culture: (a) how the researcher overcomes his/her prejudice in relation to the ideas and practices of others, (b) the inability of anthropologist to rely on their personal insight to assess reality in other people's culture.²² In spite of Greenblatt and Rosen's observations, the researcher as an insider recognizes the concern of the Gbagyi/Gbari and acknowledges his own reflexivity as an outsider.

Closely related to the thoughts in this thesis, is the definition of culture as the "whole way of life, material and non-material, of human society"²³ by Aylward Shorter,²⁴ a scholar who worked in East Africa. He observed that culture as an actively social phenomenon is a reflection of a society's "tradition and its interaction with other societies."²⁵ Although Shorter's argument seeks to explain that the mobility of culture stems from its ability to interact with traditions through human experiences, it is arguable that not all aspects of culture can do that effectively. While the Gbagyi/Gbari adjusts to the influence of other cultures, they nonetheless relish the importance of Knunu and hold to its practices very tenaciously. One of the respondents explained that no matter where the Gbagyi/Gbari goes and whatever they become, elements of Knunu remains entrenched in them, for instance, their form of greetings cannot change, neither are their family and ancestral ties.²⁶ Collins Airhihebuwa's definition therefore, which states that "Culture is a collective sense of consciousness active enough to influence and condition perception, judgement, communication, behaviour, and expectations and the location of power in a given society,"²⁷ captures Knunu more realistically. Hence, the ability of culture to define identity and knowledge is expressed through institutions such as families and schools as well as in communications. So, when Mbiti identified an average African as breathing, living and sleeping in their religion,²⁸ one can draw a parallel with the influence of Knunu among the Gbagyi/Gbari, given its pervasive nature. Roy Wagner (1938–2000) also an anthropologist with an interest in symbolic anthropology stated that culture is a combination of invention and convention.²⁹ On one hand, Wagner argued that the invention of culture is not a concept

that shapes the lives of the people who share it.³⁰ Rather, it is people who shape their culture by constantly manipulating conventional symbols taken from a variety of ever changing codes to create new meanings.³¹ To Wagner, culture evolves from the dialectics that ensued in the relationship between the individual and the social world, manifesting in the relation between invention and convention, innovation and control, meaning and context.³² He stated that the symbolization processes that generate the construction of meaning in culture are the same as those that anthropologists use to invent the cultures they study. He agrees with Geertz that culture in its usage conveys human actions and meanings down to the most basic level of significance.³³ Whereas one may argue that invention may not overwhelmingly be associated with the Gbagyi/Gbari due to their perception that Knunu has been institutionalized for them by their ancestors, nevertheless, the overreaching influence it exerts on them makes it clearly a formidable symbol. Wagner's assertion is true of the Gbagyi/Gbari who, despite continued denials of participating in Knunu practices, have significantly retained Gbagyi/Gbari names and regularly require their living relations to give such names to their children. In doing that, the Gbagyi/Gbari may be said to have appropriated Knunu as an invention by sustaining and adapting on it in their new faith.

On the other hand, convention - the institutionalised aspect of culture - communicates the referential symbols which, unlike metaphors, have the effect of exerting their influences on other areas of culture.³⁴ Wagner identifies words as the most significant examples of arbitrary symbols, and that the changes in usage and meaning a word undergoes over a period of time is enabled by metaphorical extension expressed in logic, a particular cultural way of making sense of things.³⁵ To him, the use made by anthropologists of the word 'culture' to signify a human phenomenon is aimed at gaining a better explanation of its importance to people.³⁶ Subsequently, culture has become a way of discussing humans and all that concerns them.

Nonetheless, his proposed assertion about the use of the word culture to clarify issues and symbols might be wrongly interpreted using convention. For instance, an aspect of Knunu *azakwoyi* ("ancestral worship") which the Gbagyi/Gbari expressively participates in has deep meaning for them. However, T. W. Dyer an early twentieth-century anthropologist who worked among the Gbagyi/Gbari in contrast to Wagner's assertion, inadequately identified the motives that lie behind Gbagyi/Gbari veneration of their ancestors and their place of abode, in reporting that the "pagans are very reluctant to vacate the site of their towns principally owing to the superstition that the site occupied has some occult value."³⁷ John S. Mbiti's view highlights an aspect that Dyer's argument was unable to accentuate, notably

examination and critique of nature and society drawn from the knowledge in social sciences and humanities.

19 Stephen Greenblatt, "The Touch of the Real" *The Fate of "Culture": Geertz and Beyond*, Sherry B Ortner ed. (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1997), p. 14.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

21 An American anthropologist at the Princeton University and is also a lawyer by training.

22 Lawrence Rosen, "Passing Judgment: Interpretation, Morality and Cultural Assessment of Clifford Geertz" *Clifford Geertz by his Colleagues*, Richard A. Shweder ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 13.

23 Aylward Shorter, *African Culture, An Overview: Social-Cultural Anthropology* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), p. 22.

24 Aylward Shorter has served as a Catholic priest and the President of the Missionary Institute, London, and has lectured in Africa, at the Catholic Higher Institute of Eastern Africa, serving as the consultant to the Vatican secretariat for non-Christians.

25 *Ibid.*

26 Respondent 6A a traditional medicine woman affirms that he has observed Gbagyis even in their new faith traditions exhibit such tendency.

27 Collins Airhihebuwa, *Healing Our Differences: The Crisis of Global Health And the Politics of Identity* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), p. 4.

28 Mbiti, (1977), *Op cit.*, p. 2.

29 Roy Wagner, *Symbols that Stand for Themselves* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 6.

30 Roy Wagner, *The Invention of culture: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 2.

31 *Ibid.*

32 Wagner, (1986) *Op cit.*, p. 8 f.

33 Wagner, (1981) *Op cit.*, p. 2.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

37 SNP 10, K. 388/1913, Memo dated 11th August, 1913. Dyer wrote a memo to the colonial office explaining the Gbagyi inability to be persuaded to live their environment and calls it superstition. That of course was his understanding and interpretation of their action.

that African culture requires that children should care for their parents in life and death. After the death of one's parents, the surviving children are expected on a regular basis to take proper care of their graves, by giving the dead food and the pouring of libations.³⁸ Hence, the practice of ancestral worship is perpetuated and, crucially, movement away from the ancestral site is resisted. Similarly, Shednayi Godwin Bawa, a Gbagyi/Gbari writer argues that the Gbagyi/Gbari do not readily submit to any plan that requires them to lose contact with the earth or with their own traditional art.³⁹ This understanding is reflected in responses of my respondents, most of whom expressed a preference to be buried at the site where their forebears have been buried, and to some extent accounts for their inability to completely give up ancestral beliefs even after becoming Christians/Muslims. All these are further indications of the pervasive nature of Knunu among the Gbagyi/Gbari even when they appear externally to repudiate it.

Richard Handler has questioned Wagner's view on the invention of culture by positing that it is impossible to conserve or authentically re-create culture because it is lived every day and since we cannot specify what we do every day, it is difficult to reinvent culture. He argued further that the motivation to re-create culture is an idea of the elite who claim to be speaking for the peasants, people and nation.⁴⁰ David L. Roy in agreement with Handler's view holds that since it is difficult for an individual to effectively escape the prejudice of one's own culture, and transit into another, Wagner's opinion is doubtful.⁴¹ Knunu thus remains a concern for Gbagyi/Gbari who contends with its influence over their lives and have found it extremely difficult to sever their loyalty to it even after their conversion (to Christianity and Islam) and education. To a large extent, it appears they are not even aware of the influence that Knunu exert on them.

Paul G. Hiebert, views culture as "the more or less integrated systems of beliefs, feelings and values, and their associated symbols, patterns of behaviour and products shared by a group of people."⁴² To effectively understand people's culture, he stated that, it is required to first observe the behaviour of such people, second, to possess the ability to identify the patterns in their actions which explains their ideas and third, to be informed of the products of material artefacts through which knowledge about the people is transmitted to successive generations.⁴³ Hence, he opines that in formal situations, behaviour and speech are carefully circumvented by culture, whereas in less formal situation, everyday life experiences provide individuals with an opportunity to choose from a range of permissible behaviours. Hiebert states further that Christians and Muslims are often unaware of how their

beliefs are shaped by their culture than the Gospel/Quran.⁴⁴ Thus, for example, I observed that the Gbagyi/Gbari in naming a child often refer back to their parents for appropriate Knunu names, privileging such names over those of their faith because they are evidenced of cultural affiliations.

CONCLUSION/REMARKS

In spite of the divergence of opinion expressed by Geertz, Shorter, Wagner, and Hiebert, three fundamental issues can be noted: Knunu has derived its proposition from the value the Gbagyi/Gbari attach to it in the midst of other cultures. Some of my respondents interpreted it as undiluted,⁴⁵ pervasive⁴⁶ and overwhelmingly dominating. It is argued that it will amount to an unfair gesture to refer to Knunu as culture alone since it encompasses both physical and spiritual concepts. Such ideas give strength to the argument in this paper, that though Knunu inhabit some traits of culture, to the Gbagyi/Gbari, it reflects an idea beyond cultural praxis. Furthermore, with the understanding that culture is a product of human actions as some parts of Knunu, it is not in itself a pure ontological reality, therefore it relates to Gbagyi/Gbari existence. However, how do we explain the continual revert to unintended human actions embedded in Knunu? The belief itself in *azakwoyi* and *azafun* ("the myriad of other spiritual being") should not be regarded as religious and cultural only but rather Knunu.

Second, the impact of Knunu is invulnerable, and remains whether it is relished or not, in the continuing influence it exact on the Gbagyi/Gbari. Knunu is the Gbagyi/Gbari ontology and epistemology. It involves issue that touches on their *zafun* ("soul"), *nawyyi* ("bodies"), *Shekwoyi* (God) and *she anyiwoshi* (the essence of things in the world). Knunu typifies the Gbagyi/Gbari knowledge of themselves innate at birth, experiences as they encounter their community, and inherent behaviour drawn for the perception of the unseen world. However, the Gbagyi/Gbari do not expect those who exist outside them to exhibit Knunu attitudes. The utmost one can expect from non Gbagyi/Gbari lives is to admit that they are imitation of Knunu. The unanimity of Knunu to them goes beyond what culture peculiarity is to specific human environment.

Third, the existence of Knunu overthrows the continuous denial by Gbagyi/Gbari's that they do not practice it. The existence/identity of Knunu is an expressiveness of its active presence in the lives of Gbagyi/Gbari. Thus, an interpretation and understanding of Knunu requires an element far beyond cultural clarifications. Having examined the place of Knunu and culture in shaping the behaviour and identity of the Gbagyi/Gbari, it is appropriate to state here that it remains a concept beyond cultural explanations for the Gbagyi/Gbari people.

38 John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1991), p. 119 f. Mbiti (1931) is a Christian religious philosopher and taught religion and African theology.

39 Shednayi Godwin Bawa, *Gbagyi and the Nigerian Nation* (Minna: Lurradd Ventures, 1999), p. 60.

40 Richard Handler, "Cultural Property and Cultural Theory," *Journal of Social Anthropology Perspectives* Vol. 3 No. 3 (2003), pp. 353-365.355.

41 David L. Roy, "On the Duality of Culture and Nature," *Philosophica*, Vol. 55 (Jan., 1995), pp. 9-35. 27.

42 Paul G. Hiebert, "Cultural Differences and the Communication of the Gospel," *Critical Dimension in World Evangelism* Arthur F. Glasser, et al., (1976), pp. 373-383.374

43 Paul G. Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1976), pp.25 f.

44 Paul H. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), p. 18.

45 Respondent 27C argued that Knunu persuasion cannot equal any other one which is why it is often carried with them to their new found faith. He is optimistic that one can hardly find a Gbagyi who does not practice an aspect of Knunu no matter how highly placed.

46 Respondent 28C on her part explained that Gbagyi may not escape Knunu practices and that even though individuals tend to see it as a practice handed over to them in ancestral beliefs, some of its tenets are inborn and inexpressible.

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