

Welcoming the Stranger:
The Christian Practice of Hospitality among Nigerian Ibibio Youth and Young Adults

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Our little band of travelers were preparing to leave Eket, East Nigeria for the international airport in Lagos when I discovered that my return ticket was scheduled for July 18 and all others were scheduled for July 16. The original plan for return had been changed and I did not receive the information. After arriving in Lagos on Monday afternoon, July 16, the leader of our group, Bishop Reddick, attempted to negotiate an earlier travel for me, but he was unsuccessful. After coming to terms with the fact that I would spend two additional days in Lagos alone before returning to the USA, I bided my travel mates of ten days farewell, gave hugs and received several wads of Naria (Nigerian currency) and hurried down to the curbside of the airport to hail a taxi. The plan was for me to return to the Excellence Hotel where the group stayed for two nights upon arriving in Lagos at the outset of our trip. I was scared. I prayed a fervent prayer that God would grant me safe passage to the hotel. I knew I would be safe once I reached the hotel. Although the twenty-minute trip was uneventful, upon reaching the hotel I breathed a sigh of relief and whispered a prayer of thanksgiving. I had decided to use the next two days for my long overdue silent retreat, praying and meditating in the cloistered space of my hotel room and its balcony. I would only engage in conversation while in the restaurant. With plans for my retreat in place I had dinner in the quite nearly vacant hotel restaurant and retired to my room. The day had been long and lonely.

After a peaceful night's rest the sunrays woke me up signaling the beginning of my silent retreat. After showering I took my Bible in hand and began my usual devotion time. I would follow devotion with meditation on selected passages of scripture in Psalms and Romans. Suddenly, on the heel of my devotion I began to pray audibly. I recited scriptures I memorized as a child from Psalms 121, 23 and 139. In the midst of praying and reciting familiar scripture I transcended my loneliness to a place where I felt fully in touch with the Holy Spirit. It was then that the Spirit urged me to get up, adorn myself with the best outfit that I had and go receive the day. I dressed in one of my newly purchased Nigerian Chaftans of red and brown. Although usually not very creative, I was inspired to wrap my head with the matching fabric forming a fanlike decorative detail for an added highlight. I felt good and I looked good as I left the safety of my room for breakfast in the hotel restaurant.

Unlike the previous evening the restaurant was busy with hotel guests. I was given a table where I proceeded to eat my usual oatmeal, toast and pineapple juice. Midway through my meal I noticed a stunning young woman looking for a place to sit and have breakfast. She noticed me sitting alone at a table with two extra place settings. I motioned for her to join me and she graciously took her place at my table. After exchanging introductions Mrs. Judith Sarpong told me she was from Accra, Ghana, visiting Lagos for a conference of women's lawyers discussing the strategies for inclusion of women in the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria review process. The constitution was currently under review by government leaders on national, state and local levels. Judith and her companion had been invited by the Women's Association for Research and Documentation Center (WARCD), a group of young women lawyers in Nigeria. I

asked if it was possible for me to sit in on one or two sessions during the next two days. She said she would see what she could arrange and that I should meet her in the conference meeting area.

Upon entering the convention hall I was greeted by two of the conference organizers who warmly invited me to participate fully in the three-day conference. They escorted me to a seat at the conference table where about forty-five delegates were expected to gather. I was given an official conference packet including the WARDS tee shirt. At the table I was greeted by Judith and Mrs. Lati Talami, a Nigerian lawyer practicing in Lagos. Lati and Judith insisted on seeing that I had all that I needed for full participation in the conference. When I was away from the table they made sure I received copies of lectures from the presenters and they saved a space for me at the table during lunch and tea-time. Although I knew little about constitutional law, they were intentional to clarify issues and seek my opinion when issues of religion and the law were being discussed. During the breaks Lati, Judith and I had stimulating conversations about our work. Lati offered her help as a resource person for my research when I returned to Dallas. In addition to Lati and Judith, many of the women attending the conference sought me out and engaged me in conversation, making me feel included and fully welcomed to their community.

I must confess I was awestruck by the sincerity and depth of hospitality extended to me. I did not expect complete acceptance or complete inclusion into the community of lawyers of the WARDC and their invited guest speakers from Ghana, Uganda and Eritrea. Perhaps I had forgotten God's promises to both strangers and hosts.

During my twelve day stay in Nigeria I had many similar experiences of hospitality extended by members of the congregations we visited and even the hospital where we served. The hotel experience was the ultimate example of hospitality that I had in Nigeria, and serves as a good backdrop for my preliminary reflections on Christian hospitality among youth and young adult Ibibio Nigerians.

In this paper, I describe a contextual understanding of the Christian practice of hospitality among Ibibio youth and young adults who are members of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME) of Nigeria and then compare these understandings with CME youth and young adults in North American context. I conclude with implications for education and formation of youth and young adults in the United States.¹

Methodology and Demographics

The research for this project involved eliciting conversations with youth and young adult CMEs in focus groups from both the USA and Nigeria. With the permission of the participants, each of the 45- minute sessions was audio recorded. I identified emerging themes and then compared and contrasted themes among the Nigerian CME's with those I heard among the U.S.A. CME's. For reasons of anonymity, the names of the focus group participants are pseudonyms. I guided the focus group conversations with the following questions:

1. Tell me about your experiences of welcoming strangers into your home and your church. Describe one or two occasions that stand out for you.
2. Where and from whom did you learn to welcome strangers?

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3. What are some of the traditional things that are done in your home or church when you welcome strangers?
4. How do you account for the hospitality of those who have so little? How do you understand the hospitality that the poor extend to strangers?

There were a total of four focus groups and additionally, a one-on-one interview. The two USA groups were youth and young adult African Americans who talked with me while attending the Eight Episcopal District Leadership Training School in Tyler, Texas. This three-day church camp provides worship, teaching/learning, and recreational activities for youth, young adults, and adult leaders from the state of Texas. The youth group consisted of three girls all 15 years of age. The young adult group consisted of three women and two men, ages 18 to 28.

The first focus group in Nigeria consisted of 24 young adults from a small town on the outskirts of north Lagos. The group was close to fifty percent women and men, ranging from 20 to 27 years of age. The second focus group was four youth from Eket, located in the southeast coastal region of Nigeria. This group was also fifty percent male and female with ages ranging from 15 to 18 years. The one-on-one interview was with a young adult woman 20 years of age from Eket. All Nigerian youth and young adults were members of the Ibibio tribe.

Anthropological research from the online databases of Art and Life in Africa and the World Fact Book offer interesting insights into the Ibibio people. The Ibibio Tribe is one of many minority tribes in Nigeria. The majority tribes, those with the highest population in Nigeria, are Hauser, Youbra and Ibo. The Ibibio people are primarily nestled between the Delta and Cross River of southeast Nigeria. Oral traditions suggest

their presence in the region much earlier than suggested by colonial records during the late 1800s. Their main economic activity is based on farming palm trees and maize. Like many Nigerian tribes, Ibibio people live in poverty, with a small group from the Ekpo society controlling the majority of the community wealth. The Ekpo are male village elders and heads of extended families.

Masks, wooden sculptures, drumming and music are important elements of Ekpo society, influencing the art and culture of the Ibibio people who were evangelized by numerous Christian denominations from North America. The rich culture was readily integrated into the new faith, but the Ibibio people struggle to balance their native religion of paying tribute to village ancestors with that of the Christian faith.

Themes of Hospitality Among Ibibio CME Youth and Young Adults

My conversations with Ibibio CME youth and young adults revealed four primary themes which are: 1) Parents and adults in the church teach the practice of hospitality; 2) Typical concrete expressions of traditions and rituals associated with hospitality such as beverages, food, sleeping quarters and transportation; 3) Barriers of difference such as language and tribe present challenges but are not insurmountable; 4) A theological theme that those who extend hospitality expect blessings from God.

1) The Ibibio youth and young adults shared similar experiences of seeing their parents practice welcoming strangers into their homes. Likewise, they talked about seeing their parents and adult members practice hospitality in similar fashion. Uwem Simon from Lagos shared this story:

I learned about hospitality from my parents, the way they receive people. My father had this hobby of making palm wine and serving it to

visitors who came to our home. He would even go out into the village and have me serve palm wine to our neighbors in the village. At the end of the day I would ask him, "Daddy, why did you do this? What are we going to sale? How are we going to eat?" He would tell me that he received from this type of hospitality a kind of dignity. People will respect him and God will bless him.

Effieafiok, a twenty year old from Eket, Nigeria had this to say. "My mother taught when you have a stranger, welcome them into the home and give them a seat. Then attend to his or her needs."

2) Traditionally a beverage is offered to strangers in both the home and church. Serenity, a fifteen year old, also from Eket said visitors are always offered a beverage first. The Nigerian youth and young adults of North Lagos listed palm wine, other wines, bitter cola, cola and beer as common beverages offered to guests in the home. After the beverage is served guests are offered melon, banana, or other available fruits. Certain types of fish and soup are also offered to guests. After worship services in North Lagos, women of the church escorted the members of our group to a room adjacent to the sanctuary and served us wine, bananas and ground nuts (peanuts). The head administrator of the village hospital located in Ikot Obio Akai, who is also a pastor of a CME Church in the area, provided cold drinks for our group. These examples demonstrate the tradition of giving beverages and food to guests.

The youth and young adults of Eket also talked about customary ways of hosting strangers in their region. These included securing a bed for overnight guests and/or securing transportation. Youth are expected to give their bed to a guest if sleeping space is limited. In Eket, motorcycles are the common form of taxi service and are used for transportation within the city and nearby villages. The time needed to hail a taxi varies from 30 minutes to an hour depending on the time of day. Even in the church guests are

recognized and given money for transportation at the end of worship service. Obtaining transportation for guests is an act of hospitality.

3) Welcoming strangers from different tribes whose language and traditions are different can be difficult but not impossible. Youth and young adults from both Lagos and Eket shared experiences of encountering strangers from tribes and communities outside Ibibio or being a stranger among other tribes. The young adults of North Lagos talked about the experience of finding jobs in various regions of Nigeria away from the Ibibio people. The language barrier between different tribes sometimes makes it difficult to find accommodations for rest when working in an area away from one's village even though the common language is English. Given such circumstances, the young adults talked about the necessity of "adapting to the situation," as Uwem put it.

Serenity, the fifteen-year-old from Eket, talked about her experience of welcoming new students from other tribes to her school.

When I see a new person from another tribe coming to our school, first of all I'll go to him or her and ask his/her name...I'll ask where he is from. I want to know the family background, know the state and know why he left his former school for our place. After that I introduce him to my friends, and he too must introduce himself to others so if they see him on the street they can recognize him as one of the students. We share things in common. If I have a problem I let him know. I tell him if he has a problem let me know as he is a stranger so that things will be easy for him.

Serenity confessed she is a friendly person and finds it easy to meet strangers. However, she admits not all students are friendly. The dining hall is the place where strangers have difficulty. She stated: "Some new students find it very difficult to sit among people from other tribes. Because most of them are not friendly they can't eat with others, they can't chat with others."

A young adult from Lagos shared an experience of a stranger coming to his church in the village compound. He recalled:

In the village, you know we live in the village compound, all the members were asked to transport themselves to another village compound for a program....A man from another church was to attend the program at another village with the name similar to ours. The names are often confused. The car dropped him at our village compound. He didn't know anybody there. We waited to see which family he would march forward to. Nobody was anxious to welcome him because nobody knew him. The women came out to greet him but saw he was a man and they had to go back [into the church]. Then they told the men and we went out to greet him and discovered he was from our [sister] churches in another village.

The above story is an example of how the church does not always practice unconditional hospitality to strangers. It also demonstrates how the interplay of gender and tradition influences the practice of hospitality in the faith community. Ordinarily, women are expected to extend hospitality to strangers, but traditionally women are not expected to approach unaccompanied men who are strangers in their midst. In the church men are expected to greet other male visitors traveling alone.

4) Ibibio youth and young adults believe extending hospitality to strangers promises a blessing from God. Central to this belief is the willingness to give whatever they have so that the guest will be comfortable. Members of the focus groups frequently quoted scripture that supported their beliefs. "Give and it shall be given unto you," from Luke 6:38 was quoted several times. Young adults from both North Lagos and Eket referred to the Genesis 18: 1-15 passage where three men at the oaks of Mamre visit Abraham and Sarah. Abraham's diligence to host the strangers, giving them the best in food and comfort, was followed by God's promise of a son even though Abraham and

Sarah were advanced in age. Uwem Simon referred to the passage of scripture in this manner:

The church is a carry over from what I learned in the home, in my family, teachings like when Abraham and Sarah received the three angels and they were blessed. Also, Christ came and said we ought to share. The more you give the more you receive.

After mentioning the Genesis passage Uwem Simon rounds off his comments on teaching and learning about hospitality with a reference to New Testament scripture and the teachings of Christ. Eighteen-year-old Samuel from Eket referred to the Abraham and Sarah story and also Lot's hospitality toward the three men found in Genesis 19.

Effiefiok connected the responsibility to give with the practice of hospitality. She said it is difficult for those who have much to give to others. She continues:

“But anyone who doesn't have can easily give to some other person. It is only a few who have the fear of God that have something and have the mind of giving it out to some other person....They know the need of being hospitable to some other person...Because they know the need of giving to somebody and they know the reward that they will have from giving to somebody...Even though the person he is giving the thing to may not reward him but God will give the reward...From giving one day he or she will be able to go up higher than before....”

Serenity said “hospitality means giving.” Eighteen-year-old Anie from Eket referred to the story of Elijah and the Phoenician women in I Kings 17:8-16 as her favorite example of hospitality. She said, “I know that whenever I give the little I have to strangers the more I will have from the Lord.”

The youth and young adults above all use biblical references to support their belief that practicing hospitality through giving to strangers guarantees a blessing from God. This is the hope they express in relationship to the Christian practice of hospitality.

Similarities and Differences Between Nigerian and North American Youth and Young Adults

Using the four themes from the Ibibio youth and young adults as the template for comparison, I will compare and contrast these with themes found in the CME youth and young adults from the state of Texas.

First, whereas Ibibio youth and young adults identified their parents as the primary teacher of hospitality in both the home and church, the focus groups from Texas identified significant church members as their teachers. The Texas teenagers named favorite adults in the church serving on the usher board as persons from whom they learned the practice of hospitality. The young adults referred to adults in the church that they modeled while they were teenagers. Important to both USA groups were the personalities of their role models. They emphasized people who smile and hug “whether you were a member or not,” said Maria a resident from Houston, TX.

Second, the youth and young adults of Nigeria identified various traditions and rituals associated with hospitality. These include, for instance, traditional foods associated with hospitality; giving the guest a place to sit or sleep; securing transportation when the guest prepares to leave. These traditions and rituals are practiced in both the church and home. Although the USA groups did not identify rituals and traditions, it became clear that their ideal of a hospitable person is one who demonstrates a warm and inviting personality and who receives familiar and unfamiliar people unconditionally.

Third, welcoming strangers and being a stranger when faced with the barriers of difference is the only area where the Nigerian and USA groups seem to share similarities. Where the Nigerians talked about barriers of language or dialect between different tribes,

the North American youth and young adults talked about racial barriers at work and at school. They shared concerns of being the stranger. For instance, they talked about their experience of often being the only African American in their classes, and being encountered with stereotypical questions about African American culture. Kermit was asked, “do all black people like collard greens” by a white classmate at the vanguard high school where he and his brother attend. Others spoke of the awkwardness they feel and perceive in white classmates who attempt to be hospitable. Most agreed, however, that the discomfort of awkward moments are worth the reward of new friendships established across racial borders. Other USA teens spoke of painful experiences of becoming the stranger in their schools and were never hospitably approached by fellow African American students because of their affiliation and friendship with white students.

Fourth, Ibibio youth and young adults expect a blessing from God when they practice hospitality, supporting this belief with biblical and theological arguments. In contrast, the USA youth and young adults did not express similar confidence or hope related to their practice of hospitality. But even then, their scripture references did not connect blessings that can result from the practice of hospitality.

Implications for the Education and Formation in the practice of Hospitality

I have chosen to discuss implications from my research with one point of compatibility and a point of contrast. I will begin with the point of compatibility. The theme of struggle in areas of difference among Nigerian and USA teenagers merits our further investigation as the church. A number of questions, I believe, sit at the core of any implications I can suggest concerning hospitality across barriers of difference.

How is the church forming teenagers throughout our global Christian communities to confront and breakdown barriers of difference? What is the nature of education in the home and church that gives teens skills for dismantling racial, cultural and economic barriers of difference? Why are the barriers of difference so pressing for teenagers in various communities around the globe?

Although the four focus groups signal an area that churches involved in ministry with youth should consider, this preliminary research has only peeled back the scab of a festering wound, particularly in African American contexts. I have a host of questions related to the Christian formation of teenagers among the Ibibio, Hauser, Ibo and Yoruba tribes. To begin with, I would like to know more about the role that the Christian church is playing in building solidarity between different tribes, and how the church is forming its youth to deal with such problems.

Similar questions should be posed about the Christian formation of African American teenagers as they face both external and internalized racism. By this I mean racism coming from outside the community as well as internalized racism, such as “colorism,” the preference given to lighter skinned African Americans based on white middle class standards. Emilie Townes gives a detailed historical account of colorism in her book *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness*. More ethnographic research is needed to explore the levels of meaning about barriers of difference among Nigerian youth as well as African American youth.

Secondly, ministry with youth across cultures (European American, Native American, Hispanic and Asian American) needs to engage youth in intentional conversation about barriers that divide them, such as race, class and gender. This is not

to imply that these types of discussions are not already taking place. But if such conversations are happening, their occurrence is a well kept secret.

Although the Nigerian and USA youth had similar concerns about hospitality across barriers, all other themes from the focus groups representing these countries were different. The Nigerian theme of expecting a blessing with the practice of hospitality stands in contrast to the absence of this theme among the USA groups. The connection between hope and hospitality stands out for me. In her chapter entitled “Hospitality from the Margins,” Christian Pohl writes:

Many of the important modern expressions of hospitality and self-sacrifice come from those on the margins of society, those who, in spite of their vulnerable and minimally respected positions, share their gifts and resources with others. As hosts, they have opportunity to teach others the skills they have learned for keeping hope and meaning alive in the midst of suffering and injustice. Being their guest involves recognition of their unique assets. As hosts, they subtly challenge the assumption of the larger society about where grace and strength are actually located.²

Pohl’s statement articulates the connection between hope and hospitality even though it focuses on this practice among marginal people. I am not suggesting that all the Nigerian youth and young adults that I interviewed are marginal people in their context. However, according to the socioeconomic standards of Nigeria, the majority of them were very poor. Regardless, unlike youth and young adults in the USA across cultures they possess skills and beliefs that nurture hope. I suggest that we attempt to learn and acquire the skills they exemplify for keeping hope alive.

² Christian D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 122.