

The Child: An Object of Moral Concern or Moral Agent? Ethical Implications for Nation-Building in Nigeria

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Abstract

A nation begins or starts with the child because the future, progress, and development of the former depends on the success or failure of the upbringing, education, and formation of the latter. The importance of the child and its childhood in the future assessment of a society can only be identified with an Arabic answer associated with her classic humorist, *Juha*, when asked to say who is more important, the Sultan or the Farmer, thus: "Who's more important", *Juha* was asked one day, "the sultan or the farmer?" "The farmer, of course", *Juha* answered. "If he didn't produce any grain, the Sultan would starve to death" (Jayyusi, 2007:143) In a classical analogy, this paper wishes to argue that there can be no nation without the 'feeder', 'the farmer', 'the child', especially a properly and morally formed one. Without good-bred children, a nation would starve to death, especially morally. There can also be no 'adults' in the proper moral understanding of it. The paper challenges the involvement of the relevant authorities in Nigeria in the proper training of the child to enhance mutual co-existence, interreligious dialogue, cultural diversity, and the spirit of brotherly love.

Keywords: the child, character formation, moral agent, moral concern

1. The Question

The question that forms the basis of this paper would therefore be rooted on the ethical issues of the child in relation to its consideration as a "person" and as a "child" with its attendant moral responsibility and predicament; with its long-standing implications on the same child as it grows up to contribute to the development of the same country. (cf. Taylor, 1985:97-114 and Schapiro, 1999:715-738). Both Schapiro and Taylor raise the issue of the distinction of the status of the child in relation to that of the adult, especially in modern ethical considerations where it is argued that all human beings have the same moral standing, basically rooted in autonomy. In this case, the moral status of the child as a person raises the other question of its legal status from the point of view of positive law or the law of the state. For instance, if positive law holds that a person remains a child until the official legal age of 18, does it imply that a person also remains a child in taking the intricate moral decision of committing suicide at the age of 16? So, one may ask as well, or, by implication, if childhood is really a moral predicament since it seems children (at least some) are able to make moral decisions?

2. The Dilemma and Consistency

In the question of whether childhood is really a moral predicament with regard to its evaluation as a person, there arises a dilemma in positing an acceptable answer. A hypothetical position may arise in this form: if the child is to be regarded as a person with moral rights, then the underlying capacities – as a being who has a sense of self, has a notion of the future and the past, can hold values, makes choices, etc should be recognised. Charles Taylor and Tamar Schapiro, already mentioned, would be in favour of arguing that the child would be incapable of certain moral decisions, if not live under certain moral predicaments. Some other schools of thought would think that since the child is capable of certain moral decisions, as already mentioned above in relation to suicide, he is not always necessarily morally handicapped. In other words, to have the aforementioned qualities is to be able to adopt life-plans.

Another classical Arabic folklore, personified in the humorist, *Juha*, can also shed some light to this dilemma and seeming philosophico-ethical impasse, which cannot be completely alienated from the problem of nation-building in Nigeria. Thus, "when *Juha* was a boy, the governor signed a decree forbidding the carrying of weapons. One day *Juha* was going to school, and he was caught carrying a long knife and taken in front of the governor. "Don't you know" the governor told him, "that I've forbidden people to carry weapons? How is it you're carrying this knife, in broad daylight?" "I'm only carrying it", *Juha* answered, "to correct mistakes I find in the textbooks". "Well", the governor said, "surely you can do it without a big knife like that". "Sir", *Juha* answered "some of the mistakes are so huge even this knife isn't big enough for them" (Jayyusi, 143).

3. Analysis of *Juha's* answer to the Governor

Juha is presented as a boy, a child, and by implication morally handicapped to take responsible decisions relating to crucial issues of his life and situation. But there is no doubt that the decision taken by *Juha* in relation to the problem facing him was deliberately carried out, albeit, its level of rational justification. Objectively speaking can one categorise *Juha's* decision to carry long life to correct mistakes he found in the textbooks as morally responsible and mature?. Could one input blames on him if he used the same long life to attack or defend himself

in the case of eventuality?.

4. The intervention of the imaginary Governor

The Governor, as ruler and moral conscience of the people he was in charge of, had passed a decree forbidding carrying dangerous weapons. We are, however, not told how the governor and the state had endeavoured to educate children - a class to which Juha belonged at the time – on the dangers of carrying dangerous instrument. The child, Juha, had acted within the limit of his moral and rational upbringing and maturity. His action leaves more to be desired when the situation of every child in Nigeria is put in the proper perspective in relation to the classical Arabic humorist, Juha. Can Nigerian children be justifiably be blamed for falling prey to criminality and other social ills such as involvement in kidnapping and religious fanaticism?

5. Problems and Further Questions

From the foregoing, one observes that certain crucial problems and further questions arise from this dilemma, especially in connection with reason. One would ask if the child could really live up to the responsible expectations associated with being capable of taking moral decisions, in fact, of being a moral agent in such demanding situations?. But the child, one can further think and argue, has the potentiality for attaining the mentioned attributes and goals. This is based on the presupposition that since a child is one who can be addressed and be ready to give a reply, he or she is presumed to be in the position to express his/her own point of view. It might be a point of view limited in rationality, as seen in the answer Juha gave to the governor on why he carried a long life to school.

Juha's answer to the governor brings our attention to the question of the Kantian distinction between the adult and the child. It is a difficulty because if it is to be properly considered as a moral issue, then it raises the question of whether the child is really a moral agent, and if he could be attributed with some conscious moral responsibilities. Here, the issue of autonomy becomes of paramount importance in the evaluation of a person, whether as a child or as an adult. This is why one would not think that we can do without autonomy in the final analysis. This is because to try to work without it and its cognates altogether would amount to risking largely to abandon the marginalised and disempowered from our societies – to which children as persons substantially belong. In the present use of the poor 'almajiri' in Nigeria by religious fanatics to bomb public institutions and kill innocent people, can one really lay the complete blame for these crimes on them?

It is important here, however, to clarify the type of autonomy that serves our purpose right. In other words, one would like to add that the variety of autonomy likely to prove useful to the dispossessed is one which emphasises that our freedom is to be found in what we do 'with' and 'for' each other on the public stage, in reasoning, arguing, supporting, challenging and confronting concrete situations. It is not the variety that suggests there is a determinate end-point of rationality, the same for all, that guarantees civilised consensus.

6. Necessary clarifications: the child as object of moral concern or a moral agent?

When we speak of a child as one who can be addressed and who could respond appropriately, it is necessary to clarify it in relation to the possible objection: as to whether holding such a view is not something different from having the potentiality to develop all these attributes. And if so, it is also important to explain what it means 'to be in the position to express his/her own point of view' Again, one needs to clarify what it consists in and what makes it his or her own. Could it be the case that the child has not yet his or her own viewpoint, but has the capacity to develop one? Moreover, one needs to look very critically at the distinction that Schapiro draws between adults and children to see whether the issue at stake is really about their respective status as persons or not, about their moral responsibilities or about moral capacities.

The issue raised leads us to another vital question of whether there can be humans who are not persons? If the child is both human and a person, it is pertinent to know that the child can be an object of moral concern, as well as a moral agent. At the same time, as Charles Taylor would argue, if the child is a human, but not considered as a person, then, it is an object of moral concern but not a moral agent. Taking a child as a moral agent makes him morally responsible for his own action. But, since it is not possible for a child to assume moral responsibility at the same level as the adult, it is not a moral agent (especially if he falls into the category of the highly or severely handicapped), a fact that portrays vividly the predicament associated with his status as a child. In this case, the child could be rightly considered an object of moral concern only. It goes on to justify the Schapirean position that adults have special obligations to them – obligations, which are of a more paternalistic nature, such as duties to protect, to nurture, discipline, and educate a child.

7. Character formation of a child

Every human being requires a certain element of formation and training to attain personhood, maturity, and necessary development. This means that character formation may not refer only to physical or psychological growth and maturity, but also to moral development. It is in this last context that character formation is

considered in the paper in relation to childhood and responsibility. According to Karl H Peschke (2009:220), "the reality of character,..., refers to moral elements which are considered internal to the person: motives, dispositions, attitudes, intentions, basic options". In fact, K.H. Peschke, (220) still argues that character formation and the components mentioned above "belong to moral being and constitute part of a person's moral identity". In other words, character involves a totality of attitudes and motivations, on account of which a person usually prefers a certain moral conduct as against another one. To know one's character is to be able to predict – even if approximately a person's comportment in certain situation and circumstances. One's character is never lopsided. It consists of the good as well as the bad motivations, virtues as well as the vices, positive and negative dispositions of an individual.

The habitual qualities of a person, such as honesty, politeness or stinginess can also be used to describe one's character. This is why it is generally assumed that virtues and vices pertain to the character of any particular person or individual. On the whole, character is used in a holistic sense, to refer to the entirety of a person. It is as a result of its holistic application to the person that the society is challenged and obliged to commit itself to the formation of the character of the members.

8. Implication for Nigeria as a Nation

Nigeria has great potentialities for greatness in all its ramifications. As a country, it is endowed with abundant resources – human and material. It can become a great nation, educationally, politically, economically, socially, culturally, morally, religiously etc. Its religious diversity alone can constitute its beauty, harmony, and peaceful avenue for mutual co- existence. If its religious plurality is positively harnessed with their moral endowment, then Nigeria can be a nation of glory on earth. According to C.O.T. Ugwu (2002:62), "The fact that religion inculcates and promotes such lofty human and democratic values as social justice, solidarity, equality, religious freedom, independence and integrity, to mention a few, cannot be undermined in its virile role of progress".

But since wishes cannot be just horses, one is left with the moral lacuna preponderant in its society. No wonder the child suffers a huge neglect, if not abuse rooted in improper upbringing, especially from the religious point of view. Thus, Ugwu (2002:63) further argues that religion can also lead to societal upheavals, especially when their roles are negatively channelled, as we currently witness with the Boko Haram imbroglio in Nigeria (Nwanaju, 2010:45).

What Boko Haram has been perpetrating with children and under-aged youth in the country in the name of religion has been existent, though without much publicity. An incident involving the killing of a teacher by her pupils in Gombe in 2007 still remains fresh in the minds of those who care about the evil carried out in the name of religion in Nigeria. Christiana Oluwatosin Oluwasesin was a Christian and teacher at the Government Day Secondary School, Gandu, Gombe where because of her intervention at an examination mal-practice involving a muslim pupil was murdered. The story has it thus, "On the fateful day, Christiana, a Christian, had to supervise the pupils of Senior Secondary School One for their Islamic Religious Knowledge Examination. As the examination progressed, she caught a female pupil, Fatsuma, copying answers from a book carefully concealed in a newspaper. Piqued by the development, Christiana collected the exhibit from Fatsuma and threw it away. She did not know that the materials were slips of the Hadith and Qur'an...Thereafter, the pupils burnt her car, and a 12-year-old boy brought Christiana's life to an end as he cut her throat with a knife...They later burnt the woman with the spare tyre of her own car (Daily Sun, 2012:16).

One observes in the aforementioned incident the cruelty of religious fanaticism using pupils to manifest what could be called an organised crime against innocence, diligence, and patriotism. Why couldn't the principal to whom the embattled teacher ran to for protection use his official position to save the life of the teacher? Why didn't the team of policemen drafted to the school at the intervention of the husband of the woman who had called them from faraway Abeokuta to run to the rescue of his wife do something tangible? How can one imagine that a principal of a school could handover a threatened teacher to be killed by a mob? Why wasn't adequate reinforcement requested in order to save the life of the woman-teacher who was fighting examination malpractice? Finally, can the pupils be declared innocent because of their age? Did they not know that taking human life unjustly was wrong? Could the 12-year-pupil who cut the throat of the teacher have done it to his own mother even if she did what the murdered teacher did? Above all, why have the relevant authorities shied away from bringing the culprits to justice, beginning with the principal and the policemen who should have done everything possible to protect the life of the teacher?

In the light of this and other similar situations, one can argue that there could be wonderful schools in Nigeria – private and public – but that without the requisite support from the relevant authorities, the outcome would be chaos. The danger is a repetition of the analogical child carrying a very long and sharp knife as a weapon to cut the mistakes he supposedly found in textbooks. The child carries dangerous weapons because the relevant authorities have not done their own assignment thoroughly and properly. The child has learnt wrongly from the society and therefore applies the wrong method to its own situation. The result could be antagonism, hatred, fanaticism, bigotry, and spirit of segregation (cf. Nwanaju, 2007:43).

In other words, there is an obvious dismal performance of students in knowledge seeking (Ezugwu, 2012:23) in Nigeria because the learning process in it is put to question. Consequently, the entire educational system is corrupted and adulterated. One should be reluctant to limit the bad influences to any particular section of the country because a critical evaluation of the entire educational system in Nigeria shows a serious breakdown in learning. Whatever efforts that have been made – covertly or overtly – by preceding regimes and governments in Nigeria, especially since after the Nigerian Civil War (1967 – 1970) to disadvantage a section of the country in relation to other parts has been seen to be affecting the entire nation negatively. There is every indication of a high level of intolerance in interpersonal relationships in the country. Ethno-religious interactions are seriously endangered, even to the level of inordinate fanaticism. Boko Haram remains a clear manifestations of this degeneration in Nigeria – religiously, politically, economically, culturally, and ethnically.

To rescue the Nigerian child and youth from further degeneration on the path of moral depravation, it behooves on us to argue that the way out of the existing impasse is an honest transformation of the educational structure in the country through a sincere involvement of the relevant authorities, public and private. The curriculum needs to be overhauled and positively implemented for the growth of the Nigerian child. The welfare of the teachers and lecturers cannot be overlooked without serious consequences on the Nigeria child. The example of the murdered teacher by her own pupils because she was fighting against examination malpractices remains a moral and historical dilemma for Nigeria as a nation. To relate such an ugly incident at any point in time raises the question of the moral integrity of Nigeria as a nation.

The government needs to ask herself why no Nigerian University makes it on the list of intellectual ranking, either in Africa or in the world as a whole. One believes that the role of the Nigerian Universities commission (NUC), as a regulatory body, should reflect the enormous responsibility laid on it. They should endeavour to make the school curriculum include practical and moral trainings in the learning process. Dialogue, above all, interreligious dialogue remains one of the ways out of the present impasse, which is facing Nigeria as a nation. If the pupils who killed their own teacher had known that there was nothing wrong in a Christian teacher invigilating Muslim pupils, they might have reacted differently. If they had known that there was everything wrong in examination malpractice, the student caught in the act would have bent her head in shame rather than using religious pretence based on the Qur'an to provoke hostility against her own teacher. Religious fanaticism, based on raw religious fundamentalism cannot bring Nigeria forward as a multi-cultural and pluri-religious country. Without bias or sheer religious sentimentalism, Muslim pupils need to be educated that the notion of Jihad as propagated by Uthman Dan Fodio in the 19th century Sokoto Caliphate cannot be literally applied to the whole of Nigeria as a nation. In other words, the relevant authorities, religious and secular should carry out an enlightenment campaign to correct the wrong notion associated with the word, Jihad. Thus, although it is commonly used to refer to "holy war" against non-Muslims (unbelievers), the word "Jihad" actually means "struggle or exertion for the sake of Allah". (Eluwa, 1988:130). For Zepp (1992:96), the Jihad should be a Muslim's true and sincere struggle to measure up to the example of Muhammad and to follow up the path outlined in the Quran. The purpose is to "achieve a just and harmonious society" (Zepp, 132)

9. Conclusion

Every nation needs healthy and morally groomed children for a bright future, continuity, and progress. Its development depends largely on the level and degree of investment it makes in the education of its children. A properly trained child stands a good chance to take objective and balanced decisions – morally and otherwise. Proper education helps to make a child a good moral agent. In other words, it would be an education that is holistic. For Nigeria to survive for a very long time as a nation, it needs to invest in its (her) children irrespective of ethnicity, religion, culture, or political affiliation of the parents. The lopsided agenda of segregation and isolation of one section of the country or the other for any purposes contrary to holistic development can never be to the benefit of the Nigerian child. Above all, the ugly incidents involving children in Nigeria cannot be unrelated to the dangers of indoctrination. And one might not be wrong to ask about the future of Nigeria if such children should at any time become either governors or federal lawmakers in a secular set up like ours. Who is to blame for evils perpetrated by or with children in whatever guise it is carried out? In fact, can a child remain a moral concern or agent, no matter the circumstances?

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