

## **POTENCY OF THE DISTINCTIVE NATURE OF AFRICAN ETHICS: IMPLICATIONS TO THE CHALLENGE OF DEHUMANIZATION IN NIGERIA**

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### **Executive Summary**

*Within the broader spectrum of human existing, the dignity of human life has continually been a global concern. Such agitations are more expressed in a context characterized by violence against human life. The scourge of dehumanization in Nigeria has prompted contributions and approaches from different fields of human endeavors. This paper premised on the potency of the distinctive nature of African ethics as an option to the Challenge of dehumanization in Nigeria. The notion is entrenched in the African religio-cultural experiences which centered on the value of human life. Methodologically, the paper employed a systematic review of African scholars that have unpacked views on the fundamentals of African ethics and its implications to threats that militates against human life. Through this methodological approach, the Nigerian context is highlighted alongside other factors that illegitimatized the dignity of human life. It also captures the various forms of dehumanization. While the paper acknowledges attempts towards curtailing violence to human life, attention is given to the Nigerian government and its relevant institutions that provides legal principles that value and protect human life in the midst of violence. The paper concludes that approaches to responding to threats to human life is not monolithic and that within the African religio-cultural experiences, there can be potent notion that can enhance the dignity of human life.*

**Keywords:** Potency, distinctive, Africa, ethics, implications, dehumanization, Nigeria

### **Introduction**

Within the broader spectrum of human existing, abuse on the dignity of human life has continually been a global concern. The scourge of this omen is more expressed in a

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context characterized by violence against human life. The plague of dehumanization in Nigeria as captured in this paper is attributed to the eruption of different forms of violent conflicts perpetrated against human life. The devastating effects of violence in the Nigerian society is more described and understood in the light of the harassment, traumatic experiences and the colossal loss of the human lives. The incessant cruelty upon the dignity of the human life consequent to the aforementioned calls into question the responses and approaches employed by concerned individuals and groups within and outside Nigeria towards mitigating this threat to human life. This paper is premised on the potency of the distinctive nature of African ethics as an option towards curbing the Challenge of dehumanization in Nigeria. The notion is entrenched in the African religio-cultural experiences which are centered on the value and dignity of human life. While taking into account the pluralistic nature of the African society, attention is tilted towards exploring the African system of thought in conversation with the African ethics rooted in the people's religio-cultural experiences. The paper leveraged on African notion proposed by some African scholars as an attempt to propagate the potency of the African ethics and its capacity to not only sustains the dignity of the human life but to also protect it. Methodologically, the paper employed a systematic review of literatures African scholars that have unpacked views on the fundamentals of African ethics and its implications to threats that militates against human life. Through this methodological approach, the Nigerian context is highlighted alongside other factors that illegitimatized the dignity of human life. The factors that illegitimated the dignity of the human person in Nigerian context are occasioned by the negative application of the Nigerian pluralism which often resulted to religious, political and ethnic conflicts. The conceptual understanding of dehumanization was overviewed with the aim of accentuating its various forms within its nomenclature. While the paper acknowledges attempts by the Nigerian government and other spirited individuals towards curtailing violence to human life, attention is given to the Nigerian government and its relevant institutions saddled with the responsibility to enforce corresponding legal and moral laws that promote the value and wellbeing of the human life in the midst of violence. The institutions as mentioned in this paper include elements of the Nigerian judicial system which focuses on the wellbeing of human dignity. Other bodies which manifestos are rooted on the need to contribute towards offering a more life-giving are referenced. The paper concludes that approaches to responding to threats to human life is not monolithic and that within the African religio-cultural experiences, there can be potent notion that can enhance the dignity of human life in Nigeria.

### **Nigerian contextual background**

The complexity of Nigeria as the most populated Nation State in Africa is attributed to its multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi religious character. In all, it has about 390 ethnic groups. Three quarters are from the Middle Belt and forty-four of

these are from Plateau State. According to Ogunleye (2021), the pluralistic nature of Nigeria has undoubtedly contributed greatly to the eruption of different forms of conflict experienced in most parts of Nigeria. According to Oyeboade, (2022) Nigeria's complex socio-political identities have been exploited by those who wish to use its ethnic and religious diversity as a reason to engage in violent conflict against human life. He further stated how Nigeria is today a context engulfed with religious and ethnic intolerance. Sometimes beginning from a simple misunderstanding, they can metamorphose into religious, communal, and ethnic clashes that often result to denying the fullness of life. Nigerian urban and semi urban areas have been affected most by these religious and multi ethnic conflicts. Whenever conflicts of this nature reoccur, they erupt much more and claim many more casualties.

In the light of this reality, ethno-religious and socio-political conflicts in contemporary Nigeria is attributed to the contentious atmosphere shaped by multiplicity of religions, socio-economic instability, Political rivalry and grave interest for amassing wealth at the expense of human dignity. Kolapo and Njoku (2022) further hold that, ethnic and religious conflicts against human life are attributed to such ill-gotten power, superiority, wealth linked to the religious and ethnic identities. This is contained in the discriminatory attitude of those in power. In recent decades religious and ethnic affiliation have become major criteria for appointments to key offices, the military, the police force, the civil service, enrolment in schools, colleges and universities the military, the police force, the civil service, enrolment in schools, colleges and universities, and so on. In a report on Nigeria at 2050, Nigeria is rated as the most complex country in Africa. This is attributed not only to its over increasing population and its multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi religious character, but the skyrocketing of factors that militate against the dignity of the human person in Nigeria. The diversities as pointed earlier which is supposed to be harnessed or managed towards the enhancing tranquility of the human person has turn into prerequisites for describing and treating the humanity. Cutting across the six geo-political zones it has been estimated that there are about fifty ethnic groups in Nigeria. As pointed out in this report, the pluralistic nature of Nigeria has contributed and will greatly contribute to forms of violence and poverty due to its pluralistic nature. The report further holds that due to the pluralistic nature of Nigeria, ethnic culture has wrongly been utilized to breed tribalism, manipulation of religious sentiments, regionalism, religious fundamentalism, and political tension which has left the country in a trail of destructive violence that does not only threaten the integrity of Nigeria but also threatens human life (Yebona, 2022).

This contentious situation according to Nirmalasari and Sarwono (2021) presents an atmosphere of rancor and domination within the Nigerian community. They further argued that, violence against the human life can be triggered through symbols because

they can speak and provoke the people's emotions which mostly result into violence. Accordingly, the violence in Nigeria does not only seek to destroy or cause physical damage to lives and properties but also has psychological connotations that undermine human dignity due to cultural, religious, or political affiliations.

### **Conceptual understanding of dehumanization**

Dehumanization is a social construct that expresses an attempt or act that denies full humanness from another human person. Dehumanization is described as the gruesome treatment of the human person with the aim to deny him or her the quality of humanness. Bar-Tal describes dehumanization as an attempt to delegitimize the human person through certain religio-cultural beliefs that seeks to dominate and discriminate a person and makes him or her appears to be inhuman. Such religious and social groups have the tendency of labeling and rejecting an individual or group of persons as inhuman. For example, during the advent of colonial administration and slave trade imposed on most African countries, people were harassed and treated as inhuman due the European system of thought and belief that the black were less human This form of dehumanization was expressed before and during the advent of colonialism in Africa and particularly in Nigeria, Dehumanization with its discriminatory tendency was entrenched in the European system of thought which became a trajectory for treating human persons in Africa. Euro-centrism is a system of thought developed within the cultural and social context of Europe which seeks to undermine other systems of thought, making western European values and culture as the universal standard through which humanity can be ascertained (Araujo and Maeso 5). The Eurocentric system of thought postures triumphalist and superiority tendencies during its encounter with non-European anthologies (Serequeberhan, 2002). This assumption was expressed in different forms by traditional Eurocentric epistemologies. For example, Emmanuel Kant states that, "The Negroes in Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling" (110-111). Contributing on the same premise, Hegel states that, The Negro as already observed exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We would lay aside all thought of reverence and morality-all that we call feeling if we would rightly comprehend him there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character (2).

Making a sense from the way and manner in which Christianity was introduced into the context of Africa, Tanger T. in his article Titled, "Missionary Adaption of African Religious Institutions: The Massai Case", delineates that the use of descriptive words such as barbarism, superstition, treachery, cunning, laziness, paganism, general moral depravity and people who lived in a perverted environment to describe the Africans, denotes the insensitivity of the Western missionaries on relevant value system that constitute the African context (1989:113).

## **Government response to the scourge of dehumanization in Nigeria**

Attempts by the Nigerian Government and other concern bodies to contribute towards curbing the scourge of violence against human life in Nigeria have brought about the introduction of alternatives approaches. Supported by Chapter four of the Nigerian constitution of 1999 section 33 as amended especially pointed out how the dignity of the human life should be protected. Based on the Nigerian perspective, the right to live is the right of all citizens to live and enjoy all privileges of protection and security to life (Seiyeta 2). An advanced understanding of the protection of the dignity of the human life as enshrined in the Nigerian constitution stipulates that the right to life encompasses right to enjoy good education, good health and right to good social amenities and good security in the Nigerian context. In the light of the conceptual definition of the dignity of life, Seiyeta (2-3) further delineates how disadvantaged a life that constantly lives yet is skeptical about the hope to life within a particular government. Such a life one cannot meaningfully participate or contribute in the development of the society.

In an attempt to respond to the adverse effect dehumanization during conflicts, the Nigerian government gives attention to the services of Law enforcement agencies and their operation mechanism enforcing the law upon perpetrators with the sole aim of curbing violence of which ever form in the country. The utilization of the military and police force in reducing the eruption and impact of dehumanization was assumed to be the first response by the government to the violence in Nigeria. However, it was proved abortive due to religious, ethnic sentiments. The military and police force were accused to have sided with their religious and ethnic counterparts to fight the other. Furthermore, as a result of the influx of firearms and counterfeit uniforms within the warring points, the military and police lost credibility before warring communities (Krause 49). The struggle by the Nigerian government and the security agencies to ensure security of all citizens seems to be sabotaged through external influence. This paper argued that national security towards protecting the dignity of the human person can be achieved only if the history of dehumanization is critically examined and alternative approaches are explored.

Another response mostly adapted by the Nigerian Government is the declaration of state of emergency. Based on the situation under consideration, in its bit to stop further escalation of how the human person is dehumanized, the Nigerian government declared state of emergency on some states. According to Premium Times of May 2013, the historical submission spelled that when Nigeria got its independent, there was alleged plan to overthrow the Federal Government by force which on 26 October, the Prime Minister, Tafawa Balewa declared a state of emergency by banning public meetings and procession in the whole of Western Nigeria. It was reported that while citing

section 305 of the 1999 Constitution, Obasanjo declared state of emergency on Plateau state. In his attempt to respond to how human lives are dehumanized through the eruption of violent conflicts of diverse forms. President Goodluck Jonathan on behalf of Government declared state of emergency on Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states. These attempts were necessitated by failure of security operatives in gaining control over the spread of dehumanization through ethno religious and socio-political conflicts that were out of the control of the local police services (Ushe 5).

In recent times, the Nigerian government employed the institution of Judicial Commission of Enquiries as response to ethno religious conflict that erupted in Nigeria. A Judicial Commission of Enquiry as the name implies is a panel that is judicially inclined saddled with the responsibility to dialogue with warring ethnic and religious groups and through a white paper report to Government all proceedings of enquiry and the way forward. The Nigerian Commissions of enquiry apportioned to states to partner with political stakeholders, security and religious leaders and through dialogue with victims explore remote and immediate causes to the ethno religious conflict with the view to produce a report to government. The commission of enquiry set by the Federal Government of Nigeria to investigate remote and immediate causes in most states that have experienced ethno religious conflicts such as Plateau, Kaduna, Borno and Yobe, seem not to achieve the desired objectives due to religious and ethnic influences (Higazi 4-5). While examining the potency of the work carried out by commission of inquiry in where they have functioned, it can be inferred that the outcomes seemed not to be potent enough to achieve the desired objectives. The intangible outcome according to Danfulani (2) were attributed to the inability of the state government to arrest, charge, prosecute initiators and perpetrators and sentence them if found guilty after they have been tried in a court of law). These lapses on the side of the panels and government have shipwrecked efforts in responding to ethno religious conflict and the adverse effect particularly on the human life (2-3).

### **Conceptual understanding of Ethics**

The distinctive nature of the African ethics can best be understood in the light of the conceptual understanding of ethics. Although the understanding of ethics may be relative based on the context it is being socially constructed and applied, yet it is generally perceived as the science of conduct. Fundamentally, ethics is considered as the ground principle by which people conduct themselves. While conversing with the various forms of ethics, Socrates argued that the emerging legal laws in every human community is a translation of ethical belief systems constructed from within a religio-cultural and socio-political experiences of a particular people. These ethical belief systems express the basic virtues of ethics that informs the right behavior of individuals and groups within the human community Strong & Meyer 2-4). The ethical values

focus on shaping people's behaviors with a clear-cut determination to be honest, fair and respect to the dignity of the human life. The ethical values of protecting the human life as entrenched in both ethical and legal principles of the Nigerian Laws constitute the supreme or golden rule upon which every citizen must be subservient (Seiyeta 2-3).

### **The distinctive nature of African Ethics**

The distinctive nature of the African ethics emanates from a comparative study of human ethical principles. The unique nature of the African ethics is identified in the light of the western moral and ethical principles embedded in a system of thought that is individualistic and discriminatory. The visibility of such elements is more expressed when the western system of thought introduced in a different context. Euro-centrism is an ethical principle developed within the cultural and social context of Europe which seeks to undermine other ethical guidelines, making western European values and ethics as the universal standard through which humanity can be ascertained (Araujo and Maeso, 2015). The Eurocentric ethical principles posture triumphalist and superiority tendencies during its encounter with non-European anthologies (Serequeberhan, 2002). This assumption was expressed in different forms by traditional Eurocentric epistemologies. For example, Emmanuel Kant states that, "The Negroes in Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling" (1960: 110-111). Contributing on the same premise, Hegel states that, The Negro as already observed exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. He further distant all thought of reverence, morality, feelings from the black Africans and nothing harmonious with humanity can be found in the African personality (2001). From the foregoing, it can be argued that the euro-centric ethical principles as introduced in Africa during the European encounter with the indigenous people carried some forms of dehumanization. Disassociating the humanity of the Africans from reverence, morality and feelings, is an attempt to deny them the quality of their humanity. It on the basis of the ethical principles that the paper quest for a distinctive African ethics that is potent to curb such forms of dehumanization.

### **Potency of the distinctive African ethical principle**

Through an ethics of care contained within the religio-cultural ethical principle of Ubuntu, every human person is expected to contribute towards protecting the dignity of humanity. The Ubuntu Ethical principle represents sacredness, goodness, tenderness to the human person (Obaje and Uzodike 36). One of the elements that constitute the Ubuntu principle as pointed out by Tutu is the religio-cultural understanding that every person within the larger human community belongs to a greater whole irrespective of his or her affiliation (Hendrick:17-18). Based on this understanding, the human person is honored and respected unconditionally devoid of any form of dehumanization. Thus, the ethical principle within the Ubuntu philosophy is considered as resource which can

be utilized to honor and respect humanity can be harnessed (:17). For example, the capacity and resilience of an African ethical principle identified within the Pyam, a tribe within plateau State of Nigeria, takes root in the understanding of God in relation to life in the community. Within the greater whole of humanity, every member participates in the wellbeing of every person irrespective of her or his affiliation.

Among the Pyem ethnic group, the Pyem religious and cultural medium for protecting and fostering mutual relationship between the human person is made the center stage life in the community. This is expressed in the drinking of local brew by two persons at the same time. According to Alfred Daspan, this form of African ethics is utilized to curb dehumanization by a community against another human community through ethnic conflicts. In an atmosphere of dehumanization, the traditional council within the Pyam is the body given specific responsibility of upholding the dignity of the human life in the community. To curb the menace of dehumanization, the local brew is brought in a calabash and the two individuals are asked to drink at the same time while one hand holds the calabash and the other holds the opposing individual. Both parties then drink the local brew from the same calabash (73).

Symbolically, the calabash is interpreted as both individuals having been originated from the same Supreme Being who is the source of all life. Holding each other while drinking the local brew means that their differences are not powerful enough to change the religio-cultural view and understanding of the Supreme Being as the source of all life. The local brew represents the condenser of all their grievances, anger and hatred that is converted to love and forgiveness and respect to the human life. Through this cultural practice, the human life is dignified in the face two individuals involving in an act of dehumanization (Daspan 74). From the Kadung's religio-cultural experience in Plateau State, Pokol (271-272) in his concept of Sumgi relates how two sprouted yam tubers from one single yam in the ground symbolizes that humankind although they may have their differences, yet they are from the same origin. While Pokol's concept emanated from a different ethnic group, it is relevant to this form of maintain human dignity among the Pyam who view drinking from the same calabash as depicting humankind having the same origin. Although this form of conflict resolution among the Pyam ethnic group involves two members of the community, it is still not divorced from the quest to always give attention to the common good of the community by traditional council leaders and lay members. It is an ethical principle that upholds the common good of the community. It is also relevant since it neutralizes grievances, wrong perceptions, hatred and any other threat dehumanizes the human life.

## Conclusion

Dehumanization has been a threat to the dignity of the human life in most Nigerian communities. This threat is undoubtedly expressed in the different forms of violent conflicts that have erupted in Nigeria. Due to ethnic and religious conflict, the quality of the human life was denied not only by the animalistic killings of human life, but also the verbal and psychological forms of dehumanization. Taking into account the various approaches to curbing this menace, this paper explored the distinctive African ethical principles embedded within the religio-cultural and socio-political experiences of particularly the Pyam people.

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