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**Theme: Unionism and Academic Productivity in  
the Nigerian Education System**

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The human nature highlighted in the definition is commonly taken to be the natural ways of behaviour that most people share as human beings. These natural ways of behaviour which are inherent in human nature are supported in the thirty – article document known as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which was proclaimed in 1948.

Since 1948, the UN has made several more binding instruments variously called 'protocols', 'conventions', 'covenants', 'statutes', 'rules', 'codes', 'safeguards', 'principles', 'proclamations', 'recommendations', 'resolution', and 'declarations'. By 1991, these were about seventy in all comprising: 1 safeguard, 4 protocols, 28 conventions, 1 statute, 2 rules, 3 principles, 1 recommendation, 23 declarations, 2 covenants, 1 proclamation, 1 resolution, 1 code of conduct among others. By 1994, Nigeria was known to have ratified about fifteen of these while appending her signature to one (United Nations, 1994). By ratification, the UN means that a country has ratified, acceded to, approved, given notification or succession, accepted or given definitive signature. In the appendage of signature, the international body means a country has only signed but the signature has not been followed by ratification.

The United States of America that recently showed so much public enthusiasm for the respect of international law and as the self-acclaimed bastion of democracy is worse off than Nigeria. She has only ratified eight, signed four and simply ignored the rest of the conventions and protocols.

It is important to note at this juncture, the critical point about human rights observation by states and individuals within the world community. The United Nations has itself pointed out that

*The denial of human rights and fundamental freedoms not only is an individual and personal tragedy, but also creates conditions of social and political unrest, sowing the seeds of violence and conflict within and between societies and nations.  
(UN 1987 p.4)*

Before we go further, it is important to note that some African nations which hitherto thought the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) was a document which addressed human rights issues from Euro-American perspectives soon adopted their own document the 'African Charter of Human and Peoples' Rights' in 1981 and the Charter came into force on October 21, 1986. Even here, the signatories hardly obey the charter they ratified. This charter attempts to define human rights from the African perspectives even though the rights and freedoms stated in the charter are not too different from

those of the UDHR. The Charter is, however, different from the UDHR essentially from the perspective that it examines the various human rights under four categories namely: Individual Rights, Peoples' Rights, Duties of States and Duties of Individuals.

It therefore tries to establish rights and responsibilities delineating, in the process, individual human rights from peoples' right. By 1991, six years after it came into force ten of the 51 member states of the OAU now African Union (AU) had failed to ratify the Charter. Among these, interestingly, were Ethiopia (host of the AU), Cote d' Ivoire and Kenya. From the 29-article Charter, it is not quite wrong to say that Africans equally share some of the beliefs and visions of other regions on what constitutes human rights even though we may not obey these rights as faithfully as the rules provide.

Now we have reached that stage in our academic development where cowardly neutrality or a laissez faire disposition to issues of human rights, is no longer tenable even though this is reflected in our lack of commitment to academic due process, represented in our attitude to the way we carry on business. The university teacher and student must be able to speak out with a strong voice against duplicity, injustice and other forms of human rights violation in the system.

Thus we should not act like Reverend Nimoiella, a Nazi victim of the holocaust who realized too late that his passivism had led to his own state of suffering

He is widely reported to have written:

*First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out:  
Because I was not a Jew.*

*Then, they came for the Communist and I did not speak out:  
Because I was not a Communist.*

*Later, they came for the Catholics and I did not speak out:  
Because I was not a Catholic.*

*Then, they came for the trade unions and I did not speak out:  
Because I was not a trade unionist.*

*Now they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me.*

And one can exchange our various activists – staff and students – for any of the groups above and we would find out that we have failed in this direction. We have become the men who died in the face of tyranny because we have been silent and spiritually dead. Dead to the extent that opportunistic self preservation and selfishness silence us against speaking out against injustice even on behalf of our students.



### 3. Academic Freedom and University Autonomy

The concepts, academic freedom and university autonomy, are two related terms which are used in contradistinction to concepts which seem to promote their denial or violation.

Academic freedom is a concept that is a little more troublesome to define because among academics and intellectuals, there is hardly a consensus on what it entails. While it may be difficult to agree to what constitutes academic freedom, it is never difficult to identify a violation of it.

This freedom covers both staff and students when they are engaged in conducting the duties for which they were employed or recruited using standard evaluation procedures.

However, academic freedom has been defined as the 'liberty of members of a university or other seat of learning to pursue their studies without being subject to external control'. This definition probably subsumes the notions of self-exclusiveness and possibly of self-sufficiency.

Another view sees it as 'freedom to teach or study a subject without fear of reprisal or hindrance'. This latter view strikes at the core of what academics do and why they need freedom to continue to do them.

For example, there was a time in the 1990s when the suggestion came from the military that academics should submit their lectures for scrutiny by security personnel to ensure that they did not contain materials considered detrimental to military interest. Of course, that suggestion was pooh-poohed by members of the academic community. Not even the vice chancellors through whom the suggestion was made could summon enough courage to attempt to implement it.

But I personally recall that at the peak of General Sani Abacha's self-delusion and desire for self-succession, I was invited by the Director of the State Security Services in Akwa Ibom to his office. On my arrival, and after their mind game, the Director who interrogated me accused me of inciting anti-military sentiment among the students. When I denied the allegation he then asked me to bring my lecture notes for inspection so that he could compare with the one his staff had recorded for him. Of course, he did not have my lectures even though he had assumed wrongly that comments interjected during lectures but which dwelt on military subjugation of the Nigerian people were necessarily in my lecture notes. Others across the country like Dr. Patrick Wilmot of Ahmadu Bello University were equally hounded out of their jobs on account of the need to regulate the content of academic teaching. What is left of the academic if he cannot teach what his interpretation of the curriculum is? Of course, those most dreaded by authoritarian leaders are academics in

the humanities – arts, education, social sciences and law. The professor of science is generally thought to be apolitical. This is a wrong assumption. Those who think along those lines are most likely to be those who do not know the Professor Olorodes of this world. This experience is what makes academic freedom such a sensitive issue in our universities today.

On the other hand, university autonomy takes up the issue of academic freedom and other issues in their wider perspectives. University autonomy refers to the institutional freedom which covers all the internal and sometimes external activities of the university. It covers individual institutional right to govern or administer itself, raise funds, pay salaries determined as appropriate to each institution subject to the availability of funds, the right to recruit staff, admit students using its internal mechanisms as have been found to be adequate and appropriate, and discipline staff and students in line with laid down employment and admission procedures.

University autonomy is therefore the mother of all concepts applied to our university system. This autonomy includes academic due process, the system of procedures designed to produce the best possible judgments in those situations in higher education which may yield a serious adverse decision about a teacher (L. Joughin, 1967). The academic due process seeks 'a clear, orderly, fair' way of making a decision by providing 'procedural safeguards' or 'procedural guarantees'. It is through it that the structure for a wise and fair administration of justice in institutions of higher learning is established.

Perhaps the issue of university autonomy which was pushed into the front burner of national issues through the Federal Governments' submission of a draft bill offers us a fair opportunity to provide critical thinking on the issue. I do not think the issue should be its desirability but the validity and sustainability of its objectives.

Along with the issue of academic freedom, the Autonomy Bill, which is still being debated publicly, provides academics with a great opportunity to deal with the issue decisively and definitely if not in the short term then in the long run. Academics have always loved autonomy but perhaps not the type offered by government. During the long period of military rule in Nigeria, the two issues were simply ignored by the military leaders as they sought to impose their will on the university communities. Thus decrees which sought to equate university teaching with what goes on in the barracks were promulgated to stifle free speech and freedom to associate and form unions for the purpose of collective bargaining. An example is the 1977 Essential Service Decree. For instance, in 1972, when the Association of University Teachers (AUT) decided to embark on a strike, the then Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon



## CULTURAL DIMENSION TO UNIONISM IN NIGERIAN SCHOOLS

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### Abstract

*This paper examined the nature of man, as a gregarious animal to whom social relationship is paramount. The nature of man makes him a unionist, and culturally man has a lot to gain by being a member of a union. Unionism in tertiary institutions is training for future roles of students in the larger society. The paper concluded that it is ideal to be a member of a union in school, however the practices of the members should conform to the norms of the larger society.*

### INTRODUCTION

Unionism can be defined as the act of organizing people into united groups for a shared or mutual purpose. Unions and associations or clubs are formed by uniting people or groups (Hornby, 2000). Such association of people could be academic, professional, religious, political or socio-cultural in nature. In an academic community like a university different unions exist. These include the Students' Union, Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU), Senior Staff Non-Academic Union (SSANU) and Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) among others.

The existence of these unions or associations in the school system is guaranteed by the following provisions of the Fundamental Human Rights of Individuals as specified in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) number 33-42:

1. Right to life.
2. Right to dignity of human person
3. Right to personal liberty.
4. Right to fair hearing.
5. Right to private and family life.
6. Right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.
7. Right to freedom of expression and the press.

8. Right to peaceful assembly and association.
9. Right to freedom of movement.
10. Right to freedom from discrimination (pp. 18-23).

These basic rights are essential conditions for peaceful co-existence and survival of the citizen as well as members of the academic community. Unions are established to serve their members through their efforts to gain recognition and involvement in decision making within and outside the school community and be encouraging elected members to contribute positively towards the shaping of the educational system as well as negotiating improved working conditions for members (Farrant, 1985).

Man by nature is a socio – political being and it is hard for him to survive by isolation (Ajetunmobi, 1999). No man can see himself as an island and, therefore, social interaction which is conscious contact between two or more people or groups in a social relationship is very vital to human existence and development. According to Olayinka (1993), man is affected by certain conditions such as his environment, heredity, and instincts but he is equally capable of choosing or deciding for himself what he wants for himself and be responsible for his actions.

As earlier indicated, it is not possible for a normal person to survive by isolation. He must interact with members of his immediate and larger society. When unions or associations are formed or established, the conduct of members must be guided by some moral or professional standards of behaviour as earlier indicated, there are many unions in our schools but this paper is focused on Students' Unionism.

### The School

The concept of 'school' is capable of many interpretations and as a result it is necessary to make a lucid clarification of the term. According to Akinkuotu (1999), the concept school could refer to "a school of thought" (collection of scholarly opinion); a place where knowledge is disseminated, the method of disseminating knowledge, also a body of learners to be taught and a body of scholarship opinion provided by the scholars. The school is an institution for educating the learners at whatever age.

Musgrave (1978) believes that the school is expected to assist the family in developing the intellect and personality of the growing child and also to allocate him when he has grown up to the most fitting niche in adult society. Citing Professor W. D. Walls in his book Education and Mental Health, Dunhill (1976) observes that the school is:



*Society's instrument for moulding the young, transmitting the cultural heritage for inculcating values, ideas and modes of behaviour in which both the continuity and evolution of humanity depend (p.17).*

The school is a social institution as it serves to bring together people of different ethno-cultural backgrounds for the purpose of preparing the individual or members of the school community especially the learners for future roles in larger society.

## Culture

Culture according to Tylor (1871) and quoted in Evans (1976) is basically "that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (p.8). It is a blueprint for behaviour in the society which has to do with "what to do with "what to be done, ought to be done, should be done and must not be done" (Akinlaye, 1999). Adedipe (1985) observes that culture includes, 'organized government, language, literature, art, music, drama and everything else which has evolved and taken shape in the environment, through processes of learning and teaching'. It is also the mirror through which a given society could be seen, identified and known for through this mirror, the arts, customs, literature, social institutions, value systems, moral attitudes and other intellectual expressions of the society could be seen, identified, known and appreciated (Makinke, 2002).

Fafunwa (1995) opines that education in modern or ancient dispensation "aims at perpetuating the culture of the society". According to him, culture in the traditional society, is not taught, it is caught through observation, imitation and mimicking of the actions of the elders and siblings. It can be inferred therefore that a strong relationship exists between education and culture as according to Edward (1972) in Omokhodion and Dosumu (2000), culture is the content of education hence culture must have a bearing on the school curriculum.

Writing on the characteristics of culture, Akinlaye (1999) observes that culture:

- is inferred from observation of individual's behaviour in the society.
- Predates a person or generation and continues beyond the individual lifespan.
- Acquired or learned by individuals and manifested in their behaviour.
- Includes, rules, codes of conducts, law or other designs for approved or forbidden action or behaviour.

- Dynamic in the society.
- Language is fundamental to the learning of culture.
- Distinguishes members of a society from the others. (pp. 23-24).

For the purpose of this paper the emphasis is on the non-material culture e.g value system, morals, attitude etc as opposed to material culture e.g tangible objects like dresses, houses etc.

## Students' Unionism

In the primary and secondary schools, what could be seen as students' unionism are in form of clubs and societies which students joined under the supervision of appointed teachers. Such clubs include:

- The Press Club
- Literary and Debating Society
- Dramatic Society
- School Choir
- Farmers' Club
- Red Cross
- Boy's Brigade
- Girls' Guides
- Life Club or Drug Free Club
- School Football Team.

All the listed students' clubs and societies afford students the opportunity of partaking in recreational activities within and outside the school. Benefits accruing to students include, inculcation of the right attitudes towards civic responsibility; the joy of helping others, shared opportunities for the development of responsibility and leadership as members are elected into offices like President, Secretary, Treasurer, etc.

In tertiary institutions, students' unionism takes place at the departmental, faculty and college or university levels. At every level, elections are organized in accordance with the laid down rules and regulations of the institutions concerned. Candidates contest elective positions into offices such as President, Vice-President, General Secretary, Treasurer, Auditor, Welfare Officer etc.

However, recent events and developments on Nigerian Campuses have revealed that things have been going out of hand. Cases abound of students misappropriating and embezzling unions' fund. Unionism has become a do or die affair. Oftentimes some executive members of the students' union



abandon their primary duty on campus (studies) to engage in full time politics. In some universities students sell landed property belonging to the universities to business men to build shops and kiosks at outrageous costs while beneficiaries are made to pay monthly rents. Some of them become millionaires overnight.

Not only that, unionism is also used as a tool to make obnoxious demands from the government and the authorities of our tertiary institutions. The students' unions do this by making the campus and sometimes the state ungovernable for the authorities through violent demonstrations, abduction of principal officers and vandalization of public properties.

For neglecting their studies for greener pastures on campus, such members of the students' union executives oftentimes force the authorities to postpone examination dates. At times students demand for their rights at gun-points, thus forcing the authority to endorse a document or sign an agreement with them at gun point. It is pertinent to know that perpetrators of these awful acts are expected to take up leadership positions in Nigeria of tomorrow.

It is right to note that unionism has also been used by students to make positive contributions towards the administration of their institutions. Signposts indicating names of faculties and departments are erected in relevant places. Reading rooms or mini-libraries are provided by some union executives for the benefit of their members. Law abiding students had in some case taken up the challenge to flush out the cultists from their campuses and according to Balogun and Jacob (1998)", organized raids masterminded by students seem to have yielded positive results in the universities of Benin, Port-Harcourt, Nsukka and Lagos.

Apart from the political unions, other unions exist among students in tertiary institutions. There are religious unions like the students' wings of various Christian denominations and the Muslim students group. There are social unions such as Association of Indigenes of different ethnic groups, Army, Airforce and Navy cadets, Man O'war, Theatre group and others.

#### Causes of problems

One of the causes of problems with our youths on campuses has to do with their characteristics. Most university undergraduates today are teenagers. They are still adolescents and this stage of development has been described by psychologists as a turbulent period. It is a period when they are attached to their age groups (peers) who teach them new skills and new attitudes that are sometimes different from the family's influence. One of the most important attitudes involved at this period is that towards authority (Musgrave, 1978; Omokhodion and Dosumu, 2000). Every human being by

nature is capable of doing good and bad. It is necessary that he is encouraged to do good always.

Communication gaps between the authority and the students can bring about unpleasant situations as students are not given the opportunity to air out their views, observations and grievances facilities are not provided to complement the academic structure the students who are mostly adolescents would have time to engage in antisocial acts that are inimical to campus peace.

#### Cultural Dimension To Unionism in Schools

From our discussion of culture it can be inferred that culture is a learned behaviour and a way of solving social problems that arise and which have been tried out one time or the other. Such solutionary answers are then passed on to new generations of the society in order to solve their own problems.

The African traditional education lay emphasis on the following:

- i. Development of the child's latent physical skills
- ii. Development of character
- iii. Respect for elders and those in position of authority
- iv. Development of intellectual skills
- v. Vocational training
- vi. Participation in community development
- vii. Promotion of cultural heritage (Fafunwa, 1995:6;6).

A fully developed adult personality will not find it difficult to obey those in authority, co-operate easily with his equals and if necessary assume authority (Musgrave, 1978). The objectives of African traditional education is the production of a personality who is of good character. According to Shoremi (185).

Good character not only includes honesty, morality respect for customs, intelligence, and also devotion to duty, courage and willingness to contribute to the development of one's community.

The African child is also blessed with a rich literary environment like moon light folktales, riddles which are rich in moral instructions. The African child is exposed to all these to guide his conducts in the society. According to Akinlaye (1999), institutions in Nigerian society regulate the modes of attaining certain recurrent objectives like birth, death, marriage, acquiring economic goods, dealing with political power, relations, maintaining social consensus and norms, as well as educationally training the young. The process by which individuals acquire these essential values, beliefs, norms, sanctions, skills and



behaviours or the society to which he belongs is termed socialization. Through socialization the individual is transformed into person with a sense of identity and the ability to discipline himself according to the accepted ideals, ambitions and values of his people.

For education to serve the contemporary Nigerian society better, it is expedient that we return to the past and integrate the traditional system of education into the mainstream of the present system of education, which in turn will guide the youths in their union activities. Our indigenous culture must be revamped, adapted and shaped to suit the scientific age in order to attain the lofty height of modern civilization (Makinde, 2002).

### Conclusion and Recommendation

The issue of unionism as it affects the life of students in Nigerian schools has been discussed in this paper. It is not a crime to be a member of a union in school, but that the practices of the members should conform to the norms and ideals of the larger society. In order to encourage the youths to be well-adjusted in the society the following recommendations are made:

- The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria should be entrenched into the school system and emphasis should be placed on the understanding of the fundamental rights of individuals.
- Government should accord education the rightful place and integrate values from our traditional educational system into the present system in order to get learners at all levels meaningfully engaged in positive pursuits in the society.
- Government should take urgent and genuine steps towards improving the conditions of lives of Nigerians by reducing unemployment figures in order to curb the desperation that influence youths into crime related acts.
- The students affairs divisions in tertiary institutions should ensure that the administration is in close touch with the students. At least students should be given the opportunity to discuss with heads of institutions once in a semester so that matters affecting them could be handled with all seriousness.
- Counselling services should be provided in these institutions so that students with psycho – social problems could be properly guided to adjust properly into a normal life.
- Students contesting political offices in the students' union government should be those of good standing as far as their academics is concerned.

- Apart from inter-university sports festivals inter-university debates in the various faculties should be encouraged among the students and those who excel should be rewarded adequately.
- Doing all these will make students' unionism more meaningful and the campuses will be made more pleasant to both the staff and the students. This will make the primary objective for establishing these institutions achievable, which is academic excellence.

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