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Relationship between Culture and Work Ethics: The Islamic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study determines Islamic work ethics (IWE) in the Nigerian context with the aim to provide a proposed model for the country, since most of the existing literature on work ethics is derived from non-Islamic perspectives. There has been a paucity of literature, which provides evidence on how work ethics is to be used in our society. In Nigeria, the IWE is traced back during the Islamic sharia period of the Sokoto caliphate. However, immediately after the Nigerian independence, the formation of Nigerian constitutions work ethics on Islamic sharia was terminated, and that gave rise to unethical behaviors in all sectors of the country's development. Therefore, this study is to provide a model that could be useful for work ethics in the Sokoto state as well as other states of Nigeria.

Keywords: Islamic Work Ethics, Religion, Culture
JEL Classifications: C610, C623, I23

1. INTRODUCTION

Culture is the total of socially transmitted behavioral patterns, beliefs, arts, institutions and all other products of human work typical of a community at a given time (Amro and Bahauddin, 2015). Work ethics is seen as a group of values and behaviors related to the workplace that a society feels are moral (Sanders, 2004). Islamic work ethics (IWE) is also seen as the orientation, which influences and shapes the involvement of believers in the work place and implies that work is necessary for a person to establish equilibrium and social life (Ali and Al-Owaihan, 2008). Each country, whether developed or under-developed in the world setting today, has different cultural behaviors and ways of training their people. However, what is morally and ethically good in some societies is being condemned in other societies (Al-Aidaros et al., 2013). For example, indecency in Muslim youth especially girls is discouraged by Islamic culture, while it is allowed in the western world (Alkharraz, 2009). According to Saleh and Lawal (2013), the political, socio-cultural and economic developments of Nigeria have been hijacked by the menace of unethical behaviors. These unethical behaviors dominate all sectors of economic development (Agbiboa, 2012; Imhonopi and

Moses, 2013; Ndikumana, 2013; Rasul and Rogger, 2013). There are various forms of unethical business or cultural conduct that are in clear violation of IWE such as hoarding, interest dealing (*riba*), false swearing, inexact weight, all of which are being practiced in Nigerian markets (Dogarawa, 2013). Despite the significance of work ethics for businesses in Nigeria, little has been contributed to the area. In view of the foregoing, this study seeks to examine the relationship between culture and Work ethics in Islamic perspectives.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature in this section discusses culture and work ethics based on prior studies, Al Qur'an and Hadiths. Several studies were conducted on culture in different contexts and countries, in the Hadith and Qur'an. Work ethics has been discussed in the literature for different types of business and dealings based on the conventional and Islamic perspectives.

2.1. Culture
Culture emerged from Latin word "cultura" which is a derivative of "colere" meaning "cultivation" or tending. It was recorded

first in the English Oxford Dictionary in 1510 meaning "training of the minds" or manners. For anthropological usage, however, culture may be defined as the way of life of a specific group (Philips, 2006). Culture is defined as the total of socially transmitted behavioral patterns, beliefs, arts, institutions and all other products of human work typical of a community at a given time (Amro and Bahauddin, 2015). Culture is also defined as man-made aspect of human environment (Philips, 2006). According to Shaffer (2005), culture is interpreted as the group of forces that defines a predominant self-identity of a specific collective of people that encompasses the factors of ethnicity, religion, history, and civilization. Cultural knowledge in the opinion of Arslan (2009) is rooted in the culture, and it is passed on through symbols, language, and rituals. Therefore, individuals relied upon assumptions, traditions, norms, values, and beliefs to make sense of a situation. One of the most important forces that influence cultural behavior is religion (Ismaeel and Katharina, 2012).

Roomi (2011) found that socio-cultural factors negatively affect the growth of women-owned enterprises in Pakistan. Meanwhile, (Tlaiss, 2015) found that, Islamic culture has positively played a significant role in the positive attitude of Muslim women entrepreneurs toward IWE in the four countries in the Middle East. Aluko (2003) found that there are different cultural influences among the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria that comprise Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo. He found that one of the tribes is more religious and less aggressive at work, while the other one is more aggressive with high emphasis and premium on money than others. Okpara (2014) also found that there is a relationship between culture and ethical behaviors of managers. According to him, long-term family commitment, loyalty to the community and family and respect for elders are some of the determinants of the cultural influence of the Nigerian manager.

2.2. IWE

IWE is an old concept that originates more than 1400 years ago. It is evidence is written in the Qur'an and demonstrated by the actions and sayings of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) (Aldulaimi, 2016; Ali and Al-Owaihan, 2008). According to Hayati and Caniago (2012), IWE comprises expectations in one's behavior at work, which includes his dedication, effort, responsibility, cooperation, creativity and social relations. Kumar and Rose (2010) perceived IWE as encouraging consultations and cooperation, and it is seen as an avenue of overcoming problems and avoiding mistakes in meeting one's needs in life. IWE is also seen as the expectations of the relationship between the individuals themselves and their attitude at work in light of Islamic tenets and values (Usman, 2015). Actually, the Islamic work culture has multi-dimensional relations with various aspects of life, including political, social, and economic aspects (Ahmad et al., 2016). Ahmad et al. (2010) emphasized that the understanding of ethics is greatly standardized in Islam because of its base in *iman* (faith). From *iman* to *taqwa* (fear and respect of Allah), that will give the seller the courage to disclose the faults in the items he is selling. The debtor may settle his debt very early and the lender may be lenient or compromise on the debt of those who cannot afford to pay, all for the desire to please Allah (SWT).

2.3. Culture and IWE

According to Al-Qaradawi (1995), culture, science, art, luxuries, literature and pleasures are not enough to satisfy the need of man by his nature, but it is only the belief in the almighty Allah that can provide security and peace to the mind and heart of individuals. As a global religion, the believers of many ethnicities and nationalities have come to accept the Islamic culture. With the growth of the Islamic empire, the knowledge of the Muslims expanded as they are exposed to the culture of the people they conquer (Tracy, 2015).

Culture has been described as one of the most significant factors that have influence on ethical decision-making of business (Okpara, 2014). Almoharby (2011) cited Mittelstaedt (2002) as stating that cultural beliefs of market participants are controlled by religion, and the boundaries of social behaviors acceptable in the market are also defined by religion.

Islam recognizes the diversity in people's culture, language, food and dress, as Allah's bounties to mankind (Al-Qur'an 30:22). However, any culture that contradicts the teachings of Islam is rejected (Al-Qur'an 4:115). In another verse Al-Qur'an says:

> "*O mankind, indeed we have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted*" (Al-Qur'an 49:13).

No culture in the world is superior to Islamic culture. Qur'an decrees:

> "*You are the best nation produced (as an example) for mankind. You enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and believe in Allah*" (Al-Qur'an 3:110).

Islam as a complete religion was revealed from God with full guidance. Therefore, any culture resulting from the experiment of any human cannot compete with it. Qur'an states:
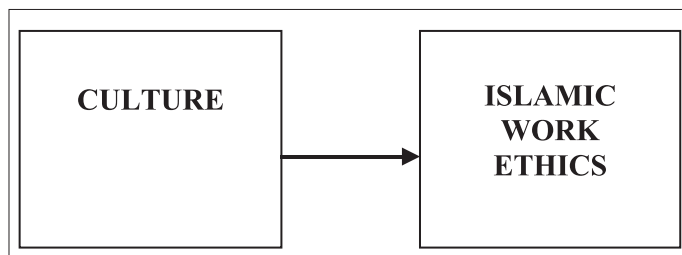
> "*This day I have perfected for you your religion and completed my favor upon you and have approved for you Islam as religion*" (Al-Qur'an 5:3).

Culture has a great impact in shaping the attitudes of a person positively or negatively. For instance, from the prophetic hadith, it was indicated that each person is born in a good Islamic shape, but the society he found himself will change him to his or her respective status. This is found in Hadith No: 2658 narrated by Sahih Muslim that Abū Hurairah reported the saying of the Messenger of Allah (PBUH):

> "*There is no child who is not born in a state of Fitrah (instinct) and then his parents make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian*" (Sahih Al-Muslim: 6650).

2.4. Conceptual Framework

Below is the conceptual framework for this study, Culture as the independent variable while IWE as the dependent variable (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Conceptual framework

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┌─────────────────┐        ┌─────────────────┐
│                 │        │     ISLAMIC     │
│    CULTURE      │──────▶ │      WORK       │
│                 │        │     ETHICS      │
└─────────────────┘        └─────────────────┘
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2.5. Hypothesis Development

Culture has been described as one of the most significant factors that have influence on the ethical decision making of business (Okpara, 2014). A business requires information on the cross-cultural ethics variation (Forsyth and O'Boyle, 2010). Cultural norms, religious prescriptions and the actual practice differ widely and are contradictory sometimes (Roomi, 2011). In some people's culture, thinking about maximizing their income at the expense of others and the company as a whole is rampant, and it causes them to behave unethically in their businesses (Forsyth and O'Boyle, 2010).

From the Islamic perspectives, cultural attitude has a great impact on IWE. People act positively or negatively in business transactions according to their cultural attitude. Al-Qur'an and the Sunnah of the prophet (PBUH) highlight the negative and positive impacts of culture on work ethics. As for the negative influence, one of the determinants is impatience and the greedy desire to acquire more wealth and take advantage of others, which make some people behave unethically in business. Al-Qur'an says:

"Truly man was created very impatient. Fretful when evil touches him. And niggardly when good reaches him. Not so those devoted to prayer. Those who remains steadfast to their prayer. And those in whose wealth is a recognized right. For the (needy) who asks and him who is prevented (for some reason from asking). And those who hold the truth of the day of judgement" (Al-Qur'an 70:19-26).

The hasty culture of a man to become very rich within the shortest time also influences his ethical behaviors. Al-Qur'an dictates:

"And a man is ever hasty" (Al-Qur'an 17:11), *"But you (men) love the present life of this world. And neglect the hereafter"* (Al-Qur'an 75: 20-21).

Another culture that controls the behaviors of human in business activities is the acquisition of power, and that makes him transgress. Al-Qur'an dictates:

"Nay, verily man does transgress (in disbelief and evil deed). Because he considers himself self-sufficient. Surely, unto your Lord is the return" (Al-Qur'an 96: 6-8).

The ignorance of the implication of immoral behaviors is another cause. Al-Qur'an dictates further:

"Truly, We did offer Al-Amanah (the trust of moral responsibility or honesty and all the duties which Allah has

ordained) to the heavens and the earth, and the mountains, but they declined to bear it and were afraid of it (i.e. afraid of Allah's torment, but man bore it. Verily, he was unjust (to himself) and ignorant (of its results)" (Al-Qur'an 33:72).

On the positive part of cultural influence, Trustworthiness (*Amanah*) is part of the Islamic culture that influences IWE. Being trustworthy entails being fair, being honest in one's business dealings, being punctual in terms of timeliness and regularity as well as honoring commitments, trust and keeping promises. Al-Qur'an states further:

"Those who are faithfully true to their amanah (all the duties which God has ordained, honesty, moral responsibility and trusts, etc.) and to their covenants…. these indeed are the inheritors. Who shall inherit paradise. And dwell there in forever" (Al-Qur'an 23:8, 23:10-11).

Islam commands all Muslims to hold people's right with high esteem. Islam also condemns all vices and corruption. Qur'an states:

"Verily, God does command you to render back your trusts to whom they are do" (Al-Qur'an 4:58).

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) seriously warns against upholding the rights of others when he said:

"God says 'There are three people whom I shall be their opponent on the day of judgment: A man who was given something in My name and then betrays; A man who sells-off a free man (as a slave) and consumes the price; and a man who hires a labourer, make use of his service then does not give him his wages" (Sahih Al-Bukhari: 2227).

Modesty or shyness prevents someone from behaving badly to his fellow human beings. A modest person will not have the courage of cheating or exploiting other people in any aspect. Prophet (PBUH) dictates:

"Modesty is part of faith (Bukhari and Muslim). He also says: "Iman has sixty odd or seventy odd branches. The uppermost of all these is the testimony of faith: La ilahaillallah (There is no true God but Allah), while the last of them is the removal of harmful object from the road. And shyness is a branch of iman" (Sahih Al-Muslim: 58).

Without shyness, someone will behave differently in business. Prophet (PBUH) says:

"Indeed from the teachings of the first Prophets which has reached you is 'if you do not have shyness then do as you please" (Sahih Al-Bukhari: 6120).

Honesty is part of the culture of a true Islamic society that is intolerant of dishonesty in all forms. Islam emphasizes honesty in all dealings. Al-Qur'an dictates:

"O you, who believe, fear God and be with those who are true (in words and deeds)" (Al-Qur'an 9:119).

The influence of honesty is reflected in the Prophetic tradition narrated by Al-Bukhari:

"Truthfulness leads to the righteousness, and righteousness leads to paradise. In addition, a man keeps on telling the truth until he becomes a truthful person. Falsehood leads to wickedness and evil-doing, and wickedness leads to the (Hell) fire, and a man may keep on telling lies till he is written before God, as a liar" (Sahih Al-Bukhari: 6094).

One of the cultures of Muslims is chastity. Chastity preserves the dignity of Muslim and the society. Al-Qur'an commands all Muslim to control themselves in words and in actions so that they will be recognized as good people in the society. Qur'an says:

"Tell the believing men to lower their gaze (from looking at forbidden things), and protect their private parts (from illegal sexual acts)" (Al-Qur'an 24:30).

Prophet (PBUH) says:

"Whoever guarantees for me (that) what is between his legs and what is between his two beards (i.e between the right and left hand sides of his beards; meaning his mouth not performing any act of indiscretion), I guarantee for him paradise" (Sahih Al-Bukhari: 6474).

In light of the above, a Muslim controls all his words and actions throughout his business process so as to obtain Allah's pleasure. Therefore, chastity influences Muslim behaviors on IWE. In view of the above, the following hypothesis is developed.

H_1 = There is significant relationship between culture and work ethics among the businesses in Nigeria.

3. CONCLUSION

The study on work ethics has been in existence for decades. In Nigeria, the work ethics was practiced during the sharia period immediately after the Sokoto caliphate was established. The Muslims who were working during the caliphate practiced the work ethics during the period. The most significant part of work ethics was based on the Al-Quran and Hadiths. The holy Quran discussed and mentioned ethics frequently. Also, several hadiths of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) talk about work ethics for Muslims. Many Islamic scholars around the world have also talked about work ethics. In fact, the majority of the literature discussed in this paper has been based on the Islamic perspective on work ethics.

While work ethics is an important tool for discussions, there is limited, or no western literature that has discussed it, particularly in Nigeria. Reasons could be that scholars regard the issue of religion to be a sensitive issue. Further studies may look into the work ethics as described in the books of Sokoto caliphate, or the

administration of work ethics in the period. These studies could also look at the influence of culture on work ethics.

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