Education and Philosophy in Nation Building: A Focus on Nigeria

Emmanuel N. Ogu, OP & Frederick Ifeanyi Obananya, OP
Dominican University Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract: The centrality of education and philosophy in nation building cannot be over emphasized. Education when rightly conceived forms the intellectual, moral, technical, and religious dimensions of the human person. Integral education makes the human person aware of his role in the society and hence to use his/her inner mind in its conscious acts of reflection and judgment for the interest of the common good. This study focuses on the necessity of education and philosophy in nation building with focus on Nigeria. Instead of leadership, it argues that the problem of Nigeria is the inadequacy of (informal) education and narratives for the pursuit of excellence – because education and storytelling impart basic human values. It proposes that the system and purpose of education should be re-visited. Children should be taught that they are trained to be a part in solving the problems of humanity, and stories of heroes should be fashioned for them as role models. Certificates should not be overemphasized above competence nor should certification be neglected. Further research is needed to fashion what it means to be Nigerian and who our heroes are.

I. INTRODUCTION

Many of the conflicts that have occurred in Nigeria can be linked to either political instability, economic inequality, or deficient religious education. The failure of the state to properly manage the land, its natural, and human resource leads to agitations in the country. These tensions arise due to some perceived acts of marginalization and insecurity. Lack of quality governance and transparency, ethnic rivalry, religious extremism, declining economic conditions and proliferation of small arms and light weapons are the six drivers of conflict and insecurity in the country. These are different instances of incompetency in the state, but basic to it, if I may say, is a lack of basic human values.

Educators, parents, and all who seek a better Nigeria ought to make a conscious effort towards a change of mentality regarding both our dealings with one another and the reason for formal education. There is political instability, bad governance, and ethnic rivalry because success (not excluding education) in Nigeria is viewed through the lens of “wealth” rather than service to humanity. From this point of view, only the individual matters. Stories are not told of men and women who lived their lives in pursuit of excellence; and excellence is not rewarded thus it is not attractive. The lack of the disposition towards excellence is evident in the way we drive, in governance, at the market, hospital, schools, etc. Through an observer – participant research method, this paper seeks to create a conscious effort towards a change of mentality. Families are to teach their children that they are in relation with other people and that their contribution to the Nigerian society is paramount because success is measured by the impact one makes on the lives of others.

Two points are to be considered in this paper. First, the state of Nigeria fifty-nine years after her independence and second, the role of education and philosophy in nation building: But before these, we shall present a theoretical framework on the theme of “common good.”

II. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

From ancient times, the notion of “common good” has been a recurring theme in Western political philosophy – as seen in the works of Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Niccolo Machiavelli, etc. Plato teaches that justice and order in the soul leads to order in the state. This is why he advocates that it is only those who have apprehended the form of the Good that are best fitted to rule the state, since such a one devotes his/her knowledge to the good ordering of the “Republic.” Just like Plato, Aristotle in his Politics teaches the need to promote order in the polis (state) since the human person, who is rational by nature, lives in the polis. Aristotle believes and teaches that the human person cannot live in isolation. The State provides the conditions that allow the individual to live the best possible life as a social, political, and intellectual being. Niccolo Machiavelli in The Prince makes us believe that politics is about the acquisition of power and possession as it favours the political fortress of the politician. This contrasts with the idea of common good. Common good, according to Thomas Aquinas, promotes the interest of the citizens in its understanding of the role of the politician as one who serves; for, the notion of common good cannot be separated from an order in the human person and a consequent order in the society.

In 2016, to show the outstanding influence of Thomas Aquinas’ exposition on law Dominican Institute Ibadan, in her Annual Aquinas’ Day Colloquium discussed

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“Politics and the Common Good.” The then President of the Institute Professor Anthony Akinwale, remarked:

Thomas Aquinas left an intellectual tradition in which there is no politics without the common good, and there is no common good without politics. Whereas a Machiavellian misconception of politics would have us think otherwise by separating the two …. A state that arrogates ubiquity, omniscience, and omnipotence to itself cannot be checked. And even when citizens freely submit themselves to such a state, their effort amounts to self-inflicted tyranny. Nigeria and much of Africa have operated on this wavelength of the ubiquitous and omnipotent state. The state, its institutions and functionaries, ought to be subservient and accountable to the citizens. But reverse has been the case.  

Hence it is clear that it is the living out of the basic human values, which is the product of an ordered soul that leads to and influences order in the society.  

III. NIGERIA FIFTY-NINE YEARS AFTER INDEPENDENCE

The Colonial Influence and its Consequence

Nigeria is located on the Western coast of Africa. It comprises of different ethnic groups and its people speak hundreds of different languages. In the year 1914 under the rule of Lord Frederick Lugard the Northern and the Southern protectorates were amalgamated – hence the state, Nigeria. By this, it would be assumed that the people leaving within this contra terra share goals and have a common vision that unites them as a nation. Sadly, such was not the case for Nigeria. Largely it could be said that the colonial masters’ amalgamation of the two parts was done to quench the colonialists’ thirst for power and possession. And as such, there was no understanding between the two protectorates even after they were joined. Instead of forming a national ideology and make the two protectorates come to an understanding and hence begin to co-exist as one, the colonialists imposed a language.  

Anthony Akinwale writes that:

The advent of European colonialists might have imposed peace on warring African ethnic communities. The imposition of the language of a colonial power might have provided a medium of communication for peoples without linguistic affinity. But it did not take long for the artificially created states to begin to unravel. In virtually every state created by the colonial powers, power was in the hands of an ethnic majority and was used in ways that alienated other ethnic communities within the same state. Ethnicity, a legitimate love of one’s ethnic affiliation, or rather, what should be seen as patriotism, quickly degenerated into ethnocentrism, which is entry into a malicious solidarity with members of one’s ethnic community to the detriment of the legitimate interests of others of different ethnic communities. Enthronement of ethnic hegemony met with resistance, the resistance was met with political repression, and with ethnic cleansing in some instances. Africa returned to the theatre of conflicts.  

Military Interventions and its Consequences

The influence and power of the colonialists was so strong that even when the Nigerian state got her independence she was still indirectly under the whims of her colonialist. The nationalists who fought for the independence could not perfectly harmonize the Nigerian state to bring out the beauty of the diverse ethnic groups. This inability lies at the very center of the state’s disintegration. The military at some instances during the post-independence period forcefully took over the government through coups d’état. Writing about the 1966 coups d’état, Major Madiebo explains that Major Nzeogwu’s aim for carrying out the revolution was to bring about a rebellion in order to get rid of the corrupt and incorrigible politicians and have them replaced with true nationalists.  

Akinwale is right that “we may not be right in blaming the military for everything that has gone wrong in Nigeria. Yet we cannot overlook the fact that the ill-advised military intervention in Nigerian politics tampered with the tripod [education, police and judiciary] on which the Nigerian society was borne, and the Nigerian society came crashing down.” Since then, Nigeria has not made much progress, even fifty-nine years after her independence.

IV. EDUCATION AND PHILOSOPHY

Education, Philosophy and Civilization

The centrality of education in any civilization cannot be over emphasized. Here when reference is made to education, informal education is included. Education when rightly conceived forms the intellectual, moral, technical, and 

4 Anthony Akinwale, “Philosophy and Leadership” The Dominican Institute President’s advice to the Philosophy graduating class of 2016 as found in their Year book titled The Sages.
religious dimensions of the human person. Integral education makes the human person aware of his/her role in the society as he/she uses his/her inner mind in its conscious acts of reflection and judgment for the common good. This is where the interplay between education and philosophy occurs. It is in this sense that education inculcates civility in the human person - as it forms the intellect to always desire the truth, the will ordered to the good – not selfish good but a good that considers the society, and the hands are taught to acquire competence. Thus integral education equips people on how to behave in the polis so as to realize their desired goal – such that the individual good is fulfilled and actualized in the common good and the common good is fulfilled and realized in the individual good. When this happens, the state actualizes itself, which is properly designated by the word civilization; and the human person also actualizes him/herself in the pursuit of truth and good.

The pursuit of the truth and the good is impossible if the state is not one. For Aristotle in his Metaphysics teaches about three qualities: oneness, truth, and goodness which account for actualization in anything that exists. He calls these three qualities transcendental qualities – for a thing is said to be actualized when it unifies its diverse motions for a single purpose; when it is authentic (true) to its nature; and finally in its disposition towards achieving its end which is good. Nigeria as a nation has not been “one,” “true” and “good” because the people are not “one,” “true” and “good.” Hence there has not been unity, clarity, and integrity since unity is a result of oneness and goodness. But integral education when rightly understood, gives rise to unity since education is inter-subjective leading to clarity in the human person’s realization of his/her personal as well as the common good.

The Role of (Informal) Education and Narratives of Heroes towards Nation Building

The family as a conjoined instrumental cause of education

James Schall (in his book On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs) teaches that “education prepares our innate faculties and capacities to do what they were made or created to do.” Paraphrasing Jacques Maritain, James Schall describes the teacher as an instrumental cause and the student as the principal cause of his own education. But more to this description, I would say that the teacher acts more in the manner of a separate instrument while the family acts as a conjoined instrument. For, both the teacher and the family are instrumental causes (only the student is the principal cause) because “man does not make man to be man, Aristotle said, but he does make him to be good.” This understanding is fundamental because a human being, though good by nature, can choose not to do the good. The choice of doing what is good, therefore, includes the acceptance of education – be it informal (as done by the family) or formal (as done by the teacher/school).

Thus, the principal cause of openness towards education is neither the family nor the teacher but the student. But, because of the proximity of the family (conjoined instrument) to the individual (the principal cause) the influence of the family becomes basic and essential to the action of another instrument – the teacher. Suffice it to say that one’s behavior is dependent on the person’s acceptance of education – learning and character, which is largely coloured by the good as understood and taught by the family.

Family and the common good

It is the function of the family to inculcate in her children that the individual good is fulfilled and actualized in the common good and vis-à-vis. This practice ought to begin from the family but enhanced in the school – as children are trained to actualize their potentials and to contribute to the society. It is difficult to say but must be said that we have lost the meaning of what it means to be “a political being” – which is to be and to relate intelligently with others in the polis. Even the purpose of going to school has been thwarted for selfish reasons – the pursuit of money. Selfishness has clouded our intellect that we no longer care for one another; success is no longer defined by the life of virtue but riches. Using Aristotle, Schall noted quite wisely that [M]ost people [according to Aristotle] need a certain minimal amount of material goods to be virtuous. But he [Aristotle] was aware of the classical tradition that the philosopher should not much concern himself with riches even if he could have them. Paradoxically, the elevation of political or economic things to the center of human attention – one of the great temptations of the contemporary religious mind – corrupts not only the higher things, but also economic and political things by causing us to expect something from them that they cannot yield….. Modernity advised us to lower our sights from contemplation and virtue, to identify our happiness with the possession of its material substrate and not with the highest things themselves. We live in a culture dominated by a lower vision.

Anthony Akinwale, “Philosophy and Leadership.”


Read Aristotle’s discussion of the Transcendentals in his Metaphysics.


James Schall, On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs, (Wilmington: ISI Books), p. 44.

Cf. Jacques Maritain, Education at Crossroads quoted in James Schall, On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs, p. 45

James Schall, On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs, p. 44.

James Schall, On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs, p. 89.
The condition quoted above is nothing but the current situation of families regarding life and existence. What matters to families is not a life of virtue but the provision of bread to live by. What families emphasize on is not a life of virtue (diligence) but riches at all cost. Life of virtue in the pursuit of excellence is no longer admired because it is not attractive. They are not attractive because such people are neither rewarded nor are their stories told. Nevertheless, these people are our heroes. For basic human values such as honesty, integrity, responsibility, selflessness, sacrifice, sensibility, and sensitivity, etc. serve as the bedrock for the pursuit of excellence as they lead to the culture of civilization. In fact, education as it yields to civilization does not work in isolation from the foundation of human values. Since when both are separated, what emerges is nothing but a literate animal.

In Nigeria, the lack of the acquisition of basic human values and the glorification of its absence is evident in the way people drive, education system, judiciary, and police. In short, according to the Nigerian standard, to be civil is to act foolishly. It can be said that families have been made to live by bread alone “and be told by their intellectual superiors that this bread is all there is, all there can be.”16 But just as aid, no matter how well intended, does no good to the poor without education,17 so would wealth without basic human values make the human person a beast.

On the need for a necessary shift of attention from material poverty to intellectual poverty

Because of the emphasis on wealth, rather than service to humanity, Nigeria’s education system is not geared towards critical thinking, creativity, and innovation. It only but trains people to read and write. Stories are not told of men and women who were creative and innovative. The Biafran head of state, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, in his wartime speech summarized many technological achievements of the Biafran nation during the war:

In three years of war, necessity gave birth to invention. During those three years…we built bombs, rockets, and we designed and built our own refinery and our own delivery systems and guided them far. For three years, blocked with hope of import we maintained all our vehicles.

The state extracted and refined petrol, individuals refined petrol in their back gardens. We built and maintained our airports….. We spoke to the world through a telecommunications system engineered by local ingenuity.

In three years, we had broken the technological barrier, became the most advanced black people on earth.18

But then, what has happened to this spirit of invention and critical thinking among Nigerians? The answer is simple – individuals who are creative and innovative are not supported and publicized. This has ruined Nigerian government (as it ranks 146 by 2019 Global Corruption Index), the economy (according to World Poverty Clock, 91.16 million Nigerians were living below one dollar per day as of February 13, 2019),19 peace (as the country is ravaged by insecurity and insurgencies),20 and even the future of the Nigerian state by the institutionalization of corruption as the measure for success.

Professor Chinua Achebe, in his book The Trouble with Nigeria, opines that Nigeria can change if she discovers competent leaders - who have the will, the ability and the vision. He affirmed: “but it is the duty of enlightened citizens to lead the way in their discovery and to create an atmosphere conducive to their emergence.”21 There is need for a change of mentality. This is possible if there is a re-visit of the system and purpose of education as well as the telling of the stories of “our heroes.” Even if there are no stories of heroes to tell, some should be created through which human values are imparted. The narration of the lives and achievements of Nigerian heroes and the revision of the system and purpose of education towards a change of mentality, are fundamental in the shaping of the Nigerian youth since “the fundamental idea in the education of the young is the fact that it is through the younger generations that society successively rebuilds itself.”22

Therefore, storytelling about men and women who lived lives of virtue as well as the rewarding of excellence will rekindle the pursuit of values and help Nigerians elect leaders who will “multiple competence” as Akinwale puts it. Those who are intellectually, morally, and technically sound. Education and moral probity are necessary but insufficient for leadership because “a morally upright but technically incompetent leader may not…be an asset because of his lack of technical competence. He may have the good will, but he

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16 Dostoyevsky’s quote paraphrased in James Schall, On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs, p. 89.
17 James Schall, On the Unserousness of Human Affairs, p. 90.
lacks the know-how of administration. Nigeria is in dire need of leaders who are not only morally competent, but who are also intellectually and technically competent.”

A leader, who is a man or woman of competence does not collapse the three arms of government but sees that each works effectively according to the constitution for the interest of the common good. “The current generation of political office holders is yet to convince Nigerians that it possesses the competence and integrity of proven statesmen. If one is to paraphrase Plato, for us to have the Nigeria we need, either our kings become competent or the competent become our kings.”

V. CONCLUSION

Education and philosophy do not just develop the nation by forming competent leaders and well-behaved citizens. They also create better structures of governance. Once there is a competent and good structure of governance, there will certainly be structural and economic development in Nigeria. Hence, education is one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations. Through integral education the whole human person is trained to contribute to the common good since it is by working for the common good that one finds fulfillment and self-actualization. To achieve this in Nigeria, we recommend that the system and purpose of education be re-visited. Children should be taught that the training they receive empowers them to solve the problems of humanity. The stories of heroes/heroines should be told to encourage the pursuit of excellence. There is need to rediscover the power of storytelling in nation building. Families, the government, and organizations should promote, encourage, and reward merit and excellence so that the upcoming generations will learn that diligence is worth acquiring. If this is done, children will understand that “ezi afa ka ego” – a good reputation is greater than money. This will be the beginning of a greater Nigeria. For when we look at the universe from outer space as Stephen Hawking said, what we see is “One Universe” and “One Human Race.” The kind of impact we desire requires that we learn to live together – for what affects one, affects all.

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