



AFFECTIVE HUMANISM: TOWARDS AN ONTOLOGY FOR ACCOUNTABILITY IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Among the myriads of problems betting the developmental strive in Nigeria, besides the problem of leadership, is the issue of corruption. The endemic nature of the problem calls for concern because of its moral implications and replying effects. Indeed, no stratum of the society is devoid of its clawing effect to such an extent that it is taken as a la mode. To redress the scenario, many measures have been taken, institutions set up to combat this menace yet to no avail. The failure could be adduced to among other reasons limiting the fight to only empirical dimension with no attention paid to the ontological dimension of the problem. This is the onus of this paper but with particular reference to the Local Government administration because of its strategic nature as a grassroot political institution and its vital role in any developmental effort and discuss in the Nigerian polity.

Keywords: Local government, Grassroot, Ethics, Accountability, Corruption, Ontology, Operational philosophy, Affective humanism, Communalism.

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Contribution/ Originality

This study contributes in the existing literature of philosophy and public affairs.

1. INTRODUCTION

To say all is well with the Local Government Administration in Nigeria is, to say the least, the truth. The question that would readily crop up is why this laudable and functioning institution elsewhere finding it difficult to thrive in this part of the globe? Is the problem in the

institution, is it in the system or is it in the operators? Is the problem the issue of the “Nigerian factor” that is always making things difficult and often frustrating lofty ideas from thriving in the Nigerian climate? There have been workshops, seminars and conferences on the improvement and proper functioning of Local Government Administration yet things do not seem to have changed for the better. The truth is that the issue goes beyond mere identification and itemization of the problems and the precipitating factor. Sometimes solutions proffered too are empirically based without probing into the ontological dimensions of the issues. The problem of Local Government administration like other public affairs in Nigeria wounds around the tethering and endemic problem of moral decadence which has resulted in lack of accountability. Lack of accountability then results in myriads of unethical acts like corruption, embezzlement of public funds, nepotism, abuse of office, etc.

This paper then believes much could be attained by way of improving the functionality of the Local Government by a deep philosophical reflection to unearth “where”, “when” and “why” “the rain started” and how it could be stopped from pouring on our heads any longer. This then informs the topic of this discuss; “Affective Humanism: Towards an Ontology for Accountability in Local Government Administration in Nigeria.”

1.1. Why Local Government Administration?

One may wonder why I choose to reflect on Local Government administration among other Nigerian public institutions. Among the myriads of answers that I would have given, the fact is given the dire need and urgency for development in Nigeria to catch up with the rest of the world, and the desire for the success of our nascent democracy and given the strategic nature, essence and function of Local Government as that of grassroot administration, then no other government agency or institution has a more relevant and intricate role to play in these regards than the Local government. A. Ekpe (2006) submissions in *Impact of Local Government on Grassroot Development* apparently justify my choice when he describes the Local Government as:

Essentially an instrument of national or state government for the performance of certain basic services which can best be (decided upon and) administered locally on the intimate knowledge of the needs, conditions and peculiarities of the area concerned; uniting the people in a defined area in a common organization whose functions are essentially complementary to those of the central government and the interest of local residents for the satisfaction of common community needs; satisfying jointly the community’s common problems and needs which would have been difficult by individuals. Consequently, its effectiveness is judged through the development it generates, social amenities it provides and the

extent that it caters satisfactorily for the happiness and general well-being of the communities it has been established to serve.

As a grassroots administration, Local Government exists for the grassroots development and a *conditio - per- quam* for the success of the presidential democracy that Nigeria is at present operating; since “Local Government is not only historically associated with democracy, it actually helps to bring about a democratic climate of opinion and participation; and helps to keep opinion favorable to democracy” Keith (1988).

From the foregoing, it could be best adduced that Nigeria’s difficulty at achieving democratic success and sustainable development can be traced *inter-alia*, to the failure of the Local Government administration; and, that a hope for a better democratic experience should better begin from there.

1.2. Why the Failure in Local Government Administration?

Takaya giving reasons besetting Local Government administration in Nigeria opines:

In Nigeria, one problem with grassroots administration is that the *philosophical and value basis of Local Government is still at the sorting threshold* (emphasis mine), even after three and half decades of independence. This has been due mainly to lack of clearly defined and nationally accepted ideal system. This, in turn, accounts for the fact that all the reforms so far attempted have failed to transform the system into an effective institution of governance at the grassroots Ekpe (2006), *Impact of Local Government in Grassroot development: The Ikot Abasi Local Government Experience*.

For Yar- Adua *et al.* (2006) the ineffectiveness and ineffectualness of the Local Government anchor on myriads of factors including but not exclusive to encroachment of state government on the exclusive preserves of the Local Government, lack of funds and appropriate institutions, staffing arrangement systems, inadequate and excessive politicking and divorce between the people and the government institutions at the most basic level Ekpe (2006) *Impact of Local Government Administration*.

Ekpe (2006) *Impact of Local Government Administration*), identifies other impeding factors to include misconception of the character and status of the Local Government system as a subordinate partner in the federating unit, regarding council’s operation as inferior services and the council operators as “naughty boys” who must be controlled and directed.

Beside the aforementioned factors, I make bold to mention institutional failure and lack of proper ethical orientation that has led to unethical conduct and practices like lack of accountability in the Local Government, which has adversely affected the effectiveness and affectiveness of this grassroots administration.

1.3. The Nigerian Situation: A Necessity for an Operational Philosophy

While much have been written and suggested on the institutional, legal structure, organizational structure, etc., of the Local Government by way of reform, little, if any, as noted by Takaya, has been suggested by way of the philosophical and value basis for the Local Government existence and operations. This informs and necessitates my titling of the paper as “Affective Humanism: Towards an ontological and Pragmatic Basis for Ethical Standards and Accountability in Local Government Administration.

The “Nigerian Situation” which we are all familiar with;- apathy to work, insincerity, laissez affaire attitude, lack of trust, lust for wealth and titles, nepotism, general lack of discipline and corruption, actually lend credence to the necessity for an operational philosophy to effect and inculcate attitudinal change.

Ebelu pathetic comments in “Altruism and Insincerity: Indispensable Ingredients for Responsible Governance in Africa” is incisive and corroborative in this regard. Ewelu (2004), comparing the leadership impulse of the West that of Traditional Africans with that of contemporary leaders in Africa writes:

In Western world, the leader and his assistants work round the clock to see that the country is made better for the good of the citizens. They employ all at their disposal to see that the country is made better than when they met it. In primitive African societies, the same dedication and truthfulness is observed in those designated to lead others, out of sincerity and concern for the good of the society; leaders resign when they feel that their continued stay in office is becoming counter-productive. The opposite is the case among African leaders. Such leaders see themselves as having arrived through their own efforts and maneuvers. Their arrival to power is primarily for their own selfish end. To remain in power, they tell a lot of lies, make many empty promises. Instead of devoting their lives and talents to the wellbeing of those they are there for, they sacrifice the interest of the public for their own selfish interests.

In the same vein, Okoro (1994) in “Squandermania Mentality: Reflection on Nigerian Culture, Educational Philosophy for Nigeria” surgically submits that:

Positions of power and authority invariably turn out to be sources of gain, financial security, job assurances, etc, for oneself, relative and friends. Influence and affluence become inseparable. Political leaders, for example, usually turn out first-rate gamblers with public time and money. Hence, they see their

time and office as grand opportunity for over-enriching themselves at the expense of the common man.

To Aristotle (1998) mind, this kind of attitude naturally disposes and inclines the person concerned “to assign to himself, the larger share of money, honours or bodily pleasures...take more than his shares of these things...indulge his appetite, his passion and the irrational part of his souls” (Ross, 1984)

Many factors can actually account for this attitude by our leaders, principal of which is the natural tendency in some people to be avaricious. Secondly, fear of returning to the poverty-stricken background they came from; thirdly, pressure and demands from family members, relatives, friends and associates; fourthly, social pressure and expectations; finally, fear of the future.

The tenacity of these factors could be evident in the tactical intrigues some leaders device to avert and scuttle all inbuilt and external institutional and structural checks against unethical conduct and financial impropriety. This also explains why all previous efforts at effective and affective Local Government administration have been frustrated; a frustration, which necessitates the suggestion of this paper for an operational philosophy that would enhance functional Local Government administration. This I designate as Affective Humanism.

1.4. Affective Humanism as an Operational Philosophy

One of the questions that Socrates, the great Athenian philosopher, tried to grapple with as encapsulated in the title of a condensed commentary by Udoidem (2001) on the trial and death of Socrates is “Why should a human being be moral?” Corollary, one of the questions I wish we would be able to answer at the end of this reflection is, “why a Local Government administrator, nay all leaders, elected or appointed should act ethically and be accountable?”

By way of answer, Ewelu (2004) observes that “a responsible leader should be accountable to the people. It is not only in matters concerning money that accountability is required but also in all the aspects of the activities of government”. The governed need to know how and why certain decisions are taken and actions are carried out by the government. This will inspire a sense of belonging in the people, elicit confidence and trust, inspire co-operation and discourage anti-positions and insubordination among the governed. This goes in line with the democratic ideals as “government of the people, by the people and for the people”.

To both the elected and appointed officers of the Local Government, accountability “as an expectation or requirement of giving an explanation of one’s action, expenditure or to give a satisfactory record of money, etc in one’s care” (Hornby, 1995), is not just a responsibility but an obligation, a duty that the onus of the office demands and places on them.

The onus of accountability is on everyone, in public or in private lives. That is why banks have statements of accounts; companies hold Annual General and shareholders’ meetings where balance sheets and statement of account are presented for considerations. Even in private life,

accountability is very important if one is not to live a meaningless life. This gave vent to the Socratic dictum that “an unexamined life is not worth living”. Accountability as the process of stock taking becomes a *sine qua non* for meaningful administration if one is to forestall distrust, dissatisfaction, suspicion, confrontation, violence, revolt and even eventual death.

Within this contextual reasoning, accountability becomes ontologically and ethically laden as an obligation that human relationship entails and classified unaccountability as unethical and ontologically bad since it is in the very essence of every being to be accountable. The wrongness of unaccountability constitutes it as a crime and condemnable. The unethical conduct like impropriety of public funds and lack of accountability becomes a grave crime in the face of expectations of society and of the onus the office entrusted on the person and the very essence of any existent.

Accountability as an ethical ideal may be difficult to attain with facility (ease), especially when faced with the factors earlier enumerated, unless one is guided by some basic principles which elicit and inform ones actions and provide the ontological and pragmatic basis for such actions. In fact, no amount of intimidation by the *Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC)* or *Independent and Financial Crimes Commission (ICPC)* can deter a determined and desperate administrator from cutting corners to misappropriate funds or temper with account details. No law will be frightening enough to deter him from financial fraud, since the demands of family, friends and fear of future poverty are even more intimidating. After all, with money, one can hope to get away as money they say “answereth everything in Naija”. It is only personal conviction and inculcated habitus, fostered by what I call *Affective Humanism* that can deter one from indulging in unethical acts.

Affective Humanism is anchored on African communalism. The central thrust of it is altruism since as earlier mentioned; the roots of the crises in governance in Africa are lack of altruistic spirit and insincerity. Altruism, as that quality that makes a person concerned about the well-being of others; having consideration for others in what we say and do, will go a long way to turn things around for the better.

Logically, humanism should naturally lead to exaggerated individualism as is evident in capitalism. It is only when humanism is tempered with affectation that it becomes ideal and relevant to the community's well-being. So, affective humanism will definitely make a leader irrespective of position or status in society to be empathic in dealing with fellow humans as human beings.

How is this disposition to be inculcated in people who have already formed habits and character? No doubt, this would be an onerous task but with conferences, workshops and seminars organized regularly on ethical orientation then, the right spirit would, to a large extent, be inculcated. These could be organized immediately after the elections as a prelude to assumption of office of leadership. Subsequent seminars could be organized quarterly as an appraisal device. A step further could be taken by creating an agency or an institution that all

elected officer must go through for a period of one or two months before assumption of any public office irrespective of status and pedigree of the person.

My reservation and fear however, is that with the inculcation of the right spirit of affective humanism, accountability may still be far from being achieved in Local Governments in its present structure. The lack of autonomy that subjects all initiatives, transactions and even budgets to the Ministry of Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs and the State House of Assembly, not only contradicts the very essence and existence of Local Governments but also arrogates and undermines the functions of the council legislatures. The joint account arrangement makes the Commissioner for Local Government the *de facto* accounting officer of the various projects executed by the Local Government administration. The general lack luster attitude of elected council members reflects the fact that they have nothing at stake. Their accountability cannot be called to question since all expenditure had already been approved and scrutinized by the expected Ministry. Non-performance is excused on the “altar of approval”. It therefore implies that the Local Council can only function to the extent the State Government desires and as directed by the supervising ministries.

Challenging too is the issue of *consensus* and *selectocracy* that accompanies the electoral process in recent times which leaves the electorate with no right at all to demand for accountability since they never contributed to the election of the people concerned. The elected officers too believe they do not owe the electorate but only their godfathers, State Government and party hierarchy, who of course are often “settled” through the award of contracts, enlistment on payroll and other devised means of “settlement”.

2. CONCLUSION

Achieving ethical standards and accountability in Local Government administration is no doubt a Herculean task yet not insurmountable. The militating factors, many of which could be classified as uniquely “Nigerian” are capable of being overcome given the right spirit fostered by strength of character. Almost all Nigerians are deeply religious, with majority professing the best ideals one could imagine. It becomes then ironical that achieving the right attitude to engender ethical standards and accountability has become a difficult task. More so, as Africans, we do, with our sense of communalism, believe in brotherhood. Why then do we throw away these lofty ideals on the altar of self-aggrandizement?

Position or no position, office or no office, the fact remains that you, Local Government chairmen and vice-chairmen, are indigenes of the communities they are presently entrusted to oversee. Tomorrow, someone else will be there. But for today, what will you be remembered for? What legacy do you hope to leave behind? Is it your unethical conduct and unaccountability that constituted a clog in the wheel of community’s progress, that hindered its growth to such an extent that it has become a pariah in the community of councils and its indigenes despised as

backward and undeveloped? One should bear in mind that his/her action(s) could have telling effects that his/her grandchildren yet unborn will be uncomfortable to bear.

Affective humanism demands of public functionaries both appointed and elected to be altruistic and empathetic in their actions, sincere in their intentions and approach to issues and committed to the very essence and ideals of Local Government administration, which is grassroots development through active participation. Indeed, the community's support and goodwill can easily be garnered if only leaders in the various starter of our society try to be ethical in their dealings and accountable to the people they are serving, even if one feels their votes never counted.

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