

SUFFERING AND SMILING: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Should suffering obliterate happiness? Genuine happiness is not a weak and fleeting emotion that shrivels at the first hint of hardship, but, rather, something much more resilient, unshakable and deeply rooted in us. If happiness depends on health, financial security, power, electricity, good road and social amenities, then most Nigerians will not be happy. The way Nigerians react to what others would see as the last straw has made them as a people very difficult to wear out. For many years now, Nigerians have died on the roads that our government will not tar; people die in the hospitals that will not be equipped; people die on the streets that is not secured; and morning afterwards, those who are left among the living will rise very early and rinse their faces and continue. Nigerians have lived under dictators of all shades, benevolent, repressive and civilian. They have seen genocide, massacres and bombs. But then this is Nigeria! It is still Nigeria! A happy nation amidst these challenges!

Keywords: Suffering, Smiling, Nigeria, Happiness, Experience

Introduction

Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence. Aristotle.

The topic of this article is a very famous cliché in Nigeria that has been used in so many contexts, rightly and wrongly. It's a title of a song by the famous afrobeat musician Fela, saying that religious leaders are enjoying themselves, while the common people suffer in cramped spaces daily. It has been on record that Nigerians are chronically happy people, and some of the happiest people in the world.

My point basically is not to dwell on this so much but give some philosophical insight into what it means to be truly happy amidst all the difficulties and challenges that the topic suggests. *Trying to be cool will never make you cool.*

Likewise, trying to be happy will never make you happy. I say this because happiness like many other emotions, is not obtained but inhabited¹. Just like a confident man does not wonder if he is confident, a happy person does not wonder if he is happy. He simply is. This topic came to mind in a recent discussion I had with some friends who insist I should be on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, *it is going to make me happy*. That is their point. It is true that as humans we naturally want to be happy. This explains why a lot of young people today spend a greater part of their day on social media chasing the things they believe will make them happy – even when those things are based on empty promises and the fake life of social media, which has led so many to work hard to achieve a standard of happiness they find acceptable. In doing so they lose sight of the fact the happiness comes from within. Mandy Hale said, *“Happiness is an inside job. Don’t assign anyone else that much power over your life.”*²

One reason Nigerians suffer and smile is because of the parlance: *“e go beta.”* At this we postpone our happiness until a time in the future when everything is perfect. We think that we have to struggle now to enjoy happiness later; when a person marries the right person, when you get the job of your dream, when you make sufficient money. We put off our happiness until conditions are perfect, at this point therefore, we need to realize that conditions will never be perfect, there will always be something happening, but along the way there will be lots of perfection sprinkled into our lives and that is what we should learn to appreciate. Don Drapper was once asked what happiness is and he defined it as *“the moment before you need more happiness.”* This may sound cynical as it is, but the brilliance of his definition lies in the fact that we rarely notice happiness while we are experiencing it, we only notice a lack of it when it is no longer there.

¹ What I am implying here is that finding happiness is not achieved in itself, it is rather the side effect of a particular set of ongoing life experiences. In Nigeria for example we confuse what it means to be happy and we present it these days as a goal in and of itself. My point therefore is that we cannot buy nor achieve happiness. Despite the misguided notion that suffering makes us better people, the fact is that happiness is good for everyone. It matters a lot for Nigerians. Happy people are more helpful, more productive and more loyal. This will help us understand better if Nigerians are truly a happy people. This is because surprisingly in Nigeria, the things we believe will make us happy don’t have much effect on our sense of wellbeing. A high IQ doesn’t make you happier. I know some really intelligent friends who are miserable. Is it money? Far from it. The more a person has, the more he wants to have. Within a short period of time he becomes scared!

² Michelle Robin, Happy New Year | Mandy Hale and Happiness, [internet]. [cited 2020 Jul 13]. Available from: <https://www.drnichellerobin.com/mandy-hale-happiness/>

Happiness and Pleasure

Happiness is one thing everyone wants and we spend our lives pursuing it, but these days it appears to be becoming elusive. Many people today spend a lot of time and energy seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, because many of us are pleasure seeking beings, at least from my experience. And we generally hope that by doing this, we will be happy. Undoubtedly, pleasure feels good, but it is not the same as happiness. It is correlated with happiness but does not cause it. There is a very enormous difference between happiness and pleasure. The latter is a momentary feeling that is generated from external things; for instance, having a good meal, progress in business, sex and many others. It has to do with positive experiences of the senses, and when things fall in place. Pleasurable experiences can give momentary feelings of happiness, but of course, the happiness does not last because it is dependent on external events and experiences. A friend of mine said pleasure is a god of false hope. Happiness on the other hand is within us as I mentioned earlier. But apart from being inherent, it is something we have to cultivate intentionally, though this cultivation looks different for everyone.

A young friend I have seen as a young happy man, humanly speaking. He married a beautiful lady, with a kid and working and earning good salary. He posts a lot of picture of him, the wife and the kid every single day. As with many Nigerian men, he loves watching football especially when his favorite club plays, he will make so much noise and feel so good when they win. I noticed he started posting writings that suggested betrayal on the part of his friends and how people don't appreciate the good he has done to them. I told him to stop. He did for a while and started again, but I didn't say anything anymore. He called me one night and was so bitter, and I noticed his desire all along has been to make others do things his own way. From our discussion I noticed that whenever things work out the way he wants he felt a momentary pang of pleasure, and if not, he became judgmental, feeling rejected by others and saw himself as a failure. We have both come to realize that happiness is choosing to be kind, and gentle other than the desire to control others and being judgmental.

The aim of the wise is not to secure pleasure, but to avoid pain.³ Aristotle.

³ Pleasure and Happiness Quotes, | AZ Quotes, [internet]. [cited 2020 Jul 10]. Available from: [https://www.azquotes.com/quotes/topics/pleasure-and-happiness.html#:~:text=Pleasure%20may%20come%20from%20illusion,can%20come%20only%](https://www.azquotes.com/quotes/topics/pleasure-and-happiness.html#:~:text=Pleasure%20may%20come%20from%20illusion,can%20come%20only%20)

Nigerians make fun of virtually every situation in the country. And many think that comedy is happiness. It is NOT. Comedy can be happiness, but it is not exclusively happiness. So many of us are deluded into believing that comedy is happiness because the result of good comedy is laughter, and we equate laughter with happiness. It is not a given that we laugh when we are happy – laughter is a nervous reaction to an intellectual construct, either spoken or visual. Happiness is altogether a different state of mind – like when you watch a child play. Comedy is not happiness, it is an intellectual and artistic pursuit exactly like painting or poetry or mathematics. You can get happiness out of it – and it tends to swindle by making us think we will inevitably gain happiness by chasing it – but it is not in itself a mental act that ipso facto engenders happiness in the practitioner. It is a craft, like chair-making. Carpenters are pleased when they make a good chair, so are comedians when they put on a good performance or write a good script.

Happiness and Positivity

We cannot control what people say about us or to us, and definitely not even what they think about us. Reason why most Nigerians will say “*I no send.*” I often tell my friends that my responsibility is to my truth, my health, my vocation and the people around. This includes choosing positivity and smiling even when I don’t want to. One obvious fact about Nigerians is that they are authentically positive people who are happy with their lives and they create fun from every difficult situation. They are not perfect people, in many parts of Nigeria there are no roads, no electricity, no portable water, no health systems and yet there they are, upbeat, unbroken and resilient people. No Nigerian is in denial about the ups and downs in the whole situation, from corruption, security and all. They have accepted what is, but they won’t accept that that is all there is. And they say: “*Ogadimma*” (an Igbo saying, meaning, it will be fine or it will be better).

When we look at Nigerians they always appear to be insanely happy regardless of what is going on in the country. We see and hear so many screaming and lamenting on the streets and television of all that is going on. After just few minutes these same people are celebrating and dancing somewhere. You may think we all have collective dementia or they are a dysfunctional people. Denying negative emotions leads to deeper and more prolonged negative

[20of%20reality.&text=Happiness%20is%20different%20from%20pleasure,struggling%20and%20enduring%20and%20accomplishing.&text=Pleasure%20is%20very%20seldom%20found,comm only%20kindled%20by%20unexpected%20sparks.](#)

emotions and emotional dysfunction. Amidst all these, what is important is to remember that negative emotions are necessary and healthy for maintaining a stable baseline happiness in a person's life.⁴ The Stoic philosopher Epictetus said that *"We can't choose our external circumstances, but we can always choose how we respond to them."*⁵ I think this is what many Nigerians live by. You hear many say *"wetin man go do?"* Timaya said in his song *"I can't kill myself."* This reflects the foundation of Nigerians' positive attitude towards the situations in the country. In coping with that they choose their attitude towards it, face the difficulty in the eye with defiance and feel it. They learn from it and think of ways to get through it with time. Unfortunately, this may be the reason why "things don't work in Nigeria" as many people believe. That is why many times you hear the phrase *"only in Nigeria"*. This is only said on the negative aspect, to say that in Nigeria everything goes. But Marcus Aurelius beautifully describes Nigeria's attitude: *"And anyone who pursues pleasure as good, and avoids pain as evil, is guilty of impiety."* Yes, Nigerians pursue pleasure to the fullest, but do not run away from pain when it comes.

People say Nigerians are always in a rush and everyone is angry, but my experience differ because I think we there are two ways of expressing the negative emotions that come as a result of the situation in our country that we often hear that Nigerians are not patient. First, we express negative emotions in a socially acceptable and healthy manner and secondly, we express them in a way that aligns with our Nigerian values. For example, non-violence is a value in Nigeria; therefore, when Nigerians get angry, they express the anger by raining insults but they will hardly go physical by throwing punches.

Positivity is not the same as happiness. We should avoid the idea that we will always be positive and feel good regardless of what happens, we should as well, avoid thinking that nothing good can come out of Nigeria again. *Ogadimma!*

Happiness and Religion

One question that has plagued happiness scientists is whether religious faith can make people happier. J. S Mbiti said that *"Africans are notoriously religious."* Meaning you cannot separate them from religion. So, it makes sense that religion

⁴ Mark Manson, Stop Trying to be Happy, | The Key to Finding Happiness, [internet]. [cited 2020 Jul 13]. Available from: <https://markmanson.net/stop-trying-to-be-happy>

⁵ N.A. Turner, Why Pain and Suffering Are Necessary if You Want to Feel Happy, | The Ascent, [internet]. [cited 2020 Jul 10]. Available from: <https://medium.com/the-ascent/why-pain-and-suffering-are-necessary-if-you-want-to-feel-happy-dca7ec436ff4>

could bring meaning to people's lives, but meaning is not necessarily the same as happiness – even if it provides people with other benefits. In Nigeria being religious mostly means attending religious activities and being part of a social network, which tends to make people happier. It is hard therefore to figure out the impact of faith from other factors, like community on happiness. Religion affects people's happiness in many ways. Religions offer the prospect of substantial benefits after the end of a person's earthly life: like entry into heaven, salvation, favorable reincarnation and so on. Even before a person gets to enjoy such distant fruits of religious devotion, being a member of a particular religion already yields a variety of tangible benefits, like spiritual guidance, social contacts, emotional and material support in times of need, conflict resolution, and the likes. It doesn't end at only the benefits. Religious membership is not that so easy, because religions typically bring with them an array of restrictions such as prohibitions on a person's behavior, dietary restrictions, what constitutes acceptable clothing, restrictions on circumstances under which men and women can mix and interact, embrace of modern technology.

Nigerians find a whole lot of solace in religion. Lasting happiness cannot be found in the acquisition of objects, substances, activities, states of mind or relationships. It resides in the simple knowing of our being as it truly is. This is the point at which some people find happiness in religion. As a priest, I know that religious people have a mind-set; the power of prayer, the belief in the life-after, knowing that someone is looking after you, that there is a higher power, that things happen for a reason. This mind-set helps believers make sense of tragedy, struggles and loss. Religion is about helping others and having them look after you. Many believers have the desire to feel that they matter, that their suffering and hard work are not done in futility, and that their lives have a purpose. They need to feel a sense of control over their fates. They need a reason to focus beyond just themselves. A research affirms that belonging to a secular friend group that engages in meaningful activities and shares a social identity might boost life satisfaction (happiness).⁶

Happiness and Politics

This is one very interesting area of discussion in Nigeria. Everyone talks politics in Nigeria. The World Happiness Report of 2017 ranked Nigerians as the 6th

⁶ Stephanie Pappas, Why Religion Makes People Happier, | Live Science, [internet]. [cited 2020 Jul 13]. Available from: <https://www.livescience.com/9090-religion-people-happier-hint-god.html>

happiest people in Africa and the 95th happiest people in the world of the 155 countries that are covered. This surely is not surprising because Nigerians have a long history of being happy. Or as Fela put it, 'Suffering and Smiling.' A 2003 World Value Survey revealed that the world's happiest people lived in Nigeria. This study was carried out over a period of three years. In a Gallup poll conducted in 2012, it revealed that Africans were the most optimistic people in the world. In Nigeria specifically, 88% of people are optimistic about their futures.⁷ I know some people will not accept this position, but it does not change the fact that optimistic people tend to expect more positive things to happen than the negative. But what is the case in the Nigerian situation? Nigerians have every reason to despair, politicians have always been about themselves, families and very close associates. Many don't care about the masses who voted them into office. And my concern is about these masses, and at the end they are still optimistically resilient. The most important thing is that optimistic approach to life is key to attain happiness. There is a deep connection between optimism and happiness as optimism reflects hope and faith which help Nigerians believe that for sure the country may not be good presently, but will eventually be some day. This is enshrined in the National Anthem: "*The labor of our heroes past, shall never be in vain.*" Whatever we need to achieve in Nigeria I believe we need to make our world of thoughts filled positivity. So, in Nigeria, achieving happiness is possible only when we do not allow pessimism to overtake our mental space. Optimism does indeed affect our level of happiness. We can therefore harness the benefits of this trait in order to achieve a better quality of life. As Winston Churchill once said, "Optimists see opportunities in every difficulty."⁸ The topic of happiness is a subjective quality and that is why it matters, because how people feel is their deepest reality and it is the way we should think about the quality of the person's life. How is their life as they themselves experience it, not as we think it might be. The law of unintended consequences states that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. For instance, if we take the school teaching profession, we know that the most important predictor of whether a young person will be a happy adult is not the grades they get but whether they are happy at school. It would make a huge difference if we could get away from the

⁷ Yemisi Adegoke, Nigerians are still happy, this is a problem, | The Guardian, [internet]. [cited 2020 Jul 13]. Available from: <https://guardian.ng/features/nigerians-are-still-happy-this-is-a-problem/>

⁸ The Importance of Optimism During Challenging Times, | Calling All Optimists, [internet]. [cited 2020 Jul 13]. Available from: <https://www.callingalloptimists.com/the-importance-of-optimism-during-challenging-times/>

focus on exams as the main purpose of education, which sets people such a burden of responsibility to themselves. A happy society has to be explicitly aimed for, it should never come as a byproduct. This is because it is so easy to get diverted into things that are more obviously measurable. So what has happened is that because income can be measured, income then has become the totem pole at the level of the country and the GDP. This is the thing that politicians feel is critical – but we know that the way people vote in elections is not influenced as much by people’s economic status as satisfaction with other aspects of their lives.

To Sum It Up...

While we are experiencing difficulties in almost every sector of the Nigerian society, it does not mean we should stop thinking about our future with hope. Right now, more than ever, it is important to embrace a positive mindset as much as we can. Let us remember that happiness is not some complex concept or the luxury life of our politicians that we think is beyond our reach. As I said earlier, happiness is something inherent within ourselves and it is only truly possible when we give it to ourselves. It is natural, and lasting, state of being that can be unlocked by the power of our personal will and sense of self. Being happy is about understanding not only ourselves, but what we want from life and empowering ourselves to pursue the things that give our lives meaning and purpose.

Sometimes when I listen to news, from the headlines you know things are not going the way they should, but I can’t remain on that level always. Many times, I pray. Sometimes I hiss. I have come to realize that living a happier life comes down to changing and working on the simple things and routines that make us who we are. Many times, I go to YouTube to revisit old Super matches and I relish those happy moments. Our parents have always reminded us that things were better at their own time (*the old good days!*), now we see the way things have turned out to be, so we believe too that things will be better, and soon! Let us re-engage our creative side to get back in touch with the things that make us feel confident and fulfilled. Only when we learn how to accept who we are and what we want can we truly unlock the happiness that awaits us at our core. Let us remember too that happiness varies from hour to hour, day to day, month to month, but there tends to be an underlying trend in our lives. I will say I have been lucky, my friends keep telling me that nothing worries me. And I think on the whole I have had a happy life. I have gained a lot from what I have learned, because I had to start to inquire into why I feel the way I do always, both in

terms of being more aware of other people's feelings but also in being better able to distance myself from the negative thoughts and feelings that all of us have from time to time. People meeting me for the first time mostly say I look to serious, but coming closer realize something completely different.

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