

## **Causes of Ethical Erosion in Nigerian Universities**

### **LES CAUSES D'ÉROSION MORALE AUX UNIVERSITÉS NIGÉRIENNES**

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**Abstract:** The contemporary feature of Nigerian university system is that of anarchy, chaos and acrimony. These can be seen in various vices such as sexual harassment, admission racketeering, exam malpractice as well as unhealthy rivalry in competition for various positions in the university system. The cause of which can be traced to lack of ethical behaviour. The genesis of this ethical erosion is to be unraveled by this paper in the proceeding paragraphs.

**Key words:** Erosion; Nigerian Universities; Ethical Behaviour

**Résumé:** La caractéristique contemporaine du système universitaire nigérien est celle de l'anarchie, du chaos et de l'amertume. Ceux-ci peuvent être vus dans divers vices tels que le harcèlement sexuel, le racket d'admission, la malversation d'examen aussi bien que la rivalité malsaine en concurrence pour différentes positions dans le système universitaire. La cause dont peut être tracé au manque de comportement moral. La genèse de cette érosion morale doit être démêlée par ce document dans les paragraphes de marche à suivre.

**Mots clés:** Érosion; Universités nigériennes; Comportement moral

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

There is no disputing the fact that the university system in Nigeria contemporarily is faced with the threat of unethical attributes. These attributes range from examination malpractice, sexual harassment/sexually transmitted marks, cultism, militant unionism among others. These phenomena emanate as a result of conflicts over norms or even as a result of absence of norms entirely. In other words, there is a serious crisis of values in Nigerian university system. In this type of situation, virtually every cherished principle and ideal of university life has been tremendously eroded. Even general norms that guide peaceful human existence are to a large extent absent in the university system in Nigeria.

Evidence of this can be seen in the high rate of admission racketeering scandals, bribery and graft, victimization, sexual harassment of female students, the proliferation of male and female cult gangs, persistent incidents of rape, female prostitution, murder, intimidation of lecturers by students, rumor mongering, examination malpractices and other anti-social activities(Salami,1999:59).

Based on this backdrop, this paper intends to trace the cause(s) of value crisis in Nigerian university system. In doing this, the paper tries to situate the phenomenon on two rungs; historical origin of university system and government policy in the country. Discussion on these factors is carried out after the conceptual framework.

## **2. CONCEPTUALIZATION**

A University is often seen as the environment or place for teaching, research and developing people. It is an avenue created for the development of the mind, the individual person, the provision of quality human capital and the development of the society. As the apex of the educational system worldwide, the main aim and objectives of universities over time have been to teach, conduct research and render public service, publish standard textbooks, storage of knowledge, certification of graduates and make enlightened commentaries on topical issues.

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In Nigeria, the university system is one of the three categories that education system is structured namely; primary, post-primary (secondary), post-secondary (tertiary). The tertiary section is also divided into three; Colleges of Education, Polytechnic including monotechnic and University. In categorizing Universities in Nigeria, two methods could be adopted; proprietorship and programme. Using the former gives the federal, state, military and private Universities, while the latter gives conventional, agriculture and technology universities. Presently, there are 29 federal, 30 state, 1 military and 33 private conventional universities. This gives a total of 92 universities in the country (NUC, 2011).

Unequivocally, university system in Nigeria has become a big industry from one University College at Ibadan in 1948 to 5 in 1962 and 92 in 2011. The number of students has similarly increased from 210 students at the inception of University College Ibadan in 1948 to 1,395 in 1960, 5,288 in 1962, 40,000 in 1976, 172,000 in 1988, 448,230 in 2000 and 526,780 in 2002. Unfortunately, only 25% of qualified candidates could be absorbed by the existing Universities which is between 13 and 15% of all candidates seeking admission annually (Okebukola, 2002).

Ethics on the other hand involves learning what is right or wrong and then doing the right thing. The right thing is not as straight forward as conveyed in a great deal of business ethics literature. Nonetheless, ethics constitutes the fundamental ground rules that direct human lives and these rules are based on values. These values which guide how to behave are considered more values e.g. values such as respect, honesty, fairness, responsibility etc. Statements around how these values are applied are sometimes called moral or ethical principles (MC Namara, 1999).

Moreover, professional ethics is knowing what is right or wrong in the workplace and doing what is right. However, making ethical decisions in workplaces are not that easy because it is not necessarily choosing between right or wrong, rather, it is more often choosing between one type of right and another. Professional activity often demands selection from alternatives that are neither wholly right nor wholly wrong. All the same, profession needs to be conducted in a manner that is acceptable and reasonably ethical. To this end, ethics in the work-place is managed through the use of codes and conduct, roles of ethicists and ethic committees, policies and procedures to resolve ethical dilemmas (Townley, 1992).

Taking a look at Nigerian University system, in particular, the Lecturing cadre, one would see that there is no precise and concise ethics guiding it. This could be due to the notion of the concept of academic freedom which is fundamental to the profession and had been carried too far to encompass freedom above the law.

Indeed, managing ethics in the workplace involves identifying and prioritizing values to guide behaviours in the organization and establishing associated policies and procedures that ensure that expected behaviours are achieved. According to Mc Namara (1999), there are six basic ethical values (codes):

- (1) Trustworthiness: Honesty, integrity, promise-keeping and loyalty;
- (2) Respect: Autonomy, privacy, dignity, courtesy, tolerance and acceptance;
- (3) Responsibility: Accountability and pursuit of excellence;
- (4) Caring: Compassion, consideration, sharing, kindness and loving;
- (5) Fairness: Procedural fairness, impartiality and consistency and
- (6) Justice: Equity, equality and due process.

Furthermore, ethics could be used in reference to the study of the principles of human action. Sometimes, it is used interchangeably with morality. Thus, ethic has to do with the study and prescription of rules and regulations regarding the rightness or wrongness of human action. That is, what is to be done and what is not to be done. In this vein, ethics may be conceived in two alternatives but related ways; in one sense, the science of morals and in another, a system of morals. In the light of the former, it is a branch of philosophy which is concerned with human character or conduct examined in the light of ideal. For instance, the good versus the bad. It is a systematic study of society designed to determine what is right and what is wrong, what is virtuous and what is vicious, what is good and what is evil. In the light of the latter ethic is connected with the rules of behaviour. It deals with standards of social conduct.

It is in this sense that once can talk of standard of professional conduct or standard of religious conduct, standard of medical practice, standards of scholarship, standard of administrative practice, standards of Christians or Muslim behaviour. All of these come under the rubric of ethics as a system of morals. The relegation of this ethical procedure in the University system in Nigeria has encouraged unethical activities which have consequently damaged the academic activities therein as well.

### **3. CAUSES**

This paper adopts two factors among many others as the causes of erosion of ethics in Nigerian University system; the origin of University system and Nigerian government policies. The former is treated in two phases; one, the origin of University system in the world which was transplanted to Nigeria. That is as a protest against religion which is the custodian or basis of morality of which ethic is a branch although this is justified because of the obstacle that religion then

particularly Christianity posed to scholarly activities particularly science. Therefore, the University is seen as a neutral ground where things could be done with no consideration of morality by extension religion.

The second stage is the origin of University system in Nigeria which has colonial colouration. This colonial legacy started in 1948 with the establishment of University College, Ibadan. That type of University system given to Nigeria was devoid of any ethical consideration other than academic activities; an island on its own. The evil in this type of University system in Nigeria could not surface at initial stage because the early intakes into the University were products of religious primary and secondary schools with strict moral values and ethics. But with the take-over of primary and secondary schools in 1970s by government from religious organizations and other private organizations; the intakes of the Universities in Nigeria thereafter were without serious moral and ethical backgrounds which in turn turned the University system in the country into an avenue of chaos, commotion, anarchy in the name of modernization or civilization and academic freedom.

#### **4. ORIGIN**

In talking of origin of University globally, it entails discussion on its concept and philosophy. From inception, University is conceptualized as links between the society and the creation of knowledge. Universities are enterprises that produce and distribute public good which is knowledge. Knowledge production is the focus of universities and that the production of knowledge has always focused on teaching and research. Apart from education and the extension of knowledge through research, the university also grants academic Degrees. Universities aim not only at teaching and research but also at consultancy. In this regard, Universities train the experts and leaders that society needs to control production for its highly qualified services in the various sectors. Thus, University is nothing other than a knowledge factory because within its enclave, knowledge is being produced, applied, preserved and communicated.

The modern university makes possible the acquisition of independence by individuals. It promotes the awakening and consolidation of critical awareness of independent and creative thinking of the ability to go beyond what is already known (Salami, 1999:69).

Surely, University strives towards intellectual freedom by posing fundamental questions and isolating itself from social pressures in an environment of meditative calm. Thus, the essence of University is the education of the individual which takes place in the living confrontation with knowledge. Professional competence and a civil sense of responsibility are merely the product of having received an education. Therefore, the three constituent elements of University are the notion of autonomy, circumscribing the freedom and independence of academic excellence. The University provides an intellectual environment which must remain free or devoid of government statutes because it is subject to the law of the search for truth.

From the above discussions on University, it would be seen that the basis of University system is academic and intellectual pursuit. Therefore, little or no room was given for the inculcation of ethics by extension moral. This is because intellectual pursuit is so entrenched that other things are eliminated from University environment by hiding under the cover of academic freedom and academic excellence.

This conception of academic freedom which suppose to be freedom for members of the academic community, lecturers and students to undertake their activities within a framework determined by that community in respect of ethical rules and international standards and without outside interference have been taken to mean that the University is a law on its own without recourse to anybody or any group of people in either the society where it belongs or the proprietor that funds it. Surely, academic freedom entails the obligation by each member of the University community to be committed to academic excellent, to innovation and to advancing the frontiers of knowledge through research and the dissemination of its results through teaching and publication. It should also entails the ethical responsibility of the individual and the community in the conduct of research both in determining the priorities of that research and taking into account the implications which its results may have for humanity and nature.

Historically, academic freedom is as old as the medieval Universities of Europe. Those Universities then were self-governing enclaves that were outside the civil law. This legal concept of academic freedom originated in Germany around 1850 when the Prussian constitution declared that "science and teaching shall be free". This includes the rights of academic staff to teach on any subject. This freedom included freedom of scientific research and the right of students to attend lectures and the absence of class-roll calls (Okojie, 2003).

This concept of academic freedom also existed in American Universities from the establishment of the first University there. With the American Association of University Professors and the Association of American Colleges jointly developed the 1940 Statement of Principles of Academic Freedom and Tenure. That 1940 Statement specified those elements which together comprised academic freedom for the University and the academic staff to teach, research, publish and speak extramurally. Furthermore, this academic freedom could be divided into two: individual and institutional.

The former protects an individual academic. It calls for the observation and adherence to the routine way that Faculty Committees, Departmental Heads and Deans operate on issues of appointments, promotion, tenure and salary negotiations for academic staff. Other aspects of individual academic freedom are those freedoms from detailed supervision in matters of teaching, research and publications by the academic staff. The latter protects the University as an academic institution from interference by government, a right that applies to the community of scholars and not to individual staff. This also includes freedom reserved for the University to select its staff, students and determines its curriculum. That is, the University can determine for itself on academic grounds who is to teach, what is to be taught, how it shall be taught and who is to be admitted to study.

This philosophy of academic freedom in the University is well entrenched if not over-entrenched into the Nigerian University system right from the inception of the system in Nigeria. This freedom has been carried too far and it has contributed immensely to the erosion of ethics in the University system in the country. It is under the umbrella of academic freedom that Piracy Fraternity was established by the then students of University College, Ibadan in the 1940s which was a sect of secret-cult that has been terrorizing the University community in Nigeria today. In the name of academic freedom cum the secularism of University system in Nigeria ethics as a branch of morality had been thrown to the dog and every member behave in an 'abnormal' way with obscene dresses, rape, examination malpractice and even murdering.

## **5. POLICY**

In Nigeria, the first control of education system at least at the primary and secondary school levels was by the missionaries with colonial government keeping a comfortable distance initially and even when the government was involved it was through Grant-in-Aid and little or nothing about the content and spirit of what they are disseminating to the students.

The church undertook the business of education not because it regarded education as good in itself, but because it found that it could not do its own proper work without giving its adherents and especially its clergy as much of the formal learning as was required for the study of the sacred writings and the performance of their religious duties (Boyd, 1961:10).

In 1961 for example, Christian Mission controlled over 79% primary schools, over 80% of secondary schools and over 76% of teacher training colleges all over Nigeria (Ejiogu, 1986). Thus, at the levels of primary and post-primary schools, the Missionaries emphasized ethic; a branch of morality through religious activities as part and parcel of education system. These levels in turn fielded the Universities in the country with their ethical background carried to the University despite the philosophy of University autonomy and academic freedom therein.

Unfortunately, there was call for government take-over of schools particularly after the civil war in 1970 which was yielded. Many reasons were proffered for this call. It was the East-Central State government that first announced the take-over of all primary and secondary schools in the state by promulgating the Public Education Edict, 1970, No.5. And from then, other states and the federal government followed in earnest. This take-over entails secularization of the educational system right from the primary to the University level. The consequence of this is that religious, morality and ethics were down played while unethical behaviour took over gradually until it was out of control and breeds chaos of highest degree.

Moreover, the integration of the Universities into the civil services lowered the prestige, status and effectiveness of the sector. Also, the centralization of admission into University through JAMB made admission not to be controlled by the Universities. Thus, the Universities lost control over the choice of who comes into the system. Even there are many students on campuses who cannot be said to have been properly admitted by the University while some campuses are over-populated because they are not in control of admission. The implication of all these developments is anarchy and chaos due to unethical attitudes as a result of uncontrollable university system.

Furthermore, the Students' Union was initially established by the University and designed as an agent of the University and every student belongs to it. The University made deductions from students' fees to finance the union. The Union Executives operated under the control of a Dean of students and a Senior Treasurer who controlled the official funds. Unfortunately, in the late 80s, it was argued that it was not right for government to finance the Students' Unions if they would often pick up protests against the same government. Thereafter, the official students unions were dissolved by government and made the new unions voluntary to students who wish to join; that action did not have the desired effect of weakening or make them less militant, instead, it bastardized them and made them unruly militant (Ajayi, 2001).

By removing the students unions from official University control; however, various external bodies with their own agenda stepped in. hence, they were controlled by those that cannot be regarded as bonafide students, who do not seem to care even if the University collapses, who interpret the right to free education and academic freedom to mean the right to rent a bed-space from the University for ₦90.00 a year and to in turn hire it out at ₦10,000.00 or more. These set of

students do not understand the significance of the Matriculation Oath that no student can remain in the University if he or she is not prepared to obey the Vice-chancellor.

During the same period – late 1980s, secret service agents were sent by government to the Universities to infiltrate the students' unions in an effort to identify and undermine the influence of the handful of activists and enhance the influence of the so-called majority who had no particular grouse against government. Such secret service agents were said to have introduced guns into University campus and the pattern of students who commit crime and get away with it because of government connections. It was that pattern that created the context in which the cults began to get out of control and operate like gangs of thugs.

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper perused through the causes of ethical erosion in Nigerian Universities which led to the violent cult activities, examination malpractice, sexual harassment among others. In doing this, the paper focused on two factors; the philosophy or origin of University and government policies as contributing factors to the erosion of ethics in Nigerian's University system among other factors.

Therefore, the University community and the entire Nigerian society as well as the government should know that Nigerian students in the University can only attain the required ethical values essentially on the introduction of religious teaching into the curricula of the Universities. This is because ethics is a branch of moral and morality can only be sought about squarely by religion particularly in Nigeria and among Nigerians. Nigeria's concepts of secularism like any other developing countries should not be like that of the Western world. The appropriate posture is a multi-religious society. This contradiction is also reflected in the country's constitution whereby the country is regarded as secular and at the same time recognizes religion – Christianity and Islam.

Without mincing words, moral integrity and spiritual vigour are essential for society building where societal values, solidarity, concern for others and fear of God are entrenched. Imbibing this philosophy in the Universities in Nigeria would make them return to a peaceful and tranquil place conducive for academic activities and excellence.

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