

ACCOUNTABILITY AS AN ETHICAL VALUE IN NIGERIA'S PUBLIC SERVICE: INSIGHT FROM THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS IN MATTHEW 25:14-30

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Abstract

Public service is a machinery for a nation's national development. It provides the required human and material resources needed for such development. Its efficiency and effectiveness could be determined by its quality service delivery geared towards the realization of the common good. On the other hand, its inefficiency is a cog in the wheel of progress and as such retards the nation's development. Observations have shown that Nigeria's public service has experienced lots of challenges which has affected the nation's development. The observed problems are inextricably linked to poor accountability consciousness. This paper, employs the pericope of the parable of talents in Matthew 25:14-30 as a framework which illustrates accountability as an ethical value and as such, an indispensable tool in public service. The work adopts literary critical method and submits that for Nigeria to experience formidable and viable public service, accountability as an ethical value should be held at esteem.

Introduction

The idea of development remains the preoccupation of every human society, organization and government especially in democratization. Such mindset requires planning hence, planning for development demands special knowledge and skill. Every nation's development presupposes the existence of a viable public service. Put differently, the development of every nation largely depends on the capability of its public service. The imperative nature of public service is realized from the fact that it serves as agent of national development. It provides the required human and material resources for a nation's national development and stability. Its competence, effectiveness and efficiency is measured by its quality service delivery. The essence of true public service is to make substantial impact and contributions towards the actualization of the common good.

Every regime in government understands the place of public service as an integral part of the socio-economic development of the nation hence, its

continuous effort to reform the public service. Okonkwo(2009) noted that right from the colonial days, Nigeria has had a total of twelve administrative reforms in the public service before 1999. Government administrators of the 4th republic are not left out in the reform packages. The cardinal objectives of these reforms had been to enhance overall efficiency and effectiveness in the structure, process and functioning of the public service.

It is important to note that in all these reforms, there are fundamental ethical principles that have continued to reoccur either as the commission's objective or as recommendations and they are considered prerequisite for effective and qualitative public service. The 2008 edition of the Federal Republic of Nigeria public service rules buttresses the above point by stating that public service system mission is "aimed at entrenching the issues of transparency, accountability, justice, equity, due process, and the rule of law". The government's argument in support of these reforms is that the overbloated nature and uninformed structure of the Nigeria public service has continued to brood inefficiencies, poor service delivery and lots of malpractices and consequently poor development.

Observations have shown that despite the number of reforms had in the Nigeria's public service, it has continued to experience lots of challenges due to distortions of the ethical values. Faseke(2006) in concrete terms stated that "despite the series of structural reforms, image laundry, improved packages and others meant to engender integrity and transparency in the civil service, the sector has not improved. The service is marked by greed, poor service delivery, misappropriation of fund, ghost workers, truancy and endemic corruption among others and consequently poor development and social instability. The above observed problems are traceable to poor accountability consciousness. This paper does not by any measure claim that Nigeria's public service has not in any way contributed to the nation's national growth. The bottom line is that the fundamental ethical values that engender effective public service are lacking. Accountability is an indispensable tool and as such considered paramount to the conduct of government business. It is the submission of this work that Nigeria's public servants should imbibe accountability consciousness as one of the ethical values that would engender quality service delivery and in turn societal development. Public servants should take their appropriate role and imbibe proper ethical values more importantly as "believers in faith" for the actualization of a sustainable Nigerian state.

Clarification of Concepts

a. Accountability

Democratic governance remains the most attractive option that could meet the challenges of development and stability especially in the developing nations. This presupposes the existence of a virile, efficient, effective, ethical and accountable public service system. Nigeria is relatively practicing democratic system of government. Such system of government requires the masses to elect people who will make decisions for them and on their behalf as their representatives in democratic republic. As representatives of the people entrusted with power to achieve particular ends, Elaigwu asserts they must be held accountable for their actions periodically. Ula-Lisa corroborates the above view by saying that they must not only be accountable but also transparent. In this manner, the people could determine the bearing of the government through the human compass (representatives). In such environment, the opinion of the people takes precedence and if objectively and conscientiously considered, democratic values and dividends with its attendant development would be guaranteed. To achieve this task, public service as agent of national development and stability must serve as a springboard for the realization and consolidation of democratic dividends. This can only be realized if the culture of accountability is imbibed. According to Ajakemo and Aroh accountability implies "stewardship, an expectation to give explanation". As carriers of people's mandate both political leaders and other public servants are obliged to be responsible and render objective account of their service to the people. In that case, accountability goes beyond the use or misuse of public fund/resources to include openness and readiness to constant analytic scrutinization. Asobie in Adefila and Adeti understands accountability as the obligation owed by anyone occupying a position of trust or responsibility to provide appropriate response to all stakeholder for action carried out and/or performance achieved in the discharge of his duties". Here, accountability is considered an obligation hence it goes as a corollary to the responsibility and authority to perform assigned duties. Omobolaji and Tunde remark that accountability underscores the superiority of the public will over private interests of those expected to serve and ensures that the public servants behave according to the ethics of their profession. Elaigwu reiterates that accountability is the ability of a public functionary to give satisfactory explanation for his or her action. When such explanation is made by the public servants to the public it becomes public accountability. Yahaya in a more elaborate approach, defines accountability as an ethical behaviour which involves responsibility for one's decisions and actions, and willingness and readiness to explain or justify such whenever called upon to do so. In a similar

manner, Ekwunife says “ by accountability we mean that process whereby people in positions of public or private trusts, honestly and willingly render a correct account of their stewardship to appropriate quarters without falsifications”. In view of this, accountability connotes provision of vivid and honest report for the utilization of entrusted resources. The quest for accountability requires public officers to inculcate moral probity, honesty, truthfulness, integrity and social credibility.

On the strength of the foregoing, accountability is considered very essential for efficient functioning of every group, organization or society especially in the Nigeria’s public service. The essence of accountability in public service among other reasons is to instill moral consciousness, illumine stewardship responsibilities and to checkmate abuses and misuses associated with powerful bureaucratic structures. Accountability serves as a control mechanism. In view of this, Raga and Derek say it guards against abuses and excesses that could be found in public service. It serves as an antidote to fraudulent practices. With the level of decline of morality in the Nigeria’s public service system, it becomes imperative to redirect the minds of public servants to imbibe accountability as one of the ethical values capable of promoting efficiency, checkmating excesses and ensuring quality service delivery. Accountability as an ethical value is an essential ingredient that could guarantee healthy and sustainable development

b. Public Service

Pope John XXIII observed that human society can neither be well ordered nor prosperous without the presence of legally constituted authorities, to preserve its institution and to do all that is necessary to sponsor actively the interest of all its members. The above assertion by John xxiii underscores the relevance and legitimacy of political authority or power. This power, Hammawa in Aghamelu says is representational. It is given to someone by the others on their behalf and on trust. Those who represent the people in various capacities in government for the realization of the public interest are known as public servants. The dividends of such representation can only be made feasible by a viable, efficient, effective, ethically minded public service. Public service therefore, is the institutional machinery of the government charged with the responsibility of making and implementation of policies. The implication is that no meaningful development would be made without this machinery known as the public service.

However, the role of Public service in policy formulation and implementation in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. Given its strategic relevance, many authors

have given various definitions. Okoye, drawing his insight from Encyclopedia and Wikipedia on the definition of public service says: we can understand that public service, comprises government personnel or employees in various government departments, or agencies in the public sector associated with the service of the community or a service that is performed for the benefits of the public or its institutions. Ejiofor in Ayodele and Bolaji posits that public service in the developing societies is everything and that the most important catalyst of development is an efficient service. Okonkwo in this regard identifies public service as an integral part of economic and social development in the developing countries.

In scope, public service include: civil services, parastatals and other agencies. Although Ajakemo and Aroh observed that civil service and public service are often used interchangeably, public service has a wider scope of service than civil service. Adamolekun and Akpan in Okonkwo made a clarification by saying that civil service is a subset of public service. Be that as it may, in the context of this work, public service shall be considered as all public functionaries in various government departments associated with the service of the community for the actualization of the common good or service in any capacity where the presence of Government is felt for the promotion of public interest (common good). Such service could be at federal, state or local government levels.

c. Ethical Values

Value as a concept is a universal phenomenon. Any human society devoid of values is bound to collapse; little wonder every human society cherishes and extols values. Nwabuisi in Ugwu clearly stated that values are fundamental to all human societies in human activities and actions all over the world. Ikeanyibe presents values as what any society care about as a group that is what motivate people from within. Values have potential powers of facilitating and creating an enabling environment for socio-economic development of the society. Values help to promote societal integrity while jettison of values its absence erodes the human society of its cohesiveness, integrity and development. Values, however, are principles of standard of living which the people consider good.

Ethics according to Omoregbe is concerned with the question of right or wrong in human behaviour. It is a moral principle that governs the human conduct. Ethics and Morality are intertwined and often times used interchangeably. The bottom line is that both deal with human conduct and in the words of Ugwueye both seek to check man's behaviour in such a way that does not only benefit one

but prevents one from hurting or injuring others. Davis in Tunde and Omobolaji defines ethics as those morally permissible standards of conduct that each member of a group wants every other to follow.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that ethical values address human conduct and as such considered indispensable in every facet of human endeavours. This work adopts Gurof succinct explanation of ethical values to connote all vital principles and acceptable norms of behaviour that public officials are obliged to strictly adhere to in the process of dealing with citizenry. Some of these ethical values include: truth, freedom, respect for life, responsibility, love, justice, equity, fairness and above all accountability.

d. Talent

It is any natural skill or ability or endowment in an individual that helps him to do something very well.

e. Parable

It is a short story that teaches a moral or spiritual lessons

Analysis of the Text (Matt 25:14-30)

The pericope under study has a close literary link with the preceding parable (Matt 25:1-13). The transitional statement in the opening verse 14 ("Again, it will be like...") attests to this. That notwithstanding, the connecting statement unveils still the thematic unity flavour of the parable. Parable of the talents falls under the eschatological discourse (Chaps. 24-25) which is characteristic of Matthew's Gospel. The author calls Christians of his era to faithful and humane service. Although no man knows the exact time of the end, but in the interim, Matthean Gospel challenges the people to ethical and responsible dispositions to service. He employed similitudes prevalent in his time to enjoin Jewish Christians on the need to be prepared in readiness to account for their stewardship.

The scenario is that of a rich man who entrusts his wealth to his three servants and embarked on a journey. Each of the servants was entrusted with monetary trust according to his ability. It is the expectation of the master that there would be faithful exploration of what was given by each servant since none is asked of the impossible. Mitch and Sri observed recorded that

It is impossible to calculate what each talent was worth in modern currency. The talent was a measurement of weight, and the value of any given talent depended on whether it was gold, silver or copper. Nevertheless, all agree that a single talent was a significant amount of wealth to be used in commercial trading.

At master's return, talent as used in the parable under study has more worth or value than the "mina" used in a similar but distinctive parable (Lk.19:11-27). Here, talents are considered as the largest denomination worth more than the mina that can easily be laid away in a piece of cloth (Lk 19:20) while the larger and much more valuable talent had to be buried (matt.25:18,25).

At the master's return, his servants were called for proper accounting. Two of the servants manifested the virtues of faithfulness and their diligence earned them 100% profit/gain. Interestingly, the third servant neither lost nor squandered what was given to him as the case of the prodigal son (Lk. 15:13) but did not make any substantial output. The question that will naturally flow is: was the third servant not accountable like his counterparts? His accountability may not be doubted but the bottom line is that there was no profitable use of his talent. One's talent is meant for the good of others. In his own case, he failed to make attempt towards rendering service to others. The idea of the realisation of the common good eluded him.

Consequently, they were praised and rewarded for their faithful service. They were identified as **good** and **faithful** servants and were charged with greater responsibilities. The third servant was reprimanded by the master equally and rewarded in terms of blame and punishment. He was identified as a **wicked** and **lazy** servant; of a truth, he was defiant and pushes the blame for his laziness to his master.

Jesus spurs us to appropriate and profitable use of one's talent for the good of all. Proper handling of one's gift would merit more while ungodly use of one's gift attracts blame and punishment. On this note Filson says "the repatire fault of the lazy servant was deadly; he made no good use of what was entrusted to him; he was not faithful".

The Nigeria's Experience of Accountability in Public Service

There is no contention that public service is a pivotal organ that could facilitate national growth and development. It contains human network relationship and association, which requires managerial skill for policy formulation and

implementation. Public service has the capability of formulating policies that could engender socio-economic and political stability of the civil society. It is within its gamut to deliver the true dividends of democracy to the citizenry.

Historically, Jega (2007) noted that the Nigerian public service used to have a cherished history of committed, dedicated and invaluable service. In relative terms, the Nigeria Public service has arguably the best trained and experienced technocrats and bureaucrats in comparison with any other African country. Not until the decade of the 1980's, when reckless misrule under the military created a spiraling decline and systemic decomposition.

Paradoxically, some of the basic requirements associated with effective and efficient public service turned gloomy. Thus, poor accountability, greed and selfishness poor performance, unethical attitude, poor service delivery and endemic corruption gripped Nigeria's public service.

Jega's attribution of the capsiding of the moral values associated with public service to the military era may not be totally disputed, but note should be taken that the situation has exacerbated even in the democratic republic.

In view of this, Abamba (2005) observed that since May 29, 1999 when Obasanjo administration took over the Nigerian governance, there have been cases of corrupt practice from the highest to the lowest level. He further noted that at the federal level, there are some Heads of States, their families, business cohorts, governors, ministers and National Assembly members who have been involved in contract scandals and other crimes against the law; yet nobody has been arrayned before a court of law to answer criminal charges for stealing public resource inspite of abundant evidence against them. Even when public official guilty of public criminal offence are identified, their cases silently go down the drain.

2008 public service rules (PSR) prohibited misconduct of any sort by P.S as stipulated in PSR 030301 and PSR 030401 respectively, other misconducts especially bribery and corruption under financial regulation (FR 030434). Similarly Gundu noted Article 23 of the Charter for public service in Africa enjoins public functionaries to refrain from, "inter alia", abuse of office and any act(s) inimical to ethics and morally.

Furthermore, in order to promote ethical standard accountability and transparency in public sector the federal Government of Nigeria established different anti-corruption agencies. Some of these agencies include: War Against

Indiscipline with code of conduct bureau (CCB), Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Independent Corrupt Practices and other related Offences Commission (ICPC); National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and control (NAFDAC). In Nigeria has also had series of reforms in the public service which according to Okonkwo had totalled 12 even before the commencement of the 4th Republic. Surprisingly enough, these agencies in union with other several reform have not totally liberated Nigeria from the monster called corruption and its attendant poor development. Nigeria as at 2006 still rank high as the 6th most corrupt country (Dukor 2005) in the world. One cannot deny totally the efforts of these agencies but the fact remains that its output is negligible when compared with the rate of corrupt practices in Nigeria.

Corruption although is a global phenomenon, it is a dangerous social ill of any human society. Osoba in Tunde and Omobolaji (2009) says corruption is a form of anti-social behaviour by an individual or social group which confers unjust or fraudulent benefits on its perpetrators (and) is inconsistent with the established legal norms and prescribed moral ethos of the land.. it diminishes the capacity of legitimate authorities to provide fully for the material and spiritual well being of all members of society in a just and equitable manner. In fact, corruption undermines credibility and depletes socio-economic growth and reputation of the society. it goes beyond fund looting to connote every act of betrayal of trust resulting directly or indirectly from the subordination of public goals to those of the individual. It is in this light that Abamba 2005 asserts that a person who engages in nepotism has committed an act of corruption by putting his family interest first over those of a larger society.

The assertion by Anyaoku that corruption has virtually swallowed up our collective values and there is hardly any sector of our national life spared of this affliction was buttressed by Osundare report thus: Corruption is a fastest-growing industry in Nigeria today it is the real money-spinner, the oil which lubricates the engine of Nigeria's politics and economy, a sine qua non in business deals, a desideratum for advancement in all spheres. Nigerians are not only psychologically intimidated, we are also morally weakened and unconcerned of our dignity.

Butressing the fact that corruption has gripped Nigerians and has taken uppermost position Osundare and Anyaoku further observed: "time there was when misappropriation of public funds in Nigeria used to be described in

millions; now it is reported in billions and trillions; and many of us urge them on and envy their luck”.

A practical follow up of the above assertion is N32.8b pension scam in which the court granted EFCC leave to seize 108 Assets of the alleged pensions under section 28 of the 2004 EFCC Act. Those involved according to Ogundele were: a permanent secretary in the office of the Head of Civil Service of the Federation, Atiku Abubakar Kigo, a director Esai Dangabar, Ahmed Iruwa Wada, John Yakubu Yusufu, Mrs. Veronica Ulonma Onyegbula and Sam Habila Zira. The accused allegedly between Jan. 2009 and June 2011 in Abuja diverted a sum of N14,518,567,724 being part of police pension cash from an account domiciled at first bank plc. Between January and December 2009 in Abuja, they also allegedly breached the public trust with N8,920,371,822 police pension fund kept at first bank plc. They were also accused of stealing N656,559,289 in January 2011 while in March 2009 another N462,963,012 was allegedly diverted from the same source while working at the police pension office among others.

Osundare (2012) further reported that in other lands, public figures go to jail for pinching our equivalent of N50, 000. In Nigeria, the higher the amount you steal, the higher you go on the national order of merit. This is made possible because of the immunity to federal or state executive from prosecution. As an adendum John Rowland the governor of the state of connectivity not only resigned but was put on trial and eventually sent to a year in jail for receiving gratification of \$100,000 that was not even in cash.

On the strength of the above recorded, it is very clear that corruption has eaten deep into the fabric of the Nigeria society. Consequently, we have plunged into the state of dysconsciousness that we have virtually lost our ethical values.

Implications

A close and critical look at Nigeria’s public service and other public institutions will unveil numerous challenges due to the jettison of the ethical values. Hence, individual and private goals have taken priority over the pursuit of public interest. Worrysome enough is the fact that these public functionaries are men and women of different religious affiliations. The situation raises question on the place of religion in civil society.

It is against this backdrop in line with the year of faith as declared by emeritus Pope Benedict XVI, that this work proposes a viable solution using the parable of the talents. The solution stems from the conviction that accountability as an

ethical value is a platform for the realization of a formidable public service and in turn viable human society. However, we can now apply this study in the Nigerian situation.

Fundamental among the implications is that public service is an invitation to faithful service. It entails foresight and investment of efforts by public functionaries for the purpose of actualizing the common good. Donahue in Hughes (1998) posits that the pursuit of the common interest requires a carefully designed structure of accountability that ensures for citizens the effort of those who act on their behalf. Accountability consciousness will spur public servants and others to good and faithful use of their positions for the interest of all.

Accountability as the heart of democracy and cornerstone of good governance works in tandem with principle of truth, honesty and transparency. These values are upheld by different religious groups especially among the three major religions in Nigeria. As affiliates of different religions, public functionaries should live out their faith in their respective positions by imbibing these moral values. In this context, there should be no dichotomy between profession of one's faith and our public life. Our religious values, norms and ideals should reflect as we perform in public sectors.

Every public servant conscious of accountability should embrace work as a vocation. This will help in checkmating bureaucratic bottlenecks, truancy, inefficiency, poor performance, ghost workers, laziness, poor attitude to work, lateness, poor service delivery and other unethical attitude and corrupt practices found in Nigeria's public service and public institutions.

Parable of the talents emphasizes individual ability. In this context, individual ability connotes expertise and acquisition of skill and creativity. If this notion should be appropriated, it will help to reduce nepotism and ethnicity force and its effects in the Nigerian society. On the part of the politicians, this passage frown at the use of fowl means in acquisition of power.

The master/servant relationship is also a point to note in the passage. Maintaining an atmosphere of cordiality will boost proficiency and realization of public goal. The text under study depicts apparently a gloomy relationship between the master and the servant. Often times, the Nigeria public servants relationship with the citizenry is nauseating. Also, making demands on the public servants without commensurable support as obtains in Nigeria will retard

service delivery. Making the subordinate feel at ease in his dependency and providing enabling environment for active service will be beneficial to all.

We can also glean from the text of the strategic relevance of proper remuneration. Remuneration can be of two kinds: by way of praise and blame. The faithful servants were praised and promoted by their master respectively and the third servant blamed and punished. Observations have shown that proper remuneration concept has eluded our nation. In concrete terms Waziri (2011) stated: "indeed, with the exception of workers in the banking, oil and Gas industries, it is fair to say that the current salary packages of workers in all other sectors of the economy are insufficient and inadequate to sustain their loyalty to the social contract with the Nigerian nation".

On the other hand, it challenges Nigeria's legal institutions to conscientious and effective use of their office. In Nigeria, the issue of 'immunity clause' and 'sacred cow' abound thus those evidently found guilty of crime feasible out of the scene without prosecution. The parable of the talents provides a better footing for the nigeri's public functionaries to embrace accountability as one of the ethical values that will engender faithful service and quality service delivery.

Conclusion

Public service remains a catalyst for any nation's national development. It provides the nation with both human and material resources required to gain growth and development. Such a virile and strategic institution of a nation is expected to be ethically minded and accountability conscious so as to accelerate efficient productivity and development. Public officers require not only acquisition of skills and knowledge but also a standard of conduct, which in turn demands ethical practices. Unethical practices in the public service hinder national growth and development hence the need to foster and promote ethical standards in the Nigeria's public service. This work, on this note, upholds the parable of the talents (as contained in the gospel of Matthew 25:14-30) as a framework for the enhancement of accountability as an ethical value in the Nigeria's public service; and if conscientiously applied would help in achieving development and positive image for Nigeria's public service.

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