

## The African Tradition and the Nexus Between Public Sector Ethics and Culture: A Critical Analysis

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### Abstract

Globalisation of public service delivery practices must overcome cultural and ethical barriers in their diversity. The pervasive Christian gospel and Islamic religion are believed to be concerned more in spirituality and less concerned with governance and political systems. The objective of this study is to expound the dilemma facing an ethical public service delivery system and to suggest possible solutions. The research methodology is a qualitative approach employed through content analysis. Findings indicate that for African states, alternative public service delivery is a question of choice by those wielding power, authority and political will. The study provides ethical initiatives to accommodate such diversity in building public sector ethics and culture. Simply relaying public service delivery strategies deemed successful in other states may not necessarily translate into success due to some ethical and cultural variations. What obtains is that, states that claim to be faith based or to carry religious ethical practices sometimes lead way ahead of others in unethical administrative practices. The contribution of the study is an additional item to the list of factors militating against effective service delivery and lack of public sector cultural ethics. This phenomenon should be tackled head-on so that service delivery is not compromised.

**Keywords:** Culture; Ethics; Public sector; Service delivery.



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### 1. Introduction

Illegal conduct, corruption, fraud and other types of criminal activity have characterised the public sector in Africa. Controversies on the behaviour of senior public sector managers, ministers and other high profile leaders seem to dominate in the public life and not far from the news media headlines. Romano (1994), reports on archbishop Schotte's address to the Synod that, "Our common situation without any doubt is that Africa is full of problems. In almost all our nations, there is abject poverty, tragic mismanagement of available scarce resources, political instability and social disorientation. The results stare us in the face! Misery, wars, despairs. In a world controlled by rich and powerful nations, Africa has practically become an irrelevant appendix, often forgotten and neglected."

Yet in the mid-1950s, (Gunter, 1955) posited that "Africa is not only vital for what it already has but is incomparably the greatest potential source of wealth awaiting development in the world". As such, to understand the import of public administration for development in Africa fully, it is germane to discuss ethics and culture in the public sector. The concern for ethics in Africa's public sector is a cause for concern primarily because success of a government is measured against the conduct of public functionaries. Issues of ethical dilemma through conflict of interest stemming from cultural diversity or otherwise should not be allowed to creep into the public service. If this is allowed to prevail, it brings discredit to the public officials' posts and disrepute to the government (Chigudu, 2015; Naidoo, 2012; Phago, 2014). As noted by Ayee (n.d), it is important to build an ethical public service because that constitutes a component of good governance, also a parameter for a country to be considered for foreign aid as advocated by Bretton Woods's institutions.

Further, there is evidence to suggest that more publicity is now being given to unethical and unprofessional behaviour than in the past (Ayee, n.d). In Africa the public's perception of unethical practices erodes public trust and confidence in governments. In response, some governments are developing mechanisms to promote ethical conduct in the public sector.

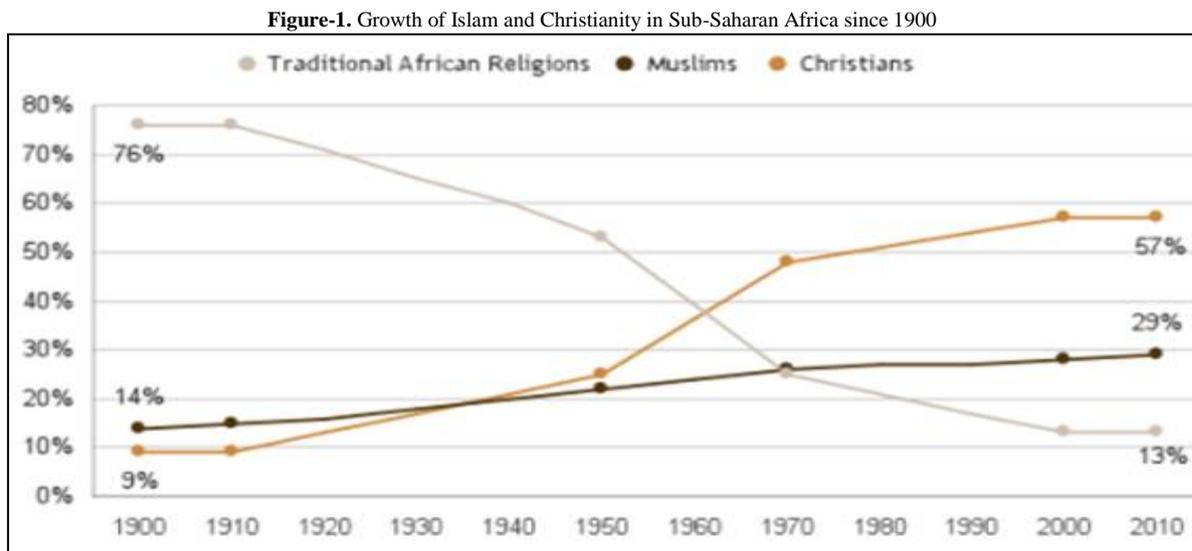
It is interesting to note how public officials are expected to be ethical in a governance culture that is highly unethical. Such a paradox complicates the measures to promote ethical behaviour in developing countries particularly in Africa. Unless the public sector ethics are embedded in the cultural infrastructure of the African society some of the perceived best practice reforms and compliance issues will remain a pipe dream. This is the thrust of this paper.

### 2. Background

According to Waweru (2011), unethical culture of impunity in Africa has resulted in Africa's own failure with countries like Libya, Democratic Republic of Congo, Northern Sudan, Somalia, Zimbabwe, Egypt, Uganda and Kenya being the worst stations for impunity. It seems people compete for public office in order to win positions of power and privilege and not to serve the people. This becomes a fertile ground for corruption and exploitation of resources for unmerited advantage in the absence of political will (Mafunisa and Khalo, 2014; Sebola, 2014).

Most countries in Africa portray themselves as Christians, Muslims or Traditionalists. Therefore, a Christian culture, Muslim culture or Traditional culture must be inculcated in the ethical conduct of public service delivery. From the biblical point of view, employee Christians are expected to be ethically conscious of the reign of God whether at work or at home and “in courts of political power” (Botman, 1997) in order to impact the world in every sphere of life. God is for justice and peace, hence Christianity should manifest in deeds at home and at work. Ethically, public officials have a way of presenting the reign of God to the public. Governments need to reflect on the role that the Bible plays in developing an ethical community. African traditional religion presents its own expectations in some cases completely opposite to the Christian values and the Muslim values. Africa and South of the Sahara in particular is predominantly Christian.

Figure 1 shows the growth of Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa from 1900 to 2010 in relation to Muslim and Traditional African Religions. The growth of Christianity accelerated from the 1950s to a peak of 57% in 2010 while there was a sharp decline of the Traditional African Religion from 1900 recording a low of 13% from 76%. Muslim steadily increased from 14% to 29% in the same period.



Source: Lugo and Coopermam (2010)

Dzimhiri (1996), notes that, while public sector structures in Africa mirror those in the West, performance has not reflected the same way. For instance, while the West talks of merit, competence, official verifiable qualifications for deciding recruitment or promotion of officers in the public sector in general, in Africa such objectivity is usually overtaken by extended family considerations, nepotism, bribery, favouritism and political considerations (Chigudu, 2014). Arguably, this is largely influenced by some of the African cultures especially on extended family considerations. Public sector reforms have invariably been developed and painstakingly implemented but desirable results have not been realised. Dzimhiri (2009), argues that change of laws alone, for example, on procurement procedures will not automatically lead to compliance or change of behaviour and attitude. From this standpoint, contemporary African culture of the 21st Century (Christian, Muslim and Traditional values included) cannot be the same as that of the early 20th Century. Public sector ethics and culture have to be developed in this context (Maserumule, 2014).

### 3. Conceptual Analysis

States that have adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and co-opted them in their national constitutions are violators of human rights, those states that adopted international labour laws and the rights to strike are major violators of labour rights (Dzimhiri, 2005). Udeani (2008), observes that, Africa like the rest of the world in the age of globalization is faced with different issues of an ethical nature (Mafini and Pooe, 2014; Sebola and Nkuna, 2014; Van Dierendonck and Driehuizen, 2015). The problem of leadership and corruption within Africa which pervades the public sector across the continent is not new as it is in other continents. However, these problems are monumental in the African setup due to lack of or warped ethical culture in the public and private sector organisations. It is therefore imperative that, scholars and researchers deeply concerned about the welfare of Africa can afford not to address the issues of African leadership and corruption.

These issues have been busying many people, both individually and collectively (Udeani, 2008). Numerous efforts have been made, and are still being made, towards finding solutions to these problems of, and within, the African leadership. The question is about what should be done from the perspective of African culture and ethics with regards to public sector leadership so as to fully address the issue of corruption and administrative malpractices (Musanzikwa, 2013; Phago, 2014) The conception of ethics in the African context is shrouded with peculiarities, some of which can be referred to as African worldviews on leadership roles. For instance, religion and ethics may not be separated hence the need to seek for a solution to an African leadership crises from a spiritual-cum-ethical point of view. This view is shared by Abimbólá (2001) who asserts that in the African culture, morality does not exist outside of religion in this and other worldly view of ethics. Etta and Asukwo (2012), contend that, religion

forms the keynote of African ways of life hence African ethics is basically seen as a religious ethics. On the other hand, (Ozumba, 1995) opines that, African ethics is premised on an impressive pillar of humanism in which the welfare of man and community are the main thrust of African ethics.

### 3.1. The Botho/Ubuntu Perspective

Dolamo (2013), brings the concept of ethics and culture in the *botho/ubuntu* perspective. He argues that, post-colonial Africa ought to recapture the values and principles encapsulated in the philosophy of *botho/ubuntu* for its people to enjoy the dignity that they deserve. According to this philosophy, individuals would become human only by becoming members of their respective communities. Shutte (2001), argues that the deepest moral obligation is to become more fully human and this means entering more and more deeply into the community with others. Although the goal is personal fulfilment, selfishness is excluded.

While the concept of *botho/ubuntu* is confined to Africa only, its popularity came into sharper focus as post-independent African states began to reflect on their historical past (Sebola and Nkuna, 2014). There were prospects of nation-building through the creation of wealth for prosperity. For Dolamo (2013), *botho/ubuntu* is an integral part of African ethics that is steeped in issues of liberation, development and identity among other issues. There is much to do with personal integrity and dignity. However, the tenets of *botho/ubuntu* are being redefined and revisited as Africa continually searches for ethical principles and values through diverse cultures that can enhance development and wealth creation. The humanistic nature of African ethics implies that it is egalitarian, not individualistic and intrinsically religious.

Man therefore finds fulfilment not as a separate individual but as a participant in a family and a community (Etta and Asukwo, 2012). It follows that, individuals develop their ethics in conformity with societal norms. If they contradict, that individual will be labelled as a social deviant and would be called to order. This explains the reason why the *Efiks* (an ethnic group located primarily in South-Eastern Nigeria) have the adage that *eto idaha ikpõn ke ikõt iforo akai* (a tree cannot make a forest). In view of this, public sector ethics should be understood in the cultural setting.

### 3.2. Overview of Culture and Ethics

Culture can be viewed as the sum total of the values which a given society cherishes and by which its members want to identify them and be identified by others Waliggo (2005). These values common in nature include among others: history and language; rites, philosophy and worldview; religious beliefs and morality; ancestors and leaders; signs and symbols. According to Iliffe (1995) the history of humanity in Africa, the scientifically accepted continent of origin for *homo erectus*, *homo habilis* and *homo sapiens*, proves that the continent has had a long history of human culture, morality and other social systems which have allowed it to grow, protect and promote human life, and extend the gift of human life to all other continents of the world. This unique contribution of Africa should be appreciated together with those values, norms, morality and worldview that have enhanced human life and created the necessary relations for survival and development (Waliggo, 2005). African culture has never been static, as some people may think; it has been dynamic just like other cultures. It has always modified its tenets as challenged by all aspects of modernity and even informed by new knowledge and discoveries.

The spotlight on ethics and culture in the public sector in Africa has been partly due to the crisis in confidence about governance and a lack of public trust in personnel. Public policy analysts as in Kimber and Maddox (2003) argue that, mounting concern over public sector ethics could be related to the effects of managerialism, privatisation and economic rationalism, all of which raise questions about the public good. Some commentators Sherman in Preston (2000) have raised concerns about the arbitrariness of public sector appointments and the soaring politicisation of the public service (Mulgan, 1998;2000). Such allegations bring the area of ethics, culture and the ethical conduct of public officials into focus. Public officials are not expected to be swayed by party, political or other pressures. The ideals of a public service are established on independence and impartiality and politicisation would be unethical (Kimber and Maddox, 2003). Public sector ethics must go beyond avoiding corruption and being efficient or providing a quality service.

According to Freakley and Burgh (2000) it appears there is a general agreement in literature that ethics is about human relationships and how human beings ought to act and relate to one another. With respect to the public sector, positive working relationship is central, based on trust, honesty and integrity between public sector officials and other stakeholders such as ministers, members of parliament, ministerial staff and members of the wider community (Ehrich *et al.*, 2004).

### 3.3. Culture and Public Administration in Africa

Due to the cultural diversity in African countries, conflicting value judgments are made which affect the political activities of both government and the opposition. This diversity also directly influences the quality of the administration of public affairs. Public officials are affected by value judgments and tend to sympathise with the values held by certain groups or individuals in the society. It is imperative that the public official does not substitute his/her personal values for societal or community values but to give priority to those values which benefit the entire society. This is a manifestation of cultural and ethical dilemma common in the public sector. Unfortunately, public officials aspire to assume senior positions, therefore the values of the regime are 'normative' (Rohr, 1978) for them and also the '... starting point of their ethical reflections' (Rohr, 1978). This should not be an embarrassment or an indication of unethical behaviour, but should mirror societal values through an interpretation of and reflection on the regime values (Rohr, 1978).

Public functionaries cannot detach themselves from the environment values because they work within a society laden with values and norms. Making decisions in the public sector requires not only facts but also values and norms. The fact remains that, in order to serve the dictates of an African government, respect for community values and norms are subordinated to those of the ruling party. Trends of inflexibility may cost the public officials their jobs. Ethics tend to evaluate behaviour against some absolute criteria then impose negative or positive values upon it. The criteria can be in writing in the form of legislation or simply the interpretation by an individual of what may be acceptable or not. Where there is no legislative guidance the public official uses discretion in consultation with senior ruling party officials.

Public administrators in Africa have crafted rules, formulated policies, implemented them but with very little if any concern of their economic and social impact. It is only prudent that, they gather views of the citizens about what should be implemented and what has been implemented. They should then report objectively to the highest level of government about concerns raised so that appropriate remedial action is taken. The notion espoused by Prinsloo (2000) that an elder person is more of a person than a younger one residing in the African culture should not be cultivated in public administration without caution. From the patriarchal and paternalistic perspective the assertion holds true because the elderly are believed to be wiser. But as Jowah (2015) put it, "It is grossly incorrect; living at different status levels does not make anyone less of a person". Therefore, in order to improve service delivery and performance in the public sector the question of who has made the suggestion should not be weighed against the social status of the person making the suggestion. Rather, it should be weighed against the merits or demerits of the suggestion. The cultural challenges are exacerbated by available leadership literature which recognises less of the indigenous knowledge, values and behaviours (Bolden and Kirk, 2006). This observation is supported by Jowah (2015) who submits that, there is a disjuncture that occurs between African values and the world of formal employment. African values are often denigrated such that putting them to practice at the work place is viewed as incompetency by the white-oriented manager.

### 3.4. Ethical Behaviour and Public Officials

For public officials, behaviour is deemed ethical if it shows elements of; being true to others, to their work and being duty-bound (Hummel, 1989). Once personnel of public institutions engage in unethical behaviour, this may lead to ineffective administration and unsatisfactory service. According to French (1983), the behaviour of the public official is vested in his ability to execute conscientiously the order of superior authorities, exactly as if the order agreed with his own conviction. Ethical governance remains the first priority of any public official and that politicians should not influence the activities of the public official. If there is no balance existing between the two, then what obtains is a situation currently prevailing in Africa where emphasis is placed more on the sovereignty of politics than on the supremacy of administration Hope (1985). This compromises service delivery as senior public officials have to spend time seeking political knowledge at the expense of professional research and development. This in turn leads to maladministration (Hope, 1985) and political corruption. Public officials in the lens of insider-outsider dichotomy (Macmillan, 2013) must be viewed in the lens of those who toe the line as it is human nature to perceive those with different ideals as a threat to the powers that be. But, norms and values are a collective agreement of what is necessary to survive, what works and what needs to be done to ensure co-operation.

One of the globalisation traps in African public administration is to satisfy the world's economy to the detriment of the citizens' social solidarity. The public sector plays to the tune of international dictates trying to keep pace with developed economies. In the process they tend to lose focus on economic and social development of the people and their countries (Ndi-zambo, n.d). This presents challenges between states and societies' relationships ethically. For example, a subsidiary state brings forth decentralised administrative actions. The active-providence state develops an administration prone to improve relations with citizens. With a patrimonial state there will be no challenge to witness for this kind of public administration.

The secret conduct of public business –administrative secrecy creates a major ethical dilemma. According to Ayee (n.d) secrecy can be a fertile ground to cover up unethical practices. It would be in the public interest to know what government is doing through open administration of public affairs in democratic governance. Corruption is often an ally of secrecy; hence corruption is practised in secrecy. As viewed by the citizens, all public officials represent the government of the day irrespective of their departments. That perception compels the public officials to conduct their duties free of bias. Even when they do, their activities are viewed with bias by some sections of the community because of the way they interact with elected politicians. In order to counter both cultural and ethical challenges facing Africa in the public sector, the panacea lies in developing public ethical culture initiatives.

## 4. Public Ethical Culture Initiatives in the African Context

Corruption and other forms of unethical behaviour are manageable when the public no longer tolerates it and encourages a dialogue. This dialogue should be engaged between the public and leaders in the society in order to mutually exchange information. Waweru (2015) observes that even in the Bible (KJV, 2011) and specifically Mathew 28:19-20, we encounter the great commission, 'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations'. This is a command with political overtones concerning ethical initiatives and not a request. It is one scripture most misinterpreted in the Bible. The leadership is not commanded to teach the denominations but the citizenship of a people which refers to nations. The interest here is not to baptise people merely as a process of making them members of churches. It is to make them members of a political community free from impunity and corruption "teaching them to observe all things as I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20). The interest is to be good disciples (public leaders) of the state,

for unto us is given the authority in heaven and on earth to develop the discipleship of countries and the continent (Mathew 28:18).

To that end, African states must canvass for transformative policies guided by ethical principles while empowering the citizenry to demand accountability and transparency (Fukuyama, 2013) from its leaders. This can be achieved through massive seminars or conferences across the political divide in both urban and rural areas. The private sector and civil society can also be roped in, in this campaign to stamp out corruption and related administrative vices. The drive must be initiated by the governments through parliament and other legislative bodies. Codes of ethics in business ensure integrity both in public and private sectors. This is practicable if governments become truly responsible and accountable in establishing the following (Waweru, 2011).

- Systems to facilitate the examination of decisions and actions of public officials in demanding an end to corruption as well as a public political life based on transparency, accountability and equal opportunities.
- A system of empowerment of citizens to develop skills to recognise and acknowledge their rights and hence fight corruption.
- A system to improve performance by developing ethical leaders and a participation that is all inclusive in leadership and in addressing corruption based on ethnic and political affiliation.
- A system to dissuade the public from either working or cooperating with leaders and elites who have corrupt characteristics.

The public sector should be guaranteed decent living wages to enhance efficiency and effectiveness. Any pay increase should be tied to an increase in accountability. Since prevention is better than prosecution, some anti-corruption agencies should be put in place reporting to an independent appropriate authority. This authority should ultimately report directly to parliament or any form of legislative body. The independent authority should be apolitical and;

- Enjoy support from the highest office of the land.
- Have power and adequate authority to access any documentation useful for investigation, to question witnesses and even leadership perceived to be of the highest integrity.

The appointment of the members of the independent authority should be through parliament as opposed to government with clear rules and regulations indicating how the office bearers can be removed. These initiatives would record success if African governments, especially ruling parties take the lead to establish professionalism in the public service and financial management discipline. Parliamentary oversight committees would then supervise the implementation. The private sector will equally be encouraged to join the fray to uphold ethical standards that will shun corruption and other ills afflicting humanity on the continent. Ehrich *et al.* (2004), argue that, there is little doubt that if institutions are to embed ethical practices into their culture, processes and structure, there is a strong role for leadership in facilitating this process. Once done, this translates in a leadership that allows others to share expertise and energy as required by the African culture (Groenewald, 2014).

Africa is enigmatic (Waweru, 2015). Enigma is defined as something that is hard to explain or understand. Literature portrays Africa as predominantly Christian with full of resources but her people are the poorest, corrupt and the mother of impunity. Ethical initiatives by the public sector in Africa should influence the political systems and assist to curb corruption while eradicating poverty as a process rather than an event. Faith-based organisations should be allowed to filter into the public sector and remind public officials and politicians of their fate when service delivery is compromised. In order to promote ethics and culture, ethics should be ingrained 'into the ethos, policies and practices of an institution' (Preston *et al.*, 2002). Nevertheless, it should be highlighted that a move towards creating a more ethical public sector is no easy feat. The challenge of politicisation may continue to creep in the way.

Perhaps it is high time for the African public officials to become more original and cease to be mainly imitators or copyists of what people in other continents have come up with for their respective peoples (Alemazung, 2012; Shai and Iroanya, 2014). This originality may help Africa contribute richly to its development as well as integrating its cultural diversity with public management ethics. It is no wonder (Waliggo, 2005) has lamented that for over a century many of the African cultural, moral and religious values have been undermined and held in contempt by many of the Western educated African elites, including many legal experts. These educated African elites must take a leading role in promoting public sector ethics and culture in Africa rather than merely despise the system from a grandstand. A holistic approach is called for in which key stakeholders are active participants in the quest to promote ethical culture, truthfulness, sincerity and honesty (Ijeoma and Sambumbu, 2013; Mubangizi and Tshishonga, 2013; Orwa, 2014; Salim, 2014).

## 5. Conclusion

This article has discussed the place of culture and ethics in Africa's public sector. Public sector reforms that have been implemented in most African countries have admittedly not yielded desired fruits due to shortage of finance, corruption, incompatible models of reforms, lack of political will or lack of administrative commitment. The article provides one additional item to the list of factors – lack of cultural ethics. There is need for a cultural change apart from structural changes often required to improve public administration. This cultural change reveals through behavioural change, attitudes, values and beliefs. There is a critical need to align public sector management with values, beliefs and attitudes of the major actors in order to close the discrepancy gap between expected service

delivery and the actual service delivery. This study argues for an ethical culture that can be cultivated through a holistic approach encompassing, among others, traditional leaders, faith-based organisations, political parties, the public officials and the business community. Christians and all types of religions in Africa are exhorted to preach against corruption and other evils affecting the society particularly in the public sector. The gospel must help transform public sector management and permeate through politicians. The ethical and cultural initiatives discussed should be embraced by states in Africa wholesome and not on a piecemeal basis. A responsive leadership style that is corrupt free and poverty eradicating should be developed. Ethical standards that include integrity, honour and justice that appear to have fallen in disuse must be re-established. Also, the Christian community should remind the public officials that in *KJV (2011)* specifically, Romans 14:12, individual accountability is desirable, necessary and inescapable. Apart from the initiatives highlighted in this article, further research ought to be done to reconcile demands for transparency and secrecy in the public sector. These two demands are often in conflict laying bare issues of public sector ethics and culture as alternatives to improved service delivery.

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