

GOD AND DIGNITY OF LABOUR IN NIGERIA: A MORAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Introduction

The concept labour can be viewed from different perspectives. In the first instance, it can be assessed in forms of work or vocation embarked upon as a source of livelihood either in a private or public affair of mankind. Also, it refers to work done for wages. Besides, it is equally a generic word for employees and trade unions as a collective. However, dignity of labour is fundamental to the nature of man because man often lifts himself when he does his work well. In line with this observation Pat Utomi writes that:

The dignity of the human person is tied very closely to work. And when we work well, when we recognize the dignity of other human beings as they work, we essentially elevate the ordinary to the level of the engagement of the divine (Utomi,2004:29).

It implies that the principle of dignity of labour is particularly tailored towards the nature of man, to work for his goodness and the society at large. Thus, it can be deduced that the subject of work or labour is man, but man is not the object of labour. It is equally inferred that dignity of labour to man has a natural divine pre-occupation or commission. In view of the above expression, this paper examines and addresses some questions as they are related to God and dignity of labour with reference to the Nigerian society. What are the factors that inhibit some people from having joy and esteem in their work? Why is it that people are being victimized in their work? Then, what are the challenges ahead for us in Nigeria?

The paper explicates the divine commission and the dignity of labour as a rational human conduct that should be a model for Nigerian society. In addition, the moral of labour is discussed as well as its social implications. The hypothesis follows Max Weber's model of theoretical framework. First, that a man must have a calling and a well-defined life career, which he pursues in a determined and single-minded manner. Second, that God has commanded the individual to work hard for God's glory because success in one's calling means that the individual receives God's grace (Dzurgba,2002:4-5). In essence, practical ethics of economic behaviour in this paper entails efficiency, hard work, industry, productivity, prudence, punctuality and justice.

Conceptual Illuminations

The word God has a variety of connotations with reference to broad based religions across the world, viz: oriental, occidental and primal worldviews. In a similar vein, the concept God, Allah, Yahweh, Supreme Being, Ultimate Reality, Brahman is conditional according to each cultural worldviews(Titus ,1979: 374-380). In the context of this paper, God is defined; and used as the Creator and Sustainer of the world and the celestial affairs. Also God is regarded as the Creator of man who equally bestows dignity and honour on him in every aspect of life.

Thesaurus gives the meaning of the word dignity as "nobleness, nobility, decorum, propriety, respectability and courtliness (Nixons: 155). This paper is not deviating from the above mentioned meanings. However, the researcher utilizes the word dignity as honour, respect and individual entitlement attached to him in his area of calling. It also connotes that no person shall be subjected to torture, inhuman and degrading treatment. Besides, that no person should be held in slavery, servitude or performed forced labour(Aturu,2001:636-637). The word labour in this paper refers to work done for wages. It is also used as

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a generic term for employee and trade unions as a collective. More importantly, it is used as work, labour, vocation or calling in any service, organization or institution.

Employer refers to the person, organization employs a worker and pays his or her wages.

Employee is a person who works and is paid regular wages. The term employee is synonymous with the word, worker in **this** paper. That is, it refers to a person who has entered in to a work under a contract of service to execute any work or labour in person. The word is also used as any person employed by another and who is paid for his or her services (Peschke, 1992:634).

God and Moral Order of Dignity of Labour

Labour is a rational human conduct through employment with a view to maintaining man's life. Thomas Aquinas gives a four-fold purpose of labour in the life of mankind. He posits that work provides for daily livelihood; prevents idleness, curbs the rebellious flesh; and equally enables a man to give alms from his material surplus. For Teilhard de Chardin, labour is related to God's glory and that is the desire to obey God's directive in the scripture. He concludes that any work which is faithfully performed has its supernatural value (Chardin,1995:53). Gyekye (2002) writes of African cultural values, dignity of labour in the traditional African society finds expressions in maxims, proverbs and various ways of greeting people at their worksites. Julius Nyerere of Tanzania draws our attention to the Swahili maxim which states that 'Treat your guest as a guest for two days; on the third day give him a hoe ' This assertion is a typical moral obligation of traditional African society on how man should acquire the habit of hard work. In collaboration to this observation, the Ewe people of Ghana opine that, 'the person who goes to draw water does not drink mud' (Gyeke,2002:101-104). It implies that through labour one get what he wants and enjoys the fruits of one's labour. Hence, these African traditional principles even resonate in other Swahili maxims, viz; 'He who gets blister from the hoe handle will not die of hunger', 'He who goes into the forest comes back with firewood' (Gyeke,2002:102). This is the reflection of strong moral base of labour in traditional African society. As a result, African Religion inculcates spirit of hard work which directly make a nation great. Complementing the above argument are other obvious cases from the Yoruba people in Nigeria, Here folksongs usually utilize to extol, and instill the spirit of dignity of labour into their children. A typical example is 'farming is our forefather's work, he who does not work will steal.' In a similar but different version, Laurenti Magesa in his own perspective argues that impressiveness of manner, cheerfulness, wit and geniality are invaluable values in African work ethic. It should be noted that as far as the entire African society is concerned, dignity of labour entails wealth in crops, animal and children. It also involved absence of diseases and oilier social afflictions (Magesa,1998:231). Then, in essence, dignity of labour connotes practical evidence of abundant life through labour.

In the Old Testament literature, the sequence of six days of creation, and a day of rest on the seventh day is an obvious case set before the people of Israel. This implies that God himself is not idle but He demonstrates an exemplary model of labour (Genesis 3:19). The seventh day is culminated as a day of rest. If God really created man according to His own image, then the obligation to imitate the Creator by the six days of week-day work appeal to reason (Genesis 1:26ff Exodus 20:9 ff). The book of Psalms even makes it more explicit that, 'Man goes forth to his work and to his labour until evening' (Psalm 90:17; 104:23; Deuteronomy 5:13). Of importance to mention, among the Israelites, the Rabbis made it a point to know a trade by which they could support themselves. In another dimension, the Book of Proverbs reproves the lazy, sluggish, and at the same time praise and commend the industrious labourer (Proverb 6:6-11: 28:19: 3 1:10-39).' All these references are indication that labour and its dignity are divine in nature. In spite of the high esteem for work in Old Testament period, the idea of social injustice and unscrupulous oppression were equally noted (Jeremiah 22:13-17; Amos 5:11). In response to this, Mosaic Law specifically introduced social legislation to protect the workers against this type of unscrupulous oppression. This is clearly stated that labour must be paid the same day (Leviticus 19:13). Besides, a labourer must not be exploited (Deuteronomy 24:14ff).The principle of dignity of labour in terms of due respect, honour, adequate compensation and equity to a labourer are divinely commissioned in the Holy Scripture. This is because painful toil and hardships are often connected with labour in human life. This high esteem of labour not withstanding, traces of injustices and vices related to labour cannot be swept under the carpet. Nevertheless, it is now established that the idea of dignity of labour vis-à-vis unscrupulous and social injustice has been in existence from time immemorial.

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ demonstrates that he is a man of manual work (Mark 6:3; Matthew 13:55). The immediate disciples of Jesus Christ likewise embarked on manual work for their living, that is to say, they had a vocation. (Matthew 4:18-22; Luke 5:1-11). In a similar vein, Jesus Christ demonstrates industry, reliability and fidelity in his teaching about work. Examples are the parables that demand industry, reliability and fidelity in work (Luke 16:1-12). The servant who buried his talent in the ground is punished as lazy and wicked. On the other hand, the industrious servants who worked with their capital are praised and rewarded as faithful and good stewards (Matthew 24:45-51; 25:14-30; Luke 9:12-27). As it follows, St. Paul requires quiet and steady work from the Christians. He himself was a tentmaker apart from being a lawyer. (1 Corinthians 9:3-15; I Thessalonians 2:9; II Thessalonians 3:7ff). St. Paul implored the Thessalonians that they should live quietly and mind their affairs, and work with their hands. It means labour is a source of livelihood and it is inevitable in life. Paul reacted sharply to Christians who tempted to neglect their regular work because of the expectation of the imminent second coming of Jesus Christ. Work is regarded as a general obligation that guarantees independence and personal freedom. St. Paul exhorts that 'let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labour, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need' (Ephesians 4:28; Acts 20:35). All these are reflections to show that human work serves God's plan and purpose in a very direct way.

In Islamic worldview, the issue of labour is paramount to life. Ajjola (1973) remarks that the most dignified in Islam, used to pasture goats in Mecca. In this modern world, there are various areas of callings. A chosen vocation is honourable provided it is pursued with honesty and efficiency. It should be noted that in an Islamic milieu, social status of a man is not determined by his vocation, but rather by his personal qualities as well as his actual contributions to social welfare of humanity (Ajjola, 1973 :154). This is because it is believed that a honest and efficient wrist watch repairer is more honoured than a dishonest and inefficient President, Governor, Minister, Director-General or any Public Officer. In this connection, the Holy Qu'ran states *inter alia*

It is He who produceth Gardens, with trellises,
And without, and dates,
And tilth with produce
Of all kinds, and Olives
And pomegranate,
Similar (in kind)
And different (in variety)
Eat of their fruit
In their season, but render
The dues that are proper
On the day that the harvest
Is gathered. But waste not
By excess: for God
Loveth not the wasters(Quran 6:141).

In Islam, the Quran establishes the magnificent means by which Almighty Allah bestows in nature for the sustenance of all His creatures. It is observed that labourers should be paid their dues or wages before their sweat dried up. Also, it is enshrined that man should then enjoy the fruit of his labour in moderation and be grateful to God.

For Quadri (1995), he corroborates the above Quranic injunction with one of the relevant sayings of Prophet Mohammed about dignity of labour. Quadri reports that 'Any Muslim who plants a plant or cultivates his plantation and a bird, or a human being or animal eats from it, shall have a reward for charity.' According to Quadri's submission, credited to Prophet Mohammed, the insinuating judgment that can be inferred is the encouragement to mankind about his livelihood. He encourages a man to labour and produce food not only for human consumption but for both animals and birds. It is equally gathered that man should till the earth, labour and pray to Allah to bless his efforts with plenty rewards. Definitely, Islam stands for justice and fair play in any choosing career. The fact remains that the issue of labour and its attendant social virtues cut across the three major religions in the country.

Dignity of Labour and its Socio-Ethical Implications in Nigeria

Nigerian Labour Act is the consolidation of the laws relating to labour particularly the labour code (Cap. 91 Law's of the Federation of Nigeria, 1958) commenced on 1st August, 1971 (Aturu, 2001:181). What are the aims and objectives of this labour act? Without mincing a word, it is for the enhancement of dignity of labour in every ramification. This is because the struggle for the dignity of labour is essentially being rooted in the fact that, man is designed, *ab intio* to work for his goodness and society's betterment at large. Of importance, the subject of work is man as indicated earlier; he, is not the object of labour. First, is human capital which deals with education and skills. Second, that human being should be valued in terms of well-being, health wise and life security. Whichever way, he asserts that human capital or the dignity of human person is under valued in the society. Thus, the performance in the work place in Nigeria is not somehow optimal. It is an obvious case that human being should be elevated above the machine, lecture theatre, medical equipment and laboratory. By this, increase in productivity through the upliftment of workers will definitely increase the value for the society either implicitly or explicitly. Also, this will bring good human relation at work and the quality of life of workers. On the other hand, the society would be improved (Aturu, 2001:181; Utomu, 2004: 29).

It is somehow embarrassing that the effects of dignity of labour are far below expectation in Nigerian context. There are glaring poor conditions of service; outright frustrations at work; unstable security of jobs; sexual harassment as well as vulnerability to retire into poverty at the end of one's service years. In this respect, Ifeanyi Onyeonuru opines that poor conditions of service, heavy workload and inadequate facilities and working environment have led to a state of frustration for university staff. However, Dzurgba (2003) equally reinforces the above that this has enabled some government workers to engage in other private practice, to subsidize their income; while some even go outside their areas of training to augment their income. In a related development, Onyeonuru (2004) has this to say:

Poor pay of academics was pinpointed by the report of the study group on brain drain in Nigerian Universities--- While a Ghanaian Professor earned about ₦228,534.00 per annum, his Nigerian counterpart earned ₦49,992.00 (Onyeonuru, 2004:7).

Then, how can the moral confidence, enthusiasm, and determination of workers be boosted? Nigerian Labour Law recognizes Labour Unions such as: Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), Senior Staff Association Nigeria Universities (SSANU) among others. The basic aims of these are to protect the interest and welfare of the workers in Nigeria, no worker whatsoever shall be subjected to torture, inhuman or degrading treatment. However, for Babangida's government had waged its war against ASUU by terminating the appointment of the President of ASUU, Dr. Festus Iyayi, illegally. Abacha's government had sacked Dr. Asobie, President of ASUU and other branch officials, especially at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Obasanjo's government, the University of Ilorin, Vice Chancellor, Professor Oba Shuaib Abdul Raheem and the General Salihu Ibrahim-led Council had in 2001, sacked all the forty-nine (49) ASUU members who had refused to break ASUU's strike and return to work. Forty four (44) of them were sacked for 'not signing' the appropriate register and returning to work by 22nd May, 2001. Five of them were union member officials who led the strike. A Reconciliation Committee, the International Labour Organisation Freedom of Association Committee, and the Federal Government's Committee on Politically-Motivated Rustication in the Tertiary Institution- all found that the 49 were victimized and recommended their reinstatement. But President Obasanjo told the entire nation that the sacked lecturers disrupted an examination. Whereas, none of the 44 members sacked was near the examination hall. The University of Ilorin never charged any of the 49 for disruption of examination and never pleaded disruption either in the High Court or before the IAP (Industrial Arbitration Panel). The Minister of Education wrote the President, Obasanjo on September 14, 2001, stating that the lecturers were sacked because of their role in ASUU strike. The President of Nigeria was told a lie, and he stuck to the lie because he needed it to implement his agenda against ASUU. ASUU went to court of Law for social justice.

In August, 2005, the Ilorin High Court ruled in favour of the 49 lecturers and ordered their reinstatement, but rather than encourage compliance, President Obasanjo called the Council of UNILORIN to Abuja and sided with those who had already appealed the judgment without Council's approval (Asobie, 2004:45-46). With all the efforts from the whole Nigeria, they were not reinstated not until the Supreme Court delivered judgment in their favour for over eight years. In the year 2000/2001, Osun State Government under Bisi Akande embarked on mass retrenchment in the state. It is disheartening that the basic reason for this exercise was that some subjects in secondary schools and Colleges of Education are not viable. Some of

these subjects are: Christian Religious Studies, Islamic Religious Studies; Fine Arts; Social Studies, History, Home Economics, Political Science among others. In essence, majority of the teachers in these areas of specialization were laid off (Udomi,2002:12;Bankole,2002:15). The action resulted into a lot of torture, suffering, dehumanisation and untimely death. Apart from poor conditions and frustrations meted out by government workers in Nigeria, there are even other gruesome cases of sacrificing the entire life in both private and individual organizations in this country. Asuquo, *et.al* (1987) observe that a renowned journalist, Dele Giwa, was killed mysteriously on the job with a letter bomb by unknown person. It is painful that the efforts to trace the culprit is to no avail in this country (Asuquo, et.al.,1987:9).

Claude Ake, a Professor of Political Science and founder of Centre for Advanced Social Sciences paid a capital price for rejecting an appointment under Gen. Sanni Abacha military administration. Ake was written by the Federal Government making him a member of the Board of Trustees of the Nigerian National Merit Award Endowment Fund. But Ake replied to the then SGF that he was greatly 'flattered and that he was in no position to give the government the performance that the position requires'. *The Punch*(2000) writes that this courageous man turned down an appointment that would put his intellectual resources at the 'Services of a bestial junta'. It is quite alarming that Ake, died as a principled intellectual in the crash of ADC Boeing 727 plane few minutes to landing in Lagos on November 7, 1996(*The Punch*,2000:17).

Jacob Segun Olatunji remarks that in the Nigeria Police, promotions and postings are being sacrificed on merit. He goes further to submit that:

We are just being used by our superior officers, it is not true that we are being instigated by politicians we are ready to work if round pegs are put in round holes, enough is enough(*Sunday Tribune*,2002:22).

This is another reflection of social injustice about the dignity of labour in Nigeria. All these are not in order of dignity of labour by God, as espoused earlier in this paper. Hence, this is morally bad. In a similar but diverse fashion is the agony of pensioners for their long overdue entitlements. As a typical example, an obvious case is that of Mr. Oladele who after spending his whole life in the service of his fatherland has no reprieve coming his way in his old age. This man fell sick and life became tougher. The man lamented that 'I am owed over ₦3million but can't raise ₦10,000 to treat myself.' This is a sad experience. More still. J. O. Adesanya 52 years, retired in 1993 from Nigerian Railway Corporation has this to say:

I experience a lot of hardship because our pension was not paid. Especially for my first child because the boy suffered a lot... I thank God that he didn't join any bad gang because of that hardship(*Sunday Tribune*,2002:9; *Nigeria Tribune*, 2002:1-4).

It connotes that adverse effects of labour is not limited to the real employer of labour alone but it touches all the dependants sociologically.

Challenges Towards Enhancing Dignity of Labour in Nigeria

In this segment of the paper, it should be felt that far-reaching social reforms and positive dispositions are necessary in our contemporary society. However, what are the solutions, steps and logistics towards enhancing dignity of labour in Nigeria, today? It is observed that while many people are ready to welcome reforms, others think differently about reforms. This is because some people even prefer to keep society as it is, preserving the status quo. Anybody in this scenario maybe described as idealist who has lost touch with reality. Nevertheless, this does not hold water in academic realm, because, of all glorified ideas there is none greater than making the society a better place to live for mankind.

As mentioned earlier; some workers are deliberately being overworked; harassed or regularly singled out to do the most unpleasant tasks that no one else desires to do. On the other hand, the effects of these types of attitude at work place indirectly turn work into a war of nerves. It is observed that many victims suffer serious health problems as a result of cruel treatments in their places of work. Besides, there are other disgusting variables too, such as psychological depression, sleeping disorders and panic attacks. Corroborating the above assertions, a German medical journal estimates that 'up to 20 percent of all suicides areas are as a result of mobbing at work' (Awake,2004: 3,4). The Bible equally states that:

This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good. Traitors, heady, high minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God. Having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. (2Timothy 3 1-5 KJV).

It implies that such inhuman and oppressive tendencies among others are not peculiar to the Nigerian society alone. Other societies too experience this. How then can we enhance dignity of labour at work? On the whole, Labour Unions's only duties are to its members and the people of Nigeria. It can never be the goal of Labour Unions to please any government in power. The obligations are important for Labour Unions to meet the challenges of the 21st Century. These are important for the Labour Unions. The historical mission of the Labour Unions is to play the role of creating new values, producing knowledge for freeing the people from the systematic domination to which the workers and the society have been subjected since slavery through colonization to the present. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the short reign of General A. Abubakar seems to be a short respite. The industrial dispute which was stalled under General Abacha was rapidly resolved with the approval of an improved package for government workers. General Abubakar regime, if he had not approved the new package, it is doubtful if the Obasanjo administration would have been inclined to do so (Alli; *The Role of Chairmen in ASUU Struggles*:10-11).

Therefore, in order to enhance dignity of labour workers' struggles through Unions need to overcome several problems within and beyond. The use of leadership position to negotiate personal advantage is injurious to the union/workers; and the decline of discipline among workers is important for understanding a possible degree of deterioration in the over-all level of integrity determination and credibility. For instance, most of the members of the Unions do not have knowledge about what being members of a Trade Union is about. The process of self-cleansing within the union is also very important. Besides, the need to invigorate inward-looking therapeutic mechanisms arises out of Unions' desire to maintain principles. Also the change of psychology of leadership like emerging of 'labour aristocracy' and a set of union leaders to see their offices as privileged positions from which they could enjoy some relative comforts. It is quite unfortunate that some union leaders often enhance their social-political positions either in administration or in government; whereas, they are required to show positive disposition towards individual's entitlement, integrity and honour. (History and Struggle of ASUU:24-27). Broadly speaking Iyayi posits that the following principles should be the fundamental basis of any viable Labour Union: integrity, transparency and professionalism objectivity and hardwork; courage; sacrifice and total commitment; internal democracy, team work and solidarity; patriotism, anti-imperialism and working solidarity. (Iyayi, *The Principles of ASUU*:6-7). Labour Unions are the channels through which workers protect their interest and welfare, however, many Unions today have been gagged and pocketed through inimical policies, reorganizations and the passage of unfavourable bills by the legislative arm of government. For instance, the Senate on Thursday 9th September, 2004 passed the Labour Reform Bill into law. The amended bill now includes prohibition of strikes by workers in essential services. The essential services in this regard are classified as workers in fire-fighting services, hospital services, electricity services, water supply services, aircraft control/aviation services, educational services and communication services (Nigeria Tribune, 2004:1&4). The crux of the matter is there cannot be strike action if the Government or employer actually reviews positively its labour relations policies and strategies. More so, financial and other socio-ethical attachments of collective negotiations should be conscientiously assessed. Hence all employers and employees should adhere to the code of good practice. In the same vein, this paper submits that every worker should treat others with respect, honour and recognition; and one is more likely to receive the same gesture from them. More importantly, every worker should keep the lines of communication open by communicating well with one's superior without giving the impression that one is merely attempting to curry any favour. In addition to the above, one should not be oversensitive to negative remark either from superior or subordinate. This is because it is not every unfair criticism that is tantamount to harassment. The book of Ecclesiastes states that: 'Do not give heed to all the things that men say... your heart knows that many times you have yourself cursed others' (Ecclesiastes 7:21-22).

Whatever the situation at work, one must try his best to pursue peace and good relations. We observe that the only guarantee for acquiring a high esteem in any vocation or calling is to be diligent and committed to our work. Moreso, one should be cheerful and try to manifest good relations. One should give thought not

only to his conduct but also to his dress. Adjustment is incumbent! On the other hand, it is our candid opinion that the employer should equally reciprocate by appreciating the true position of the subject of labour, that is to say, man. The recognition should be in terms of various incentives such as financial benefits; assurance of security of job as; well as development of human resources. The fact remains that if the employer and the employee would play their parts well, the idea of "strike" can never come into play in Nigeria.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined the principle of dignity of labour as a divine commission from God. It is argued that God Himself demonstrated responsibility of work ethic through a reflection of His six-day account of creation. God further designated the seventh day as the day of rest in the Bible. However, in as much as man was created in the image of God; then, we are not undermining the ancient authority of the Holy Scripture by affirming the obvious that man should emulate his Creator. Along this line, it was further opined that as a carpenter, Jesus Christ engaged in a family business. He worked hard to meet the needs of his home, by supporting his widowed mother, Mary, his four brothers, namely James, Joses, Judas and Simeon as well as his two sisters (Mark 6:3). In Islam, choosing a career is honourable provided it is pursued with honesty and efficiency. Besides, the paper also remarked that traditional religion places dignity of labour in a high esteem. The paper corroborated this observation with traditional maxims and folksongs. Thus, African traditional adherent affirmed that, "labour is the only remedy to poverty". Another similar instruction to their children and relations is that, everybody must work because moon is working in heaven. Meaning *E jé kí a s í s ní torí is ní ò s í pa s ní ò run*. In view of the above expressions, the researcher endeavoured to stress the social and moral impacts of dignity of labour in Nigerian society. The paper identifies some of the implications as poor conditions of service; insecurity of job; agony after retirement; lack of development of human resources; psychological trauma among others. Consequent upon these adverse effects of labour in Nigeria, some hints are given as recipe with the view to re-orientating these menaces in the country. Adhering to these recommendations would give the labourers a sense of dignity and satisfaction. This will make them do better. Obviously, they cannot but believe that they have found grace of God in chosen career and see it as God's ordained career.

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