

## MY GRANDMOTHER'S ADAGE

According to a Yoruba adage, life is a place of knowledge and wisdom. One must live his or her life carefully. People who are the most careful make mistakes not to discuss people who live life carelessly. Growing up in Lagos, Nigeria has made me who I am today. Everybody's lifetime is full of experiences. The experiences we go through help form and shape our identities. The experiences that led me to where I am today are connected to my grandmother's practices and sayings. Her sayings about life helped shape who I am as a person. In this paper, I will be exploring my coming of age through my experience in Nigeria using one of my grandmother's adages about life: "Life is like a game, most people are searching for what to eat, but some people end up being eaten, some ate, while some are just there watching." Remembering this adage has led me to where I am today because I do not want to be in the category of people who were eaten, nor do I want to be in the category of the people who watched in life. I want to be in the category of people who ate.

The people who ate are those who make their lives meaningful; they have a purpose in life, and they make sure they are satisfied with how they live. The people who watched are the people whom life passed by. They are not aware of what is going on around them or how much time has passed, and because of that, they are neither eaten, nor do they eat. They are stagnant. The people who are eaten are those consumed by life; they do not fulfill their purpose, and they do not achieve any of their goals, aspirations, or desires. They are the people who are not favored in life because their lives are worthless, and most of their desires are in vain.

My grandmother was a caring woman who believed and practiced that other people's needs come before your own. Observing her practices and sayings has helped shape my identity. Most of the time, she used proverbs on a day to day basis. She made sure she explained and gave

an example of what her proverbs meant since I did not understand them. One time she told me a story about her struggles as a child. My grandmother did not have all the support she needed from both of her parents because her father passed away when she was five. Leaving her and her mother alone with two siblings, it was difficult to make ends meet. Due to the way she lived her life, she passed her adage about life to her children and grandchildren.

As a child, I could not understand my grandmother's adage about life. But as I grew older, I realized that I have lived according to it. The memory of her story kept recurring in my life as I grew older. In *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, a book that analyzes how the past shapes a person's identity in the present with the use of memory and the type of memory he/she keeps, Lowenthal explains that "[m]emory pervades life. We devote much of the present to getting in touch with some aspect of the past." (194). This means that memory is perceived through each aspect of a person's life. An individual lives his or her life through the type of memory he or she keeps. Looking back, I am fully aware that I have lived my life through the memory of my grandmother's adage. The memory has helped me to overcome and understand some of the challenges in my life. Also, my present experiences have enhanced me to keep in touch with my past memory.

As a young adult, I comprehend from my grandmother's adage that the people who are are those who try to find a purpose in their lives. No matter what obstacles they are faced with, they try their best to overcome those obstacles in order to fulfill their purpose in life. Being born and raised in Nigeria, I could not understand why some things are certain ways. For example, I could not understand some of the cultural norms in society, especially those concerning women, including why women have to do the domestic chores while men only have to work all the time and dictate their households. This example is seen through Joan Scott's *Gender: A Useful*

*Category of Historical Analysis*, a book that focuses mostly on the analysis of female gender history and its role in politics and power. Scott claimed that “the term gender is part of an attempt by contemporary feminists to stake claim to a certain definitional ground, to insist on the inadequacy of existing bodies of theory for explaining persistent inequalities between women and men” (389). The inequality between men and women was really disturbing to me as a young adult, to the extent that I wanted to become a male. It made me think of the things I would have the opportunity to do as a male child. This societal norm also upset me during my childhood because I disliked being told what to do by a male. Feeling that I was being controlled made me disobey most males in my life, especially my dad and uncles. I always thought that if I obeyed them I would not be able to be the independent person I have always wanted to become. I would be like other women who were mistreated because all they wanted to do was satisfy their husbands’ needs. Because of this conflict I struggled with in Nigeria, it was difficult for me to interact with people. I kept to myself most of the time, to the extent that my parents were scared of what my future would hold. Since I did not associate with people most of the time, I started to feel lonely. This feeling of loneliness made me realize that I was playing the part of the people who were eaten in life. Most people view loneliness as a disease they have to pity, and people who are lonely are often categorized as being depressed. Because I did not want society to condemn me or see me as a person that did not have a purpose in life except for being lonely, I re-envisioned my life. I began to understand how society worked, and I established good relationships with people. I also recognized that some things are just meant to be. I embarked on a journey of people who ate by getting used to the rules laid out by society. So it is clear to see that the path I chose empowered me to overcome some of my challenges in life; specifically, I acted according to society’s rules.

Furthermore, my grandmother's adage has helped me to succeed in dealing with racial discrimination, and it guided me to discern people who watched in life. These are the people who neither eat nor are eaten. They are the people that would never learn; even though they are part of the society, they do not know the changes going on around them. In *Race and Ethnicity in Society: The Changing Landscape*, Omi and Winant argue that racial formation is a "process of historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized" (70). This means that racial formation is a process by which an individual's racial identities are categorized. One example of racial formation occurred in my high school. The majority of the students that attended my high school were African-American. When I first came to the United States, most students in my school thought I could not speak English; some believed that in Nigeria, we lived in huts, rather than houses. Some asked me if we wore clothes or if there was internet in Nigeria. All these notions the students had about Nigeria, sometimes Africa, generally distressed me. This is because the United States is known to be the most civilized country, but listening to these entirely ignorant questions made me blame the society some of the students lived in. Most of these students lived on the south and west side of Chicago. This area in Chicago is known to be the most dangerous area where gun violence mostly occurred; most people living in this area are less likely to succeed because they lack resources. The type of neighborhood some of these students lived in made them ignorant about some of the changes going on around the world. This is a perfect example of racial formation because in the social structure in which my school had been grouped, most people referred to themselves according to their neighborhood. When most people hear of the south side of Chicago, they think about gun violence and gangs. At this point, I was so embarrassed that I decided to stay mute to their questions. This is not because I did not have an answer for them, but because if I had

answered them, I would have lashed out at them with my words and anger growing inside me, which might have led to an altercation between us. Because I did not want any form of argument that would not only embarrass me, but also disappoint my parents, I decided to endure my frustration.

Looking back at it now, I realize that I was silent because I did not want to be perceived negatively by my parents. My parents are the type of people who value self-respect and what others have to say about their children. They want every one of their children to act right in society, even if it means to be silent. They want others to see their children as well-respected individuals and because of that, I had to paint a good image of myself, most especially in public. So, if I had gotten into an argument with one of my school-mates just because of wanting to justify the perception of Nigeria, I might have gotten written up which might alter the perception of my parents about me. According to the looking glass- self-concept which said that when we encounter others, we look to see how they are responding to us...we get information about who we are and how we feel about ourselves based on what we think others think of us" (O'Brien 112). Also, the theory of significant others presented that "we are not equally sensitive or persuaded by the views of everyone we encounter. We are much more likely to pay attention to and be influenced by the reactions of someone who is significant to us" (O'Brien 113). It is clear that because I did not want to be perceived negatively by my parents, who are important to me, I put on a different identity at school, which was the opposite of my identity. I was also aware that I was silent at their ignorance because I still could not believe that in this twenty first century, the world of advanced technology, there were still people living in Chicago who did not know about the world they lived in. It is obvious that they were the people who watched in life. More importantly, because I have chosen the path of people who ate, I was able to discern the people

who watched in life, overcome my frustration, and define my own theory of the people who watched, to whom I referred as the “ignorant people”.

Now at UIS, I am trying to find a balance in life. I have seen those who watched, and I have experienced the path of people who were eaten. I have learned from my previous experiences the path of people who were eaten and the path of people who watched. Because I do not want to follow any of the previous paths- I want to eat in life- I need to find a balance by putting on a different performance. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life: Selection*, Erving Goffman defines performance as “the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” ( 266). This definition of performance is illustrated in my attendance at my aunt’s church. Every time I visited her church, I had to put on a performance tolerable by everybody else. Although I was not familiar with the church culture, I had to perform an act acceptable to my audience by acting as if I knew most of the things going on. Also, in order for me not to embarrass myself, I tended to notice other people carefully so as to perform a good act. According to Goffman, embarrassment occurs when a person cannot perform his identity well ( 267). Because I do not want to be in the group of people who watch, I decided to put on a performance. During this performance, I learned a little bit about typical church culture, and now I can go to her church, feel comfortable, and perform a great act. So, one can conclude that in order for me to eat in life, I must put on a performance accepted by my audience.

In conclusion, living by my grandmother’s adage, I have achieved my coming of age. I have been able to overcome many obstacles in life. Realizing that I do not want to be one of those people in life that watch or end up being eaten, I have learned to perform different

identities and performances throughout my life. I now understand that in order for me to eat in life I must be able to adapt to the rules of life and find a balance- the balance that would enable me to achieve my aspirations and goals, which is to eat in life. In the course of eating in life, I must perform different acts and identities and make sure they are acceptable to my audience. Even though I have already experienced so much, my identity and performance will continue to evolve over the years until I find a perfect balance in life. Now my identity is of a person who is working towards eating in life.

## Works Cited

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