

## **Dietary Laws and Social Transformation in Nigeria: The Old Testament Perspective**

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**&**

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### **Abstract**

The paper elucidated the social problems of Nigeria and also identified the multi causal factors of these problems. Poverty, human rights violations, poor education, poor dieting and poor health all contribute to the deterioration of the social structure. The paper's preoccupation is the transforming role of diet to Nigerian society. The problem of ill health which has been of major concern to the country is caused partly by wrong dieting. This poor health condition and poverty translate to other social aspects and tend to weaken productivity. The study gave a general overview of dietary laws, synonymously described as food taboos from selected world religions. The paper set out to achieve these objectives: to properly examine Old Testament (OT) dietary laws; to show that dietary laws are curative tools for poor health, poverty etc: to show that the dietary laws can restore the relevance of religious laws and ethics to people's behaviour; and to show that observing the OT dietary laws can improve the nation's health and wealth. A hermeneutical analysis of salient words taken

from Hebrew texts was done, using the literary criticism method. The study showed that OT dietary laws were of immense benefit to the Jews both physiologically, spiritually and medically. Finally, the paper opined that the OT dietary laws can be introduced as agent of social transformation in Nigeria.

### **Introduction**

The social structure of Nigeria suffers some levels of destabilization due to multiple reasons. These factors including, poverty, human rights violation, poor education of masses and lack of educational opportunities, poor agricultural production and poor dieting abound in the society. Poverty indeed is the primary and root cause of most of the social problems in Nigeria. It poses a great challenge to the country because poverty nurses and engineers all forms of criminal acts. The problem of human trafficking, armed robberies, kidnappings, fund embezzlements are all off shoots of poverty. Nigeria is rated as one of the 20 poorest countries in the world by the Fund for Agricultural Development (FAD). Over 70% of the population is classified as poor with 35% living in abject poverty. The poverty situation of Nigeria is so severe that majority of Nigerians lack the common necessities of life like food, shelter and health care (Orabuchi 2007).

From the nature of the social stratification of the country, the highest tier is made up of wealthy politicians, businessmen and the educated elite (MA-NI 2010). The lower classes tend to have little chances of breaking even from the vicious cycle of poverty. The politicians and business men of the high stratum live in affluence and most times infringe on the rights of the lower class. Politicians entice people with high sounding promises that are never met. Ehusani (1996) gave a catalogue of the economic, social and political problems plaguing the country. Conclusively, he stated that Nigeria is a country where the government is adamant to the cries of the populace. The citizens resort to strike actions as a means of getting their demands met.

The rot in the educational sector is not a hidden fact. Ekweremadu and Babangida (2010) recently decried the decaying educational system. They expressed concern on the negative impact of poor education on development. The Nigerian Universities Commission (NUC) is working assiduously to ensure that sub standard Universities are phased out. The primary and secondary institutions suffer same fate of poor academic output. Intellectualism is commercialized and University products are not marketable. Many school leavers are jobless and worse still are not enterprising.

Agriculture lacks sufficient support in order to effortlessly produce food in proportion to consumption demands. The food

produced and the mechanisms of production do not promote good health. Most often, the fertilizers and chemicals which are used for food production, damage much of the nutrients in food. This transformation in food production is generally caused by the influence of modernization and urbanization and probably by other factors. Coupled with the problem associated with mechanized farming, people's dietary lifestyles also underwent some transformations. People feed more on refined, over processed and artificial foods than the natural, organic plant products. This shift from traditional organic diet to modern diet has brought about an increase of diseases.

Okeke (2008) in her research on diet in developing countries revealed some enlightening facts. One of such discoveries made from the study is that the 21<sup>st</sup> century dietary lifestyle of processed, refined food, saturated fat and sugar is responsible for the increase in non communicable diseases. People who feed more on those diets are more prone to diabetes, heart attacks and stroke than those who do not. These non-communicable diseases have been on the increase and will continue to increase drastically in a few years to come if unchecked (Okeke 2008).

The indispensable role of diet in regulating health is a well known fact. The problem of the poor health condition of most Nigerians is also an undeniable fact. One of the major

problems that set the economy back is the huge amount of money invested in health care annually yet without achieving the desired result. Lawal (2008) reported that the Federal Government promised to provide 150 billion naira to fight malaria. It is logical and factual that malaria incapacitates many of the working class and consequently weakens production. Malaria is one disease apart from tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, and cancer that threaten the progress of the country.

This study is an attempt to investigate how diet can be applied in solving the health and social problems of the society.

The study will also explore the possibility of using the dietary laws of the Old Testament as tool for social transformation. The paper is guided by the following objectives: to examine the dietary laws of the OT; to show that the OT dietary laws can be a means of alleviating poverty ; to restore the relevance of religious laws and ethics to peoples' behaviour ; to show that observing the OT laws can improve intellectualism and good health.

Keywords

### **Dietary laws**

Dietary laws are rules promulgated by a religion or culture concerning what is and what is not permitted to be eaten by some classes of people and for particular towns or seasons. These rules

cover permissible and impermissible foodstuffs. They are rules regarding how animals are slaughtered and combination of food.

### **Social Transformation**

Social has to do with organization or relations between people and communities, where as transformation from the verb transform means to change the appearance or character of somebody or something ( Hornby 2002).

Social transformation therefore is a change in appearance or character of people in a relationship and between peoples in a given organization or community.

### **Dietary laws in Religions**

Diet simply means food and drink taken habitually and dietary laws are codified set of rules about which foods or combination of foods may or may not be eaten. Historically speaking, dietary laws existed some time before the biblical period. However, the first appearance of food laws in the Old Testament was during the deliverance of Noah (Gen. 7: 2 & 3), when God instructed Noah to take seven pairs of each kind of ritually clean animals and one pair of each kind of unclean animal. The origin of these prohibitions and commandments are varied with societies and religions. In some cases, the taboos are a result of health considerations or other practical reasons. In some others, they are

as a result of human symbolical systems and for psychological reasons. Societies instituted food taboos as a means of protection against diseases. Some foods are prohibited from diet because they are not known by people and they are feared to be poisonous or harmful. Food taboos existed in traditional societies but they are as varied as the human race itself. (McCarthy 2003). Although food taboos exist in every culture, they are particular to societies and cannot be regarded as a universal custom as such (Eliade 1987) Rad (1963) spoke of the pig and Boer which stood in special relationship with Aligan Baal and played a role in the cult of Astarte. He noted also that the Ras shamra (extra biblical document) recorded the same dietary law found in Exodus 23:19, 34:26 and Deuteronomy 14:21 “not to seethe a kid in its mother’s milk.”

The practice of keeping food taboos existed in Canaanite religion and in the Ancient Near East (ANE). The romance of the culture of the ANE and the Israelites was lauded by many scholars like Shorter (1992), Alexander (1999), and Okwueze (1998). These affirmed that the Israelites’s cultural, social and religious practices were heavily influenced by the Canaanites whom they lived with for the most part of their lives. Apart from the Canaanites, dietary laws are observed in most world religions. In Islamic religion, the unlawful/prohibited food is described as *haram*, for instance pork and alcohol. *Halal*

describes all foods that are permitted to be eaten. In Hindu religion, fruits, vegetables, legumes, rice and spices are eaten. On the contrary, beef and all beef products, garlic and alcohol are forbidden. Brahman priests take only vegetarian food prepared with butter. The vegetarian meal is believed to stimulate vitality, energy, vigor, good health, joy, cheerfulness and these create pure, peaceful and balanced mind good for body soul and spirit.

In Buddhism, vegetarian diet is encouraged; fish and meat can also be eaten but not for the monks. Buddha advised the monks to abstain from these kinds of meat for their self respect and protection. The meat of human beings, elephants, horses, dogs, snakes, lions, tigers, boars and hyenas are discouraged as food. The reason for abstaining from such meat is that some animals attack people when they smell the flesh of their own kind.

In the traditional religion, especially in African traditional religion certain animals are not eaten by some societies. These animals are referred to as totems. They are engodded and killing them is tantamount to abomination. These sacred animals vary from society to society. People believe that eating animal meat can influence human character and behaviour. Ade Adegbola (1998) affirmed that if one eats pork, he/she is likely to display the pig's slothful character. In some traditional Igbo societies, pregnant women are not permitted to eat the grass-cutter *nchi* because it is believed that the unborn child's life can be



influenced by the animal's character. *Enwe*, monkey is also forbidden for pregnant women for fear that the children may imbibe the stealing nature of this animal. Other forbidden meats are lions for men whose titles are taken after the animal Ogbuagu, lion killer and *Ogbuehi* (cow killer) and the like. Animal parts are forbidden for special classes of people.

A close examination of dietary laws in religions show close similarities with the OT laws of diet. Areas of differences exist also. Notwithstanding these similarities, the OT dietary laws are very unique and complex and not to be compared with dietary laws of any religion or society.

### **Dietary laws of the OT**

The OT is divided into three broad divisions namely- the Law/*Torah*, the Writings/*Kethuvim* and the Prophets/*Nevi'im*. The laws of diet are skeletally discussed in these OT divisions but are more concentrated in the *Torah*. Shea (2008) rightly observed that the texts that deal with this subject are not abundant in the Hebrew Bible beyond the Pentateuch. Genesis 1:29 stated that God gave all green plants to man to be food for them. Thus God said "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit in it. They will be yours for food". By this dietary law, God declared all fruit, seeds, grasses and plants as food for mankind. All, Hebrew *kol* must

mean all the parts of a plant- root, bark, leaf, grain, flower, seed and fruit. In declaring every plant as food, how does God intend to solve the problem of the obnoxious nature of some plants? It must be that God intended that some plants may not be good as food but can be used for healing. Ezekiel's comment on this issue perhaps throws more light on it for he said...“their fruits will be for food and their leaves for healing”. The books of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 contain an exhaustive discourse of the laws of diet given to Moses and Aaron by Yahweh. Hence Leviticus 11:1-2 stated “the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Say to the Israelites...” This address is followed by instructions of which animals they should eat or not eat.

Subsequently, God gave some dietary laws concerning clean (edible) and unclean (inedible) animals. The first sets of land animals that are specified as food are those that possess split hoofs and chew the cud. Some of the animals are the Goat, the Mountain sheep, the Gazelle and others. All these belong to the class of ruminants. They are known for chewing food thoroughly and this prolonged chewing of food helps in removing some poisonous substances in food. The meat gotten from these animals are healthier than those of the non ruminants.

Allegorically, cud chewing implies chewing or considering actions before execution. Boer (1976) argued that God by this law expects his children to consider their actions

thoroughly before carrying them out. Pig/swine, camel, rabbit are the abominable animals that should not be eaten.

The water creatures which God commanded his people to eat are all fish that have fins and scales. In fact, all creatures found in all types of water whether seas and brooks are meant here. Any fish that does not match this description will not be eaten. Jameison (2004) postulated that the reason for the importance of scales and fins is that fishes use them for carrying out their excrescences. The other creatures that lack this quality cause malignant disorders especially in hot climates (Fausset 2004). Shark, oysters, eel, shell fish of all kinds, mollusks or crustaceans are not to be eaten (Barnes 2004).

All clean birds are edible but there is no general norm governing the prohibited birds. A list of 20 inedible birds are given instead (Lev. 11: 13 – 19). The possible explanation for why this category of birds is prohibited is that they are preponderantly carnivorous (Faley 2007). As far as they can be identified, the birds listed in these verses are such that feed on animal food. According to Henry (2006), “God will have his people abhor everything that is barbarous and cruel and not live by blood and rapine.”

Furthermore, in Leviticus 11:21, God commanded that all fowls that creep or that go upon all four shall be abomination to God’s people. Swarming creatures therefore should not be eaten.

In Leviticus 3:17 blood and fat are proscribed diet. Fat, Hebrew *chelebh* should not be taken with absolute literalness. One cannot eat meat without getting the fat in it. Moreover, the human system needs a measure of fat. What this law is emphasizing is saturated fat. Scientifically, it has been proven that people who take saturated fat and excessively too are prone to heart attack and other associated diseases Fuhrman (2006). In fact, he added that fat clogs up blood vessels and increases the risk of diseases like bowel and breast cancers. Akin to the law of fat is the law prohibiting the eating of blood or more explicitly eating meat with blood in it. This law has a penalty attached to it. Theologically, blood represents life and all life belongs to God. Blood eating from research findings does a lot of harm to the body and ultimately leads to untimely death. Clemency (2003) who conducted a research on the Masai of East Africa who leave mainly on milk and blood discovered that they do not live long. All dead animals whether of the clean and unclean specie must not be eaten.

God made food laws in the OT as institutionalized health care system. The Israelites who lived a lifestyle according to *Torah* were generally healthier and were spared from venom and non communicable diseases (Douglas 2004). God did not specifically indicate the health benefits in the laws of diet but they were implied. Hirsch (2002) in his work refuted the health

rationale of these laws but scientific research has revealed the concealed medical significance of these dietary laws (Pamplona-Roger 2004, Golovanoff 2007, and Praette 2008). Having examined these dietary laws, this paper would pragmatically discuss how the dietary laws of OT can serve as social change agent in contemporary Nigeria.

### **Dietary laws in health and economic transformation**

The health status of Nigeria can be transformed through the use of herbs for diet and healing. As this study pointed out earlier, health care is one major phenomenon that has weakened the economy of Nigeria. With lots of money invested in the eradication of malaria alone, the country suffers a level of impoverishment. God has commanded mankind to eat herbs as food in Genesis 1: 29. Herb, Hebrew *'eseb* occurred in many OT references meaning vegetables and fruits. In Daniel, the word *zeroyim* from the root *zara*-to-sow and *zera* (noun) seed (Ebo 2005), has been translated pulse (KJV). Pulse however means nothing but herbs namely fruits or parched peas or lintels. Nelson describes the word pulse as vegetables or edible seeds. Therefore whether *zeroyim* (pulse) is used or *'eseb*, same meaning is intended (Gen. 1: 29, 30, 3: 18, Ezekiel 47: 12, Daniel 1: 12ff). God's intention for this dietary law is to provide herbs as healing

food. That God here instituted a health care system for mankind is obvious.

From the OT perspective therefore, herbs should not be perceived as some religious and ritual concoctions administered by a traditional medicine man. They are simply fruits and vegetables that grow around our environs. Ilonzo in her book *Herbs and Your Health* revealed that modern medicine developed from herbs. She therefore posited that ‘most manufactured drugs have herbal origin, it is only the industrial revolution and consequent refinement of chemical technology that has reduced our dependence on herbs. In fact, every region in the world has at some point in time used healing plants (Ilonzo).

Traditionally, the Israelites used plants for healing like in the case of Hezekiah where the poultice of the fig was used on the boils (Isa. 38:12). In traditional Nigerian society people relied on herbs for healing and food but modernity has deemphasized the use of this system of medicare. If people imbibe the culture of using more of herbs, the poverty situation of many people will be transformed. Herbs are affordable and accessible and conform to our original dietary lifestyle. They can go a long way in providing cheap health care to people at grass root level. In fact, herbal products provide medical opportunities to both the rich and poor and breach the gap between them (Gbenda in Okwueze

2004) Using herbs for primary healthcare has been endorsed and is currently given recognition by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Stanley).

Herbs have been described as nutritional power houses that can nourish the body and serve as preventive measures against a number of diseases. (Obinna 2008). Herbs like spinach grapes and cabbages inhibit cancer growths. The consumption of phytochemicals and antioxidants contained mainly in fruits like strawberry, watermelon, and carrots can reduce risk of cardiovascular diseases (Onyemade 2008). Herbs fight free radicals and strengthen the human immune system and also provide prevention against diseases.

One fascinating importance of herbs is that they can provide healing to some ailments that defy orthodox medication. The affordability, accessibility and compatibility of this healing method should encourage people to adopt it as a dietary pattern.

### **Dietary laws and moral transformation in Nigeria**

The OT laws of diet are designed by God to bring about moral transformation in the society. The laws are meant to address ethical matters in society apart from their theological significance. Dietary laws should inculcate discipline and self control in Nigerians. If people can discipline themselves by abstaining from the prohibited diets like fat, blood, pork and

other prohibited diets they are likely to stay away from some deadly diseases caused by these diets. If dietary discipline is achieved, the same discipline can also be extended to other areas of life and relationships in the society. Being able to discipline one's appetite symbolically and figuratively would mean that appetite for wealth and unnecessary wealth acquisitions can be disciplined. Discipline would mean that the money voted for projects would be used judiciously.

Inedible animals are described as abomination by God (Deut. 14: 2). The word *ta 'ab*, abhor and *to 'ebha* abomination show the degree of God's dislike for those animals. Interestingly, abomination is used to describe unjust acts that are not acceptable to God – such unjust acts are haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that are quick to shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil and a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers. God hates and abhors these acts and those who do them. In addition to the aforementioned acts, God also abhors the use of false scales (Prov. 6: 16-19, 11:1). All forms of deceit and injustice are condemned. All forms of blood shed through assassinations, inter-tribal wars, abortions and cultic activities are all abominations, *to 'ebha* to God. By forbidding his people from eating birds of prey – eagle, vulture, stork and the rest, God intended that people should not prey on



others. The word prey Hebrew *shalak* in English means ‘to hunt’, to take advantage of or to attack another person. It refers to an animal hunted and killed for food or a person who is taken advantage of by another. In Isaiah 10: 2 God warned “woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees...who withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their **prey** and robbing the fatherless. God therefore abhors acts of preying as he abhors eating birds of prey. The dietary laws can transform the society ethically when these dietary principles are rightly implemented. God is a moral God who himself is an embodiment of morals and he employs his followers to exhibit morality in their daily interactions within the society.

### **Dietary laws in transformation of education and intellectualism**

Maintaining OT dieting of fruits and vegetables ensures mental stability, increases intellectualism and boosts education. The decaying educational system which has been a concern in recent times can be transformed through proper feeding. Wrong dieting can make people less productive both intellectually and technologically. The story of Daniel and his three friends in Daniel 1: 12ff provides a premise for this argument. Daniel and his friends fed on vegetables and water for ten days and

eventually appeared better nourished and healthier than those who fed on the king's sumptuous diet. (Dan. 1: 15). Daniel was intellectually and mentally sound and very productive (Dan. 2: 14).

The University system should produce people with sound intellectual and innovative abilities to boost innovations. If the society is educationally and intellectually sound, it can advance research and development. There are rooms for more research and development.

### **Conclusion**

The paper gave a purview of the social condition of Nigeria. The fact that Nigeria has undergone various transformations since the inception of modernity and urbanization was made obvious in the study. Various practices in society are under heavy influence and diet for one was influenced in no small measure. The change in dietary lifestyle resulted in poor health and this poor health condition has affected the nation's productivity and development. Poor health has also impoverished the country because a huge sum of money is invested into the health sector. The nation is in dire need of social transformation in the areas of health and intellectualism in order to boost research and development.

The paper examined the concept of diet and the practice of food taboos in other religions with emphasis on OT dietary

laws. Though the OT dietary laws share some areas of similarities with dietary laws of other religions, they are quite unique. They are basically Theo-centric laws that are theologically motivated for holiness. These laws were itemized and analyzed.

Findings from the study of OT dietary laws show that if the question of good dieting is properly addressed, the social situation of Nigeria will change drastically. Nigerians should therefore align themselves with a dietary transformation which ultimately can result in the social transformation of society, both economically, behaviourally and educationally.

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### Oral Interview

S/N	Name	Status	Age	Date of Interview	Town/ State
1	Mrs. Nkechi Okeke	Staff Nurse	55	12/03/2007	Ezinifite/Anambra
2	Mrs. Justina Atama	Villager	48	22/06/2007	Nsukka/Enugu State