

73

NIETZSCHE'S PRINCIPLE OF INDIVIDUALISM AND SELF-OVERCOMING: A PATHWAY FOR NIGERIA'S DEVELOPMENT

Osita Nnajiofor and Jim Edidiong

Abstract

Nigeria is a country with diverse cultures, traditions and societal expectations. These societal expectations pose a threat to human beings when the demands are not achieved. Generally, society expects individuals to possess certain characteristics like strength, leadership and courage. People are also expected to succeed professionally, support their families and contribute to their communities regardless of any hindrances. However, these expectations vary from one culture or belief system to another. Friedrich Nietzsche's theory of individualism and self-overcoming offers valuable insights that can be of great help when applied to the context of Nigeria's development system. Nietzsche believes in the power of individuals to rise above societal norms and limitations to achieve greatness and self-fulfillment. For Nigerians, the concept of individualism can be seen as a means for personal growth and empowerment to break out or free them from the constraints of social conformity and define their own paths, values and aspirations. Though religion as one of the agents of socialization has its own merit, it has been a great threat to society. Nigeria cannot attain her expected development when most Nigerians are yet to be freed from the shackles of religious indoctrination to the realm of self-fulfillment and self-actualization. To be freed from these limitations, this paper proposes individualism and self-overcoming as a panacea against religious indoctrination and cultural belief systems that are hindering our development as a nation.

Introduction

Society often imposes certain standards, expectations of behavior, and appearance on individuals to ensure the peace and stability of that society. This pressure of any kind seeks one to conform, whether from religious, political, social, economic or cultural, can be overwhelming. These pressures lead to challenges such as inferiority complex, anxiety and depression, which are prevalent among the youths in the present times. Nigeria and other African countries have undergone significant changes and challenges in recent times; among others are the political upheavals, economic downturns and security threats. These challenges have forced Nigerians to look inward, re-evaluate their values and explore their capacity for self-overcoming to navigate these turbulent times. Nigeria is a country with a diverse religious landscape, with Christianity and Islam being the predominant among others. Nigeria is also vested with different cultural diversities and heritages. Some of these cultural beliefs are the major challenges affecting the existence of human beings, especially when they are repugnant to the nature of man. Nigeria, with over 250 ethnic groups is not immune to the challenges of cultural crisis. These cultural crises Nigerian faces are erosion of traditional customs, values and cultural practices. The advances of modernization and globalization have led to a decline in interest and participation in cultural activities and practices. Moreover, the political insurgencies in the North, the conflict between farmers and herders in the middle belt, and the agitations for secession in the Southeast have all contributed to the cultural loopholes among the different ethnic groups in the country. Hence, the government's lack of the political will to address these challenges



has further exacerbated the cultural crisis in Nigeria. However, our focus here is how culture and societal norms pose a challenge to human existence; hence, we examine Friedrich Nietzsche's theory of Individualism and self-overcoming as the way forward for breaking adamant customs and cultural norms in Nigeria.

A Brief Background of Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche was born on 15th October 1844 in a town formerly known as Prussian Saxony now Germany. He was born into the family of Lutheran Pastor, as a son of a pastor; he grew up in a conservative and religious family. His father, Carl Ludwig Nietzsche died when he was tender age leaving him with his Mother, Franziska Nietzsche, sister, Elisabeth Forster-Nietzsche and other members of his extended family. Academically, Nietzsche showed exceptional academic abilities from an early age and received a scholarship to study at the prestigious Schulpforta boarding school. After completing his education there, he enrolled at the Universities of Bonn and Leipzig, where he studied classics and philology, with the hope of becoming a minister. In his younger years, Nietzsche was religiously devout to Christian belief due to his upbringing; he became a member of the Burschenschaft Frankonia, where he stopped his theological studies and drifted away to embrace spirited atheism in his early twenties, which is one of the features of his philosophy. David Strauss's *Life of Jesus* and Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* influenced Nietzsche with its argument that the people created God and not the other way round. He, however, wrote a letter to his sister Elisabeth, who was deeply religious, regarding his loss of faith. The letter contains "Hence the way of men parts: if you want to strive for peace of soul and pleasure, then believe; if you wish to be a devotee of truth, then inquire..."¹

Nietzsche concentrated on studying philology under Professor Friedrich Wilhelm Ritschl at the University of Leipzig in 1865, where he became friends with Erwin Rohde, his fellow student. At his twenty-five, he was appointed professor of classical philology at the University of Basel, though he had not yet completed his doctoral degree, he attracted the attention of scholars through his works. In 1879, Nietzsche was tired of academic life and suffering from one health challenge to another. Hence, he retired from teaching. Battling with illnesses such as headaches, nausea, insomnia and bad eyesight, he travelled from place to place (Switzerland and Italy) in an attempt to regain his health. Nietzsche's final years were a time of deep loneliness and he came to a logical conclusion that "A profound man has to have friends, unless he still has god. But I have neither god nor friends..."²

Nietzsche's mental and physical health got deteriorated to a neurological disorder, he spent his life forecasting the future cultural crisis just over the horizon at the time when most of his centuries were oblivious to what lay ahead; however, he died on 25th August, 1900.

Nietzsche's Theory of Individualism and Self-Overcoming as a Pathway to Progress

Nietzsche was a German Philosopher who had a profound impact on various aspects of society. His ideas challenged and questioned traditional moral and philosophical foundations, influencing areas such as philosophy, psychology and political ideologies. In a developing country like Nigeria undergoing social, political and economic changes, Nietzsche opines that individual empowerment and creative self-expression can inspire individuals to overcome challenges and pursue personal and professional growth. In

his analogy of “will to Power”, Nietzsche posits it to be a call to assert one’s own agency and to strive for excellence. In Nigeria, where entrepreneurship and innovation are thriving, Individuals are encouraged to pursue their passions and excel in their chosen fields in a legitimate manner.

Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy has a significant impact on the intellectual and cultural worldwide even in Nigeria. His view challenges conventional beliefs and offers new perspectives on various aspects of human existence. Even though his influence in Nigeria may not be equated to some other parts of the earth, his philosophy still found resonance and has been interpreted and applied in unique ways within the Nigerian context. One of the aspects Nietzsche’s philosophy has resonated with some Nigerians is his critique of oppressive moral and social norms. He encourages individuals to question and challenge the prevailing moral systems and to assert their own values and ideals. In Nigeria context, this resonates with those seeking to challenge and break free from traditional cultural practices that may be limiting individual freedom or perpetuating inequality.

Nietzsche emphasizes on the power of the individual, the cultivation of personal strength and the self-mastery to stand firm in tackling the challenges. In a country like Nigeria, undergoing rapid social, political and economic changes, Nietzsche’s ideas about individual empowerment and creative self-expression can inspire individual to overcome the challenges and pursue personal and professional growth. Additionally, Nietzsche’s concept of the “will to Power” has been interpreted as a call to assert one’s own agency and to strive for excellence. In Nigeria, where entrepreneurship and innovation are thriving, this interpretation of Nietzsche’s philosophy can motivate individuals to pursue their passions and excel in their chosen fields. Apparently, it is important to note that Nietzsche’s philosophy is complex and multi-faceted, and different individuals may interpret and apply his ideas in diverse ways. Some may critique Nietzsche ideas for their potential to promote individualism at the expense of community, or for their potential to undermine traditional values and social cohesion.

Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy is renowned for its emphasis on individualism and self-overcoming. He believed that living a fulfilling and meaningful life requires us to overcome the limitations and constraints that the society and we impose on us. His theory of “Übermensch” or the “Overman” exemplifies his ideal of self-overcoming. For Nietzsche, the “übermensch” is an individual who has surpassed the limitations of the conventional morality, religion, and culture. In his view of overman, Nietzsche does not have a particular.

Individual in mind, but describing the type of person that will realise, for the first time, all the unfulfilled potential within humanity. “The time has come for man to set himself a goal. The time has come for man to plant the seed of his highest hope.”³ the übermensch is one who creates values, lives authentically and creatively, and embraces life’s challenges rather than seeking comfort and security. The path to becoming an übermensch involves self-overcoming, which means overcoming one’s weaknesses, fears, biases and limitations through constant self-reflection, self-critique, and self-transcendence, which is on the premise of “the unexamined life is not worth living” by Socrates. Nietzsche opines that Christian morality was imposed upon individuals by the church and society, which stifled their creativity and individuality. He sees this as a form of oppression that prevents individuals from being true to themselves and living a joyous and fulfilling life. In this realization of self, Nietzsche proposes the idea of the “Superman” who would transcend

traditional morality and social norms, and live according to their own values and will. He believes that superman could achieve a state of “amor fati” or love of fate by embarrassing the uncertainties of life and finding meaning in the struggle for self-realization.

Nietzsche viewed the traditional moral and cultural values of his time as limiting and oppressive, preventing individuals from fully realizing their potential. In Nigeria, most cultures are putting people in captivity, yet some people are smiling in pain and anguish; hence, this is a call to awaken from the slumbers of cultural oppression. As Nietzsche saw it, there is a need for individuals to break free from these constraints to live a meaningful and fulfilling life. Hence, people should develop their unique identities rather than conform to the expectations and norms of society⁴.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Friedrich Nietzsche’s theory of individualism and self-overcoming has been widely debated and analyzed in various cultural and social contexts. In Nigeria, his ideas have been embraced and adopted as a way of promoting personal freedom and self-realization. Individuals are encouraged to overcome societal limitations and constraints and to create their own unique paths in life. This theory may also be used to critique and challenge the dominant capitalist society, which values competition and individual achievement above all else. The concept of self-overcoming has been examined through the lens of community building and collective action, as a way to bring about social change and promote equality and justice. Nietzsche’s ideas have the power to inspire individuals and communities to challenge the status quo and strive for greater personal and social freedom. It is, however, pertinent to acknowledge the potential dangers of individualism, particularly when it is taken to an extreme and leads to the neglect of social responsibility and community engagement. Nietzsche was critical of the prevailing modern notion of individualism that emphasizes personal success, autonomy, and self-interest. He argued that this form of individualism erodes communal values, promotes a culture of competition and encourages the overpowering of weaker individuals by the strong leading to a sense of alienation and the loss of a collective identity.

In relating Nietzsche’s ideology to Nigerians, it is essential to consider the country’s cultural, social and historical context. Nigeria is a diverse nation with over 250 ethnic groups, each with its own values and ways of life. Traditional communal values are deeply rooted in Nigerian society, emphasizing the importance of family, community and collective wellbeing. However, with the influence of globalization, urbanization and Western ideologies, Nigerians have increasingly embraced individualistic ideals. This is a paradigm shift and it is because of the impact of neoliberal economic policies that prioritize competition, materialism and personal success. On this note, as a way of recommendation, Nigerians are encouraged to pursue individual goals at the expense of communal welfare, potentially leading to a breakdown in social cohesion and a decline in collective responsibilities. Nietzsche’s analysis alerts us to the potential consequences of this individualistic trend on Nigerian’s wellbeing. The hyper-competitive nature of individualism can exacerbate existing inequalities, making it difficult for marginalized groups to thrive. The emphasis on personal success and autonomy may lead to isolation and disconnection from one’s cultural roots and community. Moreover, Nietzsche warned that individuals can foster a ‘will to power’ mentality where people strive for domination and

exploit others. This could manifest in Nigerians prioritizing personal gain over ethical considerations, leading to corruption, nepotism and a disregard for the common good.

Endnotes

1. Wallraff, C. F, *An Introduction to the Understanding of His philosophical Activity*. Chicago: Regnery, 1965, p. 436
2. Ibid
3. Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and For None*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, New York: Penguin Classics, (1961).
4. Nietzsche, F. *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*. University of Nebraska Press. 1986. p. 231.
5. Schaberg, William (1996). *The Nietzsche Canon*. University of Chicago Press. p. 32.