

THE SACREDNESS OF HUMAN LIFE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA: VIOLATIONS AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

This paper examines the sacredness of life in contemporary Nigeria from the perspectives of its violations and solutions to curb further occurrences. There is an urgent need in Nigeria of today to stop the wanton killings of innocent citizens. Human life which was respected as sacred in our traditional societies have been violated injuriously at the wake of unbridled quest for power, money, fame, and even for most frivolous reasons and least provocations. The findings of this paper reveal, inter alia, that the recent escalations of conflicts by Boko Haram Islamic insurgents, terrorists Fulani herdsmen, armed bandits, kidnappers and cattle rustlers, suicide executors, cultists, ritualists have contributed to huge losses of human lives. There is gross abuse of the sacredness of human life in contemporary Nigeria. This study proffers solutions which include but not limited to respect for human life which is an inalienable fundamental right of all human beings. The methodology employed in this work is phenomenal-descriptive which means that the ugly events of incessant killings of self or by another in the country were studied and presented with the view to finding lasting remedies to these unfortunate desecrations.

Key words: Sacredness, Human Life, Violations, Solutions, Contemporary Nigeria.

Introduction

The sacredness of human life in Nigeria as it is presently has been gravely compromised through violations. The traditional societies that make up Nigeria, using Igbo tribe as a specimen, had deep respect for the sacredness of life and the dignity of the human person. African Traditional Societies had a lot of cultural values such as philosophical thoughts and proverbs, community life, hospitality, sense of human relations and industry, respect for authority and the elders, sense of the sacred and of religion that was deep, sense of time and the respect for the sacredness of life. On this note, Onwubiko (1988: 29-30) wrote: "The African does not like violence per se. This is because shedding of blood is abhorred. People who were killed were those whose continued existence was a threat to the life of others and to the peace of the community. In such cases, the principle that is better for one man to die than for all the community to perish, applied. War was taken as a last resort, that is when all formal and normal courses of action to search for peace had failed. Murder was not encouraged, especially within the clan. If a man conscientiously killed another man within the community, he was killed himself. But if he killed a kinsman inadvertently, he

was exiled for some long period”. This respect for human life is seen in the maxims like *ndu bu isi* - life is first, *ndu ka* - life is supreme, *igba ndu* - covenant, *ndu ka aku* - life is greater than material wealth, *Nwakaego* - the child is more precious than money, *nwaka aku* – the child is more precious than material possession, *nwadi mkpa* – the child is of utmost importance, *nwa asoka* – the (birth of this) child is sweetest and so on. These names point out how precious life is for the Igbo. The child as *nwa* extends to adults too who can as well be *nwa nne m* (my brother or sister), *nwa nna m* (my paternal relation), for examples.

Within the cultural milieu of the Igbo, life is preserved and that is why offences against life such as its violation is a crime; whether it was suicide or murder, strict and stringent sanctions were placed on the offenders. Such sanctions included exile or death. Prayers and sacrifices had plea for life as a constant. An appeal is made to God to bring life through fertility, regeneration and the preservation of the living. “In this light, unborn children are protected and, abortion is tabooed. Sources of life are sacred. Trees and animals believed to facilitate reincarnation are also sacred. The sanctity of human reproduction derives from the sanctity of life in the African concept” (Onwubiko: 29-30). And because poverty was understood as antithetical to good life that is, life unbefitting the human person, poverty is not celebrated in Igbo land. In like manner prayers and sacrifices are offered against poverty. It is normal to hear such prayers like: “*Nkwo kwotara anyi ihe oma , Eke ketere anyi ihe oma , Oye wetera anyi ihe oma*” *nakwazi* “*Afor hotara anyi ihe oma*” - that is praying with the four Igbo market days (*Nkwo, Eke, Oye, Afor*) that every day should bring us good things with which life will be sustained.

The sense of hospitality is an index associated with life. Let the stranger live, let the stranger not be embarrassed because of the unfamiliar environment and so he/she is received with kola nut (*oji Igbo, cola acuminata*), with food and good accommodation. As Opata (1998:100) explained: “The meaning and significance of kola nut can be looked at from three perspectives: the individual relations level, at the level of group or communal relations, and at the level of ritual. At the level of individual relations, *oji* is a sign of goodwill. As a sign of goodwill, it is always the first thing one has to present to a visitor. With the discoveries of modern science on human health, many do not take Kola nut but still, kola in the sense of other items are presented to show reception, peace and hospitality. Kola as nut or other item is the first item presented to a stranger or visitor, no matter what other edibles that might come subsequently; and in this understanding, it is a credible symbol of hospitality in Igbo cosmology.

The sense of industry is linked with an idea of maintaining capacities and capabilities to sustain life whether it is through agriculture, commerce or civil service (that came later with colonization), that is legitimate work generally. Community Life involved peace and harmony, legal judicial system to maintain peace, resolve conflicts and sustain security. Again, this is a pointer to love for human life and this underpins the Igbo philosophy of “*egbe belu ugo belu nke si na ibe ya ama be, nku akwakawa na ya kama ya gosi ya osisi o ga ebe*” – this proverb talks about live and let live.

Respect for the elders and the care for the aged in a robust elastic care in Igbo gerontology is a wish to live long. It is believed that there is a blessing associated with whoever is taking care of his/her aged parents and very closely associated with this wish to live long one sees why euthanasia is a crime in Igbo society no matter how old or degenerated by disease one may be, it a common wish that one dies a natural death *onwu chi* as different from induced death *onwu ike*. The Igbo put much premium on the sacredness of human life; this one of the Igbo sublime cultural values.

The above picture represents what it used to be in African Traditional Societies. In these cotemporary times, life is no longer seen by many as sacred in Nigeria and the evidences of this ugly phenomenon can be seen from the following facts:

1. Suicide: The prevalence of suicide today in Nigeria shows that many families and most of the ethnic nationalities do not have the moral lessons given to their children in the process of socialization that teach that life belongs to God - *chinwe ndu*; that even though my self belongs to me - *autonomy*, it is myself that belongs to God - *theonomy*. Youth suicide across tribes, profession and arc of life is seen to occur very often in these contemporary times in the country. Life has become very cheap, erroneously though, that the young and undergraduates take their own lives for most frivolous reasons like that their lovers on campus disappointed them, mental challenges and depression, inability to pass examinations as if failure is no longer an event rather than a person and for common disputes and family controversies, economic hardships, among other reasons.

Secondly the post-mortem issues around the persons who committed suicide have been relaxed; these issues are punishments meted out to corpses of suicide cases that showed abhorrence and served as deterrents to those at the level of suicide ideation. Those who committed suicide are given befitting burials today as if they were heroic. We are not talking about suicide that came due to religious reasons but suicide that came from economic, social, psychological and political issues. However, not even for religious reasons were suicide execution allowed in Igbo society.

2. Kidnapping/ Abduction menace: In Nigeria, kidnapping and abduction were originally ways, illegal though, grievances were ventilated for example, the Niger-Delta militants agitating for resource control in their ancestral places against government but today kidnapping has turned into a very big illegal business with vast syndicates and networks. The ungoverned forests and undeveloped spaces became safe havens for kidnappers; not the roads or the homes, mosques or churches, markets or offices, the neighborhood or familiar terrains are safe today. People have been kidnapped from any of these points. Ransom is demanded and even the ransom so demanded and paid does not guarantee the safety of lives, the lucky paid the ransom and were released. The unlucky came slow with ransom and were killed. Through kidnapping and killing of the kidnapped, lives have been wasted across the length and breadth of this country, the revelation is that life is now a commercial quantity to be sold, saved or lost and no longer the precious gift from God.

There are also some kidnappings and abductions executed for ritual and demonic purposes. It is an immoral development found to exist in Nigerian contemporary history. Added to this crime is its new face; namely: self-kidnap. This is whereby one arranges and fakes his/her own kidnap and demands ransom from sympathizers, family members and friends. This shows what life means for people in this frame of mind and undertakers of this venture.

3. **Hired or Political Assassinations:** It is very common to hear that people have been killed by assassins especially after an investigative enquiry into those deaths, it became clear that people died in the hands of known, perceived or unknown enemies who employed the services of assassins to gun down the life of the opponents. This ugly datum shows hired assassination as a commercial enterprise because some bad boys have it as their means of their livelihood; again, an evidence of life as compromised.

4. **Murder:** The story comes up now and again about the rate at which people who are close by affinity or related by consanguinity commit murder in their groups. Wives have killed their husbands, husbands have killed their wives, brothers have killed brothers, sisters have killed sisters, friends have killed friends, business associates have killed one another and even employees have killed their employers over little quarrels in the family, in the office, in business circle have led to the unwanted and avoidable option of murder. What it shows is that it is not just about temperament or hot-temperedness, it is not just about conflict here and now - *hic et nunc*, it is about the loss for respect for human life.

5. **Ritual killing:** Human beings have been sacrificed for most unholy reasons before temples, demonic shrines and in kingdoms of occultism. Very closely associated with ritual killings in Nigeria today is the sale of human parts. The police had arrested and their cases prosecuted in courts those who have been caught as ritualists who kill human beings and the chilling aspects include the selling of human parts as meat in restaurants as if Nigerians are cannibals. The obnoxious trends of baby factories or baby farms have been noted as worse suppliers of children and infants to ritualists in the Nigerian Society.

6. **Poisoning:** Those who didn't want the route of killing by the instruments of metal chose simple poisonous concoctions and by that means took away lives. This phenomenon has been reflected in many indigenous films shown on the screens of our Television sets. This is a reflection of what is obtained in the society. It could be *crimen* whereby lovers struggled over who marries who; the evil option became to kill by poisoning. This death by poisoning also include what happens in hospitals where the medical ethics of saving life was thrown overboard by recklessness or neglect on the parts of doctors, nurses, medical laboratory experts or pharmacists; some have been injected with what could kill slowly either in the hospitals or in the prisons. This is a means of fighting the so-called enemy wrongly, of course.

7. **Abortion:** Abortion is the willful termination of an unwanted pregnancy. In the words of Peschke (2009:334): "Abortion is the removal of the non-viable embryo or fetus from the mother's womb by human intervention, whether by killing the human being before the removal from the womb or whether by exposing the same to a certain death outside the womb". According to kajo (2007:33), abortion is 'the termination of pregnancy,

spontaneous or by induction, prior to viability”. It is “...an act of destroying the life of an unborn baby either by killing it in the womb or by taking it out of the womb before it is able to survive”. There are two types of abortion, namely: spontaneous abortion and induced abortion. Spontaneous abortion is miscarriage. Miscarriage is not a willful act and consequently has no moral culpability since it lacks voluntariness and therefore not it is a human act. The induced abortion has two sub-types which are therapeutic abortion and criminal abortion. As its name implies, it is in the course of therapy that it occurs; that is why its other name is curative abortion where the death of the unborn child/foetus is foreseen but not intended. In this wake, we have the principle of double effect. However, criminal abortion as its name signifies is a purposeful, willful abortion. This kind of abortion is a culpable sin against human life. It is immoral and has high rates of procurements in the world. On the prevalence of abortion in Nigeria, Ewelu (2002:132) wrote that: “The rate of abortion in Nigeria today is quite alarming. To preach against abortion in Nigeria today is to sound primitive and uncivilized. Many Nigerian doctors who were unable to make it in the normal practice of medicine have hit the jackpot by procuring abortion. Yes, killing the innocent has become a lucrative business in Nigeria today. Where is the high consciousness of the sanctity of life, which we inherited from our forefathers? The way we Nigerians treat human life today portrays nothing sacred, nothing precious about it”. Many Nigerian babies have been lost through abortion. Married man and women, unmarried youth, teenagers, students, widows and widowers, working class persons and the unemployed are in the evil ring of abortion by procurement or advice.

Factors that promote the violations of Human Life in Nigeria

One begins to wonder what has led to these compromises against life; that makes the past holier than the present in this context. A keen observation shall arrive at these factors:

1. **Materialism:** One can be anything in the space of celebrities because of finances and so many adopt the way of getting money and getting rich quickly by any means so as to meet up with the hail of the society even if one could end in hell as a consequence.
2. **Social media:** It is strange when one hears or reads that social media contribute in no small measure to the violation of life. When one gets to know that a particular substance with which one in the other part of the country used to take his/her life then the depressed who contemplates suicide looks for the substance in order to execute suicide ideation, and that was the story of sniper with which many Nigerian undergraduates of information that this or that jumped into the river to kill him/herself or by hanging. The instrument of hanging drawn or shown in the social media. Again, the elaborate narrative on how the funeral was celebrated speaks volumes on what modernity has brought to our land. The way the corpse was treated in ancient times as an abomination without funerals served as an eye opener to how one's funeral would go if he/she were to commit suicide, the family shame, the rituals and other appeasements, prayers without solemnity made people to see evil in suicide. But today, suicide cases do not receive such ignominy

from the living and the moral lessons are not given as seriously as it should be by words and actions.

3. Ethno-religious conflicts: There are instances of conflicts and escalated violence between tribes in Nigeria. These are either due to boundary adjustment issues, historical events, settlement matters, chieftaincy tussles, cultural violations and retaliations, religious intolerance and many more of such reasons. According to the former executive Governor of Nasarawa state, Alhaji Adamu, 2002:5), “The bloody clashes in Benue and Taraba states are inter-state and inter-ethnic; those in Plateau (Jos), Nasarawa (southern senatorial zone of the state) and Kaduna states were/are intra state and inter-ethnic. The crisis in Bauchi was both inter-ethnic and inter-state. There is thus a common characteristic of inter-ethnicity in all these clashes. There is a religious coloration to the clashes in Kaduna and Jos...we acknowledge the fact that religious coloration has become as dangerous and nearly as intractable as the fundamental cause or causes of these inter-ethnic clashes”. Ethnic-religious riots, violence and escalated crises have consumed Nigerians and sent many to early graves due to lack of frameworks for conflict resolution and stiffness to invitation to peace round tables. When people do not toe the path of peace and resort to violence, the consequences are always fatal. This means that they would continue to fight each other and lose lives.
4. Erosion of cultural values: It is very clear that some of these African cultural values have suffered neglect over time. The new generations do not appreciate those values any longer and here we are suffering the consequences; one of which is loss of lives. One life lost to violence is one life, too many. In it humanity is irrevocably diminished.
5. Armed robbery/armed banditry/terrorism: This is another means through which people have lost their lives in Nigeria; evidences show that through extreme violence like Boko Haram insurgency, cattle rustlers, armed banditry and Fulani herdsmen people have lost their lives more than even in civil wars. Aluko (2019:1-2) reported that “No fewer than 310 Nigerians were killed in various security crises across the country in May 2019....” the breakdown revealed that Zamfara lost 67 persons to banditry, Borno state lost 64 lives to Boko Haram terrorists, 51 deaths from banditry, kidnapping and related crises. Other states included Rivers 18, Ogun 4, Ebonyi 5, Taraba 29, Plateau 12, Edo 12. Jigawa 26, Lagos 1, Delta 1 and Kogi 1. In January 2018, 371 people were killed by cattle rusters in Zamfara state, northwestern Nigeria (Onwuzuruigbo, 2019:1). The former governor of Zamfara state, Abdulaziz Yari is reported to have said that “nearly five hundred villages and thirteen thousand hectares of land have been devastated, and two thousand eight hundred and thirty five people killed between 2011 and 2018” in Zamfara and parts of neighbouring Kastina state by gangs of armed bandits(Suleiman, 2019:1-2). The Fulani herdsmen have killed many innocent citizens in the middle belt and southern regions of Nigeria in recent times.
6. Absence of robust social justice that breeds positive peace values. Accidents due

to bad roads, diseases, absolute poverty, no prompt payments of salaries and retirement benefits or non-payments of these at all, and lack of basic amenities that support life have contributed to deaths in Nigeria. Democracy dividends are not enjoyed by the greater majority of the people and many who lost hope could not cope and have died.

7. Legal frameworks: Those who violate or take lives are left without justice whether in the civil or in the traditional societies. The rich or the influential procure deaths through extra-judicial killings, electoral or domestic violence and all sorts of criminal activities and go scot free.

Solutions to Enhance the Sacredness of Human Life in Nigeria

Every social vice has solution. The violations of the sacredness of life in contemporary Nigeria have solutions too. These solutions include:

First, respect for life as an inalienable right of all human beings should be taken as inviolable and sacrosanct by all Nigerians. Chukwudozie (1999:11) wrote to this effect that: "Right to life, is in fact, the most fundamental of all rights. This is because, it qualifies to stand as the foundation, or the super-structure on which other rights are built. Certainly, every man should have a right to his physical existence, and all that support human life (both on himself and that of others)". Any form of torture, slavery, inhuman treatment, violence, kidnapping, rape, murder, euthanasia, suicide, cruelty, pause to genuine freedom, abduction, man-made poverty and insecurity should be avoided by all means in order to enhance the sacredness of human life in the country.

Second, the religious bodies and orientation agencies have to give without ceasing the value re-orientation on the moral impermissibility of injurious violations to human life will go a long way to enhancing the dignity and sanctity of human life. Many Nigerians have derailed and lost the grasp that human life is holy and should be respected as such. Re-orientation will help many come back on this good moral value of the sacredness of human life. The Church, family, the school and the social media should be used as credible platforms to achieving this moral value that is fast eluding us.

Third, the respect for Social justice should work on the realization of a strong and impartial judicial system and robust legal frameworks to punish offenders who violate the sacredness of human life. The judiciary is the last hope of the common man therefore from its temple of justice there should be no sacred cows and untouchable once human life is extinguished or abused. To be punished are syndicates of any evil structures that lead to death like merchants of drugs and arms, contractors who failed to execute infrastructures of public interest like roads, bridges, airports, hospitals, stadia, houses, etc that resulted in death of a person.

Fourth, there is need for free and regular medical check-ups for all Nigerians. This will help determine the state of mental health, depression and the likes that have resulted in suicide and other human life violations.

Fifth, let the government provide for the people and improve on the citizens' standard of

living. The people are suffering deprivations in many ways: lacks of food, shelter and clothing have put much pressure on many who collapsed to death. With good social net, viable economy, life is prolonged in dignity.

Sixth, the security architecture of Nigeria has failed to protect Nigerians from Boko Haram terrorists, Fulani herders, kidnappers, cattle rustlers and other gangs who kill, maim and destroy. It is stating the obvious that the sacredness of life shall be restored when these groups' activities are curbed.

Seventh, materialism and inordinate quest for power should be replaced with good virtues that give evidences to good moral life. Therefore churches, the academia and traditional institutions should be careful whom to give honorary or chieftaincies titles or seek financial assistances from. When those who are morally depraved like known gun men, ritualists or embezzlers of public funds are honoured publicly, it goes deep in corrupting the young who may think that “the end justifies the means”.

Eight, there is need to uphold those positive African values inherited from our ancestors. These cultural values are very akin to the gospel values of Christ and his teaching on the sacredness of human life. He said that not only that we should not kill but that we should not be angry with anyone nor rain abusive words on him or her (Matthew 5:21-22).

Conclusion

We have tried in this paper to x-ray the missing link between the past and the present with reference to the sanctity of human life in Nigeria. Life which used to be a precious gift is now taken for granted for what could be wasted for frivolous reasons. Nigerians and the entire human race should know that for no reason at all should life be wasted. Nigerians are adherents of various religions that preach the need to preserve life. The Christian Bible in Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17 condemn murder. The African Traditional Religion sees murder as *nso ani*, a taboo and an offence against the earth goddess, *ani* and God, *Chukwu Abiamu*. The extent life is taught to be preserved in Islam calls for deeper studies because it has contributed through terrorism to the loss of lives in huge numbers not just in Nigeria but as the global diary holds. It is a divine law to preserve one's life and the life of the other. In this light, therefore, we all should, no matter our orientations, ideology or religious affiliation appreciate and uphold everyone's right to life and its sacredness.

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