

# Influence Of Cultural Diversity Among Artisans On Construction Sites In Abuja-Nigeria

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**Abstract :** *Migration of people from one place to the other nationally and internationally has given rise to diverse workforce which have added more value to many organisations including construction firms. Construction firms should be realistic about the diversity of different tribes on site and explore adequate measures aimed at effective management of this diversity. There are varied distributions of tribes on construction sites. This varied distribution affects the behaviour and effectiveness of site workers. Hence, this study appraises cultural diversity in construction sites in Abuja through combination of personal observations and structured interviews at twenty construction sites. Twenty sites were carefully observed and ten managers were interviewed for this study. The findings show the level of mixture of tribes on the construction sites, the languages of expression among the varied site workers and their interaction with one another as they interact and work together. It is very important for the construction firms to put measures in place to explore the advantages of diverse workforce as well as mitigate on the minuses to boost productivity. It is therefore expedient for the construction firms to create cultural awareness on sites translating the safety slogans, sign posts in different languages that are representative of the workforce in order to have optimum productivity.*

**Keywords :** *Construction Site, Diversity, Language, Migration, Tribe*

## INTRODUCTION

Managing diversity is vital and a key to benefitting greatly from ever increasing diverse workforce in multicultural organisations. Managing diversity becomes imperative due to the staff distribution and cultural status of construction workforce which can be homogenous or heterogeneous or combination of both. It is not abnormal that some sections of work on construction sites are homogenous due to the nature of the work and the skill required which may not be uniformly distributed but can only be obtained from some particular tribes on site. This disparity in staff distribution may increase challenges among the ethnic groups that if not adequately managed, can affect the overall productivity and reputation of the company which employed them (Loosemore, Phua, Dunn and

Ozguç, 2010). Placing the right people for job is a skill that every manager and supervisor should acquire for successful management of the team.

The styles of management differ from one organisation to the other. While some manage based on the educational knowledge acquired, others manage based on the experience acquired over the period of time from working on the site. Success therefore, demands efficiency from both the managers and the diverse workers on site whose main objective should be how to get the work done in collaboration with other members of the team. Although diversity is a double edged sword, managers always should see it from the positive perspective and tap the benefits it offers to the organisations.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

The construction industry all over the world is made up of culturally diverse workforce and the reality on ground shows that Nigeria is not an exception and Abuja in particular. Over the years, the construction industry has seen a great transformation as a result of increase in technology developed by people of different cultural background (Loosemore, *et al.*, 2010). From the Bureau of Labour Statistics (2003), high rate of fatality among the Hispanics due to accidents on sites is a continuous occurrence as a result of inability to read safety sign posts in a language other than their own, which consequently affects their productivity on sites. Also Ngowi and Mothibi (1996) found that cultural differences constituted the major cause for seeing safety procedures differently on construction sites in Botswana. Trajkovski and Loosemore (2006) examined the Australian construction industry, where non-English speaking migrant workers fill a high proportion of trade positions and rely on their native language to communicate on the job site. The authors find that such behaviours create "linguistic ghettos" on the jobsite which inhibit integration and development of second language skills. One of the primary dangers of such linguistic ghettos is an inability of migrant workers to interpret safety warnings.

Communication problems caused by language barriers are one of the major challenges affecting work and social relations between different ethnic groups on construction sites. Loosemore and Lee (2003) discovered that the association of certain trades with certain ethnic groups (Italians in concreting, Koreans in tiling, and Chinese in plaster boarding) deepens the complexity of language problems. Since each ethnic group tends to specialise in a particular trade, the workers of each trade tend to use their first language at the workplace. They further stated that the intensity of communication problems become more challenging when workers of different subcontractors have to work together.

### Nigeria Ethnically

Following New Guinea and Indonesia, Nigeria is the third most linguistically and ethnically diverse nation in the world (Mohammed, *et al.*, 2008). This reflects a highly ethnically diverse nation and an obvious reality of the challenges of a real culturally diverse society. This diversity affects every area of the economy including the construction industry where large numbers of people of diverse ethnic groups with variation of cultural patterns (Roger and Mallam, 2003); religion, language and way of life are found working together. The relative resources and riches of the country and the large size of some ethnic groups have given rise to the expression of their ethnicity in outstanding and sometimes problematic ways (Roger and Mallam, 2003). Nigeria being a country with multiple ethnic groups is susceptible to conflicts emanated from cultural differences.

### Ethnic Dominance

The dominance of a particular ethnic group in a particular sector of the economy has an important implication for the equality. In the society, it can be seen clearly that a particular ethnic group has dominance over the other, that is, majority versus minority and the exclusion of minority in certain employment. This ethnic problem as seen in our society is reproduced in the Nigerian workplaces (Roger and Mallam, 2003).

According to Nnoli (1978), there are some obvious features of ethnicity as highlighted below:

- Ethnicity entails an element of common consciousness compared with other ethnic groups
- Ethnicity is present in a country that is made up of multiple ethnic groups
- Ethnicity brings about the formation of in-group and out-groups in agreement with the social identity theory.

Diversity is an important issue because the demographic composition of employees has changed drastically as more ethnic groups have now entered the



workforce especially in the construction industry due to rural-urban migration in search of better living conditions. To be successful, organisations need diverse employees as a resource to improve performance. Experience has shown that the quality of decision making in terms of diverse employees is richer and broader. Work, promotions, and rewards must be allocated in a fair and equitable manner.

## METHODOLOGY

A combination of methods (personal observation and structured interview) was adopted in the study. Kothari (2004) stated that observation is a method that is widely adopted in behavioural sciences which has to do with the researcher gathering data by direct observation without asking the respondent (unit of analysis). The structured non-participant observation method described by Kothari (2004) was adopted. In a related development, structured interviews according to Haigh (2008) involve the interviewer asking the interviewee a list of predetermined questions, Hence, the same questions are asked to all the persons who will be interviewed. This approach due to the standardisation of questions asked, reliability of the results and the conclusions that will be reached are enhanced (Haigh, 2008). Similarly, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) are of the opinion that standardising the interviews ensures comparisons to be made between the interviewees. As a result of the above reasons advanced by Haigh (2008) and Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011), the approach adopted for the interview sessions was the structured interview with both closed and open ended questions asked from the interviewees. Twenty (20) construction sites were observed, while 10 managers using purposive sampling technique were selected from the construction sites visited. The personal observation was done on 20 construction sites in Abuja; each site was observed for a period of thirty minutes. The categories of people observed were the sites personnel. The sampling unit of this study consisted of

construction firms in Abuja (20), basically medium construction firms were measured in terms of the workforce size. The observation and the interviews carried out were analysed using content analysis.

## FINDINGS

### Personal Observation

#### *Cultural Dimension And Status*

The distribution of staff along ethnic group into different trade on construction sites in Abuja was observed. The distribution of staff in the twenty selected construction sites along a particular trade were not uniform. In some sites Yoruba dominates as Artisans while at some sites, other tribes are seen working as Artisans. In most of the sites, the iron bending work is a mix of the Gwaris, Yoruba, Igbo, Tiv and Hausa. Majority of the labourers are Hausas.

#### *Interaction*

The major language used on the sites observed was majorly Pidgin language, little of English during communication with member of dissimilar tribes, for instance, Hausa and other local dialects such as Tiv, Ebira, Akwa-ibom were also spoken. The interaction in local languages was conspicuous during break time. Also, there was a particular site where all the sites workers were from Republic of Benin and hence the workforce was homogenous. Most of the tribes especially the Hausas segregated in group to interact at a particular time such as break time. Notwithstanding this social identity, cross cultural friendly interactions were also observed. The social identity does not deplete cross-cultural friendly interactions despite a few cases of misunderstandings among the tribes. Various challenges of a multi-cultural workforce as it affected ethnicity, gender and religion were observed. Women were not seen working all entire sites visited. Most of the women seen were cooks while majority of the site personnel were male.

The conflicts on sites and their causes were observed. There was an unpleasant exchange of words between



two operators involving a Yoruba man and an Igbo man over the issue of parking of a bulldozer. The use of abusive languages with gender strife was also noticed. There was also an exchange of words among the persons of different tribes that diverted the attention of others from their work.

Various in-group and out-group activities were observed physically on the selected construction sites in Abuja. Activities such as eating together, discussions which serve as a form of social gathering among the tribes were observed during the break time. Most of the workers break into their affiliated tribes during break time to discuss together.

### Strategies

The style of diversity management employed was observed. The absence of cultural awareness slogans, stickers, and signboards in different languages representative of the diverse workforce depict that there were no cultural awareness programme

instituted on the sites for the sites personnel. This shows the indifferent attitude and lack of commitment of the management to cultural diversity management.

### Neutrality In Judgement When Conflict Arises

Many of the tribes have been able to adapt and integrate themselves to the general local language, Hausa. Nonetheless, the Hausas are still taking time to adapt to the most of the sites visited as they stick together. It was also observed that in cases of conflicts, there seemed to be alliance formed to support their tribes even when the person is wrong.

## THE INTERVIEW

### Homogenous/Heterogeneous Tribes

Majority of the managers/supervisors interviewed, stated that most of their sites workers are heterogeneous giving the reason for unequal distribution of craftsmen across ethnic groups and scarcity of skilled workers.

**Table 1 : Summary Of The Content Analysis**

Cultural dimension and status	Yoruba dominate as Artisans while at other sites other tribes are seen mostly working as Artisans. In most of the sites, the iron bending work is a mix of the Gwaris, Yoru ba, Igbo, Tiv and Hausa. Majority of the labourers are Hausas.
Interaction	The major language used on the sites observed were mainly Pidgin language, little of English during communication with members of dissimilar tribes, Hausa and other local dialects such as Benue, Tiv, Ebira.
Various challenges of a multi-cultural workforce as it affects ethnicity, sex, religion were observed.	Women were not seen working on all the sites visited; most of the women seen were cooks while majority of the site personnel were male.
Conflicts on sites and causes were observed. Also, various in-group and out-group activities were observed physically on selected construction sites. Activities such as eating together, get together, discussion etc. which serve as form of social gathering among the tribes were observed during break time.	There was an unpleasant exchange of words between two operators involving a Yoruba man and a man of some other tribe, over packing of the bulldozer. Use of abusive language with gender strife was also noticed. There was also an exchange of words between personnel of different tribes that diverted the attention of others from their work.
Cultural diversity strategies employed	No cultural awareness evidenced by absence of cultural awareness slogan, stickers and signboards.
Adaptability and flexibility to accommodate different groups on construction site.	Most of the tribes have been able to adapt and integrate themselves to the general local language, Hausa. Nonetheless, the Hausas are still taking time to adapt to most of the sites visited; they stick together. It was also observed that in cases of conflicts, there is alliance to support their tribes even when the person is wrong.

*Manager one* : There are different tribes in my section but not cut across all the ethnic groups. Mostly they are the Igbos, Yorubas, Tivs and the Hausas.”

*Manager two* : “Of course, many tribes work here. The Tivs, Hausas, Igbos and Yorubas”

*Manager three* : “This site is a heterogeneous site comprising of three major languages and other tribes such as the Gwaris, the Nupes, the Tivs and the Akwa-iboms.”

Majority of the interviewees' sites comprises of diverse workforce. However, on the other hand, despite scarcity of skilled workers, two of the managers still wish they could have a homogenous workforce for security reasons, which one could be inferred to be the reason why some sectional trades are homogenised. For instance, from the personal observation made in one of the sites visited, the workforce comprises basically of foreigners from Republic of Benin. They were brought in from Benin Republic because of their competence in that aspect of work. The workers basically were speaking in their local language on site. Though the site engineer, a Beninois man, gave the researcher an audience, he however, did not allow full access to the site to interact with his workers saying that the information given by him on the interview guide should be used for others. This shows a collectivist nature which sees all in the in-groups as “one” for the right of the group to be protected.

### **Main Tribe / Workforce Distribution**

*Manager one* : “Yoruba are the main tribe followed by the Hausas. The Yorubas dominate because of the unavailability of workers and the initial refusal of the indigenes (Gwari) to work on site. This compelled the management to transfer workers from South-West and Eastern parts of the country to Abuja to work and also to recruit some other tribes available in Abuja. In addition to this, the Yorubas and Igbos are always available because they want to work so as to make money.”

*Manager two* : “Hausas dominate when it comes to unskilled work such as digging which is a tedious work. Their wages are cheaper compared to the other tribes. The Hausas bring in their brothers to work on site and organise themselves to work collectively. No preferences for any particular tribe is given, once you can deliver you are the best man for the work.”

*Manager three* : “The Tivs dominate this site because they are hardworking and usually bring in their brothers en mass to work on sites. Mostly they are very good in mason work. Also, the Igbo mixed with few other tribes usually handle the electrical aspect of the work. The Hausas mostly dig and do labourers' work. From my past dealings with the Yorubas, they are too sentimental. They segregate and most of the times want to take over your work.”

The last statement from manager three has an element of cultural bias enveloped within. Baum, Devine and Hearn (cited in Gong 2008) discovered that employers despite recruiting people from different ethnic groups also get involved in discrimination issue against employees that are not from their tribes or of low social status. Having already developed a tribal sentiment over a tribe because of past happenings will nonetheless affect communication with such tribe on site. Managers/supervisors should therefore purge themselves from tribal sentiment borne out of negative outcome of some particular tribes and should always open a new way for new work, rather than generalising behaviour.

*Manager four* : “Hausas dominate the site at the preliminary level such as in digging of foundation and labour work. The Yorubas are into mason and carpentry work, The Tivs are very good in interlocking stone, Few Gwaris are in iron bending and labour work while the Igbos are more into electrical work”

*Manager five* : “Basically the Yorubas and Igbos dominate the middle management level. This has to do with their educational qualifications and level of workmanship attained with the organisation.

However, at the lower level, the tribe distribution is somehow uniform.”

*Manager six* : “The tribes on this site are basically from Republic of Benin.”

*Manager seven* : “Igbos are the main tribe on this site because of the influence of those at the top who are Igbos by tribe. Nonetheless, other tribes are also working on site here.”

*Manager eight* : “No tribal dominance.”

The workforce distribution in different skills, agrees with the personal observation that skill is not uniformly distributed among the diverse workforce apparently due to scarcity in skill work and the lack of interest of some tribes in construction work. Loosemore and Lee (2003) in their analysis of Australian construction sites, discovered that some tribes concentrate on some aspect of work perfectly (Italians in concreting, Koreans in tiling, and Chinese in plaster boarding). This scenario could be found on Abuja construction sites too where some tribes specialise in an aspect of work which they are known for. If you have work on excavation of foundation, carpentry work you can look for the Hausas and Yorubas respectively. The potentials of different ethnic groups present a broader labour pool and knowledge sharing (Gong, 2008) because each ethnic group has a unique way of doing things. .

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Abuja construction workforce is made up of diverse workers from different ethnic groups spread across various ethnic groups.
- The skills are distributed across the diverse workforce.
- Generally, there is no dominance of a particular tribe.
- Most of the tribes have a religious belief which they bring into their work place as it influences their work style and orientation.

- 68.2% of the tribes on the sites have respect for the traditions of other people.
- The attitudes of construction firms in Abuja restrict the work of women on sites. It suggests gender bias and also agrees to the male-dominated nature of construction work.
- The construction sites are occasioned with tribal challenges of discrimination, acrimony, conflicts and language barriers.
- Abuja construction firms have not reached the full potential to manage diverse workforce.

Majority of the site personnel preferred to work with members of their ethnic group.

*Manager five* : “Basically the Yorubas and Igbos dominate the middle management level. This has to do with their educational qualifications and level of workmanship attained with the organisation. However, at the lower level, the tribe distribution is somehow uniform.”

### CONCLUSION

The influence of cultural diversity among artisans on construction sites in Abuja was examined. Based on the findings and discussion, the following could be inferred :

- The sites studied were heterogeneous.
- There were closer ties between the various tribes but it was more pronounced among the Hausas because they have stronger bond and affinity towards people from their tribe.
- Women were not part of the artisanship.
- The Hausas dominated the excavation and general labour on the sites.
- The Igbos dominated electrical work.
- The Yorubas were found as masons and carpenters.
- Due to the security challenge in the country, managers are circumspect about whom they should employ as artisans.



The traditional management style employed by the sites surveyed was not sufficient to effectively manage the cultural diversity on Abuja construction sites. In addition, conflicts on sites are connected to misunderstanding. Cultural differences were paramount on sites between members of the same group compared to members of dissimilar groups.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

For construction sites in Abuja to have the potential to manage the diverse workforce as it relates to cultural diversity, following points are recommended:

- For the managers to get the best from the site operatives, Hausas that are unskilled should be brought in as people who will be used for excavation and general labour. Yorubas that are masons and carpenters should be sought while Igbos should be employed to take charge of electrical work. This is borne out of the antecedents of these tribes which is without prejudice to other tribes that are in these trades.
- Heterogeneity of workers should be encouraged as it will be difficult for them to collude and sabotage the efforts of managers by decreasing the productivity which is likely to occur in a homogenous site.
- As much as possible, construction firms should create cultural awareness on sites, by translating the safety slogans, sign posts in different languages that are representative of the workforce.

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