

SPACE TRANSFORMATION AND REPRESENTATION

REFLECTIONS ON UNIVERSITY CULTURE

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OLATUNDE BAYO LAWUYI
AND **CHINYERE UKPOKOLO**

Space, Transformation and Representation

Reflections on University Culture

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GOLDLINE & JACOBS PUBLISHERS

GLASSBORO • NEW JERSEY

Goldline & Jacobs Publishing
Glassboro, New Jersey 08028, USA
WWW.GOLDLINEANDJACONS.COM

Space, Transformation and Representation
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ISBN: 978-1-938598-00-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012939132

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PREFACE

Cultures are created by human collectives to enhance lifestyles and coexistence through the establishment of value systems, traditions, beliefs and survival strategies that are aimed at cohering the community or social group. There are distinctive features – spiritual, material and intellectual – that each society or social group has to contend with and the varieties are what distinguish one society or group from the other.

The university as a human collective has a unique culture of its own and the uniqueness lies in the fact that those that form the university community are from different cultural backgrounds. On their coming together in pursuit of intellectual excellence they perceive themselves as being a collective that can influence the wider society not necessarily with the arrogance of the *ivory tower* image the university portrayed in the past as being remote from society but in the need for collaboration with the wider world through its various actions that give true meaning to the concept of *town and gown*. The universities are no more elitist centres for academic pursuits; they are centres for mass education in various disciplines.

Since the essential core of any university is in its staff and students in a productive and creative academic environment akin to what the Germans as far back as the nineteenth century recognised as *Lernfreiheit* and *Lehrfreiheit*, Professor Olatunde Bayo Lawuyi and Dr. Chinyere Ukpokolo have put together various views on university culture under a general title: *Space, Transformation and Representation: Reflections on University Culture*.

The Twelve Chapters, in addition with the introduction and the postscript, are a *potpourri* of views and expressions on the university environment as it reflects on the life of its constituents. From “The Culture of Academic Rationality and the Rationality of Academic Culture” to “The Challenges of the Memorialization of the University Space”, the contributors attempt to draw our attention

Chapter 5

BRIDGING GAPS, CREATING SPACES: UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN FEMALE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN INTER-CULTURAL ENCOUNTER

CHINYERE UKPOKOLO

INTRODUCTION

In order to meet the challenges of knowledge production and address societal problems, the university evolves a value system that, in fact, constitutes part of the knowledge production and dissemination processes. At admission into the university, students are socialized, and are expected to adapt to and adopt aspects of the university culture, and be transformed by the same. This contributes in shaping their behaviour by making them to think and act 'differently.' Indeed, students in the university are expected to conform to institutional ideals in their quest for knowledge, integrate themselves into the culture of their new environment, and undergo changes in 'character and learning' within the periods they are pursuing their educational careers in the university. Such cultural adaptation and adoption influence their conduct in the university, the choices they make in the challenges of their immediate situations, which, to a very large extent, influence their outcome both academically and socially. Hence, students are often encouraged not just to pass through the university but also to allow the university to 'pass through them'. For this reason, those students who do not adopt this perspective are regarded as 'triangular students' (see Fig. 1), that is, students whose daily routine revolves round classroom, library and, hall of residence, neglecting the social component of university life.

This paper takes a look at the female undergraduate students of University of Ibadan and their encounter with the university environment. It also explores how the university environment assists in bridging the gaps between the student's home culture and the university culture in an attempt to make their transition less strenuous, and finally evolve a university product identity through cultural negotiation. Basically, therefore, this study addresses questions such as: What happens when a female undergraduate student moves from the familiar home culture to the unfamiliar university culture? What are the structures, mechanisms and platforms in the university that help the student in bridging the gaps that exist between her home culture and the university culture, and enable the new entrant to engage in cultural negotiation?

Both quantitative and qualitative methodologies were employed to generate data for this study. For quantitative methodology, a total of 1,200 questionnaires with close-ended items for easy statistical analysis were constructed and administered to the participants. Participants were selected from female undergraduate students who have spent at least a session in the hall of residence. For the qualitative methodology, a total of 60 students participated in in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Fifteen participants for in-depth interviews were selected from each of the three halls of residence in the institution. To make up these 15 students, participants were randomly selected from different departments. Members of the Hall Executive Committee in each hall of residence also formed part of key informants in each hall, and also participated in focus group discussions (FGDs). Primary techniques, therefore, include: Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), In-depth Interviews (IDIs), semi-structured interviews, and observation. Interviews and focus group discussions took place in the Students' Common Room in each hall. For the secondary method, journals, books, magazines and Internet were consulted. Triangulation of methods helped to validate the data from different sources. The taped interviews were transcribed and analyzed using descriptive and interpretive analyses. For

quantitative methodology, simple frequency and percentage were adopted to analyze the data.

ENCOUNTERING THE UNIVERSITY

The university culture is a conglomeration of cultures, though by the nature of the university setting, one can, indeed, talk about the university culture. For the new entrant into the university, the myriads of frameworks of thoughts are presented to her. As the 'jambites' (new entrants) observe the 'stalites' (returning students), they seem to come to the conclusion that 'these people are in-charge of their lives'. For the one who had always been under the close monitoring or as they would rather say 'in control' of parents or school principal as the case may be, this is worthy of all the troubles. Hence, she feels like a tourist. As if to give credence to this supposed freedom, the individual student is made to realize that she is 'free' and, hence, treated as an adult - no consultation with parents or guardians. Ironically, most of these students are simply 'pseudo-adults.' But, these students are expected to navigate their new environment and find meaning and purpose in all that take place around them. Undeniably, the expectation is that the new student is to chart the course of her life on campus and be able to achieve the very purpose that brought her into the university in the first place - get a degree, and a good one at that. Scholars have observed that, whether at the foundational level of education or at the tertiary level, most students experience 'culture shock' at the initial stage of moving from the familiar home culture to the unfamiliar school culture. At the international level, Pedersen (1994), for instance, argued that international students often experience tremendous stress during the early days of their encounter with their host community. In his research, Berry (1984), advocated a cognitive approach to international students with focus on psychological adaptation to accumulative stress as a way of assisting the new migrants (Berry, 1984, in Pedersen, 1994: 159).

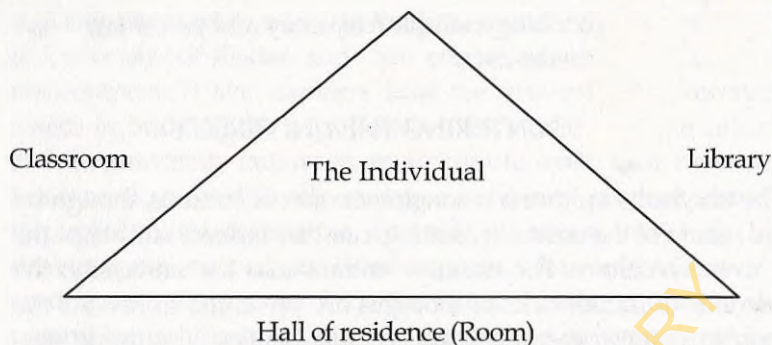


Fig. 1: Exceptional student's life on campus often referred to as 'triangular student.' This category of students hardly interacts with the social environment of the university. Rather, their lives revolve around the classroom, library and hall of residence. The effect is that they may lack the social skills needed for successful social life outside the university.

Invariably, although the university space opens to all candidates that have met the admission requirements, not all the admitted students find the space welcoming as they initially anticipated. Many often confront various challenges ranging from academic-oriented challenges that could lead to the withdrawal of some of these students from the institution without a degree through what the students of University of Ibadan termed 'Tsunamiization', or 'sosolusoization'¹ to other challenges that are socio-culturally-based, which in fact could have contributed to the academic-oriented problems.

For most of the new entrants, the fundamental challenge is bridging the gap created by the differences between their home culture and the university culture in order to achieve the primary objective that brought them to the university in the first place, that is getting a degree. When a student moves into unfamiliar culture zone such as the school, Adler (1985) observed that they experience 5 stages of adjustment/acclimation periods, which he calls 'a five stage of a U-curve'. These, according to him, are (a) the 'honey moon stage' when the student feels like a tourist; to (b) depression, when the student is overwhelmed by personal inade-

quacy in the new culture; to (c) hostility, when the student blames the host culture; to (d) autonomy, when the student sees both good and bad aspects in the host culture; and finally to (e) biculturalism, when the student is as comfortable in the host culture as back home' (Adler, 1985 in Pedersen, 1994: 159). However, for Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963), cultural adjustment goes beyond the U-Curve hypothesis, and hence they developed a W-curve hypothesis and argued that those who experienced U-curve acculturation pattern will likely experience same in their return to their home community (Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963 as cited in Onwumechili *et al.*, 2009). Though subsequent scholars have criticized this position and raised other indices that can affect the adjustment patterns of transient such as age, sex, skin colour etc., and subsequently affect the outcome of one who comes in contact with a foreign culture. For instance, Onwumechili *et al.* (2009) contend that "[b]oth the U and W curves failed to acknowledge the possibility of different outcomes for different individuals and instead theorized that all persons are bound to adjust to the host culture" (Onwumechili *et al.*, 2009: 117). Nevertheless, as Onwumechili *et al.*, subsequently noted, the postulations of the U and W curves theorists, contributed immensely in understanding the acculturation pattern of those who successfully adapted to their host culture. And for this reason, the positions of both the U and W curves theorists are still relevant in understanding undergraduate students' encounter with the university culture in Nigeria. Successful adaptation leads to biculturalism, where the migrant is comfortable in both the culture of their host community and home culture. For the student, it is a situation where she/he is comfortable in both cultures - home culture and school culture. In the case of international students, Berry noted that the international student must choose from certain options, which are:

Assimilation, which means giving up the student's cultural identity; integration, which means fitting into the larger social framework; rejection, requiring withdrawal from the larger society; or deculturation, resulting in alienation and a loss of identity (Berry, 1984 in Pedersen 1994: 159).

The university has both the macro and micro cultures. The macro culture is the mainstream framework of thought and training while the micro culture are those divergent cultural practices characterizing different groups and associations within the university space. Among these are associational life as exemplified in ethnic-based associations for instance, and other identifiable cultural practices which are associated with different groups located in the institution such as departmental/faculty peculiarities, religious groups, and clubs/societies within the university environment. In the process of interaction with others, the student interprets and defines situations, develops meanings which directs her action and through these processes continues to construct her own social world (Haralambos *et al.*, 2004: 208). In Nigeria with more than 300 ethnic groups, the universities in the country house students from diverse cultures with their individual cultural peculiarities. Aspects of this cultural distinctiveness are translocalized into the university space through ethnic-based students' associations. Of course, there are also international students with their mark of cultural distinctiveness. These diverse groups of students are expected to adapt to the culture of the university. The space, thus, provides the platform for cultural negotiations to take place - norms and values are re-examined, questioned, accepted or rejected and new ones grafted.

BRIDGING GAPS

Getting admission into the university is a fulfillment of a great dream for most students, particularly those admitted to study their 'dreamed' courses. The excitement of moving to higher educational level, the opportunity for social mobility which higher education offers, and the social status and identity, which a newly admitted student acquires, are part of the reasons for the excitement. However, the first few weeks of moving into the campus prove a challenging experience to the new entrant. The case is not different for the undergrads in the University of Ibadan. As an informant who is now a 400 Level student in Faculty of Agriculture recounted:

I was tired. I was confused. In fact at a point, I wanted to go home. I spent a lot of money calling home. I was worried (400 Level Student, Faculty of Agriculture).

However, there is a minority group of students that does not find the university environment much challenging. These are those students who have been living in the environment all their lives, as one or both of their parents work in the institution, which offers them the opportunity of living in the university residential quarters. For this group of students, however, visitation to their homes is a frequent occurrence. For instance, the student may wake up in the morning, goes home to bathe, have breakfast and from there to classes. She is sure to return after classes to have lunch/dinner before retiring to the hall of residence to sleep. This 'double residence' pattern continues the first few months of admission into the university, until final adaptation to the present reality is achieved.

Generally, however, the challenge of surviving in the university begins with processing admission. Most informants noted the challenges of obtaining necessary clearance from the Admissions Office, and obtaining receipts at the university account office, after payments have been made at the stipulated banks in town; registering at University Health Centre; accessing information from the Internet and filling necessary forms. To others, waking up early to attend classes was a herculean task. Choice making was not easy too. Knowing the right thing to do and where to obtain necessary information to the processes of course registration all require cultural adaptation and adoption that moves the students out of the comfort zone to the immersion in the unfamiliar. For instance, some informants noted that they were confused and did not know which activity to carry out first. According to a 200 Level Anthropology student:

While I was waiting and spending time to register in Jaja (the University Health Centre), I did not know that classes had started. I did not know that I could register at Jaja later. I thought that I needed to do that one first before attending classes (200 Level Anthropology Student).

Permanent accommodation is not readily available for the new students until necessary clearance is obtained. This period is marked by stress, anxiety, uncertainty all mixed up with happiness; happiness, because at last there will no longer be the need to write the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board examination (JAMB), the national entrance examination into a university. This, indeed, is a great expectation! The university is not unaware of the challenges confronting the students, hence, attempts are made to bridge the gap created by cultural differences, and the social dislocation which the students may experience. Certain structures and mechanisms play significant roles. Some of these are examined below:

Students' Affairs Division

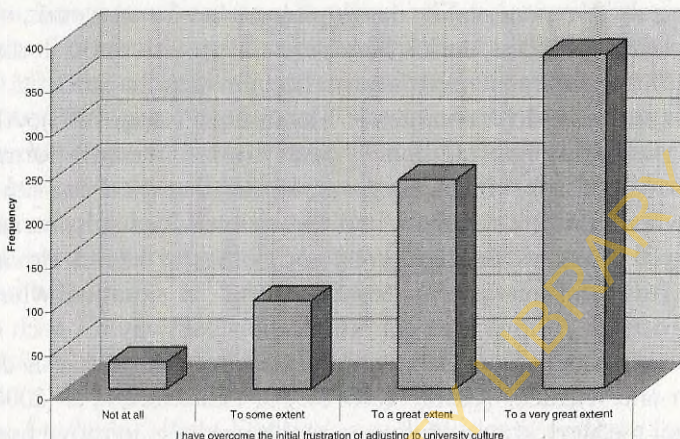
The Students Affairs Division sees to students' welfare on campus. It provides the platform where students' complaints can be channeled and addressed as much as possible. The division looks into such issues as counseling and personal problems, housing, orientation, financial aid, scholarships and prizes, careers etc. Basically, the objective of the division is to "provide an enriching cultural, physical, social and morally uplifting environment for the students as a rewarding complement to his academic work" (UI Student Information Handbook, 2009: 65). Through 'Orientation Programme' anchored by the division, the students are intimated of the diverse service-oriented units in the institution, and workings of the institution generally. Students are made to realize that there exist places where help could be obtained; they are advised on values to pursue and vices they must abstain from. For instance, billboards with inscriptions admonishing students to avoid cultism are strategically placed at certain locations on campus. The students are equally informed of the committees where one could report to when one's freedom or right is threatened by an individual or group. Some of these structures are intended to play the role of 'pseudo parents' to the students while on campus. Yet, it is the duty of the individual student to make use of the structures.

Peer Mentoring

In a learning community such as the university, mentoring assists the mentees (or protégés) in developing a plan for academic, social and career success; enrich their personal growth through contact with university environment and acclimatize the students to life on campus (Melon Academic Mentoring Project, 2003). Although mentoring has traditionally been divided into two (formal or informal), Clarke (2005), however, argues that there are situations where both the mentor and the mentee mutually benefit from each other as the two assist each other to attend similar goals. This, she refers to as "co-mentoring", a situation where there exists "a reciprocated communication pathway for each of the participants in the relationship and equal role status of the mentor and mentee" (Clarke 2005: 3). For Pelliccione *et al* (2004), informal mentoring is "a lifeline to enable students to move from a state of disequilibrium to a more comfortable state" (Pelliccione *et al*, 2004: 9). For the female undergraduate student in University of Ibadan, informal mentoring, achieved through social interactions, helps her to acclimatize, bridges the gaps between the home and the university cultures, and to develop positive behavioural change by dropping 'non-conforming' behaviours. Citing Kerka (1998), Clarke observed that the essence of informal mentoring is the establishment of interpersonal relationships based upon effective communication. Mentors in informal mentoring relationships provide direction, support and insights and, essentially for the mentees, with "a sense of what they are becoming" (Debolt, 1992 as cited in Clarke 2005: 4). The major feature of informal mentoring is spontaneity. Relationships are formed spontaneously through people getting to know each other in the university environment. Interestingly, the major observation in the nature of informal mentoring among the students in the university is interchangeability of roles. Ability to provide necessary information that saves peers from additional stress is a good reason for the emergence of a possible 'temporary mentor'. Respondents also acknowledged other advantages of informal mentoring which include development of good interpersonal relationship, establishment of bonding between the mentor and mentee and helping

the mentee overcome her challenges and achieve successful adaptation as demonstrated in the chart below:

A Chart on Adaptation to the University Culture



The above chart shows result of students' adaptation to the university culture: 'I have overcome the initial frustration of adjusting to university culture' where 82.5% of the total respondents show that they have overcome the initial frustration of adjusting to university culture and 17.5% of the total respondents disagreed. Obviously, overtime, as the students interact with their peers, observe and respond positively to their situation, and avail themselves of the opportunities provided by the institution, a larger percentage of the students tends to overcome the initial frustration, adjust successfully to the university culture, as they conform to socio-cultural expectations. Findings also demonstrate students' desire for more staff involvement in mentoring undergraduate students.

Creating Spaces: Students in Cultural Negotiation

As the new entrant continues to interact with her new environment, the undergrad continues to identify what she perceives to be the culture of her new environment which she must adapt to. Overtime, she begins to realize that the university is 'a melting pot of cultures', a process where people from diverse ethnic and racial

backgrounds come to interact, free of constraints as it were, in the life of the larger community (Bennet, 1990: 86), while maintaining a mainstream culture undiluted by the sub-cultures. The undergraduate student also discovers that she needs psycho-social support which could be obtained through group membership. As Axelson rightly notes, "Identification with a group has both positive and negative ramifications. Group life and group membership brings a sense of security and belonging, a fulfilling of human gregariousness" (Axelson, 1985: 125).

Part of the culture of the university community is identification with one group or the other. Being a student implies that one is already affiliated to a particular department. This is compulsory. However, there are other 'secondary' groups, which include social clubs, religious groups, and ethnic-based associations, which are also part of the university culture. That is, part of the micro-culture of the university. Although not compulsory, these multiple groups are open to those students who wish to identify with any, and so contribute to the student's overall transformation into a university product.

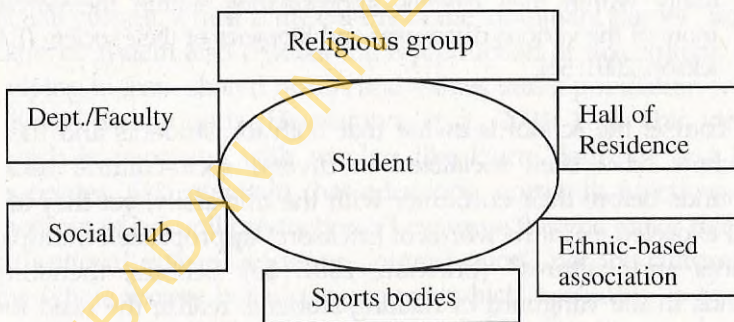


Figure 2: *Students' Multiple Group Membership*

The university environment through associational life offers the student a leeway to evolve a new identity. The school socializes students to acquire the knowledge, attitudes (which include open-mindedness, a sense of freedom, respect for the rights of others *et cetera*), and skills needed to function effectively in each cultural setting, to gain the competencies that will enable them to

function within and across other micro cultures in their society, within the national macro culture, and within the world community (Banks, 2001: 7 – 8).

The culture of the university is aimed at inculcating in the students new ways of speaking, of thinking. Erickson (2001) sums this function thus:

Schools are collection sites for diversity of voices and identity. Schools ask of students that they try on new discourses, new ways of speaking and thinking, new ways of being a self, and to appropriate them as their own (Erickson, 2001: 53).

This cultural exchange processes are not limited to the students. Their teachers who interact with these students on day to day basis are inclusive and, therefore, part of this agency. Erickson, again hints:

[S]chools ask this [i.e. try new discourses] of teachers as well, in order that they may come into closer awareness of and engagement with the voices of their students and also develop intellectually within their careers, appropriating within themselves more of the various discourses and literacies of their society (Erickson, 2001: 53).

Of course, the school is aware that both the students and their teachers have been socialized in diverse socio-cultural backgrounds before their encounter with the university, yet they are still expected to, in the words of Erickson, “appropriated multiple voices and cultures” (Erickson, 2001: 53). Schools, therefore, stands in the vanguard of making students realize the need for their transformation, learn, for instance, to “live together harmoniously in a world that is becoming smaller and smaller, and if you believe that greater social equality will result if students learn to respect one another regardless of race, class, gender, or disability (Grant and Sleeter, 2001: 65).

In the halls of residence, particularly among room-mates, students learn to tolerate one another, and at times generate enduring friendship among members, and help one another to ne-

gotiate their challenging experience. According to a fourth-year Geography student:

Aaaah! Initially I never liked my room-mate. We quarrelled several times. I could not understand her. She could not understand me. But do you know what? By the time we finished the session, we have become the best of friends. We had to beg the hall warden to allow two of us to stay in the say room the following session (400 Level Geography Student).

By implication, room-mates help one another to drop 'non-conforming' behaviour, as well as accept behavioural differences by learning to tolerate one another. This further helps the student to develop broad-mindedness in her interaction with other students, and thereby challenging one another to accept differences.

Social scientist like Durkheim, posit that the major function of education is the 'transmission of society's norms and values' (see Haralambos *et al.* 2004: 173) and university products stand in the vanguard of that agency. This functionalist perspective implies that students in educational institution are socialized into a particular culture, which is the culture of the 'dominant classes'. Educational system also ensures the reproduction of this culture, by helping to instil shared norms and values into a population with diverse backgrounds (Haralambos *et al.*, 2004: 173). This view, which is associated with scholars like Pierre Bourdieu and his associates, also maintain that education primarily functions as medium of cultural production. They argue that the major role of educational system is 'cultural reproduction', not the culture of the whole society but of the groups, which, according to them, have the power to "impose meanings and impose them as legitimate", by defining their own culture as "worthy of being sought and possessed, and establish it as the basis for knowledge in the educational system" (Haralambos *et al.*, 2004: 215).

University students in Nigeria and elsewhere, emerge from diverse socio-cultural and economic backgrounds, pass through the university, and are sent back into the larger society to help to propagate the cultural values imbibed in HEIs. Erickson puts it this way:

Culture shapes and is shaped by the learning and teaching that happen during the practical conduct of daily life within all the educational settings we encounter as learning environments throughout the human life span, in families, in school classrooms, in community settings, and in the workplace (Erickson, 2001: 32).

While the students pass through the university, they are expected to 'unlearn culture', their individual cultures imported into the educational environment, that is 'shedding it off' as well as adopting a new culture that is made available. Not only through curriculum design are cultural issues addressed but also through intra- and intergroup interactions. In fact, Erickson puts it more succinctly, "[A]t every moment in the conduct of educational practice, cultural issues and choices are at stake" (Erickson, 2001: 32-33).

Undoubtedly, embedded in the mandate of the university is the creation of free space for students' potential development and transformation. This role is unequivocally articulated in Mission Statements. For instance, for UNESCO, any action that impinges upon the overall development of students is regarded as violation of academic freedom. Through the processes of social interaction in the university cultural environment, the student begins to perceive the self as autonomous entity and capable of playing important role in the transformation of the larger society. The university also makes the students to believe that the future of their society and country depends on their action or inaction. Hence, the students begin to select and drop cultures, values, and to recreate values that shape their identity. This is also achieved through the various outlets within the university space where the students can express themselves constructively. While some may decide to join religious group, others may opt for different clubs and societies, including clandestine ones! Yet, others may choose to go with social clubs and ethnic associations. Students are increasingly recognizing the need to engage in activities outside academics, and religion, which they believe is predominant in the institution. For most of the informants, University of Ibadan is

“too academic conscious”. Also, informants are quick to point out that the dominating influence of religious activities on campus deprives the students of the opportunity of acquiring other social skills which are necessary for survival outside the university environment. According to a third year Economics student:

You know, this thing is not good. Everything is book, book, book. Or church. No social life. If a student that attends parties has problem with her studies they say ‘It is because she attends parties.’ But when a student that attends church activities is told to withdraw, they don’t blame her. You can’t drink alcohol, they will condemn you. I drink alcohol because in my home we drink. My mum drinks. I’m different. Nobody should condemn me (300 Level Economics Student).

For this category of students, the university social space is constricting. And this deprives people of her kind of the opportunity of having fulfilling complete social life on campus. For instance, condemnation of beer/alcohol drinking by her peers is depriving her of enjoying what she loves. For that, she is not free. In addition, functional students’ unionism, which some students believe, will equip them with the leadership skills needed to participate in shaping the affairs of their country in the future has been suspended at the time of this study due to court injunction. At their immediate situation, however, the informants believe functional students’ unionism will enable them to present a common front in bringing before the university authorities any challenge they may confront.² Although, while the litigation between the university and the former Students’ Union body was ongoing, the authorities of the institution inaugurated students’ representative body known as ‘Caretaker Committee’ for the negotiation of issues with the authorities and *vis versa*. This, the informants, however, believe is inadequate as the new body is not as dynamic and confrontational as most of the students would wish. Nevertheless, for the generality of the informants, the university space has provided for them a space for dynamic encounters.

CONCLUSION

The thrust of this paper has been to examine the female undergraduate students' encounter with the university culture, and their negotiation of their new environment. The argument in the paper is that though at the initial contact, the student finds the environment unwelcoming, felt lonely and abandoned, overtime, she begins to adapt to that environment. Informal mentoring among peers plays key role in their successful adaptation. At the initial point also, the university through certain structures and mechanisms such as programmes anchored by Students' Affairs Division, which function as integrative apparatuses, assists the new entrant in cultural adaptation. Besides, because the university environment provokes the students to think and act 'differently', the student also is exposed to other processes of transformation. Students' multiple group membership and participation in these groups also demonstrate the integrative role of social formations within the university and their contribution in expanding the students' social worlds. Thus, the university provides enabling environment for the students to bridge cultural gaps, and creates spaces for them to negotiate a new identity. As Onwumechili *et al.*, rightly affirmed, "identity is not created in isolation but it is only understood, developed, changed, or modified in the process of interacting and relating with others" (Onwumechili *et al.*, 2009: 123). This, in any case, does not occlude the need for more staff involvement, through formal mentoring system for undergraduate students, in engendering positive intercultural encounters for students within the university space.

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks go to my research assistants, and the undergraduate students of University of Ibadan for their participation in filling the questionnaires and responding to oral interviews that produced this paper. I also thank the executive committee members of the female halls of residence, and the Hall Wardens of these halls for granting me interviews. Above all, I am most grateful to MacArthur Foundation for the award of the research grant for the research project from which this paper was extracted.

NOTES

1. 'Tsunamization', or 'sosolusoization' connotes 'destruction', which means 'being told to withdraw from the university due to poor academic performance'. The terms were derived from two major occurrences respectively: (i) Tsunami, which took place in Indian Ocean in 2004, with devastating effects on countries in the Southeast Asia and beyond, (ii) The plane crash in Nigeria in 2005 that involved 'Sosoluso Aircraft' where lives were lost.

2. This study was carried out within a historical context. At the period of the study, 2009 - 2010, students' unionism under Students' Union Government was suspended on campus due to court injunction. At the time of publication of this paper, however, the ban has been lifted.

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