

Conflicting Social Values and Moral Decadence in Tertiary Institutions in Northern Nigeria: Yesterday and Today

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Abstract

The increasing spate of moral decadence and the degeneration of our moral values have not left any fabric of the society untouched. The various political, economic and social institutions at different levels, particularly in Northern Nigeria, have not been immune to this cankerworm. Taking a historical and sociological perspective, this paper traces the origin of the decline in social values from the Sokoto Caliphate era to the colonial period and the era of military interregnum. It is argued that leadership and educational institutions, which are critical to reorientation by virtue of their socialization capacity and capability, lost their focus as a result of internal contradictions that were worsened by colonial domination and subjugation. The colonial system did not share the existing values in Northern Nigeria. Its rampaging exploitative system conquered the values it met on the ground through a new professional and commercial class and the Native Authority system. The military came into power with no well articulated or robust values and ideals. Thus, our educational system entered into a crisis in ethical values with which it still finds itself struggling today.

The current Nigeria situation has led to the decline and near collapse of culture that was built on a sound intellectual foundation. The states of Kanem Borno and the Sokoto Caliphate succeeded because they were led by leaders who were guided by a tradition of scholarship and learning that were designed to solve problems of the society.
(Muhammad N. Alkali, 1991)

1. Introduction

Each generation and each society involve a set of values that over time becomes binding on both individual and groups living in a particular location in time and space. Even though such values become institutionalized and entrenched, they are subject to re-evaluation and modification with the exigency of time. From this perspective, this paper attempts to evaluate the social values prevalent in Northern Nigeria from pre-colonial times to the present with the objective of situating the moral decadence in tertiary institutions in its historical context. The paper argues that the second generation of leaders in the Caliphate had to contend with certain forces that undermined institutionalized ideals. The inherent contradictions in the society progressively eroded these much cherished values and with colonial subjugation and domination, moral decadence became widespread. In this, our tertiary institutions were not spared.

Societal values, leadership and the educational system are critical chains in the conceptualization, institutionalization and entrenchment of moral values in the society. Societal values are what the society cherishes as the way things are supposed to be done and how members of the society are supposed to conduct themselves mentally, spiritually, intellectually and morally. The positive actions of the members of the society are supposed to accompany these abstract concepts. Thus, the members of the society are to be actively or robustly involved in all activities that portray the society in the best possible light – through their productive activities, social relations, governance and leadership.

Leadership is key to the upholding, dissemination and protection of these values. Once the leadership becomes nonchalant, either by acts of omission or commission, deliberately or otherwise, the values become just mere concepts. These societal values must continuously be made available to members of the society through everyday learning and/or formal education. Our educational institutions, like their types the world over, are supposed to be the vanguard of these societal values as agents of socialization. The collapse of our educational infrastructure, the

increasing apathy to education, the high cost of education, poverty in the midst of plenty, increasing examination malpractices and the growing materialistic tendencies in society, all call for a re-examination of our societal values.

Things are falling apart in our nation today. Moral decadence is everywhere and not a single fabric has been left untouched. The federal and state tertiary institutions are all faced with a crisis of confidence. The economy is comatose. Power supply is epileptic and leadership is tattered. There is dishonesty, loss of integrity, erosion of transparency, and a lot of distrust and disharmony. How were our traditional social values transformed? What were the dynamics over time that explain our present predicament? This paper is an expository voyage into the basic contradictions in the socio-political system in this part of the country that dealt a gradual, very serious but systematic blow to the much cherished values that were entrenched in the Northern Region via the Sokoto Caliphate. The stress and strains that affected the structure of the Caliphate as an autonomous, complex political and economic system are examined (Last, 1967).

2. Phase One: The Caliphate

By the end of the first decade of the 19th Century, most of what is today Northern Nigeria had become part of the Caliphate with the exception of Borno, parts of Adamawa and the Jukun territory of Wukari where, as a result of stiff resistance to the Jihadists, a large number of communities remained non-Muslim up to the advent of British rule (Alkali, 1991). The Caliphate included about 30 emirates and their dependencies occupying an area of nearly 150,000 square miles (Alkali, 1991). The Caliphate was the incubator of the culture, norms and social values on which foundations the social fabric of the northern part of Nigeria was built. It was the major historical development that influenced or changed the attitudes and behaviour of the society (Alkali, 1991). According to Tukur (2004), the Caliphate survived and flourished because both its ideals and the conduct of its founders reflect the commitment to proper conduct of public affairs. These ideals and conducts were a product of a local synthesis of understanding and appraisal of the objective reality on the

ground, ideas from scholarly literature and a tradition of learning. The academic ideals were time honored ideals rooted in the traditions of scholarship which had formed the basis of intellectual endeavors in the Islamic World for centuries. Hence was possible the birth, spread and consolidation of ideals such as justice, ease and kindness, humility and modesty, integrity, honesty and service to the community (Tukur2004).

Among the leadership values that accompanied these ideals, 'justice' towered above all others.. In this context it means that all political actions were in accordance with the various aspects of the Shar'iah. Justice is synonymous with good governance and good leadership. It is equally synonymous with honesty, integrity and service to the community "without which the very existence of the state is meaningless" (Alkali 1991).

The Caliphate grew, prospered, and reached its apogee in the second half of the 19th century. However, inherent internal contradictions set in motion certain forces that were to undermine the ideals on which it had been established. Last (1970) opined that in the various emirates there was the continuous growth in the princely class - the Sarakai. This class grew over the course of the 19th century due to the fact that most of the Sarakuna (princes) had many children as well as a large retinue of officials. Meanwhile, there were not enough resources within the sarauta system to adequately cater for them. Sarkin Kano Abdullahi, for example had 28 adult sons with titles who were active in politics before he himself died in 1882 (Last, 1970). Last went further to say that assuming that one emirate in 1820 had only ten 'key' massu sarauta, by 1900 in that emirate alone there were potentially ten thousand young men-'princes' interested directly or indirectly in the resources of the sarauta. To compound the problems, they had several thousand followers of varying kinds willing to support them in times of conflict. With their upper class taste and upper class rascality, little wonder that some of them took steps to undermine the ideals in their quest for survival. The burgeoning sarakai faced financial troubles. What to do with the young men? How could they earn their livelihood? It should be recalled that the sarakai did not trade; they were trained to govern and hence their means of livelihood had to be

linked to the palace rather than the farms, or even the market places.

With the caliphate growing too large for effective administration two distinct zones or frontiers developed: the core zone of the datijai and the outer zone of the yara. The datijai were in control. This was the zone of the ruling sarakai and the elderly Emirs. At the peak of the Caliphate these did not go out on military campaign; instead in the 'core zone' scholarship of Mallams and their almajiris flourished and moral values of the Jihadists, such as justice, were dominant with efforts constantly made to uphold the ideals. The 'outer zone', that of the yara, included the youngest sarakai and consisted of those who went on military campaign. Here, the Mallams were marginalized. In this zone were found some of the young sarakai who were expelled from the core zone because of their undesirable attitudes and behaviors. Since this system of expulsion did not address the problems fundamentally, frontier values filtered back to the core. Therefore, militarism gradually competed with scholarship for dominance and eventually edged it out. The yara threatened the authority of the datijai scholars who tried to sustain the old values but who gradually became disillusioned and withdrawn from the mainstream life and politics in the cities (Last, 1970).

3. Phase Two: The Colonial Phase

The colonial domination and subjugation of Northern Nigeria further compounded the woes of the societal values of the Caliphate that were already being battered by the contradictions that existed between the core and the outer zones. In 1903 at Burmi the last Caliph, Attahiru, was assassinated, an event that was to affect the society of northern Nigeria politically and culturally for the next hundred years. (Alkali, 1991). The main purpose of the British in Nigeria was to exploit the resources of the nation for the benefit of their people and the economy of Britain with little or no significant cost to themselves. The colonial administration levied high taxes on the emirates and exploited their available natural resources. The British believed, in spite of what they found on ground in terms of an efficient and

dynamic political system, that their own concept of government, values and standards were superior to those of the Caliphate (Alkali 1991). They found willing collaborators among some of the pilgrims who had been to the Holy land and were keen to 'modernize', to get up-to-date in the North African or Egyptian manner.

The Indirect Rule that became the chosen strategy of the British to administer the Northern Nigeria was a ploy to give that section, and indeed the whole nation, a semblance of native authority administration. The British did not share the value system, standards and norms of behaviour which they found in the Caliphate. The ultimate objective was to bring it into approximation with British ideals of justice and humanity. What Lugard wanted was the transformation of the value system of the wider society of Northern Nigeria which was derived from the Islamic norms and form of government (Alkali 1991). With colonial rampage and the introduction of an exploitative economic system, little wonder the existing values had to give way.

The Emir's scholars and other leaders of the old Caliphate lost their independence and control. They became servants of colonial masters rather than leaders of their people. In the new dispensation, they had to carry out orders in accordance with the dictates of their new masters. There emerged a new class of 'traditional' elite and this created a wide gap between the old system which they were familiar with and the one which their new masters imposed on them. The steps taken by the British to generate more resources for effective administration sent those time tested values into further unrecoverable death. Land tenure and control was in the hands of the Emirs and Chiefs. They were bent on creating a landlord class where apparently it had been non-existent, a development that was counter to the philosophy of the mujahidun of the Sokoto Caliphate and of the Ulama of Kanem Borno (Alkali 1991). The colonial administration wanted to transform the emirs and chiefs into rulers and wealthy landed class rather than leaders and guides of their people. This was a reversal of the value system and ideals which were brought about by the reform movement.

The amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 therefore, created in Northern Nigeria three categories of new political elites. The first group had older conservative members of the legislative council between 1923 and 1934. For this group (Tukur, 2004) the colonial phenomenon is a good civilization that should be substituted for the native culture. The imperial powers and their representatives are trustees and guides that will help in raising Africans to higher materials and intellectual planes. The second category had a thin line of departure with the first group. They were constituted by new breed 'professional and commercial classes'. Their inspiration is from western imperialism. They saw themselves as beneficiaries of the colonial state and "would remain loyal and committed to its values, norms and standards" (Alkali, 1991). The third category accepted "European superiority in the material but not cultural spheres" (Tukur, 2004). The group is made up of people who shared two worlds, as it were, a mixture of the so-called traditional elite and part of the newly emerging class of Western educated elite. Some of them received their Islamic education at home and were trained in some of the earliest Western type education from Teachers colleges, and Middle and Secondary schools established in the North. Many were graduates of the famous Katsina College.

The Native Authority system put its stamp on the death warrant of the existing values and ideals. It created more room for corruption, nepotism, greed and selfishness. The political elite began to develop the culture of self centeredness. The admission exercise into the Kafinsoli Agricultural School between 1938 and 1960 gives some insight into this development. It was established for the children of the peasantry but it ended up as a school for the children of the Native Authority officials. Its first enrolment in 1938 had twenty-four boys. Eleven of the students were sons of the District Heads, four of them were sons of the village heads, one an education Mallam's son. Out of the total number only five were children of the farmers (Alkali, 1991).

Jega (2002) posited that the glorification of the Native Authority system and the condoning of the excesses of traditional rulers by the colonial officials created tension and conflict among the

Western educated 'moderate reformers': the traditionalists as well as the talakawa (commoners) and 'radical reformers' on the one hand and the masu sarauta (aristocratic title holders) on the other hand. In the different phases of Zamanin siyasa (era of Western-style party politics) tension and associated conflict conditioned politics and political processes in Northern Nigeria. Northern Nigeria politics is neither totally conservative nor essentially a continuation of tradition amidst change (Jega, 2002). However, colonial administration degenerated into extortion and exploitation of the people. Repudiation of taxes become common and even the ruling class was experiencing impoverishment. The Emirs were accountable to the colonial government. Bribery and corruption within the system was assuming a dangerous dimension so much so that Balewa had to raise a motion that received widespread support in the House of Assembly calling for it to be stamped out. While the second class Emirs and Chiefs agreed that there was widespread incidence of bribery and corruption and either supported or were indifferent to the motion, the first class Emirs resented the motion (Yahaya, 1980).

In spite of this, the likes of Sardauna, the late premier of the Northern region who has been described as "a catalyst for a very long historical process of community consolidation among the northern provinces" (Paden, 2007), made efforts to develop a new value-system for Northern Nigeria. He tried to harness the historical energies of diverse societies into a common sense of purpose and identity and to transcend ethnicity as a basis for political community (Paden 2007). His focus was a new set of values which focused on making the North great and adequately prepared for the challenges of a greater Nigeria. But with his death and coming into power of the military these values were checkmated and systematically put in the cooler.

4. Phase Three: The Military phase

The intervention of the military in the political landscape of the country finally nailed the coffin of the time tasted values and ideals that had characterized the northern Nigeria. Competition

for power and wealth among the civilian and military elites was taken to its highest level. It could be recalled that when the military first captured power its leaders were largely green horns as far as public administration was concerned. In any case, most of the military governors were posted outside their states of origin. Even if they were left in the states they still had to depend on civilian administrators as commissioners and permanent secretaries, not to talk of board members. Favoritism, nepotism, corruption, and unprecedented materialism reared their ugly heads. In Northern Nigeria, the old value systems inherited from the Caliphate were abandoned. In their place were "new counter-cultural and irrelevant ethics" (Alkali, 1991). From the national perspective there was the absence of any value system that would hold the society together. There was lack of consensus on the subject of ideals which Nigerians should seek in their public and private lives. As asserted by Alkali (1991), after destroying the ideals which people cherished before the coming of the Europeans, new ideals that could guide thought and outlook in the future were not put in place.

5. Implications for our Tertiary Institutions today

This lack of well articulated and robust values and ideals is manifested in our educational system today. Our tertiary institutions are faced with a crisis of ethical values. The Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CDHR) in its 2001 report, emphatically stated that injustice in its various forms exists in our tertiary institutions. The leadership of our universities has moved from honesty and accountability to dishonesty and unbridled fraudulence. Even those who are vested with the responsibility for education are neither knowledgeable nor enlightened (Alkali, 1991). According to Abdullahi Smith (1975), Northern Nigeria has found itself in the present predicament because of the absence of a tradition of scholarship and learning capable of producing leaders with honesty and integrity who value good reputation and service to the community more than material wealth and selfish interest.

The leadership of Northern Nigeria must re-invest the

scholarship and intellectualism of the Caliphate era if it is to re-direct affairs in the public life and the tertiary institutions. It is only when this is done that honesty, integrity, transparency and service to the society can take central stage once again. Leadership must be proactive in all it does, both in thought and action. The whole of the North must be seen as its constituency. The people must be seen as brothers and sisters regardless of ethnic, religious, geographical and ideological differences. It has to consciously promote honesty and transparency in appointment, admission and distribution of resources. Justice must, therefore, be its watchword. The tertiary institutions must be staffed by credible people.

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