

Ethical Degeneration in the Nigerian Public Service and the Quest for Honesty and Integrity: The Case of Oyo State Civil Service

Anthony Mayowa Oladoyin*
Fatai Olubunmi Adesanmi**

***Abstract :** The State of morals among accounting practitioners and professional public servants in general has indeed been appalling. Apparently, one witnesses ethical disintegration in virtually all the hitherto sacrosanct spheres of public and corporate life. This study is a novel endeavour to unravel the overt and covert causes of ethical degeneration among accounting practitioners and public servants in the Nigerian public service; and to systematically examine the various interventions by successive regimes to bring about moral sanity and decorum in the ethical disposition of Nigerian public servants. The study approached this issue by doing a general review of literature on corruption, ethics and accountability in the Nigerian public service. The primary data, which reinforce this study, are derived from questionnaire analysis and personal interview.*

The study found among others; first, that the perquisite condition of life that could motivate good works are absent in the Nigerian polity; second, that accountability institutions are either impotent or absent; third, that comprehensive national planning that could check ethical misconduct are absent and, fourth, that the Nigerian leadership is in itself corrupt and not transparent.

In the end, the study concluded that there is no end in sight for unethical behaviour among professionals and public servants except fundamental attitudinal re-orientation backed-up by purpose and good leadership is undertaken at all facets of public life.

* Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Administration, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

** Department of Public Administration , Faculty of Administration, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

Introduction

The character and the nature of the Nigerian public service since independence has not altered in any significant manner. The political class, the private sector and the public service have all been involved in the snag of ethical misdemeanour and this largely explains why the term 'Less Developed Country' has been applicable to Nigeria. In 1993, the interim government leader, Chief Earnest Shonekan publicly acknowledged in his budget speech to the nation that "corruption" is the bane of Nigeria's social and economic woes.

The public service, it must be noted, plays host to a gallery of professionals and one would therefore naturally expect the public service to be a haven of moral decorum, but it is unfortunate that the literature is replete with innumerable cases of bureaucratic and political corruption (Olowu, 1993; Kanu & Osunbajo, 1990; Olisa et. al., 1991; Ekpo, 1979; Dwivedi, 1978; Ayo, 1994; Newswatch, March 13, 1995; Business in Africa Special Report, 1999; Ezeani, 2003; and Hope and Chikulo, 2000). These scholars and papers differently looked at the various instances and forms of corruption and ethical malpractices in Nigeria on the one hand and Africa in general on the other hand. What readily comes out of the study shows an ominous sign that corruption might ultimately require a divine intervention for its extermination.

It is in this direction that this study attempts to examine the causes of ethical degeneration in the public service; its consequences life prospects and social development and the various efforts of government to combat the epidemic. Finally the study will critically look at why the various efforts of successive regimes have not been yielding the desired corrective results.

Background to the Study

Several regimes starting from General Yakubu Gowon through General Buhari/Idiagbon, General Babangida, General Abacha to the current regime of President Olusegun Obasanjo have all grappled one way or the other with ethical re-orientation of the Nigerian polity. To Gowon, pursuing unity and brotherhood was seen as a way of fostering ethical sanctity. Murtala in his own case

was more frontal by taking the bull by the horn, when he embarked on a physical purge of about 15,000 public servants in 1975; thinking that a mass purge will permanently nib in the bud the spate of ethical indecorum in the country. Unfortunately, little did he know that the problem was more endemic as the stump of the purged indecorous public service soon grew and widened to an alarming and almost uncontrollable magnitude of 'super-sonic' ethical malaise.

The approach of Obasanjo, which centred on 'Green-revolution' at that time was a combination of moral and economic reform. Unfortunately too, the discovery of oil and the influence of international communities truncated the policy. Alhaji Shagari's regime also made frantic efforts to re-position Nigeria on the path of moral and economic uprightness when he instituted ethical revolution and austerity measures. Sadly too, the programme was ill conceived and it lacked necessary effective implementation strategies. The policies in the first place did not enjoy the support of important stakeholders that ought to have translated the policies into public good. This eventually nipped in the bud the success that ought to follow. No wonder then that Buhari/Idiagbon started on a hard note on 31st December 1983 by establishing the very popular programme christened War Against Indiscipline (WAI). For the first time in the history of Nigeria, an ostensibly positive and feasible moral turn-around was witnessed in the hitherto discrepant and atrocious attitudinal dispositions of Nigerians; but alas, the abrupt end, which came to the regime on the 27th of August 1985, punctuated the new orientation.

Babangida's administration did a lot in the area of ethical re-orientation of the Nigeria citizenry. For example, he continued with the WAI programme. He later instituted the Mass Mobilisation for Social and Economic Recovery (MAMSER), which was saddled with the task of inculcating in the Nigerians the tenets of ethical and national decorum. However, the regime's achievement on moral orientation was not as successful as that of Buhari/Idiagbon because most of the efforts were not pursued to a logical conclusion in the area of implementation. In other words, lip service was only paid to some of the campaigns. Again, the

government practice patently contradicted its moral campaigns. For instance, the administration witnessed the use of '10%', 'kickbacks', 'settlement', 'one-Nigeria' and all forms of regime misconduct. When Abacha came on board in 1993, his introduction of War Against Indiscipline and Corruption(WAIC) goes a long way to show the inadequacy of WAI under IBB's regime. It further justifies the expansion of the former programme from WAI to WAI-C, that is, War Against Indiscipline and Corruption.

With the advent of Obasanjo, a renewed call for ethical re-orientation is now being made. On September 10, 1999 President Obasanjo, launched the National Rebirth Programme (NRP). In summary, he is calling on every Nigerian to 'say well', 'think well', 'act well' and 'Nigeria will go well'.

At this juncture, it is expedient to approach this paper in a more organised manner by outlaying the major discussions thematically as follows:

- Conceptual Analysis
- Methodology
- Presentation of Findings
- Consequences of ethical degeneration on labour productivity
- Efforts, and appraisal of efforts of political regimes
- General remarks
- Conclusion and Recommendations

Conceptual Analysis

Public Service

Public service comprises a complex web of institutions with active human beings at the centre. It has to do with the way power is exercised to meet defined goals of governments. It is therefore, as a concept related to governability, leadership and social services delivery capacity. It has its origin in the ancient world for steering the ability of a nation and to direct the socials, economy, culture and geography of such nation.

It refers to the aggregation of divergent interests and thus promotion of policies that can creditably represent the public interest. Its economic undertone is concerned with the delivery of goods and services in order to meet the needs of the society. It is about the way authority is exercised in the management of an institution. Thus good public service equals sound management of public resources devoid of corruption. It is in this light that the quest for transparent public service becomes universal.

The system of government in every nation strives to provide and maintain a good public service in which government employees are effectively engaged in the diverse activities necessary and sufficient to attain defined government objectives. In effect, nations whose public service is remarkable for corruption remain underdeveloped while their citizens are condemned to the status and woes of poverty and ultimately, societal decay. To prevent this, accountability becomes the watchword. The public service means the totality of the administrative structure within which the work of government is carried out. The public service is used in the narrow sense of the word, meaning an important government institution comprising the staff of the central administration of the nation or state.

Public service is vitally important to the development of a nation. The public service plays vital roles in the overall development of a country in the areas of implementation of government policies, national security, economic growth and national stability etc.

Many a times the term "public service" can be used interchangeably with the term, "civil service". The word Administrator is commonly associated with the civil service more than any other sector of the public service. In most literature that are available, it appears that civil service has been given a dual meaning. First, it refers to the body of permanent officials appointed to assist the political executive in formulating and implementing government policies. These officials are called civil servants. In the second sense, the term refers to the ministries and departments within which specific aspects of government work are carried out. The civil service comprises the civilian employees of the central government, while the staff of the numerous local

government authorities and of the public corporations sharing both public virtues and public vices with the civil service. They do not share the label. The civil service 'proper' then means the central administration of government.

Ethics in Nigerian Public Service

Ethics is described as the branch of philosophy concerned with conduct and character. It is the systematic study of the principles and methods for distinguishing right from wrong and good from bad. Ethics has various interconnections with other branches of philosophy, such as metaphysics, the study of reality. Experiences that have led to ethical inquiry are uncertainty or conflicts of opinion about what ought to be done.

We can say what makes right actions right? How disputes about moral questions are resolved? It is the task of ethics to answer such questions. Philosophical ethics is often called normative ethics. Among the questions of normative ethics are what makes right actions right? How can we tell what is right. Why should I be moral?

The new Webster dictionary explains that ethics relates to morality of behaviour, conforming to an accepted standard of good behaviour for example in a profession or trade. Moral philosophy, studies the principle of right or wrong in human conduct. To some scholars ethics is the science of morals or the rules of conduct recognised in certain limited departments of human life.

Public Service Ethics

The public service ethics includes the following:

- (1) Neutrality to politics
- (2) Impartial service
- (3) Merit and achievement
- (4) Expertise
- (5) Hierarchy of command
- (6) Accountability

- (7) Loyalty
- (8) Courtesy and respect
- (9) Integrity
- (10) Confidentiality.

Degeneration of Public Service Ethics and Accountability in Nigeria

All over the world, corruption has been found to be hostile to administrative ethics and accountability of Public Administration. In Nigeria, the problem is more serious as corruption in the country has assumed a devastating magnitude. Corruption in the public service has stifled its growth in Nigeria to the extent that the country has not been able to provide adequate social services for her populace.

A public official is corrupt if he accepts money or receives anything in kind for doing something that he is under duty to do, or that is under duty not to do or exercise a legitimate discretion for improper reasons. Corruption in public service is any decision, act or conduct that was perverse to democratic norms and values. Public service corruption is also known as bureaucratic corruption. It is the most dangerous and endemic type of corruption; it is often called "Egunje" "settlement" etc.

It has been argued that most members of Nigerian public service who are in power are prosperous through corruption. It has also been argued that the negative effects of corruption are many. Some of these negative effects are:

- (a) Diversion of public resources to private pockets
- (b) Increase in overhead cost of utilities
- (c) Engaging incompetent officers
- (d) Encouraging false wealth among civil servants.

There is no doubt therefore that Public Administration is a reflection of its environment. This is quite true of the Nigerian Public Administration. In fact, it has been pointed out by Adamolekun (1983), that theories of public Administration are

more likely to be country-specific rather than universalistic. In other words, this indicates that the Administrative system of any country correlates and relates highly to its attributes of government.

It is therefore evident from the above that public workers that are involved in corruption cannot be ethically compliant as its expected of them. It follows that dishonesty, partiality; disloyalty among other vices against ethics of public service will be their hallmark. When this is the case, accountability is totally thrown overboard.(Oladoyin and Akinsoyinu 2003)

Ethical Virtues: Honesty and Integrity

Adetoye (2001:85-92) argues that public ethics encapsulates honesty and integrity. Integrity is a moral attribute that must be possessed by any public officer. It is a fine degree of moral excellence. A public officer is adjudged to possess this attitude if officially uncompelled, and naturally, he will most faithfully follow rules and procedures and compel his subordinates to do as handling public funds and properties. Such person must make deliberate efforts to sustain such attributes, and so, it became an attitude, a culture and a code of conduct.

The preservation of public confidence in government is an essential ingredient for civil servants. This is an important requirement for all civil servants and it is referred to as integrity. Integrity requires public servant to maintain high ethical standards by being honest, trustworthy, frank but unobtrusive, principled and morally upright to avoid bringing discredit upon the public service. To be morally upright, public servants must not indulge in corrupt practices, which may discredit the service. Sanda (1991:50-67) is of the view that corruption obstructs the fundamental goals of public administration, which is the advancement of human welfare and socio-economic development. He sees "the near absolute powers over the organizations resources to allocate, appropriate or to misappropriate" as being the primary reason "largely responsible for the level of corruption which this society has witnessed in the last three decades or so" (Sanda 1991:58-67). Andrew Muller gives a graphic definition of

corruption as (C) corruption = M (monopoly) + D (discretion) - A (accountability). The definition omits V (values) and seems to suggest that ethics are irrelevant. In studying the apparent intractability of corruption in many countries, V (values) have risen to the fore along with other vital linkages that help present a more comprehensive picture of the nature of corruption in any given country. (Muller 2001:3). Bello-Imam in his own perspective sees corruption as a vice that "is international in scope, monstrous in nature, crudely rampant in developing economies and unconstructively devastating and pervasive in all less-developed countries of the world (LDC)". "Corruption is a vice which turns man's behaviour inside-out for personal gain" (Bello-Imam 2004:266).

Our allusion to corruption is necessary because the perversion of honesty and integrity in any public institutions either leads to indiscipline or corruption. Honesty is another word closely linked to transparency. Honesty means truthfulness; the disposition of the mind to state things as they are without any pejorative colouration. Honesty entails trust and is requisite as virtue for public office. Once a public servant is no longer honest, the fabric of the society he represents automatically crumbles. By implications, any professionals either surveyor, accountant, doctor, engineer, administrator in the public service that fails to exemplified honesty and integrity in its official capacity is a misfit and real source of social crisis and misdemeanour.

The barrage of facts gathered from the literature simply points to the fact that ethical valuation in Nigerian public service is poor and much is needed to be done and urgently too particularly from the top to the bottom.

Methodology

The study falls under the purview of sample survey, which is a variant of descriptive research design. It starts off from the initial hypothesis that the ethical virtues of honesty and integrity are fast deteriorating in the Nigerian public service. The study relied on both primary and secondary data for the writing of this report. While the secondary data were extracted from existing works in

the area as well as from relevant texts, magazines and official documents, the primary data were derived from questionnaire and interview schedule analysis.

The study covered five randomly selected ministries in Oyo State of Nigeria namely: Finance, Works and Transport, Environment, Education, and Commerce and Industry.

A combination of stratified and random sampling techniques was adopted. The 100 respondents to whom questionnaires were administered were stratified into randomly chosen ministries in Oyo State. Thereafter, every ministry was stratified further into two namely senior staff and junior staff. Furthermore, the categories were each divided into two based on gender, implying that 5 male and female staffs were administered with questionnaires.

Similar approach was adopted for the interview session. A total of twenty (20) staff were interviewed. The sampling procedure for the choice of the 20 interviewees was also random. However, 4 interviewees came from each Ministry. The 4 were divided along gender lines and on junior-senior staff classification line.

The data gathered were analysed descriptively with simple inferential statistics and the qualitative aspect was subjected to a normal descriptive explanation and subsequently to critical argumentation and second-order level of analysis.

Results and Discussion

The foregoing study reveals the following results among others. Six pertinent questions were asked in both the questionnaires and interview schedule. The questions are:

1. Is it true that the ethical virtues of honesty and integrity are fast eroding in the Nigerian public service?
2. How will you judge the pervasiveness of ethical degeneration in the Nigerian public service?
3. State the types of ethical degeneration in the Nigerian public service and attempt their rating in terms of degree of prominence

4. State the causes of ethical degeneration in the Nigerian public service and attempt the rating of the causes in terms of degree of prominence
5. (a) What are the various government efforts in combating ethical degeneration in the Nigeria public service?
b. Are the government interventionist efforts efficacious?
6. a. Are you optimistic of a permanent solution to the problem of ethical degeneration in the Nigerian public service?
b. Justify your position.

The first part of this report will be the simple statistical presentation. This will be followed by qualitative presentation and discussion.

Table I: Confirmation of the Erosion and Degeneration of Ethical Virtues of Honesty and Integrity in the Nigerian Public Service

Items	Frequency of Respondents	%
Strongly Agreed	88	88
Agreed	8	08
Undecided	4	04
Disagreed	-	-
Total	100	100

Source: Field Survey, October 2004.

Table I above patently shows that it is a truism that ethical virtues have been greatly eroded in the Nigerian public service. This is the more evident as there case in daily newspaper and magazines about assorted corruption incidences among many public officials. 88% of the respondents strongly supported the assertion that ethical values have been eroded in the Nigerian public services.

Table II: Pervasiveness of Ethical Degeneration in Nigerian Public Service

Items	Frequency of Respondents	%
Generally Pervasive	70	70
Partially Pervasive	20	20
Undecided	6	6
Not Pervasive at all	4	4
Total	100	100

Source: Field Survey, October 2004.

Regarding pervasiveness of the problem, 70% of the respondents support the view that ethical degeneration in the Nigerian public service has assumed an extremely wide magnitude in the scheme of things; hence the judgment that it is generally pervasive.

Table III: Rating of Causes of Ethical Degeneration in the Nigerian Public Service

Items	Frequency of Respondents
Greed	87
Poverty	81
Poor Condition of Service	73
Avarice and Ostentation on the Part of Leadership	68
Loss of Career Security and Post-Retirement Fear	88
Socio-cultural Influence	52
Uncertainty in the Micro-economic Environment	40
Poor Infrastructural Facilities	10

Source: Field Survey, October 2004.

Table III shows the most notable causes of ethical dereliction in the Nigerian public service. Most importantly three factors were

adjudged most as the prominent causes of ethical degeneration namely. Loss of career security and post-retirement fear (88%), greed (87%) and poverty (81%) respectively. It must be noted here that multiple responses were permitted because of the nature of questions.

Table IV: Rating of Types of Ethical Vices in the Nigerian Public Service

Items	Frequency of Respondents	%
Financial Misappropriation and actual embezzlement of fund	61	61
Absenteeism and lateness	12	12
Insubordination	5	5
Nepotism and favouritism in staffing process	22	22
Total	100	100

Source: Field Survey, October 2004.

The above table simply reveals the various ethical vices among public servants in Nigeria. The most prominent ethical vice is misappropriation of fund and actual embezzlement of fund.

Table V: Assessment of the Efficacy of Government Interventionist Effort in Combating Ethical Degeneration

Items	Effective Responses	%
Highly successful	7	7
Successful	2	2
Undecided	8	8
Partially successful	21	21
Not successful	62	62
Total	100	100

Source: Field Survey, October 2004.

The efficacy of government intervention at various stages has only yielded little or no success. The personal interview session revealed the actual efforts and policies of the federal government in tackling institutional corruption. Erero and Oladoyin (2000:280-287) identified and discussed such institutional

arrangements such as: Code of Conduct Bureau, Code of Conduct Tribunal, Public Complaint Commission, Public Accounts Committee and Quasi-Judicial Bodies.

Table VI: Assessment of Optimism of a Permanent Solution to Ethical Degeneration in Nigerian Public Service

Items	Frequency of Responses	%
Very High	—	—
High	—	—
Undecided	17	17
Very Low	72	72
Low	11	11
Total	100	100

Source: Field Survey, October 2004.

The above table shows that the optimism for a positive change in the ethical status of Nigerian public service is very low. 72% of the responses affirm this. This is not to say that a dead end has been reached but it only requires a concerted effort by all and sundry, starting first from the leadership down to the grassroots.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study has shown that the state of ethics in the Nigerian public service is a highly pathetic one. The effect of this scenario on job performance, efficiency and productivity is indubitably dire. In fact, the low level of socio-economic development in the country is not un-associated with the snag.

The basic conclusion from the study is that ethical degeneration in the Nigerian public service has become endemic. The study is recommending among others the following measures that:

- Existing accountability institutions should be strengthened;
- The national rebirth programme should be revitalized and invigorated;
- Leadership must demonstrate honesty and integrity in their personal lives;
- Penal sanctions should made effective;
- A robust ethical re-orientation and campaign should be embarked upon; and
- Anti-corruption laws should be promulgated.

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