

The Concept and Philosophy Underpinning ASUU Leadership Model and its Relevance to the Prevailing Socio-Political Reality in Nigeria

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Abstract

ASUU is a union of Nigerian academics whose struggles have significantly impacted positively on tertiary education in Nigeria. A major component of ASUU's strength and resilience is the quality of its leadership, the concept and philosophy underpinning this and the institutional integrity it has maintained over the years. What is it with ASUU leadership that makes the organization strong? How and in what specific ways has ASUU persevered the persecution and manipulations of the postcolonial Nigeria state and its ruling elites? In what way is ASUU conception and philosophy of leadership relevant in contemporary Nigeria? This paper examines these issues against the backdrop of the dearth of credible leaders in contemporary Nigeria by attempting a meta-theoretical analysis of ASUU leadership model. Drawing on the rapidly expanding literature on the subject, the paper concludes with far-reaching recommendations on how this typology of leadership could be replicated in the current democratic dispensation.

Key words: ASUU leadership, struggles, socio-political realities.

Le concept et la philosophie étayant le modèle de l'élite dirigeante du SPAU et de sa pertinence à la réalité sociopolitique qui prévaut au Nigeria

Résumé

Le syndicat du personnel académique des universités (SPAU) est une union des universitaires nigériens dont les luttes ont sensiblement un impact positif sur l'enseignement supérieur au Nigeria. Une composante importante de la force et la résilience du SPAU est la qualité de son élite dirigeante, le concept et la philosophie qui sous-tend cela et l'intégrité institutionnelle, il a maintenu au fil des ans. Qu'est-ce qu'il y a dans l'élite dirigeante du SPAU qui rend l'organisation solide? Comment et dans quelles manières spécifiques le SPAU a enduré la persécution et les manipulations de l'Etat post colonial du Nigeria et ses élites dirigeantes? De quelle manière la conception et la philosophie de l'élite dirigeante du SPAU sont-elles applicables au Nigeria contemporain? Cet article examine ces questions dans un contexte de la pénurie des chefs crédibles au Nigeria contemporaine en tentant une méta-analyse théorique du modèle de l'élite dirigeante du SPAU. Tirant sur la littérature en pleine expansion sur le sujet, le document conclut par des recommandations de grande portée sur la façon dont cette typologie de l'élite dirigeante pourrait être reproduit dans le système démocratique actuel.

Mots clés: l'élite dirigeante du SPAU, les luttes, les réalités sociopolitiques.

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Introduction

The nexus between leadership and the development process in Africa has since been articulated by leading scholars who agree that leadership has always been at the heart of the contemporary African development predicament since the 1960s (Uchendu & Okpoko, et al, 2010; Okpeh & Due, 2015; Adekunle & Nwauwa, 2016). Available evidence on this has shown that since the decades of the independence struggles, there has been a progressive decline in the quality of leadership countries in the continent have had since they regained independence from the erstwhile colonial imperialists (Mahadi, et al, 1994; Achebe, 1983; Maier, 2000; Madunagu, 2007; Ikoni, 2010). Unfortunately, this has implicated the socio-economic and political transformation of the continent. Thus, notwithstanding its economic potentials, a recurrent decimal in the history of the continent of Africa has been the gross inability of its leaders to extricate it from the shackles of dependency and underdevelopment, twin phenomena which have ensured the disempowerment of a majority continent's populace with disastrous consequences on their wellbeing. The canvas painted here is amply exemplified in Nigeria, the most populous Black Country in the world. The leadership question in Nigeria is both complex and multidimensional. In one context, it speaks to a class of rulers who grossly lack ideas and the capacity to use these when they are given. In another, it reflects a deep moral decadence in which the ruling elites are bankrupt, corrupt and unpatriotic. It also underscores the parochialism, mediocrity and nepotism which pervades leadership at all levels in Nigeria. The leadership question in the country is arguably one of the most important factors in the development lethargy the country is entangled with.

Against this backdrop, this paper sets out to examine why and how leadership in postcolonial Nigeria is a major issue in the development process. Using the ASUU leadership model as a framework of analysis, I hope to advance a thesis on how the leadership question in Nigerian can be resolved. The main arguments of the paper are fragmented into five inter-locked segments. The first three parts explore the critical issues in the leadership question confronting contemporary Nigeria and underscores why and how this is a serious development issue in the first place. This is followed by a systematic elucidation of the concept and philosophy of leadership in ASUU and in what specific ways this is unique from other forms/types of leadership. In the fifth segment, I shall explain some of the very obvious achievements of the Union as a result of the institutional integrity which its leadership principles and philosophy have ensured and guaranteed and why this is relevant to contemporary Nigeria, while the sixth segment summarizes the major arguments of the paper.

The Condition of Nigeria as a Context

Two viewpoints have always clashed over the condition of Nigeria and its prospects for survival. For want of a better phrase, these viewpoints are: (i) the "Naija Optimists" and (ii) the Naija Pessimists" (Okpeh, 2013). The optimists contend that Nigeria is a country with immense potentials for greatness. For this spectrum of thought, the country has all it takes to shake-off the yoke of underdevelopment and the crises it has generated over the years (Mahadi, A., *et al*, eds., 1994; Usman, 2000; Jonathan, 2013). They therefore argue as follows:

- (i) Nigeria is the Giant of Africa: it has the natural resources, it is blessed with human resources that is enterprising, it has played (and is still playing) prominent role in bringing stability to other countries in Africa;
- (ii) The greatest strength of the country lies in its multicultural composition which although admittedly very tasking to manage, has produced a unity in diversity;

- (iii) The country survived a major bloody civil war (fought between 1967-1970), it has survived many multicultural crises, it shall survive the current development challenges confronting it;
- (iv) Majority Nigerians would prefer to be together as one united and indivisible entity than apart and independent from each other (Okpeh, 2013:2-3).

Pessimists generally lament the lethargic state of development in the country amidst the abundant human and natural resources mother nature has endowed the country and its people. This spectrum of thought do not see the possibility of the country surviving the many contractions it is entangled in and have advocated its dismemberment so that its constituent parts can go their separate ways.(Onwodiwe, 1998; Maier, 2000; Ikoni, 2010; Baraje, 2013; Ade-Adeleye, 2013; Okpeh, 2013). Scholars here rationalized their conclusions on the following basis:

- (i) Nigeria is rich yet hopelessly so poor as a result of which it is helplessly entangled in the gridlock of a debilitating lethargy;
- (ii) Since the demise of military dictatorship and the dawn of the current democratic dispensation, Nigeria has been immersed in profound socio-economic crises that has made it vulnerable in the international economic system;
- (iii) Across the length and breadth of the country, the mass of the people suffer immense economic deprivation and disempowerment as a result of which abject poverty is perpetually on the increase;
- (iv) The Nigerian state is incapacitated by its virtual failure to protect its citizenry and/or create an enabling environment for their continued existence (Okpeh, 2013, 2-3).

However, it should be pointed out that in their respective submissions, both schools of thought agree that leadership, its quality and dearth remains the crux of the Nigerian situation (Achebe, 1985; Mahadi, et al eds. 1994; Hagher, 2002; Fashina, 2010).

The Political Economy of the Leadership Question in Nigeria

In a very fundamental way, there is a sense in which leadership defines the problem with Nigeria. What is it with leadership in Nigeria (and indeed Africa)? Why and how is it a problem at all? What is the relationship between leadership in Nigeria and the crisis of development confronting the nation and its people? To answer these questions it would be necessary to explain the political economy of leadership in modern Nigeria. A circumspective analysis of the political economy of the leadership question in Nigeria (and indeed Africa) glaringly reveals a number of interesting facts. The first of these relate with the fact that, the contradictions in the structures that birthed and nurtured modern leadership under colonialism has not been sufficiently negated five decades after political independence (Ake, 1985; Onimode, 1999; Okpeh, 2002; Fashina, 2010). The colonial order was marked by wanton brutality, oppression, exploitation and marginalization. All of these were necessary to ensure the extraction, appropriation and repatriation of surplus value from Nigeria to metropolitan Britain. In the context of its operations, colonialism created a kind/type of leadership that was not only pliant and removed or isolated from the people, but more importantly, one that was unpatriotic, unaccountable and therefore irresponsible.

Secondly, the postcolonial state and its instrumentalities also failed to objectively mediate the antagonism and ambivalence arising inevitably from and between the structures on the one hand, and their managers (the ruling elites) on the other (Fashina, 2010; Akinwumi and Okpeh, et al, eds., 2005; Alemika & Okoye, 2002; Akinwumi, Fwatshak & Okpeh, 2007). The postcolonial state in Nigeria is held hostage by its unpatriotic ruling elites who in their often bitter and violent

struggle for resources appropriate its apparatuses as a means of survival. Increasingly, the state lacks the critical autonomy and neutrality to mediate intra-elite squabbles or any other conflict for that matter, redefining its nature and character as a “captured” entity. The incapacitation of the postcolonial state in this sense is partly responsible for the recrudescence of ethno-religious conflicts, the growth of militia and terrorist organizations as well as insurgents in virtually all parts of the country.

Thirdly, since the state and its managers lack capacity, principles and values are compromised and economic growth and development are jeopardized on the altar of crass greed, opportunism, parochialism, nepotism, corruption and theft of our common wealth (Odekunle, 1986; Stapenhurst & Kpundez, 1999; Enweremadu & Okafor, 2009). Our leaders act with impunity: Nigeria begins and ends with them, they know everything and can do and undo, and they act as if they have another country than Nigeria. They are callous in their audacity, careless in their profligacy and cruel in their conduct and disposition. As a result, the critical nexus that should exist between leadership and followership is ruptured since the latter is alienated from the former in a manner that is counter-productive. Studies have shown that the failure of the postcolonial Nigerian leadership is directly linked to this development (Hagher, 2002; Okpeh & Ukase, 2016).

Thirdly and as a consequence of the above processes, there has been a progressive decline in the quality of leadership from one generation to another since 1960. If we say the first generations of modern Nigerian political leaders were morally corrupt and bankrupt, those who succeeded them after the Nigerian Civil war were worse. Whether as military or civilians, the post 1970 political leaders were not just reckless, unprincipled and grossly irresponsible; they were repressive, predatory and prodigal. In their cluelessness, they conceived the nation as their “conquest” that would have to be ruthlessly exploited not for the general good, but personal interest. The nation groaned on the account of the rapacious activities of these self-serving leaders and its disempowered citizens continued to gnash their teeth from the pains and agonies of poverty and penury. The reality in contemporary Nigeria is therefore that credible leaders are not only in short supply at all levels but the concepts and ideals that drive pragmatic, positive and dynamic leadership are fast disappearing from the society. What we now have are rampaging corruption, impunity, lack of accountability, nepotism, parochialism, lack of patriotism, mediocrity and sheer wickedness, as the unfortunate ideals of leadership.

The Concept and Philosophy of Leadership in ASUU

By now it is evidently clear why leadership is critical for the stability, growth and development of any organized human entity. Indeed, leadership is *asine qua non* in the dynamic process of organizational change and transformation (Paden, 1986; Olusoji, 2002; Hagher, 2012). Reinforcing this point in the specific case of Africa, Kumuyi (2013, p. 43) asserted that:

Leaders! Their dearth has imposed painful limitations on our collective existence. It doesn't matter what type of organization you are in: leadership determines success. It is a critical variable in development calculus; and its dearth is the sole restrictive force that has barred Africa and its peoples from moving up and forward.

Generally, leadership speaks to an extraordinary capacity to influence others in a group; uniqueness, calmness and an aura that endears one to others; and the ability to lead and having the capacity to deliver on a collective vision.

While the above may be the broad outlines of leadership at all levels, leadership in ASUU is unique in many ways. In order to understand the uniqueness of ASUU leadership model, it would be proper to interrogate the philosophy and ideals this reflect and around which its goals are erected. Underpinning all ASUU struggles is its principled resolve to defend the education sector at all levels in Nigeria. Thus, as an organization, the Union has consistently strived to achieve the following inter-related goals:

- (i) Building a free and just society;
- (ii) Struggling for a sound educational system;
- (iii) Enthronement of industrial democracy;
- (iv) Enthronement of a productive and autonomous university system where academic freedom reigns;
- (v) defence and promotion of the socio-economic and cultural interests of the nation;
- (vi) defence of trade union rights of all Nigerian workers;
- (vii) promotion of research and knowledge;
- (viii) opposition to all injustices and all discriminatory practices based on class, gender, ethnicity and religion;
- (ix) building solidarity in the trade union movement;
- (x) promoting respect for international conventions/declarations on Academic Freedom, Human and Labour Rights;
- (xi) promoting democratic values through participation in popular struggles; and
- (xii) encouragement of, and contribution to affirmative action to redress historical and contemporary inequalities based on gender, nationality or any social disadvantage (Fashina, 2010, pp.: 51-52).

Extrapolating from the above, it is possible to summarize the contending issues in ASUU struggles throughout its over four decades of existence. These issues are many but basically they revolve around the question of improved funding to the education sector, university autonomy and academic freedom, comparatively better conditions of service for university academics and arresting the brain drain phenomenon in order to reposition Nigerian universities for global competitiveness and the onerous task of nation building.

In ASUU, leadership is conceptualized as a *process* defined by the ever-changing dynamics of society and the Union's response to these. It does not "just happen", it is not spontaneous like the switch on the wall that is manipulated between "on" and "off", it is not a divine revelation in which the leader is supposed to be "appointed" by supernatural forces. For, according to Fashina (2010, p.48):

The idea that some are *born* leaders is questionable. Leadership is *acquired* in the process of organizing people. Good leadership requires education, self-examination, experience, training and struggles. A leader, to excel must continually work on his/her performance, do a self-criticism of it, learn from errors and improve upon the practice of leadership on the basis of self –understanding and self-criticism (emphasis added).

But this does not mean that in ASUU, we do not believe in God, our ultimate Benefactor. Of course we do. It is just that in the mechanistic, oppressive and exploitative socio-economic and political enclave we exist in, our leaders are necessarily the by-products of our history of struggles.

Secondly, in ASUU, leadership is for all practical purposes not about "office holding", although it relates to holding an office. This is the case because, one can hold an office that bestows

on him/her enormous power and authority, but may still fail to qualify as a *leader*. Fashina (2010, p.50) explains this point further in the following passages:

An ASUU Chairman has some powers defined by ASUU's Constitution. But this does not make him a *leader*. The Chairman is a leader if the exercise of his constitutional functions makes members of the Union disposed to active involvement in achieving the goals and objectives of ASUU.

As a Union of intellectual workers, leadership in ASUU is therefore not a mere title, but a relationship between that title and the degree of commitment to service to the Union; it is about dedication, commitment to duty and performance anchored on the philosophy and principles of the Union. Some of these principles include integrity, transparency and accountability; professionalism, objectivity and hard work; courage, sacrifice and total commitment; Internal democracy, team work and group solidarity; and patriotism, anti-imperialism and working class solidarity (Iyayi, 2002; ASUU, 2014; Fashina, 2010). Thus, to be a leader in ASUU, one must demonstrate a capacity for hard work, be professional and objective in his/her conduct and have integrity.

Thirdly, leadership in ASUU is both a relation and a process in which there are constant interfacing and mutations. It is a relation involving persons who are mutually engaged in some cooperative activity or chains of activities directed at achieving a common goal. Therefore, at whatever level it manifests, leadership in ASUU embodies a grid of interactions between ASUU members themselves; between them and government at various levels; between them and ASUU members and their students; and between them and the larger society. The leader in ASUU should learn and understand the intricacies within and between these clusters of interest groups and appreciate how they evolve and manifest in the progress of society. On the other hand, as a process leadership has to be acquired or learnt. In ASUU, we acquire leadership skills by learning the art and science of managing people and ideas with the view of accomplishing a set mission, a task or an objective or sets of objectives. In this connection, leadership is not static since it evolves gradually and matures and develops through a process of being, knowing and doing. In ASUU, we totally agree with Warren Bennis in his magnum Opus, *Becoming a Leader* (cited in Okpeh, 2008, p. 7) when averred that:

Good leaders are *made not born*. If you have the desire and will power you can become and effective leader. *Good leaders develop through a never-ending process of self-study, education, training and experience* (emphasis added).

Fourthly, leadership in ASUU has its basis in the followership. We believe and are convinced that there must be a robust followership before an effective leadership can emerge, serve its purpose and have meaning, essence and significance in the Union. In other words, leadership emerges from followership, it vibrates in the followership, it is, by and large factored by the followership. This conception of leadership underscores our principle of internal democracy, team work and group solidarity which the Union is well known for. According to Iyayi (2002, p.19):

The important questions to ask are: to what extent do grass roots members participate in decision making? Does the leadership arrogate to itself all wisdom in decision making? Do certain members of the leadership manipulate or hoard information so that these become a source of personal power? How much debate and discussion take place before decisions are made? Is criticism welcomed? How much communication is there between the rank and file members and the leadership? Is the flow of communication largely top down? How

quickly does information move between the leaders and members of the union? Are members afraid to express their opinions in the presence of their leaders? How much power distance is there between the members and the leaders? Is there personality cult? Do the leaders seek to monopolize power? Are the members educated by the leadership so that they can make informed, self-emancipatory choices? Are our elections open, free and fair? Are barriers of any sort placed in the way of people in order to prevent them from aspiring to certain or any leadership position in the organization?

The followership is critical to *all* ASUU operations. It is the support base of ASUU struggles, it determines how far our leaders can go and it is the source of the Union's strength and capacity. Without the followership, there cannot be leadership in ASUU. Therefore, where an ASUU leader distances him/herself from congressmen and women, isolates, alienates or completely ignores his/her followers; there are bound to be problems in the healthy development of the branch. Indeed, the lacuna between leadership and followership this would result into could injure, jeopardize or in fact negate all together, the common goal of the branch with catastrophic consequences.

Fifthly, in ASUU, leadership is not merely a title in which the leader is clad in some regal paraphernalia of office underscored by a pseudo-status befitting such a position. Quite on the contrary, here, it is more about a function dimensioned by commitment, diligence, transparency and accountability. Leadership in ASUU relates to accepting responsibilities and having the capacity to deliver credibly. Our leaders do not beat drums or brag about being leaders; they are known and experienced by their performance and the extent to which they advance the central goals of our organization. The leader in ASUU does not see him/herself as all-knowing, for he/she is only *primus inter pares*, among fellow ASUU activists in the branch on whom he/she necessarily and constantly relies for support, encouragement and advice. Any branch Chairperson that considers him/herself as the most intelligent and knowledgeable on all ASUU issues and struggles and therefore cannot be corrected by congress, is not a *leader* but a *ruler* and has no business being in ASUU.

Sixthly and lastly, leadership in ASUU speaks to enormous sacrifice, dedication, commitment and perseverance. Framed in the context and history of being closely and actively involved in the activities of the Union at various levels, leadership here is by and large about pedigree. ASUU leaders have a pedigree of identifying with and supporting the Union at the most daunting moments of its struggles. Our leaders do not just emerge; they are made from the crucibles of agitations for a better system and society. They do not merely pop up from the ripples of band wagon effects, by intimidation and petition-writing, political campaigns or from the incubus of the manipulation of primordial tendencies: they are the creation of our sweat and blood, the sweat and blood of our resolute struggles against the neo-colonial state and its anti-people socio-economic and political policies. Our leaders know that a lot would depend on the depth and quality of sacrifices they have to make in order to sustain our resolve. AsIyayi (2002, pp.: 25-6) admonishes:

Leadership involves both privilege and responsibility. In our (ASUU's) circumstances however ... the responsibilities are bound to be very heavy and the privileges light. Only those who have stomach for those responsibilities need to aspire to leadership positions in the Union. Such leaders will be recognized by the members themselves because they will have a track record of performance In the best tradition of our Union, individuals do not lobby to occupy positions in our Union; rather we have a way of identifying those who have the stomach for the work to be done.

The point here is that, leadership in ASUU is a very serious matter indeed. Unlike in other organizations where leadership comes from the weight of one's pockets or status in a group, in ASUU, it is a product of struggle and sacrifice; dedication and perseverance; as well as commitment and service. The ASUU platform is neither for religio-ethnic jingoists nor charlatans and demagogues seeking cheap popularity or vain glory. It is not for sycophants, marabouts and reactionaries of any kind who move about and around declaring their shifty loyalty and support for those in the corridors of power. It is for patriotic and progressive Nigerians, those who believe in equality, justice and fair play. It is also not for "passive by-standers", "yes men and women" and those who would always "join them" because they cannot "beat them". It is for those who would dare to challenge the *status quo*, resist injustice, oppression and exploitation anywhere; those who are courageous enough to say "No!" to the monsters and demons in our universities.

5. Relevance to Current Realities

Armed with above conception of leadership, principles and goals, the leadership of ASUU in collaboration with its affiliates across the country has positively and constructively engaged the postcolonial Nigerian state and its ruling elites in the last forty years with some credible achievements in the education sector generally and university education in particular. First, the Union has ensured the progressive increasing in the funding of the education sector. It has also reduced the phenomenon of brain-drain by ensuring the gradual improvement of the condition of service of Nigerian academic. ASUU has contributed to the emergence of a single university system in Nigeria (comprising Federal, state and private universities). This has made it extremely difficult, if not totally impossible to sell off our universities to entrepreneurs.

It is to the credit of ASUU that our public institutions of higher learning are still thriving and guaranteed financial interventions via TETFund, Needs Assessment and other strategic grants from the federal government. The Union has also continued to ensure the repositioning of our universities to make them more responsive to our development needs and aspirations as a people and a nation. Without ASUU our universities would have long been swallowed by corruption, like other sectors of our country. ASUU has also ensured the democratization of the organs of university administration, academic freedom and relative autonomy as well as insulated our universities from the more virulent and malignant manipulations of the ruling elites and their cohorts on our campuses. Finally, ASUU has ensured professional ethics, quality pedagogy and a high sense of intellectualism, which underscores the quality of some of our graduates.

Conclusion

What we have tried to do in this essay, is to attempt a discussion on ASUU leadership model by interrogating the principles and concepts guiding the Union's activities. Our analysis does show that ASUU has a concept and philosophy of leadership that is dynamic, purposeful and progressive. From the standpoint of its major achievements as a body, the Union's leadership model is exemplary. Can the leadership model be replicated in our national life? My answer is YES! It can and it should. Nigeria is at the crossroads at the moment and needs a principled, committed and dedicated leadership to pull it out of the doldrums. The ASUU leadership example offers an interesting example of what is required and how this can be achieved both in the short and long terms. Nigeria needs a leadership that is transparent, accountable and has integrity; objective, diligent and professional; totally committed, courageous and dedicated to national aspirations; democratic, grassroots based and people-driven; and, above all, patriotic, anti-

imperialism and united. This is one sure way of resolving the leadership conundrum in contemporary Nigeria.

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