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AN ESSENCIST X-RAY OF LEADERSHIP PROBLEM AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The persistent crisis of development in Nigeria cannot be adequately explained by economic scarcity, institutional weakness, colonial inheritance, or corruption considered in isolation. At its deepest level, the Nigerian development crisis is a crisis of leadership understood as a crisis of human essence, moral consciousness, responsibility, and the purposive use of power. This paper undertook an Essencist x-ray of the leadership problem in Nigeria and argued that the fundamental defect of Nigerian leadership is not merely the absence of political competence but the displacement of the essence and purpose of leadership by the pursuit of private, sectional, ethnic, religious, and material interests. Essencism, developed as a philosophical framework by Samuel Asuquo Ekanem, begins from the proposition that the essence of a thing determines what it ought to be and what it ought to accomplish. Applied to leadership, this means that leadership must be evaluated according to its essential purpose: the rational, ethical, accountable and developmental advancement of human beings and the common good. The paper argues that when leadership loses this orientation, public power becomes an instrument of domination, primitive accumulation and institutional capture. Nigeria's problems of corruption, insecurity, poverty, unemployment, infrastructural decay, educational weakness and democratic dysfunction are therefore manifestations of an underlying leadership pathology. The paper proposed an Essencist leadership model founded on human dignity, moral consciousness, knowledge, competence, accountability, justice, service, institutional responsibility and developmental intentionality. It further argued that implementation requires transformation of political recruitment, civic education, public institutions, leadership training, accountability mechanisms and the relationship between citizens and political authority. The paper concluded that Nigeria requires not merely a change of leaders but a philosophical reconstruction of leadership

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itself. Development becomes possible when political power is returned to its essence as a moral responsibility for the flourishing of persons and society.

Keywords: Essencism, Leadership, Development, Political Morality, Accountability, Governance, Democracy, Human Essence, Public Responsibility.

Introduction

The question of leadership occupies a peculiar position in the Nigerian philosophical and political imagination. Nigeria possesses abundant human and material resources, a large youthful population, considerable intellectual capital, extensive agricultural potential, petroleum and mineral resources, and a strategic geographical position in Africa. Yet these possibilities have not consistently translated into corresponding improvements in the quality of human existence. Poverty, insecurity, unemployment, infrastructural deficits, corruption, educational inadequacy, institutional weakness and social injustice remain persistent features of the Nigerian condition. Contemporary scholarship repeatedly connects these problems with failures of leadership, accountability and governance (Gberevbie *et al*. 1-2; Abada 1-3). The conventional approach to the Nigerian leadership problem frequently proceeds from political science, public administration, economics or sociology. These approaches are valuable because they identify institutional structures, patterns of political behaviour, resource distribution, corruption, electoral practices and administrative deficiencies. Yet the persistence of the problem suggests that something deeper is involved. If institutional reforms repeatedly fail, if anti-corruption campaigns produce only temporary effects, if constitutions are repeatedly amended without corresponding ethical transformation, and if political office continues to attract persons whose principal interest is private enrichment, then the problem is not simply institutional. It is philosophical.

The philosophical question is therefore: What is leadership? More precisely, what is the essence of leadership, and what happens when those who exercise political power cease to embody that essence? These questions move the discussion from the surface of political administration to the ontology and ethics of political existence. It is within this philosophical space that Essencism becomes relevant. Essencism, as developed by Samuel Asuquo Ekanem, is a philosophical orientation concerned with the essence of things and, particularly, the realization of the essential capacities and purposes of human existence. Ekanem explains Essencism as a philosophical project directed toward recovering what makes a thing what it is and applying that understanding to human and social development (Ekanem and Ekefre, 303-310). His subsequent works apply the Essencist perspective to education, democracy, social justice, environmental questions and development. The present paper extends that philosophical orientation to leadership. Its central argument is that the Nigerian leadership problem is fundamentally an Essencist problem: leadership has been separated from its essence. Where leadership should mean service, responsibility, justice, competence and the advancement of the common good, it has frequently become associated with power acquisition, personal accumulation, patronage and political survival. The paper therefore seeks to accomplish four objectives. First, it clarifies the philosophical meaning of leadership from an Essencist perspective. Second, it x-rays the principal manifestations of the Nigerian leadership crisis. Third, it establishes the connection between leadership failure and underdevelopment. Fourth, it proposes an Essencist framework for reconstructing Nigerian leadership and translating that reconstruction into developmental practice.

The Conceptual and Philosophical Meaning of Essencism

The concept of essence has occupied philosophy from antiquity. Aristotle distinguished between what a thing is and its accidental characteristics, arguing that knowledge requires attention to what makes a thing what it fundamentally is (Aristotle, VII). The question of essence therefore asks a foundational question: what must a thing possess or realize in order to be what it is? Essencism appropriates this philosophical concern and applies it to human and social realities. Ekanem's formulation identifies Essencism with a philosophical concern for the essence of human existence and the realization of the purposes embedded within that existence (Ekanem and Ekefre, 303-10). It is consequently not simply an abstract metaphysical theory. It has ethical, educational, political and developmental implications. The important distinction is between existence and essential realization. A person may exist biologically without realizing the moral, rational and social capacities that distinguish human existence. Similarly, an institution may formally exist while failing to realize the purpose for which it was created. A government may possess constitutional legitimacy while failing to promote justice, welfare and human flourishing. A parliament may exist without exercising meaningful oversight. A university may possess buildings and personnel without realizing its intellectual mission. In each case, existence has been separated from essence.

This distinction is fundamental to an Essencist understanding of leadership. Leadership is not essentially the possession of a title. Neither is it essentially the occupation of a political office. A person may be president, governor, minister, legislator, local government chairman or political party leader without realizing the essence of leadership. Office is therefore accidental; leadership is essential. The former concerns position, while the latter concerns purpose. From this perspective, the essence of leadership lies in responsible influence directed toward the realization of the common good. Leadership is therefore fundamentally relational. The leader exists in relation to the people, the institution, the law and the future. Political leadership cannot be reduced to the ability to command because command without moral purpose can become domination. The Essencist question is consequently not merely, “Who is in power?” It is, “For what purpose is power being exercised?” This question is particularly important in Nigeria because political office frequently possesses enormous material and symbolic value. When political office becomes the principal route to wealth, status and influence, leadership is easily transformed into an instrument of private accumulation. Essencism challenges this transformation by insisting that power must remain subordinate to purpose.

Leadership as an Ethical Essence

Leadership possesses at least six essential dimensions: purpose, service, responsibility, competence, justice and accountability.

i. **Leadership and Purpose:** A leader without a clearly defined public purpose is merely a possessor of power. Political leadership must have an objective beyond the preservation of office. Aristotle's conception of political association is instructive because the political community exists not merely for survival but for living well (Politics I). The same principle is applicable to Nigeria. The purpose of government cannot be reduced to winning elections or maintaining political control. The ultimate purpose must be the improvement of human conditions. Development, therefore, is not an accidental consequence of leadership; it is one of its essential ends. An Essencist leader must consequently ask: What kind of society am I creating? What kind of citizen is my administration producing? What institutions will remain after I leave office? What

condition will the next generation inherit? Leadership becomes ethically meaningful when it is capable of answering these questions.

ii. **Leadership as Service:** The second essence of leadership is service. Public office is a fiduciary responsibility because public resources are held in trust for the people. The Nigerian Constitution itself establishes principles of governance that connect political authority with the welfare and security of the people. Yet the philosophical significance of these constitutional provisions is frequently weakened when public office is treated as personal property. An Essencist conception reverses the conventional hierarchy. The leader does not possess the people; the leader is responsible to the people. Political power is therefore not ownership but stewardship. This principle also resonates with African communitarian understandings of personhood. John Mbiti's famous observation that African conceptions of personhood are profoundly relational captures the idea that individual existence is inseparable from community (African Religions and Philosophy 106). Leadership, accordingly, should be judged by the quality of communal life it produces.

iii. **Leadership as Responsibility:** Power without responsibility is dangerous because it creates the possibility of arbitrary action. Hans Jonas argues that modern technological power has expanded the consequences of human action and therefore requires an expanded ethics of responsibility (1-2). Political power presents an analogous problem. The greater the authority possessed by a leader, the greater the responsibility attached to its exercise. A Nigerian political leader controlling public budgets, security institutions, appointments and policy decisions possesses the capacity to affect millions of lives. Such power cannot be ethically neutral. Essencism therefore transforms leadership from a privilege into an obligation.

iv. **Leadership as Competence:** Good intentions are insufficient for leadership. A person may be morally sincere and nevertheless administratively incompetent. Development requires knowledge, institutional understanding, policy capacity and the ability to translate vision into programmes. Amartya Sen's conception of development as expansion of substantive human freedoms is instructive here. Development is not merely an increase in aggregate income but the enlargement of people's real opportunities to live lives they have reason to value (18). Leadership must therefore possess the intellectual competence necessary to create such opportunities. An Essencist leader must be both morally responsible and technically capable.

v. **Leadership as Justice:** Justice constitutes another essential feature of leadership. Political authority loses legitimacy when public resources are distributed according to ethnic, religious, familial or partisan preference rather than justice. Rawls's principle of justice emphasizes the importance of institutions that structure social cooperation fairly (3-4). Although Nigeria's social and historical circumstances differ considerably from Rawls's theoretical context, the fundamental philosophical point remains useful: institutions should not be structured principally to benefit the powerful. Essencist leadership therefore rejects discrimination and arbitrary privilege because they contradict the essential purpose of political authority.

vi. **Leadership as Accountability:** Accountability is perhaps the most practical manifestation of leadership's ethical essence. A leader who cannot explain decisions, expenditures, appointments and policies to the public exercises power without sufficient moral restraint. Research on Nigeria has repeatedly established a connection between leadership, accountability and development. Gberevbie et al. identify poor leadership,

unethical behaviour, corruption, weak resource management and inadequate accountability among the factors undermining sustainable development in Nigeria. Essencism adds a philosophical explanation: accountability is not merely a bureaucratic mechanism; it is part of what leadership is. If leadership cannot answer to those over whom it exercises authority, it has lost part of its essence.

An Essencist X-ray of the Nigerian Leadership Problem

An x-ray does not merely describe the external appearance of a body. It attempts to reveal what lies beneath the surface. An Essencist x-ray of Nigerian leadership must therefore look beyond individual scandals and identify the philosophical structures that produce recurrent failure.

i. **The Substitution of Power for Purpose:** The first pathology is the substitution of power for purpose. Political leadership frequently becomes an end rather than a means. Once political power becomes the principal objective, public policy can be subordinated to political survival. Projects are selected for visibility rather than developmental value; appointments are made for political loyalty rather than competence; public expenditure becomes an instrument of patronage; and institutions become mechanisms for consolidating power. This is an ontological inversion. The means becomes the end. Leadership becomes power acquisition, while the people become instruments for sustaining the leader. From an Essencist standpoint, this represents a fundamental loss of identity. Leadership ceases to be leadership precisely because its essential purpose has been abandoned.

ii. **The Privatization of the Public:** A second pathology is the privatization of public resources. When public office becomes an avenue for private accumulation, the distinction between public and private morality collapses. The state is treated as a source of personal wealth, political patronage and family advancement. The consequences are enormous. Resources that should finance education, healthcare, infrastructure and security are diverted from their developmental purpose. Corruption therefore becomes not simply an economic crime but an ontological contradiction: public resources cease to perform their public essence. Scholarly analyses of Nigerian governance have repeatedly identified corruption, weak accountability and poor leadership as mutually reinforcing factors in the country's development difficulties (Abada 43; Ologbenla 67).

iii. **Ethnicity and the Fragmentation of the Common Good:** Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversity is not itself a problem. Diversity becomes problematic when political leadership converts identity into an instrument of exclusion. The Essencist perspective asks whether an identity-based political action advances the essential dignity of the human person and the common good. If an appointment is made solely because an individual belongs to the leader's ethnic group, the principle of competence is displaced by primordial loyalty. If resources are distributed primarily for electoral advantage, justice is displaced by patronage. This produces what may be called fragmented citizenship. Citizens increasingly encounter the state not as members of one political community but as members of competing networks seeking access to state resources. An Essencist reconstruction requires a movement from primordial loyalty to civic loyalty.

iv. **The Crisis of Political Education:** Another fundamental problem is inadequate political and civic education. Democracy requires citizens who understand rights, responsibilities, public institutions and the moral meaning of political participation. Ekanem and Ekefre argued that education informed by Essencism can contribute to liberation from

ignorance and the development of citizens capable of confronting intolerance and social dysfunction (303-10). The political consequence is significant. Where citizens lack adequate political consciousness, elections can be reduced to transactions. Votes become commodities, politicians become patrons, and political participation becomes a struggle for immediate material benefits rather than a process of choosing those capable of advancing the common good. Leadership failure is therefore partly a citizen-formation problem. Bad leaders emerge and survive within political cultures that reward bad leadership.

v. **The Crisis of Moral Consciousness:** The deepest pathology may be the erosion of moral consciousness. Institutions can establish rules, but rules alone cannot create morally responsible leaders. A person determined to steal will search for ways around anti-corruption regulations. A person determined to abuse power will manipulate institutional weaknesses. Law is necessary, but law requires moral agents capable of respecting it. Essencism therefore emphasizes the formation of the whole person. Ekanem's educational application of Essencism suggests that education should cultivate not merely intellectual capacity but moral and social responsibility (Ekanem and Ekefre, 265-72). Leadership development must consequently become character development.

vi. **The Crisis of Vision:** Development requires vision because development is fundamentally future-oriented. A leader without developmental vision may administer existing problems without transforming the conditions that produce them. Vision involves the ability to see beyond immediate political cycles and imagine institutions capable of serving future generations. Nigeria's development challenge illustrates the importance of this distinction. The World Bank's Nigeria Development Update has emphasized the need for sustained reforms capable of restoring macroeconomic stability and creating conditions for growth. Yet reforms themselves require leadership capable of sustaining difficult policies beyond immediate political calculations. An Essencist leader therefore thinks historically and futuristically. The leader asks not merely what produces political approval today but what produces human flourishing tomorrow.

Leadership and the Nigerian Development Crisis

Development cannot be separated from leadership because development requires collective decisions about the allocation and use of resources. The Nigerian development crisis has several interconnected dimensions: economic poverty, unemployment, infrastructural deficits, educational challenges, insecurity, environmental degradation, weak institutions and democratic distrust. These problems are not independent. They form a system. For example, unemployment can intensify poverty; poverty can facilitate criminality; insecurity can discourage investment; weak investment can reduce employment; corruption can divert resources from infrastructure; poor infrastructure can reduce productivity; and weak education can reduce the human capacity required for technological development. Leadership determines whether these problems are approached as isolated crises or as interconnected developmental systems. An Essencist approach rejects fragmented governance because human beings themselves are integrated beings. Economic development without moral development can produce sophisticated corruption. Technological development without environmental responsibility can produce ecological destruction. Political development without civic education can produce electoral manipulation. Economic growth without distributive justice can coexist with mass poverty. Development must therefore be holistic. This corresponds with Ekanem's broader

application of Essencism to social justice and democratic values. His argument is that poverty, social injustice, insecurity and democratic dysfunction require a philosophical transformation that addresses the moral formation of citizens and the values governing political life (Ekanem and Emejulu 1455-65). The central Essencist proposition is thus: The development of society cannot exceed the moral and intellectual development of those entrusted with directing its collective affairs.

Towards an Essencist Philosophy of Leadership

An Essencist philosophy of leadership can be summarized through seven principles.

i. **The Principle of Human Dignity:** Every policy must ultimately be evaluated according to its consequences for human dignity. A government that increases wealth while degrading human dignity cannot be regarded as fully developmental. Human beings must therefore be treated as ends rather than instruments of political power.
ii. **The Principle of Essential Purpose:** Every public institution must be evaluated according to its essential purpose. The essence of a legislature is not merely legislation but representation, deliberation and oversight. The essence of the executive is not merely administration but implementation of policies for public welfare. The essence of the judiciary is not merely adjudication but justice. The essence of the civil service is not personal enrichment but professional public service. Where an institution deviates from its essence, reform becomes necessary.
iii. **The Principle of Moral Consciousness:** Leadership must be grounded in moral consciousness. The leader must possess the capacity to distinguish what is politically possible from what is morally permissible. This distinction is crucial because political expediency cannot be the ultimate standard of public action.
iv. **The Principle of Knowledge and Competence:** An Essencist leader must value knowledge. Public policy should be informed by evidence, expertise, research and rational deliberation. Political leadership should therefore develop systematic mechanisms for consulting universities, researchers, professional bodies, civil society organizations and communities.
v. **The Principle of Accountability:** Every exercise of public power should generate a corresponding obligation to give account. Accountability should operate vertically through elections and horizontally through legislatures, courts, audit institutions, anti-corruption agencies, professional bodies and civil society.
vi. **The Principle of Justice:** Justice requires impartiality. Political leaders must distribute public opportunities according to legitimate criteria such as need, competence, equity and developmental priority rather than personal loyalty.
vii. **The Principle of Future Responsibility:** Leadership must consider generations yet unborn. Infrastructure, education, environmental policy, public debt, natural-resource exploitation and institutional reforms should be assessed according to their long-term effects. This principle is particularly relevant to Nigeria's natural-resource economy. A country cannot claim development merely because it extracts resources. Development occurs when resources are converted into enduring human capabilities and institutions.

Implementing Essencist Leadership in Nigeria

A philosophy becomes socially significant when it moves from conceptual reflection to institutional practice. Essencism must therefore be translated into concrete mechanisms.

i. **Essencist Political Education:** Nigeria requires a systematic programme of philosophical and civic education beginning from the primary level and continuing through tertiary

education. Citizens should be taught the meaning of democracy, public accountability, constitutionalism, human rights, political responsibility and the common good. Education should also cultivate critical thinking so that citizens can distinguish political propaganda from political truth. This is consistent with Ekanem's argument that education can be used to liberate citizens from ignorance and promote democratic and social values (Ekanem and Ekefre, "Education and Religious Intolerance" 303-10).

ii. **Essencist Leadership Curriculum:** Leadership training should become part of the preparation of public officials. Such training should include: i. philosophy of public service; ii. Ethics and moral reasoning; constitutional responsibility; iii. Public financial management; iv. Conflict resolution; v. policy analysis; vi. Human rights; vii. Environmental responsibility; viii. Development economics; ix. Accountability and transparency. The objective should not be merely to produce technically competent administrators but ethically conscious leaders.

iii. **Reforming Political Recruitment:** Political parties should establish transparent criteria for selecting candidates. Educational attainment alone should not be the sole criterion, but candidates should demonstrate competence, integrity, public service record and developmental vision. Political recruitment based primarily on wealth and patronage contradicts the essence of democratic leadership.

iv. **Strengthening Institutions:** Essencist leadership cannot depend entirely on individual virtue. Institutions must be designed to constrain the abuse of power. Legislative oversight, independent auditing, judicial independence, transparent procurement, freedom of information, asset declaration, open budgeting and effective anti-corruption institutions are therefore essential. Recent scholarship on Nigeria's legislature similarly emphasizes the importance of oversight mechanisms and institutional accountability for effective governance.

v. **Linking Public Expenditure to Human Development:** Public expenditure should be evaluated according to developmental outcomes rather than merely expenditure levels. An Essencist budget asks: How many children received quality education? How many citizens gained access to healthcare? How many productive jobs were created? How much infrastructure became functional? How much poverty was reduced? How much insecurity was prevented? What institutional capacity was created? This transforms budgeting from accounting into ethical development.

vi. **Creating a Culture of Consequence:** Leadership accountability requires consequences. Where public officials violate laws, misuse resources or abuse constitutional authority, institutional processes must produce consequences irrespective of political status. Without consequence, accountability becomes rhetoric.

vii. **Reconstructing the Citizen-Leader Relationship:** The citizen must cease to be perceived as a passive recipient of political patronage. Citizens should understand themselves as co-owners of the political community. This requires active participation in elections, community organizations, professional associations, civil society and public debate. The leader and citizen are therefore mutually responsible for the quality of political life.

Essencism, Democracy and the Common Good

Democracy is frequently defined procedurally through elections, majority rule and representation. Yet democracy possesses a deeper moral essence. If elections merely determine who controls state resources, democracy becomes a periodic competition for power. If elections produce governments that disregard human dignity, accountability and justice, the formal existence of democracy does not guarantee its substantive realization.

Ekanem and Emejulu argue that persistent poverty, social injustice, religious violence and insecurity raise fundamental questions about the extent to which Nigerian democracy is realizing its developmental and social purposes (1455-65). Essencism therefore asks democracy to return to its purpose. The essence of democracy should be understood as a political arrangement through which citizens participate in determining the conditions of their collective existence under principles of dignity, justice, equality, freedom and accountability. The common good must therefore occupy the centre of democratic leadership. This also requires an ethical transformation of the citizen. Citizens who sell their votes, defend corrupt leaders because they belong to their ethnic or religious groups, or demand personal benefits from public officials participate in the reproduction of the very leadership crisis they condemn. Essencism therefore refuses to locate the entire problem in political elites. It asks the difficult question: What kind of citizen does a corrupt political system produce, and what kind of citizen reproduces that system? The answer points toward a dialectical relationship between leadership and followership. Bad leadership corrupts citizenship, while morally weak citizenship enables bad leadership. Development therefore requires transformation at both levels.

Critical Reflections on the Essencist Proposal

An objection may be raised that the Essencist approach is too idealistic. Nigeria's leadership problems, it may be argued, are structural and cannot be solved by appeals to morality. This objection has merit if Essencism is understood merely as moral exhortation. But Essencism as applied here is not a proposal to replace institutions with personal virtue. Rather, it combines moral formation with institutional design. A second objection is that the concept of essence may itself be difficult to establish. Human beings disagree about what constitutes the essence of leadership. This is philosophically legitimate. Essencism should therefore not be interpreted dogmatically. The essence of leadership must be continually subjected to rational criticism, public deliberation and historical experience. A third objection is that Nigeria's diversity makes the idea of a common good difficult to operationalize. Yet diversity does not eliminate the possibility of common principles. Human dignity, justice, security, education, healthcare, opportunity and freedom can provide a common normative foundation without erasing cultural differences. Indeed, the existence of diversity makes a philosophy of common good more necessary. The value of Essencism is consequently not that it offers a magical solution to Nigeria's problems. Its value is that it supplies a philosophical criterion for distinguishing authentic leadership from the mere occupation of political office.

Conclusion

The Nigerian leadership crisis is deeper than the failure of particular political administrations. It is a crisis of the meaning and purpose of leadership itself. Political authority has too frequently been separated from moral responsibility, public service from private accumulation, competence from political loyalty, and democracy from the common good. An Essencist x-ray reveals that these problems share a common pathology: the separation of leadership from its essence. Leadership exists essentially for responsible service, justice, competence, accountability and the advancement of human flourishing. When these purposes disappear, leadership becomes domination. Political office becomes private property; public resources become instruments of patronage; citizens become clients; institutions become mechanisms of political control; and development becomes perpetually deferred. Essencism provides a philosophical response by returning leadership to the

question of essence. What makes leadership leadership is not the possession of office but the realization of its moral and developmental purpose. The implication for Nigeria is profound. The country does not require merely new political personalities. It requires a reconstruction of the philosophy of political leadership. It requires citizens who understand democracy as responsibility rather than entitlement; leaders who understand power as stewardship rather than ownership; institutions that embody accountability rather than patronage; and educational systems that cultivate moral consciousness alongside intellectual competence. The implementation of Essencism should therefore occur through political education, leadership formation, institutional accountability, merit-based recruitment, constitutionalism, transparent public finance, civic participation and a deliberate culture of responsibility. Ultimately, the question of Nigerian development is a question about what kind of human being Nigerian leadership is producing and what kind of human community political power is creating. The Essencist answer is unequivocal: development becomes authentic when leadership realizes its essence in the service of human dignity, justice, knowledge, accountability and the common good. Nigeria's transformation will therefore require more than economic planning or institutional restructuring. It will require a philosophical reawakening a recovery of the essence of leadership itself.

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