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CHAPTER ELEVEN

ETHICS AND NATION BUILDING IN NIGERIA: THE MEDIA DIMENSION

PATE, Umaru A.



INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses the subject of ethics and nation building and their connections to the mass media in the Nigerian context. In the social sciences and particularly communication studies, ethics is central in academic and practical engagements. Ethics is critical to credibility in the gathering, processing and delivery of information for believability. For an individual or a people to internalise, accept, believe and actualise the content of information, such an individual or people must adjudge the source and content of the information credible on the basis of truthfulness, competence, dynamism and relevance. When an individual is sufficiently and ethically informed, he/she becomes knowledgeable on a particular subject and the mind is freed from uncertainty, liberated from ignorance and empowered to effectively participate in the process of nation building. Therefore, we can easily see the linkage between ethical delivery of information and nation building in a context like our own.

Ethical Context

Since independence, Nigeria and its people have been struggling with different approaches to build the country and set it on the path of political, economic, environmental, social, technological, educational and cultural greatness. As a process, nation building is about national development. In the case of Nigeria, national development connotes unity, qualitative and quantitative improvement in the living standard of the people as well as a remarkable progression on the human development index. Over time, we have tried different political systems, implemented numerous economic measures, adopted various educational policies and evolved a variety of social transformation efforts to facilitate the process of nation building. Yet, Nigeria has remained a nation seized by the drawbacks of development in the form of poverty, conflict, corruption, poor governance, materialism, weak institutions, political misbehaviour, general indiscipline, and infrastructural weaknesses, among others. Standards are alarmingly declining in many facets of our private and public behaviours.

The growth and development level of the nation have continuously failed to correlate with the quantum of resources allegedly expended over time. Contradictions of abundance of oil money and widespread poverty as well as an affluent few and the majority poor stare us at every turn on

the landscape. We are a country endowed with much potential or rather wasting potential but rated among the poorest countries in the world irrespective of all the hype about our abundant natural resources. More disturbingly, not only are we rated a poor country, but one of increasing poverty, in which much resources are allocated to the process of development, may be misallocated with diminutive results.

Arguably, the slow progress in the nation building process can be related to factors like poor governance, indiscipline, disregard for ethics, and negative attitudes which are manifested in widespread corruption, examination malpractices, disorderly conduct, lawlessness, impunity, impatience, cutting of corners, lies, intolerance, cognate social evils, disrespect for agreements, bureaucratic dishonesty, self-centred attitudes, etc. Such anti ethical behaviours and negative values have exerted serious consequences on our individual and corporate images and reputations as Nigerians, at home and abroad. Perhaps, unable to understand why things do not appear straight, many of the times in Nigeria, a foreign journalist once remarked that: “Nigeria is just like an unfortunate sick man. He has refused to respond to treatment. But he also refused to die”.

At several times, efforts have been made to attack negative values and institutionalize ethics in our individual and national lives. There was, for example, the ethical regeneration initiative of President Shehu Shagari through the Ethical Revolution in 1981, General Buhari's War Against Indiscipline, General Babangida's MAMSER, General Abacha's WAI-C (C-for Corruption which has transformed to the National Orientation Agency); President Obasanjo's multi-pronged war on corruption; and President Jonathan appointed a Special Adviser on National Ethics and Values with aborted plan to transform the office into a full Ministry of National Ethics (Vanguard, March 17, 2013).

Currently, President Buhari is fighting corruption fiercely and campaigning for Nigerians to believe that “change begins with me”. Above all, the 1999 Nigerian Constitution has recognised the place and role of ethics in our national life. Section II, sub section 23 provides that: “The national ethics shall be Discipline, Integrity, Dignity of Labour, Social Justice, Religious Tolerance, Self-reliance and Patriotism”. That provision is captured in the spirit and functions of the National Orientation Agency. Equally, most of our institutions and professional regulatory bodies have strict ethical codes that are supposedly being enforced to ensure that things are done appropriately and transparently. After all, it is the upholding of such globally acknowledged ethical values that will earn the country recognition, respect and integration in the globalised world.

However, we do not seem to have substantially succeeded in upholding the constitutional provision on national ethics in a great deal of our individual and corporate lives. A high level of indiscipline characterise our personal and official conducts. Indiscipline simply means exhibition of inappropriate and unethical conducts that are intentionally aimed at subverting, undercutting and undermining proper and correct behaviour. Indiscipline is widespread; it is vertically and horizontally prevalent and runs from the bottom to the top. Indiscipline is visible at our homes, schools, roads, offices, markets, business practices, politics; mention any sector of our national life and you can easily point out aspects of unethical and indiscipline behaviour common to it. Indiscipline breeds immorality, impatience, deception, shamelessness, criminal tendencies, corruption, cutting of corners and institutionalization of mediocrity and degradation of values and bastardization of credibility, integrity and quality in personal and official affairs. Let us cite the example of the current practice of democracy in the country. It is evident that while

we have accepted to adopt and practice the democratic option of governance, we have, unfortunately, demonstrated increasing inability to imbibe and strictly subject ourselves individually and collectively to the rules and tenets of democracy. Many of us exhibit anti-democratic tendencies and engage in selective interpretation and application of democracy and its pillars.

Fifty seven years after independence, we are still far from the point where trust and confidence amongst and between us define and drive relationships and interactions at all levels in the country. Every sector of our national life is afflicted by one form of unethical behaviour or another. Some of the negative attitudes are institution or zone specific, and a lot more are commonly and federally distributed; not restricted to any defined boundaries like gender, religion, location or even social status. In fact, many of such negative values seemed to have developed into attitudes that many of us no longer regard them as obnoxious.

Ethics

Ethics refer to the forms of behaviour and conduct that are socially correct based on core values cherished and upheld by the society. Strictly speaking, ethics is:

the science and art of proper behaviour. It is the branch of philosophy that studies human actions in terms of being right or wrong, licit or illicit. In other words, it is the science of good and evil. The good is what is to be done and the evil is what is to be avoided. It is also the science of what is permitted and may be done or, what is forbidden and may not be done. In this perspective, ethics has to do with obligations and rightfulness in actions and indeed in decisions as well (Iroegbu, P. 2005)

Ethics is not a foreign concept in Nigeria. It is deeply enshrined in our constitution and the various regulatory codes in the country. In fact, the national ethics is derived from our religions, individual cultures and social etiquettes. For instance, the two major religions have very strict provisions and prescribed codes of behaviour that are ethically based. Similarly, our individual cultures and traditions have prescriptive codes on personal and social values as well as standard rules of engagement in relationships. Thus, our deficient and negative anti ethical behaviours may not be due to the absence of a foundation or background. Each one of us comes from a specific background where the influence of religion and culture is enormous; yet, our society is highly afflicted with cases of indiscipline, corruption, intolerance, dependence, immorality, etc. So, why do we wallow in unethical conduct despite the obvious implications on our individual and collective development as a nation? What gratification do we obtain in holding on to unethical behaviours?

One can easily cite a number of reasons responsible for a lot of the unethical behaviours that are manifested in our society. The first one is derailed leadership and poor governance as manifested at all levels. Without doubt, the quality of leadership and governance in the country has been on the decline over time. It seems that from the 1990s, the deregulation and liberalization witnessed in our economy have also affected our characters and standards of behaviour, individually and collectively. There are numerous evidences of the failure of leadership and its deficits at all levels in the family, corporate and public domains. Leaders and followers openly and brazenly engage in unethical and lawless behaviours that contradict the constitutional provision on national ethics.

Oddity is increasingly becoming normality in our governance process. Many things are wrong; yet, things appear to be correct. Any leadership that is self-centred, corrupt, sectional and insensitive would lack the moral courage and the spine to be able to insist on ethics, demand transparent behaviour and enforce laws. In such a situation, the followers would simply copy the behaviour of the leadership and perpetrate incorrect acts knowing that the sanctioning regime is no better. For instance, somebody once raised a doubt on our national resolve to defeat examination malpractices by asking the simple question: “How can students shun malpractice when they can see criminals being set free through legalisms and court room gymnastics or, worse, through wretched and criminal influence peddling?”(Aminu, 2006).

Secondly, widespread and demeaning poverty compounded by the spirit of excessive materialism in our society has fuelled failure to uphold globally acknowledged standards of behaviour and the core values of *equity, freedom, care and compassion, participation, sharing, sustainability and responsibility* (Globethics, 2013). Poverty can compel individuals to break rules and resort to negative actions that may appear rewarding in the short term. Poverty can make individuals to dodge their responsibilities. Poverty can also lead to desperation. Thus, in desperation to escape from poverty, individuals break rules, worry less about integrity, disregard other persons' convenience and abandon social etiquettes; more so, that unethical behaviours are sustained by an increasing level of reward and the temptation of “if you cannot beat them, join them”.

The third reason may relate to the quality of institutions in the country. When institutions for monitoring, detecting, and preventing wrong behaviours and for apprehending and prosecuting perpetrators are weak, such acts are sustained. Existing regulatory societal institutions are progressively declining to fight malpractices and lawlessness at the cultural or national level, whether one is talking of the family, educational establishments or the law. It means that ethics are not being upheld. It means that justice is not being done. While all of us and particularly, the police and the judiciary need to get their act together over these matters, one is always discomfited by the widespread and endemic practice of very highly placed people using whatever influence they have to shield or free wrong doers. The country is breeding many powerful individuals at the expense of its institutions.

Another major cause of the devaluation in our ethical standard is the impact of globalization. Globalization and infiltration of external cultures have impacted negatively on our values and positive attitudes. We have copied a lot of negative influences that left many of us hugely confused, if not sick. While we are good in copying the easily damaging values, we do not seem to be able to indigenise the discipline, hard work and accountability that we see elsewhere when we travel. Characteristically, we go for the easier options that often prove unsafe for us and the nation.

Dangers and Consequences of Unethical Behaviours

Unethical conduct, immorality or negative values are devoid of ethical benchmarks. They are dangerous social evils. They can be damaging to the society, to the extent of leading to a failed state. And, like all forms of things that are wrong, the dangers are multifaceted and some of them concrete enough.

Inappropriate behaviour has very serious economic implications. In this country, the cost of corruption is incalculable. Huge sums are stolen, diverted or wasted as a consequence of not doing things in the right way. Each day billions of Naira is lost through time wastage, squabbles,

naked stealing and many other acts of indiscipline. The system is robbed of trust. Good governance is undermined and democracy weakened. The perception and reputation of the country get spoiled as we see in several international reports like the ones from Transparency International and others.

Apart from direct wastage of money, there is also wastage in the form of opportunity costs to the nation and society. Indiscipline is recognized as one of the main causes of poverty and underdevelopment in a community. Governments of developing nations embark on reform measures principally to attack poverty. It can be seen that the war against poverty cannot be won with endemic corruption and indiscipline. An evil like the disregard for correctness can destroy the system, make it impossible to fight poverty and hinder efficient use of economic resources for nation building.

Equally, unethical behaviours result in widespread societal intolerance, disdain for alternative opinions and hatred for individuals and cultures different from our own. For instance, ethno-religious killings and the intolerance exhibited by different groups is an indication of failure to abide by correct religious teachings, deficient sense of social justice and contempt for one another. Even frightening is the fact that the political elite is not robustly tolerant. The intolerant attitude of some of our politicians to alternative views or options in the present dispensation is frightening and threatening to democratic values. In fact, one can argue that while we have happily embraced democracy, our politicians have shown that they are unwilling or incapable of imbibing the tenets of democratization, two of which are tolerance and allowance of freedom to dissent. Increasingly, we are seeing the crude emasculation and physical strangulation of the alternative voice in the public domain. There are hardly any exceptions. Elsewhere, I had observed that:

The unwritten rule nowadays is that the *Oga* and his team members are always right, their achievements, no matter how mean, unsurpassable and the state will collapse without them. Any view outside this framework is abominable, condemnable, and punishable. Woe betides whoever that holds or dares to express contrary opinion. Such a fellow is berated, political hustlers are sponsored to reply him in the most uncouth of languages, and media managers are rattled and in worst cases, dethroned. Thus, in such a climate, members of the general public maintain sealed lips and government media houses become exceptionally selective on whom to feature on their airwaves. Sycophantic elements rule the airwaves, honest citizens' recoil into their shells and democratic ebullience takes flight. A culture of resignation, despondency and fear predominates. Democratic values decline and society degenerates (Pate, 2007).

It is also important we realize that if young people are raised on culture of indiscipline, intolerance, sycophancy, integrity deficit, cutting of corners, disrespect for rules and regulations, laziness and anti-intellectualism and other forms of negative values, especially where it is done in collusion with elders, leaders and teachers, then, the society is doomed. We may be destined to a life of laziness, crime, fraud, conflict and corrupt practices. Unethical behaviours can breed laziness, anti-intellectualism, irresponsibility and disdain for logic and deep thinking in personal, business and official activities. We cannot afford all of that in the process of trying to build the nation.

Today, the consequences are evident in our impatient and shallow handling of issues; we celebrate much and deliver too little; our love for jamborees is unlimited; we like sycophancy and hate deep thinking and scientific approach to issues. Because of mental laziness, there is poor knowledge of the country as demonstrated in the huge deficit in the understanding of our heterogeneity by a large section of the population particularly the young (Pate, 2010). And, where they do, regrettably, many have a poor picture of the complexities of the nation's composition. The understanding of the Nigerian nation and its citizens in terms of geography, history, sociological and anthropological set ups and other basic information that can foster the spirit of togetherness is grossly deficient. This is why today even basic arguments on general issues of governance are easily and arrogantly localized into ethnic or religious provincialism. Matters are simplistically ethnicised or religionised instead of subjecting same to deep analysis, objective assessment and scientific conclusions based on knowledge and circumstantial evidence.

Unethical conduct leads to loss of credibility. Elsewhere, an ethically indicted person is very unlikely to rise to a position of trust and leadership. It dogs the perpetrator through life like an albatross round the neck. However, in Nigeria, the story is not similar. And, this is not good for our individual and collective reputation as members of the global community. Where a country becomes notorious for indiscipline, crookedness, corruption and everything negative, nothing will ever be believed from that country. Such a country loses international credibility. Its documents, including certificates and receipts, will not be believed. Where certificates awarded by a country's educational institutions are disbelieved, documents from its financial institutions disrespected, agreements with its governments suspected; then, it is real trouble. Business becomes risky and costly. International partners keep us at a distance.

Under the circumstances, those who can afford to avoid us will always choose to do so. Hardly will anyone from outside care to come to invest in the country or even come for tourism. Worst of all, even outside the country, some of us do not behave better. Such rascally behaviours are exported. Little wonder that a national newspaper columnist once lamented, thus: "The attitude of most Nigerians, especially many of those who travel out of this country is not helping matters. There is the arrogance exhibited, baseless arrogance in most cases; there is the criminal disposition of some of them. There is the mediocre attitude of officials; there is the unwelcoming attitude of Nigerian officials at the points of entry, and the fact that we keep reminding fellow Africans that we are the leaders in Africa when we are not ready to shoulder that responsibility" (Abba Mahmoud, *Leadership*, December 26, 2013). Locally, leaderships at several levels are being discredited by the followers. Thus, in a society where leadership is perceived to be deficient in honesty, lacking in transparency and verily disbelieved, one cannot expect development and national consensus.

Insisting on Values for Development

It has been argued repeatedly that the value system, attitudinal orientation and behavioral pattern of the people in a place have profound impact on the economic, political and social development of their environment. Thus, where widespread social malady appears to have lasting personal rewards to successful violators, then, it may become difficult to defeat negative behaviours and sustain positive conduct. So, it has to be confronted in a sustained fashion in order to restore the pride and credibility of our people for national development.

The first requirement is to ease those pressures that increase the temptation to engage in negative acts that are unethical. That means, within available resources, to improve the quality of life of

the people. Serious and transparent governance together with adequate attention will increase the confidence of the people and reduce the tendency to cheat in order to make it.

Character training of children and the youth is probably the most difficult and the most effective approach. Parents should not only ensure that the children receive adequate character training, they must be very firm against their children engaged in dubious and negative acts like examination malpractices. They must never fail to condemn and reject any sign of or tendency to cheat on the part of their wards. No matter how excellent the performance looks, it should be rejected and condemned if the results appear to have been obtained fraudulently. What applies to the parents, should apply to the Federal, State and Local Governments and the corporate world. Where officials are involved in shady behaviours, the punishment must be severe and predictable to discourage others.

One can also advocate for a more critical approach in our leadership recruitment pattern in the society. The current system allows many defective leaders to emerge in very strategic positions thereby failing to provide the necessary guidance based on character, knowledge and sacrifice. The society is always the worst off when incompetent leaders emerge be it at the family, community, organizational or state level.

In a summarized form, Ogundele and others (2010) had suggested a three pronged approach in addressing the ethical challenges confronting us in the nation. The stage approaches are:

- a. **Strict Sanctions:** This process calls for the imposition of severe and appropriate sanctions on individuals and organisations that breach official business and societal ethics. These sanctions must be prompt and sufficiently strong to act as deterrent to other prospective offenders. If people are not punished for offences committed, it tends to encourage other people to emulate perpetrators of unethical conducts. Our institutions, law enforcement agencies and legal system have major responsibilities in this aspect.
- b. **Moral Suasion:** This approach calls for the launching of massive campaigns for disciplined behaviour and practices of sound moral values. This should be championed by individual families, communities, religious institutions, business organisations, governments and its agencies. This calls for serious moral revitalisation on a higher scale than what is presently in place.
- c. **Reward of Excellence or Outstanding Ethical Behaviour:** The society should encourage and honour outstanding acts of disciplined behaviour. Such gesture on the part of appropriate authorities, institutions or individuals will motivate others to be ethically correct in their behaviour. It will also prove that it pays to be correct in conduct.

The Media Dimension

Media professionals wherever they may be in Nigeria need to have a clearly defined framework that can guide them on approaching and handling issues of national ethics and development. Ethics must be fully understood at the various levels starting from individual organizations through the local government up to the federal stage. This means that media professionals must be well educated about their organisations, communities, issues and challenges in the country for them to be able to advocate and discuss convincingly on ethics at the various levels. In other words, apart from knowing their professional responsibilities and organizational commitments, they need to have sufficient understanding of the Nigerian nation, the attitudes of its citizens, their geography, history, sociological and anthropological set ups and other basic information that can foster the spirit of empathy and inclusion in the process of nation building.

Deficiency of such knowledge basically explains why even arguments on general issues of governance are easily and arrogantly localized into ethnic or religious dimensions with the attendant consequence of dividing the people and causing confusion. It is therefore imperative for individual media professionals to have improved knowledge of the country, its constitution, and ethical direction to support the process of nation building. Based on correct knowledge and conviction, the media and its professionals can easily provide a strong sense of direction and real determination to facilitate the development of their communities and country to greatness based on ethical reasoning and behaviour.

To this end, each journalists should be able to encourage his/her organisation to operate on strict ethical standards and focus on programmes and policies that advance cohesion and development. The media should promote ethically oriented interactions between diverse people of the country to reduce the level of misconceptions about our identity and existence as a people in one country. The more people interact with each other, the more educated they become about themselves and the better for the nation in terms of mobility, peace and progress.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to indicate that there is a strong correlation between positive values, correct attitudinal disposition and sustained ethical standards with nation building and development. Evidently, Nigeria's progress is hugely challenged by the devaluation of our ethical values beginning from the family up to the highest level of governance. These negative values are manifested in widespread corruption, malpractices, dishonesty, provincialism, etc. The consequences are, of course, poor governance, injustice, conflict, poverty and underdevelopment with a very doubtful reputation in the global community.

But, we are hopeful that with conscious effort to address the issue of ethical reasoning and orientation, Nigeria can overcome its challenges and attain its rightful position in history and earn respect as a country of honest citizens and transparent leaders. In this respect, media professionals have a strategic role to play in helping Nigeria to build itself based on globally acknowledged ethical values.

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