

**A CHRISTIAN APPRAISAL OF THE PERFORMANCES OF ELDERS IN
PUBLIC OFFICE IN NIGERIA: ABUSES AND IMPLICATIONS ON
CREDIBILITY**

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Abstract

A cursory glance at most public political offices in Nigeria reveals they are headed by the elderly. The rationale behind this as in typical African traditional society is the assumption that elders are richer in experiences and wisdom. Armed with these, it is expected that an elder can and should discharge his/her responsibility to the Nigerian citizens with integrity and in accordance with the laid down rules of conduct in public office. Incidents and circumstances in Nigerian have revealed that there is broken thread between the traditionally revered status of the elder and the much desired honesty, accountability and uprightness of character. Consequently, this breeds corruption and stagnate growth and development thereby leading to untold hardships and difficulties. This paper takes a historical look at the status of the elder from the biblical perspective and the image in African traditional society and examines the effects of abuse of the status in public office. The paper therefore in the light of Christian model of eldership proffer more viable ways elders are to conduct themselves in public office to remedy the lost connection to a better Nigeria.

Keywords: Christian, Public Office, Nigeria, Responsibility

Introduction

It is difficult to find any culture or world religion that despises the elderly. Therefore every culture and religion in the world holds elders and their status in high esteem and obliges the young to honor them. In both Jewish and Christian scriptures, this obligation comes next to honoring God (cfEx 20:12). Even the modern civilization with its revolutionary tendencies and emphasis on freedom has placed the elderly on high pedestal. This is embodied in the United Nation(UN) resolution 37/51 of 3 December

1982 on the elderly. UN has also accredited 6,110 Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) worldwide who enjoy consultative status with UN Economic and social council (UNECOSOC) to care for the elderly.

Unfortunately, this universal moral obligation of the young to honor elders has not gone un-trespassed. The violation which is called elder abuse has taken global dimension as acknowledged by world health Organization (WHO) in 2002 (cook 2003). It is also variously called elders mistreatment, abuse of older adults or senior abuse. The UN adopted the definition of Hourglass as a single or repeated act or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person. By indication elders are the sole victims of elder abuse in the hands of younger persons. An empirical study “found that western typologies of elder abuse do not cover all types of abuse manifested in African countries. These types of abuse were found to be more violent and to be perpetrated collectively, not individually as is the case in western countries, that issue of elder abuse in Africa concerns human rights” (Monica 2004). For example, epileptic payment of pension in Nigeria financial. While it is acknowledged that Africa and Nigeria in particular are not left out in elder abuse, yet in Africa this is aberration not the norm, African culture is much respectful of elders and pays much obeisance to elders. This is what brings the relevance of elite theory to this write up.

The Elite Theory in its classical form was first developed by two Italian sociologist Vilfredo Pareto (1848 – 1923) and Gaetano Mosca (1858 – 1911). Their view differ from Max’s view as they saw the inevitability of elite rule and rejected the possibility of proletarian revolution leading to establishment of communist society (Haralaubos et al 2007:530). Pareto considers the elite to be more cunning and intelligent while Mosca saw them as superior with more Organizational abilities. Both theorist agree that the elite minority owe its power to its united and cohesive form and as such rule disorganized and fragmented mass even in the so called democratic states.

The weakness of this elite’s theory is based on little or no systematic evidence and its overemphasis on the superiority of elite psychological characteristics. Notwithstanding, the underlying idea of the theory that small group can become dominant through organization and holding position of power remains influential among scholars (Haralanbos et al 2007:531). It is this remarkable influence on scholars that led to the revisionist forms of the theory in the context of USA by (Wright Mills 1956) and in Britain by (Hywel Williams 2006). In the Nigerian context, the dominance of the elite is undebatable when one glances at the political terrain. The younger generations may pick offence at it but it has been the status quo inherent with the African traditional society.

But where events took a bizarre twist in Nigeria is when elders that have been so much revered and entrusted with responsibility assume public office and grossly fail to meet expectations. The concern here is that elders as political elite who represent their states, constituencies, community and group in the presidency, state house of representatives, state house of assemblies and head of various government parastatals ironically become stumbling blocks to national progress and to younger generations thereby betraying the integrity their status signifies. This paper sets out to examine elders as political elite and their performances as a channel of amplifying integrity in the light of biblical teachings. The African image and the biblical notion especially the Christian model of eldership will be surveyed. The paper will see to the maturity and integrity of character of elder will pave way to greater growth and smooth government beneficial to all Nigerian citizens.

Conceptual Framework

Elder: The term Elder has various usage as in entertainment, geographical name, proper names of people and even plants. However, for the purpose of this paper, we are concerned with the definition of *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary*, that elders are “people of greater age, experiences and authority”. It is applied to connote positions of persons in administrative cultural and religious circles, simply put, elder is administrative title of somebody in position of authority. Culturally, elder has and transmits cultural and philosophical knowledge, one who has gained recognition as a custodian of knowledge and lore, often a leader. Religiously, a person valued for wisdom and holds administrative title and with responsibility to preach and teach in Christianity and as honorific term for senior Buddhist nuns and monks. The key of being an elder includes age, experiences, wisdom and authority. Elders age varies for different countries. However, UN considers 70 for old age (Scherbove et al 2019) while WHO set 50 for sub-Saharan Africa (Kowal et al 2001). So to be precise, this concerns elders in the public office with the exception of clerics of various religions and the traditional rulers.

Public Office: Merriam Webster Dictionary gives legal definition of public office as “an office created by a constitution or legislative act, having a definitive tenure and involving the power to carry out some government function”. Oxford Dictionary’s definition directly speaks to our paper as it sees public office as “a position of authority or service involving responsibility to the public, especially within the government”. This explicitly means the offices of the clerics and traditional rulers are excluded. Public offices are occupied by civil servants such as state governor and his deputy, state auditor, state treasurer, attorney general, state school board member, state senate, speaker of the house of representatives, president of the senate, president of the federation and his deputy and so on.

The Elder in African Traditional Society

The African culture is certainly one of the world cultures that exalts the elderly as a beacon of hope for the younger generation. An empirical study by Mbele using evidence from folklore and literature found out that “it is simplistic to say that conventional wisdom presents the elder in African society as a wise, dignified and powerful figure who keeps the culture alive and guides the young” (Mbele 2004). By implication, the elder is much more to the African society. This is confirmed by the view of Osei-Nyame that “early novels and narratives within the tradition of African narrative fiction reveals the presence of the elders and ancestors in the African imagination in ways that demonstrates their importance within African society (Osei-Nyame). He pointed to an example of the Igbo regard for and portrayal of the elder as a superhuman in the work of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe 1986:3).

Here is little folk literature as proverbs that further demonstrate elders as life wire of African society: A village without the elderly is like a well without water, those who respect the elderly pave their own road to success, the mouth of an elderly man is without teeth but never without words of wisdom. And that a youth that does not cultivate friendship with the elderly is like a tree without roots.

The aforementioned points then seem to provide justification why elders are the leaders in African traditional societies. They are the kings, the chiefs, the medicine-men, diviners, healers, members of secret societies, rain makers and also importantly they serve as a bridge between the young generations and the ancestors.

The Elder in Biblical History: the Christian Model

The English word elder is a literal translation of the Hebrew word ‘Zaken’ (meaning elder or beard) used in the Old Testament and the Greek word ‘Presbyters’ (which means elder or old man) used in the new testament (McKenzie 1976:225-229) and no specific age in both. In the Old Testament, elders played more of political role (leadership) but also religious function (though this was solely for priests, prophets, judges). They were qualified as the elders but variously as elders of the city, of the land, of the congregation of the tribe (mentioned), of Judah and Jerusalem etc. McKenzie also outline 4 functions of the elders in the Old Testament:

- 1) They represent the entire people (as representatives of families, clans and tribe) on political or religious matters and spoke on their behalf. For example “Thus Moses gathers the elders and speaks to the people (Ex 3:16, 4:29). The elders asked Samuel to appoint a king (1 Sam 8:4).

- 2) The elders act as associate, cabinet or companions of the leader in exercise of his authority (cf Ex 3:18, Dt 27:1, Jos 8:10) Moses selected 70 elders as his associate (Ex 24:1ff).
- 3) The elder sometimes appear as governing body (cf Jos 9:11, Jos 5:8ff, 11:5) and also colluded to oppress the people (Is 3:14). They also voted for war or peace (cf 1Kgs 20:7)
- 4) Severally they appear as judicial body though not mentioned in code of the covenant (cfDt 19:12, 21:3).
- 5) They are also among the officers of the king (cfJgs 8:8, 2 Kgs 10:1).

Thus the elders as heads of families, clans and tribes were representatives of the people not only as associate with Moses and the judges but with the monarchs.

In the New Testament, four types of elders are mentioned. First “After undergoing a relative eclipse under the monarchy, the elders acquired new significance both during and following the exile” “these are the elders who were rabbis of earlier generation whose opinions on the law were regarded by the pharisees as of equal authority with the law itself. Jesus refused to be bound by these traditions” (cfMtt 15:1ff) (McKenzie 1976:226). Secondly, there were Jewish elders (Jesus contemporaries) who along with the scribes and priests made up the Sanhedrin. “In the time of Jesus, the Sanhedrin was made up of priests, scribes and elders. A council of elders was ordinarily responsible for the running of each synagogue. Although possessing a variety of administrative, doctrinal and juridical functions, Jewish elders were essentially lay people clearly distinct from the priestly caste (Donovan 2006:800). It is certainly this same elders who took action against disciples of Jesus in Acts chapter 4 and 6. Thirdly, we have the elders of the early church first mentioned in Acts 11:21ff. “without any explanation of their origin” in the absence of any precise information, one has to assume that the church simply took over the existing terminology” (Donovan 2006:800) thereby imitating the Jewish religious administrative structures. The fourth group are the 24 elders in the book of Apocalypse (4:4, 10; 5:5ff; 7:11, 13 etc). “They are a heavenly divine council formed on the analogy of the Old Testament council of elders.

The elders of the early Christian church and the virtues they stood for is surely our focus. It is from this that the Christian model of eldership is derived. Historically, elders were involved in 3 key moments in the early church. First, it was to the elders that Barnabas and soul handed over donation from the community in Antioch (Acts 11:30), secondly, it was the elders and the Apostles that decided on the issue of circumcision at the council of Jerusalem (cf Act 21:18), 4thly in Acts 14:23 Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for

them in every church. Lastly, in Acts 20:17, if Paul gave a moving farewell speech to the elders.

It should be noted that while Luke used the word elders, Paul preferred overseer (episcopus) also meaning bishop and Peter used shepherd. From the pastoral letters 1 Tim 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9) and 1 Peter 5:1-4) we hereby outline the Christian model of eldership.

- a) Good reputations and personal integrity- Above reproach and respectable (1 Tim 3:2, Titus 1:6) being example to the flock (1 Peter 5:3) Holy (Titus 1:8) well thought of by outsiders (1 Tim 3:7)
- b) Family life: Marriage, sexuality and children upbringing- The husband of one wife (1 Tim 3:2, Titus 1:6), must manage his own house well (1 Tim 3:4) his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination (Titus 1:6).
- c) Personal self-control- sober minded (1 Tim 3:2), self-controlled (Titus 1:8), not greedy for gain (Titus 1:7)not quick tempered, not quarrelsome, not a drunkard (1 Tim 3:3) Disciplined (Titus 1:8).
- d) Relational skills with people- Gentle, not quarrelsome (Titus 1:7,8)
- e) Hospitable and loving (1 Tim 3:2, Titus 1:8)
- f) Spiritual maturity- not be a recent convert or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil (1 Tim 3:6)
- g) Abilities: Good manager, Biblically knowledgeable and communication skill- He must manage his own house well, (1 Tim 3:4), he must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it (Titus 1:9), Able to teach (1 Tim 3:3).

The Elders as Dominant Force in Key Public Offices in Nigeria

It was earlier pointed out how the elders, especially kings, chiefs and their offspring were then the elite sole healers in African traditional society. However, there seems to be exceptions as the popular African proverb suggests, “When a child washes his hands clean, he eats with elders”. Meaning that, mature behaviour entitles even the young to sit beside kings (Kanu, 2015:305).

The involvement of the young who were not necessarily from royal families came with the advent of colonization and independence. Lloyd noted the emergence of old and new young elites. “The traditional elite of the political office holders of tribal societies and the earlier westernized elite (Lloyd 1970:14) who merged to become the modern elite is a national elite..... in the end both groups of elite had to merge and form a formidable

front” (Tola et al 2014:134). It seems this is a coalition of convenience to get rid of the colonizers. But the young educated elites rose higher as Tola et al continued to observe. “With independence, the social alignment was transformed, shooting the (young) educated elites far above the traditional authorities in national political”. This is further confirmed by Lloyd “throughout sub-Saharan Africa, political power has been rapidly passing from the colonial rulers to members of indigenous national elites, men who predominantly young, highly educated and comparatively wealthy”, (Lloyd 1966:1).

The traditional elders as elite did not give up but adapted and took advantage of their status. “The alternative measures for the traditional authorities were the training of their children in order to compete at the highest level” (Tola et al 2014:135). Ake (1981:47) agreed that the traditional elite upset the imbalance by “the concentration of educational opportunities on the people who already had high socio-economic status in traditional society particularly the sons of chiefs” Ake 1981:47).

Other important events that affected upward mobility to the elite class include the military coups and counter coups, the civil war (1967-1970) and the subsequent military rule. Subsequently, this class (of elite) was joined by the ambitious members of the armed forces. Nigeria thus became a theatre of the interplay of forces between the civilian and the military political elites” (Yola et al 2014:136). The inevitable consequences is that elders who in many cases are incompetent, over-aged and sick occupy and dominate key public offices in Nigeria thereby confirming the projection of elite theory. The aftermaths of these development in the political elite setting accounts for our present ordeal which is closed to the worst case scenario in our political history.

An Appraisal of the Performances of Elders in Public Offices in Nigeria

In Nigeria, one may emerge as a public office holder through the political process of election or appointment to function in any of the arms of government (judiciary, Legislative and Executive). Regardless of the particular office one occupies, the common name is civil servant or public servant or public office holder as one serves in public (not private) sector. Oyibo draws our attention to an important dimension of entry to this office- Oath taking. “Those who emerge through the political process to serve.... are by law required to take an oath of office publicly to be faithful in the discharge of their duties” (Oyibo 2014:59). This is required as contained in section 135, subsection 2(a)-(b) of the Nigeria constitution.

By its nature, oath taking is an official promise publicly made to the public besides other countless promises made at campaign prior to political victory. “Like oaths in the Jewish society they are used in Nigeria to determine the veracity of intention or the truthfulness

of intention to serve the people honestly”. But unfortunately Oyibo observes “in Nigeria public office holders generally take these prescribed oaths of office and yet renege on them. Thus, raising some questions bothering on morality” (Oyibo 2014:61). This mischief and malpractice of performance in the public office in Nigeria by the so called elders are further attested to by Berekiah”. Public office holders no longer have regards for the oath of office they took and they do not feel any restrain in perpetrating all forms of malpractices while in office and those they are leading have to be well connected in order to get any meaningful service from either the private or public sector without undue stress” (Berekiah 2007:57). Historically, oath breaking and failure to fulfill campaign promises is a capital vice giving rise to other vices from the perspective of Christian model of eldership, this analyzed above is a major breach of integrity since having good reputation and person requires that one must be above reproach and respectable and be an example to the flock (1 Tim 3:2, 1 Peter 5:3) if an elder grossly violates his promises and is dishonest without remorse where is his honor?

The concept of elder from the outset in Old Testament Jewish root was representative of family, clan, community, tribe or entire nation. Coincidentally, this is reflected in our polity as House of Representatives. Public office holders are therefore representatives (not of themselves) but delegated to serve along with other representatives of other communities, ethnic groups, etc. The call here is to reduce to the minimum the flame of ethnic bigotry and religious segregation considering the Biblical injunction that an elder should be well thought of by outsiders (1 Tim 3:7).

But of major relevance to the Nigerian context is that an elder is a representative delegated to serve based on trust. Adegoke note that “it is a trust entrusted on the public office holder by the community who appoints or elect them and it represents a psychological contract between the public office holder and the general people whom he would try to guide protect and treat in a justly manner (Adegoke 2006:218). Contract of any kind is inseparable from trust, honesty and maturity of both parties. Dzurgba adds that honesty is manifested in trust worthiness, truthfulness, sincerity, integrity and fairness; it means also the absence of deceitfulness and untruthfulness (Dzurgba 2008:62)

Unfortunately, bribery and other corrupt practices in public offices including looting government treasury have become not only common practices but institutionalized. It is to address this foreseen human selfish tendency that the Christian model of eldership explicitly spells out that he should not greedy for gain or lover of money (1 Tim 3:3, 1 Tim 3:9). If an elder upholds this virtue, he may not enrich himself as is the common practice in contemporary Nigeria politics. However, he would definitely not be found wanting on issue of accountability.

For an elder to be deservedly tagged as such, maturity is necessary a hallmark and associated with it is self-control. If not so, how can one differentiate an elder from a child without these virtues? It is said that “maturity does not come with age, it comes with acceptance and discharge of responsibility” (anonymous). In the light of the Christian model of eldership, an elder who is to lead is not expected to be a child in the faith “he must not be a recent convert” (1 Tim 3:6) and should have self-control “not drunkard, and violent but gentle, not quarrelsome” must not be arrogant or quick-tempered, master of himself and self-controlled (cf 1 Tim 3:3, Titus 1:7-8). Unfortunately, elders in the Nigeria parliament have joined the rank of many nations in legislative violence. Notable incidents include 22 June 2010 violence that “broke out after a group of members were suspended for accusing the speaker of corruption” (Ebo 2010). Also on 18 September 2013, “fight broke out after a group from the people’s Democratic party(PDP) tried to address parliament” (BBC News). At the state level, an incident in one of the states in the North led to the exchange of slap between an incumbent governor and his deputy. Galusha, a US congress man attempted to give insight to this occurrence; “crowd some hundreds of men together on a hot afternoon or night, fill them with fire of partisan ardor; perplex them with doubt as to the personal gain or loss that may follow their vote on the question at issue and instill them with envy of and ill-will toward, their fellows and you have abundant material for a row. All that is needed is an excuse and that is too often found” (Galusha 1900:1194). Added to this immaturity and indiscipline are the issues of erratic insensitive comments, sexual harassments and immorality and the likes which do not portray the Nigerian public office holders in good lights. These vices and malpractices may not be peculiar to Nigeria, yet what is wrong is wrong even if it is a global phenomenon.

Implications of Elders Status Abuse on Credibility in Public Office

Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines Credibility as the quality that somebody or something has that makes people believe or trust them. Synonymous for the term includes dependability, reliability, trustworthiness, integrity, character etc. By its nature, public office is not private. The public office holder is voted in by the public and ought to offer service to the same public. The link between actions of an elder as public office holder and his/her credibility is hereby established. Credibility is important as it help to influence people’s patterns, behaviors and thoughts about or towards somebody or something” (Vanourek 2020).

Until recently, there was a saying in Nigeria commonly repeated that “politics is a dirty game”. We hear less of this now. Suddenly everyone wants to be in politics, most likely for economic reasons and for being victims for shying away from it (politics). However,

the belief behind the saying still exists. Public office holders are considered dishonest, thieves and even collaborators with criminal and terrorist elements in the society. Consequently, as Oyibo noted “the implications of the fore-going are that the honesty of the contemporary Nigerian public office holders is now in doubt locally and internationally” (Oyibo 2014:62).

The abuses of public office have inevitably put a negative tag on its credibility. Naturally every living being adopts the attitude of evasion and avoidance towards something considered unpleasant or harmful. As a result of the exploitative, mischievous and dishonest tag on public cause by misconduct, the public attempts avoiding contacts. An investigation into misconduct in public office testify to this “the belief that contact with the police can itself be dangerous is a belief supported by evidence that is too pervasive to be dismissed as random or rare and too persuasive to be disparaged as inconclusive or insufficient (ACP 2000).

In every society, elders or elites are seen as pace-setters and measure of moral standard for the young to follow. Hence their action in public office in the presents is destined to cause domino effect in the society. If elders persist in abusing their status in public office, the implication is that younger generations will see public offices as den of robbers and cheats which criminal elements in them can aspire to be. Hence crimes and malpractices are expected to escalate there in future.

In connection with the above is the inevitable natural feeling of anxiety, uncertainty and fear among the contemporary young generation of Nigerians. It is comparable to the plight of passengers in a plane, cruise ship or any land commercial vehicle who suddenly realize that their pilots, captain or driver respectively are hijackers. This is no fairy tale but the reality written on the faces of most Nigerians today.

An implication directly connected with the above is productive leadership and mentorship is at stake. This then implies that brain drain is likely to continue and for those whom are not bold enough to venture there to remain constrained and contended with the private sector.

Recommendations

While Nigerians ought to be ashamed of the damaged integrity of our elites national and internationally, yet we must be appreciative to have survive so much together. This exceeded the expectation of the international community who forecast our disintegration to either back to our various pre-colonial ethnic kingdoms or to complete anarchy. Though the Nigerian state survived the divisive force of ethnic religious bigotry and

ransack by the elites but left in what state? The country is seemingly at the brink of collapse. If there is any time, therefore now is the time to honor the anthem “the labors of our heroes past shall never be in vain”.

The post-military democratic government of Chief Olusgeun Obasanjo set up the economic and financial crimes commission (EFCC) to combat the excesses of our elites and corruption in general. Yet it was plagued by the same vice it fights becoming one of the institutions that has lost credibility. To restore and maintain that credibility, it requires an upgrade by the consistent and insistent application of the highest standard of conduct for all without bias of religion ethnicity, region or political affiliation.

But how is the above achievable when the commission is under the sway of the government which is also affiliated to one religion, region, party etc. it is therefore obligatory by law to make the commission independent. It is also not enough to have laws which abound in Nigeria but not only EFCC but Nigeria in general to focus more on the enforcement on strong and clear politics on integrity in public office. The practical and public enforcement of such policies on trespassers will serve deterrence to anyone aspiring to that office. This may include termination of Job, relegation to lower rank, imprisonment or fine in accordance with the law.

In general preventive measures are more efficient. Therefore, it requires that more resources be dedicated to screening and background investigations of public office holders' candidates. The standard should be raised instead of lowered. It is beneficial to regularly organize and fund workshops and conferences on credibility in different sectors of public services.

It is also worthwhile too that the clerics become instrumental in creating enlightenment on credibility by their actions first before carrying microphone in both the church and the mosque. The call is of greater appeal to Christian clerics to whom the Christian model of eldership directly speaks to.

Conclusion

In every society worldwide, traditional or modern, attaining advanced age is considered fortune and a great one if attained with good health and wealth. It is however considered greatest if an elder reaches it and with noble character has positive legacies to show for it. The developed counties of the world are where they are on account of the selfless sacrifices and services their elites made while they were in public office. To attain this, our elders in public office must go beyond public speech and with credible performances reorient and redirect the affairs of leadership that will usher Nigeria into new era of

security, peace and progress. With Christian model of eldership, we have guarantee to that path.

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