

# THE HUMANISTIC IMPERATIVES IN AFRICAN POLITICS

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## ***Abstract***

*Africa is bedevilled by several vices covering its socio-economic political ambiance. The continent abounds with unemployment, poor infrastructural development, poor work ethics, corporate organizational irresponsibility, nepotism, factionalism, political 'god-fatherism', tribalism, ethnicity, social injustice, lack of respect for both procedural and legal justice, religious squabbles, poverty, hunger, poor maintenance culture, insecurity of life and property, and a lot more. The Machiavellian style of leadership has further deepened the African states into retrogression and epileptic development. However, African problems can adequately be solved with the interjection of morality in terms of Humanistic Ethical Paradigm and its two interrelated proposals, namely respect for human dignity as a basis for individual and social action, and focus on character as the highest value in the assessment of human personality.*

## **Introduction**

The main objective of this paper is to situate the African socio-political contradictions within the purview of the concept of Humanistic Ethical Paradigm as a necessary way of eliminating the present political and economic violence in the continent. African societies are bedevilled by various crises in their politics, economy, social and cultural experiments. The interactions of the Africans at various levels of these crises are obviously characterized by several inhibitions and crude form of violence. This is obviously visible in the

fall of moral rectitude in both the leaders and the led. There is lack of moral conscience which is the foundation for all healthy holistic development in any nation in the world.

The continent is presently abounding in unemployment, poor infrastructural development, poor work ethics, corporate organizational irresponsibility, nepotism, factionalism, political god-fatherism, tribalism, ethnicity, social injustice, lack of respect for both procedural and legal justices, and religious squabbles, poverty, hunger, poor maintenance culture, insecurity of life and property. Mugabe (1991: 22) underscores the African tragedies thus:

*Africa is now home to the world's largest number of least developed countries. The continent further boasts of the largest refugee population in the world. Furthermore, it is a theatre of endless conflicts, civil strife and gross human right abuses. Whereas standards of living in other continents have risen over time, in Africa, present standards of living are not better than they were two decades ago. High unemployment, inflation, civil strife, poverty, refugee crisis, desertification, disease, malnutrition- the list is endless-appear to be the only legacy the continent is capable of passing from one generation to the other.*

The poor state of the continent has led to so many theories attempting to provide the reason the continent has degenerated to the state of repressive political construct and obvious irresponsibility to the plight of the masses. For instance, in Nigeria, our peculiar problems have been ascribed to the absence of public spirited leaders (Achebe, 1983: 1):

*The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the*

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*responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership. I am saying that Nigeria can change today if she discovers leaders who have the will, the ability and the vision.*

The description given by this great citizen of our 'great' continent is applicable to almost (if not all) African countries. Although captured in the 1980s, the situation described has remained the same till date. This has set so many political thinkers and public analysts wondering if African societies are making any progress in development.

Also, a foreigner, given his long tenancy in Nigeria, succinctly projects his careful observation about Nigeria (by implication Africa) in this manner (Maier, 2000: xxx):

*In Nigeria, the blame for its lost generation falls squarely on the shoulders of its people's leaders- corrupt military dictators and their civilian accomplices who over the past quarter of a century have humbled a once proud nation through outright incompetence and greed.*

It is a uniform discovery of these thinkers that the major problem with Nigeria - as it were the whole African continent - is traceable to our impassive leaders whose major goal is the accumulation of private property. African leaders are suffering from 'hypertensive materialism', that is, uncontrollable desire for material things. Despite Africa's vast natural resources, its people remain in the deadly grip of poverty, squalor and destitution while buffeted by environmental degradation and brutal tyranny. At judiciary or an impartial police force or civil service may exist in form but, in many cases, the substance has changed. Operating through non-official networks, the ruler gets his way by bypassing official structures, turns them into his own fiefdom by ensuring that anyone in a position of power in those institutions is either a relative or in some way beholden him. Generally, there is hardly any loyalty to the state itself, let alone to the

development of the people. In many African countries the president does not distinguish between the national treasury and his own private bank account, or between the police force or army and his private militia (Nnoruka, 2003).

This is the situation of Nigeria's political leaders who wedge the power of governance. The treasury of the nation has become the target of everyone, who desires to go into politics. As a matter of fact, the idea of politics is that of quick means of generating financial abundance and living in a paradise that is immune from human suffering, pain, poverty; in a world of complete pleasure for the politician and his allies. Not only does the politician concentrate on amassing wealth for himself, also those who were party to his political enthronement, whether with the consent of the people or not, will be paid back from the nation's treasury.

With the current political situation in Africa, it is obvious that our problem is first and foremost that of political leadership. However, the problem is basically a moral problem, which is the basis of unethical leadership practices in Africa. That explains why the interjection of Humanistic Ethical Paradigm into our socio-economic political activities is here prescribed.

There should be a departure from blaming the peculiar problem on colonialism and imperialism. Despite Africa's wealth, the continent is still at the lower ebb of development, ravaged by different kinds of crises. It harbours some of the poorest and most corrupt countries in the world, yet it is blessed with abundant human and natural renewable and non-renewable resources. The continent is blessed with mineral, physical, biological and energy resources including fishery resources, timber, water resources, wildlife, medicinal plants, mineral resources, ornamental, food and cash crops. Despite all these, Africa is still a well-known undeveloping continent. This is because those who are in position to judiciously and equitably distribute these resources live on the principle of radical political egoism, using political power for the advancement of selfishness.

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Lamenting the sorry state of the African societies, Kwasi (2003: 337) posits that:

*If we were to be very honest with ourselves, we surely would not find it too difficult to be convinced of the fact that Africans have been irresponsible and harmful to Africa in terms of self-governance.*

### **Machiavelli and Nietzsche: A reinvention in African politics**

An observation of African leadership style and political landscape reveals a replica of Machiavellian Prince, who should pretend to be good in order to access the political power in the state; and Nietzschean Superman, who has killed the idea of God and, thereby, reinvented the Master Morality as against the slave morality that embodies the concepts of love, compassion and human sympathy. Both Machiavelli and Nietzsche separated politics and morality, contrary to the efforts of early political thinkers to ground politics on morality. Both Plato and Aristotle attempted the provision of viable social order for the polity advancing the need for a just society whose end will be the good of the people. They set out to provide a society that would promote harmonious peaceful co-existence among its people. Machiavelli who wrote from the background of his days has been misinterpreted and wrongly applied by African leaders, whether directly or indirectly, thus (Machiavelli, 1961):

*A prince...must have no other object or thought, nor acquire skill in anything, except war, its organization, and its discipline. The art of war is all that is expected of a ruler;...The first way to lose your state is to neglect the art of war; the first way to win a state is to be skilled in the art of war.*

The fight for State's power of governance by the different political parties in Africa is conducted in the manner of Machiavelli's art of

war. The statements such as ‘do or die’ election credited to the former President Olusegun Obasanjo of the fourth Republic in Nigeria between 1999 to 2007, is nothing but a statement emanating from a disciple of Machiavellian Prince and Nietzschean Superman, who has no regard for the people. He has been counselled (Edo, 1998),

*So he must never let his thought stray from military exercises, which he must pursue more vigorously in peace than in war. These exercises can be both physical and mental. A wise prince must observe these rules; he must never take things easy in times of peace, but rather use the latter assiduously, in order to be able to reap the profit in times of adversity.*

This is the basis of warfare conception of politics in Africa. It is not intended to indict Machiavelli for negative and warfare conception of politics in the continent, but rather to analyse African brand of politics in line with Machiavelli’s immoral stipulations for political leaders. The political leaders should ever be ready for war even in the time of peace. Africa’s political leaders tow this line of reasoning. That explains the reason behind political violence resulting from our elections. The massive election rigging is a further demonstration of Machiavellian prescription of warfare politicking (Dukor, 1991),

*...taking into account, he (the prince) will find that some of the things that appear to be virtues will, if he practices them, ruin him, and some of the things that appear to be vices will bring him security and prosperity.*

He opposes morality in politics, believing that morality and politics are not compatible. This conception is extravagantly wrong because ethics/morality, attempt to promote good and virtuous behaviours in all interpersonal relationships in order to avoid situations described by Thomas Hobbes in the State of Nature as ‘war of all against all’

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(bellum omnium contra omnes), and ‘man is wolf to man’ (homo lupus homini) (Omeregbe, 2003):

*...there are two ways of fighting: by law or by force. The first way is natural to men, and the second to beasts. But as the first way often proves inadequate one must needs have recourse to the second. So, as a prince is forced to know how to act like a beast.....one must know how to colour one's actions and to be a great liar and deceiver. Men are so simple, and so much creatures of circumstance, that the deceiver will always find someone ready to be deceived. A prince...need not necessarily have all the good qualities...but he should certainly appear to have them.*

This possibly explains why falsehood is conceived as the hallmark of politics in Africa. Developed countries of the world could prosecute a public office holder for distorting the truth. But, in Africa, the art of truth distortion is seen as an art of political ingenuity. Machiavelli posits that the ruler should pretend to be compassionate, faithful to his word, kind, guileless and devout (patriotic). Although, according to him, these qualities will undermine his political authority, he should pretend to be all these in order to win the confidence of the people. From Machiavelli's point of view, the ends justify the means. He argued that the main purpose of politics is the cruel possession of political power without giving cognizance to the method or means of attaining political authority.

The present decade of democratic governance in several African states attests to the Machiavellian crude and rude pursuit of political authority as the ultimate goal of politics. Contrary to Machiavelli and his African disciples' practices, the ultimate goal of politics is rendering service to the citizens whose consent is germane to the realization of the democratic processes. But at present, the consent of the people is less important in the political processes in most African states.

For Nietzsche, the slave morality is a weak morality that is not fit for rulers. In order to ensure ruthless immoral values in the society, Nietzsche postulated the death of God, removing the sense of a supersensible being who will judge all immoral acts.

With both the Machiavellian and Nietzschean styles of leadership, the African societies returned to the Hobbesian jungle, where man began to prey on his fellow man in quest of self-survival. Given the nefarious activities of these unethical, Machiavellian political leaders, the people became disconnected from the state. This kind of leadership style proposes individualism, as against the African disposition to communalism, which is a system characterized by the idea of brotherhood and oneness. The individualistic nature of this leadership style deliberately led to the disconnection between the people and their elected leaders who wedge the state power of governance. Edo (1998) underscores this perfectly:

*The people of Nigeria neither understand the sanctified institution of the state nor do they have any commitment to it. The Modern Nigeria state and its socio-economic formation lack an organic relation with the traditions of the people. It has not vibrantly integrated individuals, groups and institutions in such a way as to create polity expressing the aspiration of the people.*

In most African countries, this non-integration of the people into the state led to the total separation of the people from the state, everyone seeking to survive on his/her own. In this struggle for self-survival, morality becomes a derogatory construct in socio-economic political lexicon. Those who eye political positions do so as a means of escaping from the general poverty the political leaders submerged the country into through misgovernance and misappropriation of public funds. The leaders obviously have no respect for the lives of fellow citizens, resulting in assassinations of several political activists and fellow political aspirants. This is still the Machiavellian concept of war as a central value in politics. The crude looting of national treasury reflects

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the leaders' lack of respect for human dignity (the citizens whose lives should be bettered through equitable distribution of social wealth and burden).

Be that as it may, how do we remedy the unfortunate situation? Edo (1998) has this to say:

*...the greatest obstacle to the development of our country is immorality, corruption, dishonesty, fraud, embezzlement of public funds, selfishness etc. it is only a moral regeneration that can cure our country and remove the greatest obstacles obstructing her development.*

Africa must begin to pay attention to morality as one of the major ways of curbing immoral and illegal practices in all strata of our society. Our quest for development must not neglect the ethical imperative of development. Edo (1998) poignantly points this out in respect to African development:

*What is required for Africa to develop is more than the acquisition and application of scientific knowledge. Development has an ethical component which Africans could neglect at their own peril.*

### **Humanistic Ethical Paradigm**

Our society should begin to embrace the Humanistic Ethical Paradigm concept as a way of introducing ethical culture in our interpersonal relationship across socio-eco-political and cultural milieu in Africa. The application should transcend all age groups and institutions - be it social, educational, political, economy, etc. This mental consciousness of the imperative of morality in any society can begin to pave way for our desired holistic development. There is the need for African society to embrace this concept in order to build a stable social order, which is a pre-condition for development. Application of this concept will

enable African states to build a socio-eco-political system void of corruption and oppression of man by man.

The goal of every normal society is to satisfy the needs of its people through mutual co-operation among them. In order to achieve this goal, there is the need in contemporary African societies to assess all human beings on the basis of the Humanistic Ethical Paradigm concept. This paradigm has two interrelated parts:

- i. Respect for human dignity as a basis for individual and social action.
- ii. Focus on character as the highest value in the assessment of human personality.

The first part refers to paying attention to the value (dignity) or importance of fellow human beings whenever one is to act either individually or collectively in the society. It should be embraced to the detriment of the politics or economy of violence which does not regard the humanity in other people. Politics of violence entails the process of maiming, assassinating, blackmailing, etc. during political electioneering processes. Economy of violence is a process whereby goods and services, which are injurious to the health of innocent buyers, are manufactured and distributed.

If Africans embrace respect for the humanity in others, they will be able to see the deterioration in both immoral business practices and unethical, corrupt, violent political practitioners. Both our informal and formal educational institutions should begin to train citizens (from the early age till adulthood) on the importance of respecting the humanity in others. This is the basis of the Humanistic Ethical Paradigm, which forbids people from treating 'others' as mere objects to be overcome in their bid for self-survival. Other people are fellow human beings in the boat of life whose company is necessary for the realization of one's personhood.

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Similar to the first part of the Humanistic Ethical Paradigm is the second formulation of Kantian Categorical Imperative (Kant, 1978):

*Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as means only.*

This formulation accommodates the possibility of emphasizing selves above others. However, it discourages one from undermining the humanity or dignity of others in the course of personal pursuits.

The second part of the Humanistic Ethical Paradigm advocates a focus on character as the highest value in the assessment of human personality. An immoral man should not be exalted in the polity, but rather should be punished so as to deter those who may likely want to embrace his path.

The opposite seems to be the case in the present African societies where men and women (especially embattled political leaders, who have been indicted for corruption) go about gleaning chieftaincy titles as though the society seems to have a lot of respect for corrupt public office holders. It is as though the chieftaincy titles are compensations for the evil done to the society or the reward for the cleverness in jumping prosecution and jail.

What this further does is a total demolition of ethical imperatives in the society. This is because these corrupt leaders who are rewarded with chieftaincy titles as, perhaps, a recognition of their smartness at embezzling public funds, become models to youths that are believed to be the leaders of tomorrow. This has been the way corruption has been bequeathed on us as a peculiar legacy from one generation to another in Africa. The Humanistic Ethical Paradigm advocates the celebration of human character in the assessment or evaluation of a person, rather than the wealth of the person. In other words, the major consideration will be the method or means of acquisition of wealth and not the wealth itself.

One is not supposed to eulogize former corrupt political leaders, whether military or civilian, who have failed in one's honest assessment of human character. They should be resisted because they have only succeeded in perpetrating corruption as a constant experience in our social-eco-political milieu. In the same vein, the business mogul whose wealth is discovered to have been generated through immoral practices or possibly through his association with political leaders, who must have transferred the nation's wealth to him as a capital for business transaction, should not be accorded respect or praise.

In the spirit of traditional African society, these corrupt leaders are not persons (i.e real human beings). This is because the attainment of personhood is related to the idea of discharging certain community/society-demanding moral responsibilities. Thus, one is a person if one lives within the dictate of the moral values in the community. For Wiredu and Gyekye, the acquired status of personhood is understood not simply as a matter of gradual socialization, but as attaining and practicing values that lead to the well-being of one's community. Gyekye (1997) argues:

*...the judgment that a human being is "not a person, made on the basis of that individual's consistent morality reprehensive conduct, implies that the pursuit or practice of moral virtue is intrinsic to the conception of personhood in African thought....the evaluative statement opposite to this is he "is a person" means, 'he has a good character, he is peaceful not troublesome, he is kind, he has respect for others; he is humble.*

The implication of this is that the people that should attract respect are those who have through their impeccable characters and moral rectitude contributed to the good of the society positively. The people that have not or that did not abuse the political power entrusted into their care are the real persons in the African sense. Such people should be rewarded and venerated or possibly be hero-worshipped, as against

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the present hero-worshipping of corrupt leaders with chieftaincy titles by traditional rulers, awards of recognition by corporate organizations, and national titles by the Federal Governments.

The careful application and implementation of Humanistic Ethical Paradigm as a new value in the socio-eco-political lexicon in Africa will lead to a complete overhaul of the present immoral political and economic constructs in the society.

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