

## An ethos of hospitality as public morality in the face of the disorderly process in Nigeria today?<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Nigeria, a highly populated country in West Africa, has for the past five years been embroiled in turmoil. Agitation arising from displacement of a large number of people coupled with alienation in their own ancestral lands and homes, due to activities of the unpopular Islamic sect, *Boko Haram* (roughly translated in English as “Western education is an abomination”). This radical religious sect seeks in the most poignant way, to create a wide gap for its own conceived Islamic world order by killing, dispossessing, kidnapping and alienating people, especially in the north-eastern part of Nigeria, bordering Cameroon, Chad and Niger Republics. Economic, religious, cultural and political lives of the locals including Muslims are destroyed. No end is in sight. However, in the face of hostility, hatred, injustice, disorder, despair and an attempt to create order, a new form of public morality is desperately needed in Nigeria, today. The questions then are: what is this public morality? How can a public morality be facilitated to salvage such a disturbing situation?

### Keywords

*Ethos of hospitality, responsibility ethics, Boko Haram, Nigeria, hospitality, disorder.*

## 1. Introduction

The daunting challenges, socio-political, economic and religious changes that emanate from such crisis incite the call for new ideologies among analysts.<sup>3</sup> This was and has been the case in the South African ethical and

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- 1 Nico Koopman used a similar expression in his article on relational anthropology that takes care of the vulnerable in our societies. See Koopman (2003).
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  - 3 This is what informed the South African theologian then at the University of Cape Town, John De Gruchy to write a number of articles that called for new thinking at the

theological circles years after the demise of apartheid, which took place in 1990 and majority rule, based on a free and non-racial categorization of South African populations, installed in 1994. Having experienced the vicissitudes of life, especially those living in the north-east of Nigeria, one begins to wonder if their current living condition is any better than those of the people of colour in the apartheid South African landscape, living then under apartheid ideology. Then, there were extra-judicial killings, disinheritance of people of their own land and other possessions.<sup>4</sup> People were also made aliens in their own ancestral lands.<sup>5</sup> This is the current situation in most of the northern part of the country. The difference between the Nigerian situation and that of South Africa is that the incident in South Africa occurred before the political independence while in Nigeria it is happening post-independence (more than five (5) decades after political independence from Britain in 1960).

Whether socio-political, economic and religious changes take place before or after the institution of a supposedly free democratic society is not really the issue. The fundamental problem is that in the midst of such changes that come with many challenges, there is a call for a new thinking, a new form of public morality, a new theology, a new way of “seeing”<sup>6</sup> together; among other things, in order to adequately and more promptly deal with such an existing situation for the benefit of future generations.

Northern Nigeria has today, been turned into a war zone! Inhabitants of the area continually cry out about their situation, looking hopelessly for help, hoping that at least they would find some form of help coming their way to no avail. From videos released by Boko Haram members, in which the Sect outlines its own warlike activities, the Sect vows to install, run and maintain their own new conceived Islamic “theocracy”. To the sect, Nigeria is in need of a new public morality and faith for peace and order

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birth of democratic rule in South Africa in the 1990s. See for example De Gruchy (1992, 1993, 1994 & 1995 among many others).

- 4 Ruth Hull has provided a detailed of how land dispossession took place in South Africa especially in the years following the promulgation of the Natives Land Act 27 of 1913, See Hall (2014).
- 5 See an essay on alienation of people in their own land in Akper (2012)
- 6 For a deeper understanding of what “seeing” entails, see Dirkie Smit (2003, 2007, 2009a & 2009b).

to reign in the Nigerian political, religious, cultural and economic circles. They therefore, claim that the best way to achieve quick results is to embark on a religious warfare (*Jihad*). Due to this, many are killed; many have lost, and perhaps forever, their farmlands, businesses, homes, and places of worship, schools, cultural lives, and so on, traceable to the Jihad. There is hatred, hostility, lawlessness, indignity of life and disorder in what one could see as a desperate attempt to create order.

In the light of the above situation and context, what public morality is needed to salvage the situation? How can it be applied and in what way, by who, given such a magnitude of disorder? This article investigates these questions. Structurally in what follows, there is in the first instance, a brief historical background of some of the events that took Nigeria to the present situation where the country now finds herself. In the second instance, the article intends to offer a conceptual clarification of an *ethos* of hospitality as a veritable public morality needed in Nigeria today. The ever changing and challenging situations of disorderliness in the country are an attempt by the sect to create a perceived Islamic world order. The third part explores hospitality, specifically looking at how it is useful in dealing with situations of hatred, hostility, despair, and disunity, among other similar emotions. The article argues and concludes with recommendations, that in a situation of hatred and disorder leading to injustice, killings and alienation of some by others, an *ethos* of hospitality appears to be a requisite form of public morality.

## 2. The downward spiral into Boko Haram abyss

It was a seemingly peaceful country until some politicians decided to have it their own way at all cost! Things fell apart (to use Chinua Achebe's expression) more radically when former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration decided in 2007 to rig elections that put into power, the administration of late Nigerian President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua.<sup>7</sup>

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7 Yar'Adua while as president of Nigeria acknowledged that the process that brought him into power was mane with serious irregularities and decided to set-up a committee that could review the existing situation with the view to correction electoral anomalies in the country for better. This Committee was headed by a retire Chief Justice of Nigeria, Justice Mohammed Uwais. Most Nigerians agreed to it that the findings of the Committee were accurate and recommendations important and useful, saying their

After the alleged rigging of the 2007 general election, there were agitations in some quarters for change of the existing situation whether through a radical violent process or otherwise. Propagandists frequently visited media houses to air their grievances over unfair electoral processes in the country. While some of these propagandists were more objective and fair in their judgments others were not. The powerful western countries also criticized the process. Though most of the multinationals' businesses domiciled in the oil rich Niger Delta region were in jeopardy due to the agitations of the militants at the time, the West still showed some level of reluctance to work with the Late President Yar'Adua's regime. The administration then turned towards the Middle East and East for support. There was an obvious suspicion from the West, especially the USA, of the strong alliance between Yar'Adua's administration and the Middle-Eastern countries. This suspicion may have angered some youths (mostly political thugs) in some parts of northern Nigeria, that may have led to the plan to cause havoc in the area. This was championed then by a former state Commissioner for Education simply known in Nigeria as Yusuf, who was a key officer in Borno State under former Governor Ali Modu Sherrif, now a sitting Senator of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Yusuf apparently resigned his appointment with the Sherrif's administration for reasons still not disclosed to the public. However, it is clear that the activities, in fact the Boko Haram Sect, became pronounced in Borno State's capital city, Maiduguri, during the administration of Ali Modu Sheriff as governor of that state.<sup>8</sup>

Yar'Adua's administration made attempts to repel the Sect by deploying heavy military hardware and personnel to the region. Scores of youths allegedly connected with the activities of the Sect were arrested and remanded in prisons within the area. Later, Yusuf, their founder and

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implementation were imperative for free fair and just conduct of elections in Nigeria. Unfortunately, lack of political will among other things kept copies of the report under lock and key file cabinets of the most powerful in the land, and a white paper was not issued to the power for use.

- 8 A northern Nigeria based newspaper, *Daily Trust* 16 September 2014 on page 53 reported the ruling People's Democratic Party as saying allegations that Ali Modu Sheriff is a prime suspect among financiers of the Boko Haram sect came to light in 2009. This allegation is sustained until today, despite repeated denial by the erstwhile governor that he has anything to do with sect let alone finance it.

leader was supposedly arrested by the Nigerian Army and handed over to the Nigerian Police for interrogation and prosecution. After an alleged meeting in the Government House of Borno State with the State Governor Sheriff, the Police allegedly shot Yusuf, founder of the Sect dead without proper prosecution. This greatly infuriated the sect as it became the beginning of their belligerence. Their major targets and threat were the Police, Military, Prison officials and government formations in the eastern part of northern Nigeria. The Sect carried out several jailbreaks as their imprisoned members were freed, Police stations razed, Government offices burnt down etc.

The poor state of Yar'Adua's health brought another dimension to the socio-political crisis that had engulfed the country and may have brought her to the current state of anarchy. The second half of Yar'Adua's administration (2008-2010) threw Nigeria into a very serious political turmoil, as his whereabouts became a mystery. Apparently, he took ill and was flown to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for treatment amidst controversies over his actual health condition. A number of pressure groups like the so-called Save Nigeria Group, Nigerian Bar Association, among others, rose up to supposedly defend Nigeria's democracy. Series of protest marches took place in strategic towns in the country calling on the National Assembly to either impeach the late President or install the then Vice President, Goodluck Jonathan as the acting President, on the basis that Yar'Adua was totally incapacitated and unfit to rule at that moment. Many in the then President's cabinet denied this claim. Yar'Adua succumbed to the ill health in May 2010 and his Vice, Jonathan was sworn in as President, Commander-in-Chief of the Nigerian Armed Forces. There were jubiliations among those who fought resiliently for his installation as President to replace Yar'Adua. It was eventually discovered that for most these people, their intentions were selfish, contrary to their claim that they wanted to defend the country's democracy. This became clear when a number of the agitators of Jonathan for President received juicy political appointments in his cabinet. Media houses were saturated with paid adverts, cities, towns and villages littered with posters calling for Jonathan to contest in the 2011 presidential elections. Within the ruling party (PDP), the originally agreed zoning plan of the seat between north and south as was the case during Obasanjo's administration as President of the country was rebuffed. The

tension in the country heightened. Meanwhile, Boko Haram intensified its onslaught against the Nigerian State's formations and personnel. By the time elections were about to hold in 2011, it was clear to every Nigerian, home and abroad, that an unstable and disorderly society had come to characterize Nigeria as a country. Post-election violence claimed scores of lives as millions were internally displaced. It was no longer just Boko Haram against the State, but all who were not satisfied with the result of the elections and so on. The already chaotic state of the country became worse! The political class began to trade blames among themselves and with party leaders, each holding the other responsible, without anyone of them proffering concrete solutions to the problems on ground. The ordinary citizens became victims and spectators, strategizing on how to survive in the midst of the chaos. It became a survival of the fittest! This has to a large extent been the situation especially in the north-east region of the county till date. This state of confusion paves the way for Boko Haram to carry out their nefarious activities as both the government and citizens appear to be helpless. On one hand the government assures the citizens of being on top of the situation while on the other, Boko Haram leaders brag about being in control of that part of the country and promise more attacks. There are killings, kidnappings, alienation of others by some; hostility, hatred and general strong sense of despair in many areas of the north. There is clearly a need for a new public morality to address the socio-economic, political and religious changes in the country that have brought with them serious challenges needing urgent attention. What could be that public morality? The next section explores this.

### **3. An ethos of hospitality?**

It was the South African theologian, Robert Vosloo, who in 2003 opened the debate more profoundly on the need for an *ethos* (ethics) of hospitality in a context of challenging and changing situations. He says: "the challenge posed by the moral crisis does not merely ask for tolerance or a peaceful co-existence or some abstract pleas for community, but for an ethos of hospitality" (Vosloo 2003:66). Thinking of a veritable option in the face of cruelty and hostility (and one could add: injustice, kidnapping, hatred etc); the alternative, Vosloo argues, "is not simply freedom" from this type of relationship, but "hospitality" (2003:66). The absence of hospitality it would

seem, results to cruelty and hostility in relationships within any given society. Hospitality may, therefore, be viewed and understood as “openness to the other and to otherness” (Vosloo 2003:67). For the Croatian, Miroslav Volf (1995:197), it is to “embrace” but more than embrace, it is actually the ability and commitment to accommodate, receive (welcome) and “entertain” the other and “otherness”.

Ability to accommodate entails the parties involved to first understand themselves and their situations, such that, they are able to “see” (Smit 2007) and think the same way, so that they are convinced of what must be done and are willing to both do this for themselves and for the larger society. There is a strong sense of trust and there is no reason for suspicion of one another, so that, the “other” feels “at home” with “otherness” to accommodate and entertain it.

A conviction to accommodate and “embrace” the other requires on the second level, the will to eradicate strangeness, suspicion, and uneasiness between selves and with the other. One of the fundamental problems with the South African past was not just the lack of freedom and the quest for it, but a serious absence of commitment on the part of many to cause change and to be able to understand the other (De Villiers 2006). It was difficult for people to embrace and accommodate the “other” and their “otherness”, perhaps owing to the fact that many of the different groups then in the South African society do not “see “ in the same way. “Seeing” in the same way and understanding each other with a deliberate intention to embrace is *sin-qua-non* to a desirable and result-orientated public morality known as ethos of hospitality.

Only a cursory look at the present Nigerian situation described earlier in this article could reveal that no public form of morality is needed in Nigeria today than an ethos of hospitality. What is being experienced in Nigeria today is not just lack of peace, but total absence of hospitality. The next section explores an ethos of hospitality as a needed form of public morality in today’s Nigeria.

#### 4. Nativating the path of an ethos of hospitality as a public morality for Nigeria, today

Drawing on the theological ethicist Stanley Hauerwas and the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre the South African theologian Nico Koopman argues that a community of character – where morals are formed – based on anthropology of giving and receiving would show hospitality to the other like vulnerable children (Koopman 2003:79). Thinking of Nigeria today (Vosloo 2013), hospitality appears to be a public morality of interdependence. In an ideal African setting, a person who welcomes a guest into his or her house is understood to have received blessings in return for hosting such a guest. It is a sign of being loved when one receives visitors. But a home that attracts no visitors is seen as unfriendly and harsh such that blessings and friendliness evade it. But how can such a society be formed, where people could learn how to live together, especially where there is a lack of trust among the inhabitants of the society?

There is no gain talking about moral ‘schools’ in a society that lacks moral beings! Who would do the teaching and who would receive it? Where there is an apparent unwillingness to embrace the idea of moral formation, teaching it becomes a waste of time. However, one begins to wonder if the Nigerian problem is the lack of moral teachers or moral “schools” to teach moral ideals in order to build character? Given the situation described earlier in north-eastern Nigeria, the problem does not seem to be the lack of moral teachers or communities where such morals could be taught, but ideal understanding of what the *right* morality *is* and the lack of *right* human beings to teach and practice such a morality.

Boko Haram itself has conceived an idea of a community of character (Hauerwas 1999) based on what appears to be a new form of Islamic morality that insists on all being Muslims and such that state laws to govern the entire society must be the *shari’ah* law. It also insists that everyone subscribes to it, regardless of your choices. It is an attempt to create a homogenous moral society within a complex heterogeneous one, with divergent religious and ethical worldviews. It is precisely the forceful way of building a homogenous community of character – to use Hauerwas’ term – that paves the way for the emergence of disorderly Nigerian society as it is experienced today.



Once there are divergent understandings of what constitutes a *right* society there could never be order. This informs why it has been argued with regard to economics and other problems that “society does not function with politics of competing interests, but the aim should rather be that the interest of all should be met” (Koopman 2003:78). This would then put to test the morality behind the convictions of the Boko Haram Sect, because in them it may be difficult to see a deliberate attempt at considering the common good or interests of the others when it insists on a shariah state that builds a certain morality acceptable to a large extent only by the Sect members? Is there any common understanding between Boko Haram members, their supporters and the rest of the Nigerian society, in northeastern Nigeria and beyond? The obvious answer is no. This is because Boko Haram has expressed through several media fora that its desire is to create, albeit through the most poignant way, an Islamic state devoid of western education and civilization with a different public morality other than what we now have. To this end, both the governments of Nigeria, Child, Cameroon, Niger republics and the citizens of these countries; irrespective of their faith commitments, say they see in Boko Haram, a deliberate effort to enforce a strange world order. The result is the disorder that is being experienced in that region. Therefore, it is clear that a common conception, understanding of a kind of society that is needed, and the formation of right human beings for the right society could help to tame the disorderly situation that has been caused by the activities of Boko Haram.

A similar call became necessary after the world wars when some Christians championed by the German Hans Jonas (1984) called for a new public morality that is the ethic of responsibility in contra-distinction to an ethic of conviction due to the challenges posed by technological advancements and its consequence of creating a disorderly society through wars. Max Weber, after the First World War reacted to the view that the German army should be disbanded due to the fact that the army was used to instigate the war that brought pains to the global society. Those who were calling for the disbandment of the army as a way of creating order in the global society is acting irresponsibly because, they were acting based on the conviction that Christianity speaks against wars, says Weber. To him, disbanding the army will create disorder in the society in an attempt to create an orderly global society, thereby, acting irresponsibly by calling for the disbandment of the

army charged with the responsibility of maintaining law and order in the society, in a desperate attempt to create order.

Hans Jonas therefore, advocates for a Christian view of an ethic of responsibility that could protect the future global world order by acting responsibly in order to protect the integrity of the future society. His concept of a Christian ethics of responsibility has been concisely exposed by the South African ethicist, Etienne de Villiers (2006, 2003 & 2012). De Villiers says Jonas argues, “Modern technology has introduced actions of such novel scale, objects and consequences that the framework of former ethics can no longer contain them”. He adds: “[N]o previous ethics had to consider the global condition of human life and the far-off future, even existence, of the race. This now being an issue demands ... a new conception of duties and rights, for which previous ethics and metaphysics provide not even the principles, let alone a ready doctrine” (2003:26; cf. Jonas 1984:6-8). For this reason, he is of the opinion that in situations like that, the world is in need of a completely new public morality to contain the challenges of the time. According to De Villiers, Jonas then set up for himself a task of developing a new suitable ethics based on what Jonas called “responsibility” for the main purpose of preserving the continued existence of humankind (De Villiers 2003:26).

What then is this ethic of responsibility? One may ask. Responsibility ethics can best be understood if one refers back to the fairly general agreement in classical form of public morality, which insists “someone is morally guilty if it can be established negative outcome is causally linked to the actions and intentions of that person and his/her actions and intentions contradicts the moral values of the particular society” (De Villiers 2003:30). So Wolfgang Huber, German ethicists, proposes an ethics of responsibility should be understood as “one that deals with typical contemporary challenges relating to responsibility and is characterised by four specific structural dimensions of responsibility” namely: foundation in a relational anthropology, correspondence to reality, theological character and the reflexive use of principles. All these are clearly exposed in his article in *The Journal of Religion* (1993:574-579). Schweiker (1995: 42-43) follows suit in seeing responsibility ethics as demanding, “in all actions and relations we are to respect and enhance the integrity of life before God” (see De Villiers 2003:27). The idea is that once it has been established in a given society that everyone has a

duty to protect and enhance the integrity of life before God by preserving supposedly, the future life of humankind, one is responsible when his/her actions rather destroyed the integrity of life before God, especially if that action destroys the future life and wellbeing of humankind. This is therefore, linked to the classical view that a person is morally responsible when the actions and intentions for those actions are linked to the destruction of the future life of humankind in a society that agrees to it that everybody should act in such a way that such actions could enhance the integrity of life before God. Does the action of Boko Haram actually protect the integrity of life, now and the future one, before God? Does it in any way enhance the future life of people in Nigeria, today? This shall be discussed later. The point here is that Hans Jonas is coming from somewhere. It is from a conviction, when he holds that “[A]ct so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life” or, as he puts it in another way, “[A]ct so that the effects of your action are not destructive of the future possibility of such a life” (Jonas 1984:11 cf. De Villiers 2006:471). In order to do this, Jonas believes that what he prefers to call “heuristic of fear” is capable of aiding us “to find out *what* it is about humankind that needs to be preserved. What foundation can, however, be given to the *duty* or *responsibility* to preserve humankind in future”? (see De Villiers 2006:472 {all emphasis original}).

Given Hans Jonas’ proposal of a Christian ethics of responsibility and De Villiers’ exposition of same, one could safely argue that responsibility ethics emphasises hospitality by arguing that “in all actions and relations we are to respect and enhance the integrity of life before God” or we should act in such a way that we preserve the future existence and welfare of the other in our society (Cf. De Villiers 2006:472-473). This is more clearly seen if one understands hospitality as making time and space with the intention to create room in order to accommodate the other (Vosloo 2003:68, 69). It is acting responsibly to avert destruction of the future life of humankind; it is acting and relating so that the other too could have life, dignity and strive for a better life of future generations by acting quite responsibly today. To be hospitable involves ensuring that the humankind comes to see and enjoy today and its goodies. It is preserving the future through our actions today. This is responsibility also.

Perhaps, if we could have in north-east Nigeria people with a sense of hospitality; ones that are willing to take and accommodate the interest

and views of the others – who are different and may be more vulnerable – into consideration, the situation of order would have been different. The agitation for order is the issue, but the understanding of what this order is and should be for all is what creates the disorderly society we have in that region. This is precisely the difficulty with classical virtue when it depends too much on acceptable moral standard before one could be held responsible for his/her actions, even if such actions are directly linked to unwanted effects. In this way, what Boko Haram sees as order is rather dis-order to the larger Nigerian society but it insists on going on with its actions. Simply put, there is hardly any point of convergence between Boko Haram's concept of a just, peaceful and godly future life and the good it seeks to preserve.

In the light of the above stated situation, it is difficult for an ethic of responsibility to serve as a veritable form of ethics in the present Nigeria. But when viewed more deeply, there is also emphasis on the preservation of the future life of humankind. Certainly, those killed do not and cannot exist now or in the future. Lives are being destroyed rather than preserved. Thus, living responsibly by acting hospitably could create space and room to accommodate the others and their otherness. For, to be hospitable involves dialogue that “speak” not of “contested spaces that serve as a battleground for the encounter with the stranger and his or her strangeness” (Vosloo 2003:68), but it speaks of creating space for the other and the stranger with his/her strangeness.

It is worth noting that almost all religious groups in Nigeria have a kind of conviction to transform the society. In fact, the idea that God is the Lord of history too is not new. Certainly, the conviction that a particular people's God is the only one God is not unique to that held by Boko Haram. The Jews have held this for centuries before the birth of many other religions like Islam and Christianity (hear ye all Israel, the Lord our God is one God. Deuteronomy 6:4). There has been within Christianity the view that Christians are called to transform the society wherever they find themselves (see for example, De Villiers 2005:551; Troeltsch 1981:576-691 etc). This type of conviction has some implications for public morality. It puts on the shoulders of some a responsibility to carry out moral transformation crusades on behalf of God and/or the society; the end result is in many cases the eruption of conflict thereby causing disorder in the society. This

is precisely the situation in Nigeria today. It has been argued that “in times of moral crisis it is especially important that we find the time and space for dialogue with the other in order to challenge racism, xenophobia, religious intolerance and loneliness” (Vosloo 2003:69). If this is done, then we may not necessary agree on what is the ideal order or what kind of future existence and life that we may want to preserve in Nigeria today as a prerequisite for dialogue; creating space, and being hospitable to the “other”. Certainly, we may not agree on what constitutes hospitality or responsible actions. But at least instead of contesting these moral ideals, we may learn to accommodate, open up to divergent concepts of these with the view to finding a common ground that may end up preserving the future existence of life and the protection and enhancement of the integrity of life before God and humankind. It can be argued that this could fairly salvage the existing situation in Nigeria, as it is being experienced today.

## 5. Conclusion

It has been argued that the existing moral crisis in Nigeria calls for more critical look at what kind of public morality that could pave the way for a new way of looking at order and orderliness. It has been established that different value systems being practised by Boko Haram and others especially in northeastern Nigeria fuels the existing crisis in the region. An ethos of hospitality so understood in the essay, offers a veritable public morality for Nigeria today, given the present moral crisis. The question of the details on how a responsible ethos of hospitality could be facilitated still needs to be explored further.

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