

REDUCING THE RISING THREATS TO EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS

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ABSTRACT

Education involves series of instructions and discipline which are intended to entrench development in an individual or a people to make them fit to serve their generation as positive agent of political, cultural, social, economic, technological, moral and spiritual transformations. By providing, effective and technical foundation and capacities to the society both at the basic and higher levels of learning. Education serves as the backbone for securing and advancing individual and national development and values. Unfortunately, there is an increasing threat to the educational development of our nation both at the individual and national levels. This work therefore is an attempt to identify the various dimensions of these threats and the roles religious leaders should play in addressing them. The study involved a survey approach and used content analysis technique in data analysis.

Keywords: Education, Development, Religious, Leaders, Nation.

Introduction

Education is an important part of societal value that is transmitted from generation to generation. According to Otokola (2017) education is to many a social force through which a person is prepared for a career. However, he states that it is a concept that is vital for the future of the world. What this means according to him is that when education is neglected or undermined by a society its consequences which though might not be visible immediately but over time would pose very far-reaching negative impact. It is against this backdrop that he observes that investment on education is one that should be prioritized as it helps to secure the future of the world and her mission. According to him education is a human resource for advancing the culture of peace, justice and formation of quality leadership in the society and should therefore be prioritized by all and sundry. The above view could be seen from the saying which states that education begins the moment a child is born. Education not only

presents the child with facts to learn it also socializes the child to the society by providing him or her with opportunity to learn cultural expectations and norms that are reinforced by teachers, textbooks and classmates thereby providing the individual with the opportunity to become an active participant in positive national development. Unfortunately, in recent times education in Nigeria has become enmeshed in various crisis or threats. The above threats no doubt must be addressed frontally and urgently as education has been identified as the vehicle through which individuals and societies convey their attitudes, values, and cultural ethos from generation to generation as well ensure that they remain relevant in the committee of progressive nations

Kyari, (2014) commenting on the high level of threats ravaging the education sector observes that the high rate of murdering of university professors, the relocation of many teachers as well as the withdrawal of many students from their schools by their parents because of high spate of attack on schools and institutions of higher learning by Boko Haram in the Northern Nigeria, the educational sector has come under great siege. This is very alarming as this posits that education has been singled out for violent attacks creating serious threat to education. As a result, he states that not less than 20 schools have been burnt by Boko Haram insurgents.

Even though the military and federal government keeps on promising that they are on the trail of these bandits, the truth remains that educational sector continues to suffer increasing assault in forms of prolonged closure of schools due to insurgent attacks, rising profile of abduction of school children in their hundreds at a time. The result is that, there is an increasing pool of children *who* are being compelled to stay out of school in the Northern Nigerian. The above view is put pointedly by the 2012 and 2013 Amnesty International report when they state that within the above period, hundreds of school children have been killed while thousands of them have been forced out of schools across communities in northern Nigeria as they flee for safety of their lives. They posit that these attacks against school children, teachers and educational facilities no doubt constitute absolute disregard for the right to life, and the right to education. Against this backdrop, a state of emergency ought to be declared against education in Nigeria. What this means is that the situation we are calls for urgent intervention in our education sector which is the backbone for national development, peace and flourishing economy. The church and in fact all stakeholders must not watch the education in Nigeria to be destroyed. This work therefore is an effort that seeks to identify the role of religious leaders in addressing the above threats to educational development in Nigeria. It seeks to examine how leadership that is grounded in theological perspective should be employed to deal with the above threats to our educational development.

Theoretical Perspectives: This work based its analysis on the theory of Cultural Universalism, as propounded by the following scholars Emile George Murdock, Claude Levi-Strauss Donald Brown and others as its theoretical framework. Cultural universalism proposes that there are practices that are found in all societies which are common to them in one form or another. Universalism is defined as the principles that a given value, behavior, theory or treatment will be same across all groups independent of culture, race, ethnicity, gender and other social identities. It is the philosophical and theological concept that some ideas have universal application. It is the belief in the existence of fundamental truth that should serve as basis for universal peace, reconciliation and development. According to Chistensson (2020)

universalism is an ideology and perspective which believes that there is only one truth and that all people have the same rights regardless of one's gender, race culture, nationality, religion, age and sex.

Based on this theory its proponents referred to as universalists claim that governments owe it as their duty to provide a level playground where all citizens are given equal access to their fundamental human rights as well as ensuring that those rights are not denied or abused on the ground of discriminative treatment. Erich (2015) corroborates the above view when he posits that there are values that should be respected by everyone whether they value it or not. The good or bad qualities according to him belong to objects that are independent of personal or tribal interpretations. This was equally the view of Walen (2019) when he states that fundamental human rights provide the basis on the access to justice can be measured. In evolving a nation that would compete globally with other nations at the level of educational development which has been noted earlier as the foundation for all round national development Nigerians must connect to global mindset or universal ethical mentality that ensures that justice is not made to serve only the good of the privileged minority. It is in this context that religious leaders must take the lead in providing leadership that aim to the achievement of quality education.

Types of Threats to Education

Political Threat: The reciprocal interaction between politics and education explains how both can influence one another. Obanya (2002) observed "Politics and education as interaction in the fullest and best sense for stimulation of the desire for better things and the urge to attain such better things" In Nigeria, it is difficult to disassociate politics from education because education is a vital force that political sector need for national development. In the same way, Uchendu (2000) said that:

No matter the system of education a country adopts, the likely solution to problems that may arise from governmental attempt to regulate the aspiration of the citizens are related to politics, as politics determine the type of education that is adopted (p.5).

In fact, research has shown that failure or success of the educational sector depends on the political system.

The political unsteadiness in Nigeria gave rise to conflicting policies in education. For instance, the continued appointments and removal of education ministers with different interests and policies is a threat to education in Nigeria. In the present civilian government, even when the appointments are made, competency is not always taken into consideration, but party alliance and association. Educational sector is a sensitive one because educational policies are supposed to be geared towards the overall development of the country through the curricular. Olayinka (2018) remarked this when he said that; "Education plays vital role in any community, communities are guided by law and order, shaping and molding issues on education that are formulated through educational policies". Education does this through other agents of socializations. Almond and Coleman as cited by Okwori and Ede (2012) said that family, church, community, school, work group, voluntary organization, media are among the agents of socialization with the primary and secondary structure.

In Nigeria however, instead of appointment of technocrats into educational offices, politicians or political leaders play politics with it and appoint people who are not qualified. Most often, their appointments are not targeted towards educational development and progress, but satisfaction of politicians or political friends and relatives. Instead of policies that can better education and the country, what we see are policies targeted to benefit politicians. Ijaduola (2012) lamented this and said that “the faces, and voices currently leading to educational reform movement in Nigeria are appointees and self-proclaimed reformer who, while often well meaning, lack significant expertise or experience in education”

It is a known fact that policies of a country have influence on its education. And this is why it is said “country can not outgrow its quality of education” it is the political office holders that determine policies about education including the funding. And in Nigeria situation, education sectors have been underfunded by the government. In fact, UNESCO has raised issues that Nigeria has failed to meet up the minimum standard funding that should be allocated to education. Olajire (2019) noted this and wrote; “The state of education in Nigeria has been affected by the persistent change in the educational policy and poor funding. These two factors came to being because of poor political ideology in Nigeria”.

Ethnic Prejudice: Education is the foundation or the base of country’s development. In Nigeria however, the system of education especially in the universities or the federal government colleges are not targeted towards the country’s development, but on tribal sentiments. This resulted to such policies in education like quota system, federal character, catchment areas and so on. This has been a threat to education in Nigeria and at the same time to the national development.

This fact has been observed in the admission onto public universities, recruitments and appointment in the universities and even location of universities. This gives rise to the deprivation of university education from more brilliant qualified candidates and therefore deny academic that can assist in the standardization of Nigerian education and national development. Abizadaeh (2001) noted the effect of ethnicism in Nigerian education on the national development and found out that in addition to the disqualification of qualified applicants, it also lead to loss of those who can participate in Nigeria developments.

Uriah (2019) lamented that ethnicity which should fasten development as it is in developed world retards development in Nigeria.

Race and ethnicity are ingredients of social composition that help to foster rapid transformation in some developed climes. However, the case is adverse in Nigeria where race and ethnic relations have become hydra-headed problems that has fueled misunderstanding and distrust. It is worst experienced in educational sector.

The above views of Abizadaeh and Uria were to show that the way tribalism is used in Nigeria especially in education sector is a threat to education and also to the country’s development.

Ethnic prejudice destroys equal opportunities in education sector. For Nigeria, equal opportunity in education is just equal provision of educational facilities and does not take cognizance of equal opportunity in education for everybody. Obozuwa (1980) remarked this misinterpretation and said; "In Nigeria context, the federal government seems to define equality of opportunity in education in terms of providing the same kind of schools, the same curriculum, equipment, teaching methods and the same quality of teachers."

Our position is that Nigeria interpretation of equal opportunity in education as noted by Obozuwa has some gaps. The gaps are unequal opportunity in admission process, recruitment of staff, appointments and so on. These gaps are created by the application of ethnic identity which is a threat to education.

Nigeria education sector or Nigerian government should know that the denial of education opportunities from the qualified people for those who are not qualified is unjust and also a risk to the development opportunity of the country. Ogan (2018) observed this; "Tribalism goes with great deal of social injustice ... Tribalism retards development because in such a situation like Nigeria, due process is thrown to the winds and as such the people who are qualified for certain positions to keep the nation moving forward are not given the opportunity". (p.253).

Economic Threat: Studies has shown that poor economic situation affects Nigerian education. Poor economic situation results to lack of fund for parents and guardians who sponsor their children and wards education. This sometimes result to child labor, either in their households or in the labor market. The outcome of this is poor school enrolments, attainment and performance. This was observed by Shafiq (2010), thus:

The reduction in adult income may also force parents to become more reliant on child labor. As a result, a child who prior to the economic crises was not a child labor may become a child labor; if the child was already a child labor prior to the crises, he or she may have to work longer hours.

This can be observed in the aftermath of Covid 19 pandemics which made some parents and guardian especially the uneducated parents to withdraw their children and wards from schools and turned some of them to hawkers – child labor. Evidence shows that this is higher in the less educated parents and guardians.

The attitude of academic and non-academic staff resulting from negative economic condition also shows economic threat to Nigerian education. For instance, the incessant strikes by ASUU, NASU, NUT, and so on has disrupted the academic calendar of Nigeria education and has affected students' academic pursuit and performance tremendously.

Staff ineffectiveness resulting from poor funding on training and retraining of staff on education sector has been discovered as a challenge to quality in Nigeria. Bamigboye, Ede and Adeyemi (2016) noticed this fact and wrote:

Significant salary reduction due to economic crises can also have a negative impact on a country's attempt to attract the best individuals to the teaching profession. As a consequence, countries will find it more difficult to maintain the quality of learning in future.

In schools, especially primary and secondary schools in rural areas, many of the teachers are not properly trained. As a result, children aren't getting a proper education.

Infrastructure has been one of the factors militating against educational development in Nigeria. Research has shown that this factor results from poor economic support to education sector. According to Rueckert (2019), basic facility is a factor to education in Africa. He said:

A child cannot learn without the right environment. Children in many countries in sub-Sahara Africa are often squeezed into overcrowded classrooms, classrooms that are fallen apart, or are learning outside. They also lack textbooks, school supplies and other tools they need to excel.

Reduction of income to parents and guidance result to parents and guidance inability to bear the costs of education such as tuition, books, feeding accommodation and so on. In some adverse economic cases, children are withdrawn from schools because of parents or guidance inability to pay the required fees.

Religious Threat: From the time immemorial, there have been existing link between religion and education as recorded by historians and social scientists. It is a well-known fact that religion especially Christianity and Islamic religions have contributed to the growth of education in Africa including Nigeria. This fastens the literacy rate among the people. For instance, in the south eastern Nigeria, the early schools with libraries and laboratories were built by the Christian organizations or groups. And these were the ladder through which the people attained education. Scholars has revealed that the first word by Prophet Mohammad as recorded in Quran is 'Igra' which means 'Read' or 'Recite' which means education.

However, religious threat to education set in when religious leaders rate religious learning very much above other education. Associate Professor Eric Chaney of Economic in Harvard University noted this decrease in education by Islamic leaders when he said that the decline in education was caused by increase in the political powers of the religious leaders who prioritized religious learning over scientific education. Then education becomes mainly religious education and therefore downplayed inquiries or education into sciences or others.

It was also recorded by historians that the threat in education started when the earlier stakeholders in education who were also Christian leaders mandated bible as the first thing to be done in school before any study of the day. We can also recollect the condemnation of Charles Darwin's 1859 theory of human evolution by religious groups. Nunn (2012) maintained that "education was the main reward used by the missionaries to lure Africans into Christian sphere ... missionaries may have altered people's view about the importance of education." Their interest on education in Nigeria was for the people to know how to read the bible and not the education into research that can lead to the development of the country.

And because of this much emphasis are laid on religious education than other areas. Today, some schools do the same thing. Instead of education focused on the country's development, they focus more on religious vow.

The Role of Religious Leaders

According to Iwuoha (2008):

In recent times, the church has proven to be formidable factor in providing qualitative and sustainable education in Nigeria. Christian churches have played a pivotal role in the provision of primary, secondary and higher education in Nigeria. However, the participation of the church in education appears to be increasing, but more efforts are required in this regard. (p. 55).

Okika (2013) expressed the views to also show that the religious leaders in addition to religious should also do more in other sectors of the society.

The religious leaders should teach people not only religion, but also civic duty. Religions are in a position to realize the task of human development in three principles domains. Through the formation of conscience and human rights, education in cultural diversity, tolerance and co-existence (p.13).

The position of Okika is that the religious leaders ought to champion other problems of the society in addition to religion. This is because the people whom they imbibe religion in them to ensure peaceful society still need other development that can make the society habitable which includes good or effective education. Ayandele (1966) reminded the church this role when he said:

Nowadays, when nearly all African countries have achieved political independence, the churches are presented with a new task. They alone have the freedom which is to come, a freedom and courage based on the gospel and their hope of God's kingdom which is to come, a freedom and courage without which they would not be able to speak. (p.175).

Since the new task of the religious leaders in Africa is to speak out to improve the society, in this paper we call on religious leaders in Nigeria to speak very much towards the observable threat to education. Through this, they can raise leaders who can tackle challenges facing education sector in Nigeria. Aniekan and Nwankwo (2019) observed this task; "Religion, through the instrumentality of religious organization must be used to raise leaders who can be relied upon as agent of transformation and the change the Nigerian nation has been waiting for over decades". (p.149).

The renewed interest in tradition, culture and custom points to the roles of traditional religious leaders in reducing the threat to education in Nigeria. This is because studies have shown that the exclusion of traditional culture and custom of the people of Africa from education sector contributed to the low standard of education, we have in Nigeria today.

The colonialists and even the African early elites failed to inculcate Africa tradition and culture into the curriculum of schools, instead the Euro-American culture and religion was inculcated. This made education in Nigeria to lack some fundamental basic need. And to solve this problem, there is a need to reconnect Nigerian education with the tradition and culture of the people. Dia (1996) as was cited by Akindele (2010) noted that "Most promising way to overcome the shortcomings of the state and its alien formal institution in Africa is to recognize 'the structural and functional disconnect between the informal indigenous institutions rooted in the region's history and culture'" (p.57).

African tradition and culture have values for education since the ages. Some may argue that African education then was informal, because it had no class rooms, desks, teacher's table and chairs, black or white board. The point is that whether it is called informal education or not, it was the education that the people of Africa educated their people with. It was that same informal education that the culture and the tradition of the people has been preserved and transmitted from generation to generation.

The traditional religious leaders are highly respected in Nigeria. So, if these religious leaders could be involved in campaigning for quality of education, it can convince other to follow their campaign and therefore reduce the threat to education in Nigeria.

Akindele (2010) recognized the need for African religion and culture in the achievement of MDG in Nigeria:

Implementation of MDGs in Africa may not substantially produce the desired result if not implemented with the African cultural milieu. This is particularly so since the conventional model of development adopted to transform African society has failed to recognize the potential of African religion, culture and traditional values of the people at the grassroots who are supposed to be the major target of the policy (p.58).

What Akindele was trying to argue is that the excluding of African religion and culture in the implementation of the MDGs contributed to its failure. This therefore means that if Nigerian can harness the norms of African culture and tradition, it would help in the implementation of the MDGs in which the achievement of universal primary education is one of the mandates.

This paper argues that, the traditional religious leaders are in a good position to ensure that the African values are harnessed to check the threat to education in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This work has identified the gaps in educational development in Nigeria that are being fueled by various forms of threats. Consequently, the gap in our educational sector continues to widen by the day which unfortunately worsen the level of poverty and conflict in the country. It is no doubt that to fasten development in Nigeria, all hands must be on deck to reduce the threat to education which is a way to a better country. It is against this backdrop that the following recommendations were made as a way of moving the nation forward educationally.

Recommendations

- i) Religious leaders both from the local and international levels must begin to form pressure groups that should stand up to defend threat to education in Nigeria.

- ii) The Church leadership must seek to liaise with political leadership who exploit their positions of authority by using, ethnic, religion and economic influence on education.

- iii) Religious leaders must be at the vanguard of pushing for the restructuring the nation politically, economically and socially so as to ensure the enthronement of true democratic society where equity, justice and rule of law is upheld by all and sundry. Religious leaders must strive to ensure that the nation is run on global standards of transparency, fairness and accountability by insisting for the institutionalization of true federalism in our constitution which would ensure inclusiveness in political leadership as well as protection of the fundamental rights of all citizen irrespective of their tribe, religion, or any other status.

- iv) The religious leaders should strive to make education accessible to the very poor who often becomes easy target for recruitment into all kinds of violent against educated elites and educational institutions. The present state where most institutions owned by Churches charge very highly outrageous fees that make it impossible for the poor and the middle-class citizen to gain access does not help in presenting the religious community as the custodian of public morality and justice. In other words the church should serve as the custodian of universal morality or ethics both in words and indeed.

- vi) They should serve as strong advocacy for the evolution of strong judiciary and rule of law which ensures that those who threaten the safety and rights of their fellow citizens are not treated as sacred cows but made to face the wrath of the law.

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