

Reading Deuteronomy 16:20 in the Frame of John Rawls' Justice as Fairness: Implications for Social Justice and Political Order in Nigeria

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Abstract

Deut 16:20 unequivocally articulates justice as an indispensable element for societal well-being and sustained political order for the nascent Israelite nation. The text asserts that there is no viable alternative to justice in ensuring the prosperity of the people in the Promised Land. Today, justice has indisputably become the bedrock of any flourishing society across the globe. This notion resonates with John Rawls' description of justice as the primary virtue of social institutions. The Nigerian experience, however, presents a contradictory and complex dynamic in which justice is frequently undermined by governance deficits and the flagrant negation of true democratic principles, resulting in a myriad of social injustices. The paper aims to interpret Deut 16:20 within the theoretical framework of John Rawls' justice as fairness, with the intent of showing the implications for social justice and political order in Nigerian society. The paper employs critical social theory to critique Nigeria's social justice situation and interpret Deut 16:20 through the lens of African biblical hermeneutics. The findings indicate that while Deut 16:20 socio-historically addresses ancient Israel, the biblical text is contextually amenable to the contemporary Nigerian social justice situation. Furthermore, it shows that the oppression of marginalised groups by privileged elites significantly contributes to the entrenchment of political disorder in Nigeria. The paper concludes that it is imperative that Nigeria prioritise social justice issues while ensuring equitable governance. Only through reforms that favour the disadvantaged masses can the nation hope to realise its democratic aspirations and secure a fair society for all its citizens.

Keywords: Deut 16:20, John Rawls, Judicial system in Nigeria, Justice, Political Order, Social Justice

Introduction

Despite the quintessential role of justice as a cornerstone for sustainable development and political order, Nigeria continues to grapple with pervasive issues of social injustice and political disorder. Systemic corruption, marginalisation of vulnerable groups, and lack of political will to uphold equitable governance continue to hinder meaningful progress in the country. Justice is tied to sustainability as Deut 16:20 unambiguously implies. It reads, "Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land which the LORD your God gives you." The text is one of the earliest within the Pentateuchal legal corpus that advocates justice as a non-negotiable principle for the growth and sustenance of the budding Israel nation. It has been shown elsewhere that the legal demands for justice in the nascent Israelite society, as revealed in the Hebrew Bible, deliberately focus on the marginalised and eventually become the basis for the framing of justice and righteousness/judgement all through the history of Israel (Idemudia 2024; Deut. 16:20; 1 Sam. 8:15; 2 Chron. 9:8; Job 36:17; Psalm 10:18; 35:5; 72:2; 89:14, etc.). The legal intent of Deuteronomy 16:20 was the establishment of social justice and unclog political order in Israel as a nation. Justice, as understood in the Pentateuch, carries the tone of a deliberate option for the poor and vulnerable groups, ostensibly demonstrating that any society where the poor are condemned to perpetual suffering is unjust.

Traditional African cultures also placed a high premium on justice as a principle of social cohesion and community development. Injustice was not only abhorred as an abomination that was capable of stampeding community progress, but also as a vice that could incur the vengeance of God, the divinities, and the ancestors (Ubrurhe 2001; Idowu 1996). The ethos of justice in traditional African cultures bears a significant resemblance to the demand of Deut 16:20. The text reveals that Yahweh instructed the Israelite community to prioritise justice, not only for their national sustenance and political order but also as a fundamental principle of social cohesion and civil liberty. It is also quite remarkable that John Rawls' extensive work on the principles of justice and civil liberty and their quintessential role in securing political order and an equitably just society reverberates the tenets of Deut 16:20. According to Rawls (1999), discussing justice is meaningless without the guarantee of equal basic liberty for all members of society. Rawls' perception of justice as fairness is similar to the Pentateuchal legislations, which sought a balance between the rich and the poor by emphasising justice for the disadvantaged groups in society. In this sense, traditional African cultures, Deuteronomy 16:20, and John Rawls' justice as fairness, all agree that, as a principle, justice ought to take a prima position in the consideration of policies for sustainable development.

Unfortunately, the Nigerian political elites and their allies continue to oppose the spirit and principle of justice in virtually all political and social dealings. One of the complex contradictions, especially since 1999, is that citizens affirm civil rule but cannot, in the same breath, convincingly and reasonably affirm the benefits of a true democracy

as seen in other climes. Despite the developmental agenda and policies of successive governments since 1999, the nation's economy continues to rank among the worst of developing countries. Many factors, including a perverse justice system, corruption, poor leadership, insecurity, and the neglect of the tenets of traditional cultures, among others, account for the present inglorious state of the nation (Nwangboso 2012; Nwanegbo & Odigbo 2013; Idemudia 2018).

The stark realities of social injustice in the country are gradually leading to unrest that could destabilise the socio-political and economic structures of the nation. The negative perception of justice among Nigerians is evident in the public's dwindling trust in the country's judicial institutions (Alia-Akpajaki & Pyke 2003; UNODC, 2006; Oke & Olufemi 2014; Adeniji 2014; Weimann 2014). The task of this study is to interpret Deut 16:20 within the framework of John Rawls' justice as fairness and show that social justice is a critical catalyst for political order in Nigeria. The paper argues that addressing systemic injustices and prioritising equitable governance are imperative for realising a just society. Social injustice can encompass the mass impoverishment of individuals, severe circumscription of community and individual rights, as well as government actions and attitudes that lack consideration; in addition, governance that is not people-oriented can exacerbate the issue.

To attain an equitable society, the Nigerian government must integrate true democratic principles and begin to implement policies and initiatives that give precedence to the people. This requires a framework that seeks a balance between governance and people's aspirations. A blend of the idea of justice in Deut 16:20 and John Rawls' justice as fairness is appropriate in this regard. MacBride (1995) already queried how contemporary biblical interpreters should take appropriate account of the extensive block of legal and cultic lore that comprises the bulk of the Pentateuch. The response to this query here is a careful probe into the original intent of Deut 16:20 as a biblical text. It does this to establish a connection between John Rawls' justice as fairness and the issues of injustice and fractured political order in Nigeria.

Methodological Grounding

This study contextually approaches the issue of justice in Nigeria from the standpoint of critical social theory. The proponents of this theory (Horkheimer, Adorno, Fromm, and Marcuse) initially developed the concept to examine both theoretical and practical social issues. Its foundation, as a theoretical approach, is a fundamental rethinking of the social structures of human existence. It argues that instead of preserving the status quo, social challenges should be addressed using fresh approaches (Ngwenyama 1991). Critical social theory, as an approach to social issues, focuses on developing alternatives for unfavourable social structures that best meet people's aspirations. This is where it differs from the conventional critical social theory, which acknowledges and supports the social circumstances that are in place (Ngwenyama 1991). The approach of critical social theory is applied in social research based on some basic assumptions, one of which is that people are responsible for the changes they want to see since they are the ones who created their social circumstances. Simply put, societies shape their own social outcomes or destinies. This perspective is quite consistent with how Deuteronomy imagined the place of the people in the establishment of justice and John Rawls' understanding of justice as fairness. This work prefers critical social theory as a method because it holds all stakeholders to account when agitating for better social policies and outcomes for the generality of the people.

We engage the biblical text here within the contemporaneous model of African Cultural Hermeneutics (ACH). The method has been defined in its own right as an approach to biblical interpretation that

makes the African sociocultural context a subject of interpretation (Justin Ukpung 1995; Adamo 2015). According to Adamo (2005), it means that African cultural hermeneutics, like any other third-world hermeneutics, is a contextual hermeneutics since interpretation is always done in a particular context. ACH probes biblical texts to find their value for African contexts. In this study, we probe the value of Deut 16:20 to justice and political order in Nigeria.

In the lens of ACH, it is appropriate to argue that the oppressive and unjust social systems that pervade the whole of Africa and Nigeria in particular are alien to traditional African cultures. They are a carry-over from the colonial enterprise in the continent. For many years, colonial administration sold the idea of superior versus inferior in the consciousness of the people, especially the ruling class. The colonial masters perpetually maintained their superior position and saw the colonised as the inferior. The Nigerian political elites seem to have inherited this obnoxious method of leadership in which they are clearly untouched by the plight of the masses. Therefore, the gap between the rich and the poor in the country continues to widen. In the ACH framework, a reading of Deut 16:20 emphasises the need to bridge this gap and address all other social injustices while seeking equity. Here lies the difference between classical Western methods of interpretation and ACH. While the former is intellectualistic in orientation and often ends in abstraction, the latter is existentialistic and pragmatic in nature, seeking actual solutions to existing problems (Ukpung 1995).

Historical/Literary Context of Deut 16:20

History preserved relics of efforts made by ancient people to establish justice and maintain political order in their societies. The ancient law code of Hammurabi, which archaeologists have discovered, and the biblical law codes of Exod 20:1-23:19 and Deut 12-26 are perhaps the most outstanding in this regard (Davies 2010). The Book of Deut 12-26, known as the Deuteronomistic Code (D), contains the longest and most developed legal provisions, besides the Book of the Covenant (Exod 20:1-23:19). The laws contained in these codes provide information on how ancient Israelite society understood justice both in principle and in practice. Deuteronomy is the last of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), commonly referred to as the Pentateuch in biblical scholarship or the *Torah* in proper Hebrew classification. People often refer to it as the "second law," possibly because of LXX's translation of Deut 17:18.

Divergent scholarly opinions exist regarding the dating of Deuteronomy. Traditionally, the book is believed to have been penned by Moses, with the exception of his death narrative. This school of thought argues that the Book of Deuteronomy resembles ancient vassal treaties written prior to 1000 BCE (Kitchen 1966; Alexander & Baker, 2003; Zodiates 1991; Brace 2014). It contains historical background, an enumeration of laws, and concluding threats and promises (Zodiates 1991). Some Old Testament scholars conclude that the whole of Deuteronomy and its law code, which in most parts recapitulates the Exodus account, is the work of historian(s) — the so-called Deuteronomistic History (Joshua–2 Kings) (Rudolf 2013; Wolf 1991). According to these scholars, the writing of the book of Deuteronomy took place in the late monarchical era, particularly during King Josiah's reign. Scholars of this persuasion often associate Deuteronomy with the book of the law that was discovered in the Temple of Jerusalem in the eighteenth year of King Josiah's reign (640-609 B.C.) and argue that there is a substantial resemblance in contents (2 Kings 22–23). This position indicates that it was a theological response to the socio-political issues that Israel was experiencing at the time (Wolf 1991; Levinson 1997; Levinson 2001; Udoekpo 2020).

Other OT scholars of divergent views suggest the dating of Deuteronomy in the post-exilic period. These writers contend that the book of Deuteronomy had undergone extensive editing in an attempt to address new theological and sociocultural challenges as the history of Israel progressed. Thus, several editorial periods are consequently identified for various parts of the book (Römer 2005; Ska 2006). As an example, Römer (2005) observes that the prologue sections 1-4 of the book were probably written during the exile to fit the narrative within the structure of Moses' farewell speech, giving emphasis to the covenant theology and Israel's history of disobedience. Carr (2011) proposes also that parts of D code (Deut 12-26) were edited during the exile and post-exile periods because of newly emerging social and religious issues, such as the cultic centralisation of the worship and social justice. Proponents of the composition theory attribute the addition of the blessings and curses in 27-30 to later editors (Carr, 2011; Schmid, 2012). For Schmid (2012), Deuteronomy 27-30 demonstrates the post-exilic anxiety of identity in Israel and calls for renewal in the community after the Babylonian exile. Similarly, 31-34, especially the description of the death of Moses, makes other scholars consider these chapters post-exilic additions (Otto, cited in Mastnjak 2016; Stewart 2025). These chapters, as noted by Römer (2005), form one of the foregrounds for the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua-2 Kings) and display theological characteristics of the later exilic community, which suffered a lack of identity.

Deut 16:20 falls within the unit comprising the whole of Deuteronomy 16:18-20 in D. It stands as a provisional obligation under the covenant between Yahweh and Israel as a nation. The Torah presents the text as an important ethical requirement. The biblical text characteristically exemplifies the Deuteronomic vision of a community that was established on divine justice. Ultimately, the text draws a connection between social justice, or communal righteousness, and Israel's possession of the Promised Land, showing that realisation of the latter depended on the former. The subject of the immediate context of Deuteronomy 16:20 is the selection of judges and officials who are responsible for settling disputes in an unbiased manner (v. 18). It anticipates a society in which judges opt for equity and refuse to accept bribes (v. 19). Verse 20 positions justice (*sedeq*) as a necessary component for the nation's prosperity and as a pivotal call to action. It is important to note that within the school of Deuteronomic history, the main goal is to reconstruct Israel's identity in accordance with Yahweh's commandments. In this sense, Deut 16:20 insists on covenantal fidelity and the assurance of Yahweh's continuous protection (McConville 2002). Thus, its focus on justice aligns with this broader mission.

Exegetical Structure and Linguistic Characteristics of Deut 16:20

The structure of the Hebrew text in Deut 16:20 emphasises certain key words, as seen here:

דל ותנ יהיה לא הוה
רשא קראה תא תשריו
חיהת ועמל פדרת קדצ
קדצ

The verse takes off with an emphasis on the singularity of justice as Israel's only option for achieving sustainable progress as a nation. The Hebrew phrase *sedeq sedeq tirdop* (דל ותנ יהיה לא הוה), which translates to "justice, and only justice, you shall pursue," makes use of a cognate accusative for rhetorical purposes (Tigay, 1996). The term *sedeq*, which could be rendered as "righteousness" or "justice," is repeated here to indicate its absolute importance. The form, *sedeq sedeq* (דל ותנ יהיה לא הוה), intensifies the imperative. Block (2012) agrees that such repetition in the Hebrew language usually conveys the

uncompromising nature of the action described. The next keyword in the text is *tirdop* (פדרת). It is a Qal-imperfect verb form that addresses the second person singular. Some translations of the Bible render *tirdop* as "You shall pursue" (Amp., NASB, Holman, among others), while some others prefer "You shall follow" or "follow" (NIV, ESV, NKJV, among others). The word shares the same root with the verb *radap* (רדפ), which means "pursuing or pursued." It connotes an active and unrelenting effort, implying that justice is not a passive concept but rather requires the active participation of the community (Weinfeld 1972; 1992).

In the Hebrew language, *tihyeh* (חיהת) is derived from the primary root *haya* (היה), which figuratively or literally means "to cause to live," or "keep or make alive" (Strong 2001: 1387). The root verb also means "to preserve," "to nourish up," and "to save alive." The combination of *lema'an* (למען) and *tihyeh* (חיהת), translated as "that you may live," entirely tied the life of the people to righteousness and justice. According to Brueggemann (1997), the combination of the promise of life and land ownership *weyarasta et ha'ares* (וְיָרָאָהָתָא תִּשְׁרִי) establishes a connection between ethical behaviour and divine favour. Within the framework of this teleological paradigm, justice is regarded as both a moral requirement and a method of ensuring that Yahweh carries out his covenantal promises. In other words, the purpose of the demand for justice and righteousness from the people was so that Yahweh could fulfil his promises. Wright (1999; 2006) links this verse to social justice and notes that Israel's claim to the land was contingent on their adjudication of equity and justice. This indicates that social justice is the primary differential between a flourishing society and a languishing one.

Deut 16:20 clearly emphasises justice at other levels of interpretation. For instance, in the context of ACH, the text is seen as a timeless demand on all humans, especially those saddled with leadership responsibilities. Traditional African cultures maintain the view that justice is a non-negotiable demand on mankind from the Supreme Being. It flows from the idea that justice is an undeniable attribute of the Supreme Being (God); and that God is the great judge to whom the whole of humanity stands accountable (Idowu 1973; Ubrurhe 2001). Traditional African cultures demonstrate a unique understanding of justice as fairness in all human conduct. People abhorred injustice and perceived it a vice that could incur the wrath of God (Ubrurhe 2001). Therein lies a connection between African culture and Deut 16:20, as shown in the linguistic characteristics. Both emphasise the need to prioritise justice in society. At all times, the reading of the biblical text should aim to question all social systems and demand resistance against corruption and injustice. Modern interpretation has to be expanded to encompass the criticism of power relations in society while stressing that actual justice calls for the destruction of systems that uphold inequity (Brueggemann 2001).

Theological Implications in the Context of ACH

One of the critical questions associated with reading Deut 16:20 is whether it was fair or not for Yahweh to expel the nations of Canaan in fulfilment of the promise to gift Abraham and his descendants the land. Bible readers who believe in Yahweh's creation and ownership of the world can theologically resolve this issue. The question should not arise as to whether Yahweh's action was just or not when we read the text. Deuteronomy 16:20 follows the presupposition that justice is an inherent part of Yahweh's character that all humans as well as Israel must emulate. This is also clearly seen in African cultures. For Africans, God is the embodiment of justice, He also insists on fair justice on earth (Idowu 1996). God is good and expresses his goodness to humans in multifaceted kindness, but the same God

demands strict justice and rectitude from the people. The position of God as judge over mankind involves dispensing of justice in reward, punishment, and retribution here on earth and in the hereafter. In this sense, Idowu (1996:174) sees justice as a divine attribute of God, which is enforced by the divinities on the one hand and a command to humans in the conduct of their affairs on the other hand. It is not strange to Africans that justice and righteousness could determine who is established in a land and who is expelled from it. Similar to the expelled inhabitants of the land of Canaan, Israel would not be able to maintain its perpetual occupation if it succumbed to injustice (Jer. 30:11; Hosea 9:1-17; Eze 39:23-24, etc.).

Wright (1999; 2004) observes that the requirement for Israel to exemplify *sedeq* (justice) is a reflection of the fundamental goodness of God, particularly His care for those who are disadvantaged (Deut 10:18-19). Unlike the nations expelled from the land, God encourages Israel to integrate justice into its socio-political structures, going beyond legalism. The covenant and Israel's tenure in the Promised Land were only guaranteed on the condition of justice. Miller (1990; 2012) observes that Israel's possession of Canaan is contingent on their adherence to the rules, with the prospect of expulsion brought about by injustice (Deut 28:15-68). According to Richter (2007), this notion is brought up again in the prophets, who restate the warnings that are found in Deuteronomy (for example, Amos 5:24 and Micah 6:8). Historically, the exiling of Israel is interpreted, especially among the post-exilic prophets, as a punishment for Israel's failure to establish a just society. This evidence indicates that justice is the key element of social-political sustainability (Richter 2002). To put this simply, the condition of justice determines the rise or fall of nations from ancient to contemporary times.

In African cultures, God reserves the right over His creation. Awolalu (1979) writes that *Olodumare* (God), as the creator of all things and all beings, will also be the judge of all. Accordingly, actions of humans and the deities do not escape his knowledge and justice. Everyone is to do his bidding, and defaulting in doing so results in punishment, while obedience in good deeds is rewarded. This understanding was the motivation and conduit of fairness and justice in many traditional African societies. The punishment for evil and the reward for good transcend the earth to the hereafter in God's pursuit of justice (Awolalu 1979). Deut 16:20 demand to pursue or follow justice is an inalienable universal call to fairness in actions and conduct. It is a call to prioritise social responsibilities. To follow justice is to deliberately attend to the marginalised by promoting and pushing principles and policies that can ameliorate their plights.

John Rawls' Justice as Fairness: Historical Background

John Rawls (1971) presents a social-political framework of justice that resonates with the ideas of critical social theory. Rawls's birth and life (1921-2002) allowed him the inevitable experience of twentieth-century turbulence. He witnessed the Second World War, the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and the Civil Rights Movement, as well as their associated conflicts. These wars and conflicts deeply influenced his pursuit of a just society. His work addressed systemic inequalities, racial injustice, and unjust concentration of political power among the elites (Eryilmaz 2019). He critiqued societies where wealth dictated political influence, allowing a few to manipulate state structures (Rawls 1971; Pogge 2007). It was under the dreary situation of the Cold War that Rawls attempted to show, as Eryilmaz (2019:12-13) puts it, "the possibility of a liberal but egalitarian theory of justice." Rawls (1971; 1999) understands his work as a rational quest to pursue an egalitarian "property-owning democracy" or "liberal socialist regime" (1971:274; 1999:242). Rawls' *liberal*

democracy is such that it seeks to mitigate inequalities and eliminate injustices. He considers justice as fairness as the answer to the demands for freedom and equality (Rawls 1999).

Equally pivotal in John Rawls' life was the context of racial segregation in the United States. Although slavery was abolished in 1865, racial prejudice and injustices continued through some legal provisions such as "black codes" and the systemic discrimination that was reinforced in the guise of "separate but equal" laws (Parks with Haskins 1992: 81-83). The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, which declared segregated education unconstitutional, and the subsequent civil rights activism, including Rosa Parks's defiance and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s leadership, culminated in landmark legislation like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Parks with Haskins 1992). Racial segregation had formally ended by the end of the 1960s, particularly during the height of Rawls' work on justice as fairness, and African Americans had gained their civil rights in the United States, with all racial segregation outlawed.

Philosophical Context of Rawls' Justice as Fairness

Rawls's theory of justice was influenced by some philosophical positions. This paper focuses especially on utilitarianism as the foreground of his theory. John Rawls is predominantly against classical utilitarianism, with the main idea that society is properly organised and, by extension, fair when its main institutions are set up in a way that makes everyone happier overall (Rawls 1971).

He rejects the priority of aggregate welfare over individual rights and argues that any system that attempts to sacrifice minority interests for majority gains cannot provide a satisfactory basis for a just society. Classical utilitarians calculate their profits and losses; if the net balance is positive, they are satisfied. Otherwise, they are dissatisfied. Thus, when gains outweigh losses, the latter become irrelevant. By the same logic, utilitarianism believes that society can balance its gains and losses. A positive net balance of satisfaction indicates that society is just and well-ordered. If the net balance of satisfaction is not positive, then society lacks proper arrangement and justice. Rawls (1999:xii) asserts that utilitarianism does not protect "the basic rights and liberties of citizens as free and equal persons, a requirement of absolutely first importance for an account of democratic institutions."

As far as Rawls is concerned, utilitarianism is unjust for the fact that it refuses to recognise the liberty of individuals, since each "person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason, justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others" (Rawls 1971: 3-4). He believed that everyone should have the same rights and freedoms: "Therefore, in a just society, the liberties of equal citizenship are taken as settled; the rights secured by justice are not subject to political bargaining or the calculus of social interests" (1971: 4). This paper accentuates this notion. Against utilitarianism, individuals' rights are not infringed for society in Rawls' theory. In essence, justice as fairness limits the extent to which satisfaction is pursued at the disadvantage of minority interests (Rawls 1971; Eryilmaz 2019).

The Thrust of Justice as Fairness

Rawls' (1971) theory of justice moves basically on the assumption that fair processes guarantee just outcomes. He explains this with the concept of "original position" (1971: 60). For him, the original position is that the representatives of justice are ignorant of the outcome, so it is impossible for them to influence the procedures in favour of anyone. In this circumstance, he deems that free, equal, and rational representatives in the society would agree on two principles:

- i. Equal Basic Liberties (EBL) state that each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others, and
- ii. Difference Principle: Rawls states that socioeconomic inequalities should (a) benefit the least advantaged and (b) be associated with positions that are open to all.

EBL is for Rawls, the foremost principle of justice, just as “Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought” (Rawls 1971:3). EBL brings to the fore that every human being deserves equal liberties unconditionally, thus emphasising the idea of freedom. Given that every person is worthy of freedom without any exception, everyone should have basic rights consistent with the liberties of other citizens. Otherwise, some may become greater than others, as in the case of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, in which some animals became more equal than the others. A society so constituted will certainly have those who are free and those who are inferior to them, thus resulting in oppression and even deprivation of the rights of the inferiors.

However, the second principle only permits inequality if it benefits the most disadvantaged. He clarifies this by stating “Social and economic inequalities, for example, inequalities of wealth and authority, are just if they result in compensating benefits for everyone, and in particular for the least advantaged members of society” (Rawls, 1971: 14-15). Rawls’ principle of justice is thus one in which nobody profits from the deprivation of others. For him, a social and economic arrangement or procedure that takes the condition of the disadvantaged in society into account is not only rational and results in just outcomes but also moral (Rawls 1971).

Utilitarianism ostensibly violates Rawls’ first principle of justice, which is the equal basic liberty of all. EBL takes priority in the scheme of things irrespective of the advantage that may accrue to a group of people in society if individual rights are infringed upon. In justice as fairness, no individual citizen is to be at a loss for the maximisation of societal good. Anything contrary to this ideal situation amounts to the justification of violations of the rights of the oppressed, which utilitarianism endorses (Rawls 1971). In principle, justice as fairness, as offered by Rawls, respond to historical injustices and any political structure that seeks to perpetuate inequalities and the oppression of vulnerable and marginalised groups in societies. He asserts that no negotiation should barter, subsume, or undermine an individual’s rights and privileges.

Implications for Social Justice and Political Order in Nigeria

One of the central themes of African cultural hermeneutics as a model of biblical interpretation is the adaptation of biblical text within the African context. It tenaciously seeks to make Africa and Africans the subject of biblical interpretation, especially emphasising the implications of a text in African existential experience. In light of this, the work examines the implications of the reading of Deut 16:20 and Rawls’ justice as fairness in Nigeria’s socio-political situation. This is executed within critical social theory, already defined in this paper. Deut 16:20 and John Rawls’ idea of justice as fairness examined in the foregoing support any call for social justice and the need for a dynamic political structure that prioritises the interest of the marginalised in societies. As critical social theory demands, changes are required in extant social structures that perpetuate unfavourable outcomes in any society. Deut 16:20, as well as Rawls’ conception of justice, unequivocally advocates justice as a primary principle in any meaningful quest for a virile and flourishing society. This resonates with the critical social theory’s insistence that societies must give precedence to principles that seek change in existing social

conditions. As far as critical social theory is concerned, people are the creators of their social conditions, and as such, they are responsible for the changes they desire. Changes in existing social structures are necessary to realise the desired outcomes of social justice and political order. The argument is so significant that the pursuit of sustainable development becomes unfeasible without justice.

ACH as a model of interpretation insists that biblical texts could have unique meaning and influence when adapted in the African context. The reading of Deut 16:20 in this study particularly exposes the prevailing social injustices bedevilling Nigeria as a country. The text shows that the sustenance of Israel in the Promised Land depended on their pursuit of justice and fairness. The adaptation of this text in the African context reveals that no less is required for sustainable development and political order in contemporary African societies. However, justice has consistently been the missing element between true democracy and sustainable development on the continent. As against the argument of the critical social theory as discussed in this paper, Nigeria’s political elites have consistently deemphasized the systemic issues of equity and fairness in pursuit of their political ambitions. Their lack of political will to engage in policy changes in the existing corrupt political structure has continued to hinder meaningful and sustainable development in the country. Deut 16:20 and John Rawls’ Justice as fairness examined in this paper, are direct indictments of the corrupt political structure, poor justice system, and untold social injustice situation in Nigeria.

On a broader scale, the urgency expressed in the biblical text reverberates in the global conversations over social justice and human rights (Richter 2007). In the Nigerian situation, the issues of social justice are urgent. The country grapples with pervasive social justice issues, including poverty, the oppression of the marginalised, and systemic repression of the masses. Poor political order occasioned by ineffective governance serves as the primary catalyst for these challenges. Today, pervasive corruption in virtually every sphere of the nation continues to subvert any meaningful progress. Ake (1996) is correct when he asserts that the Nigerian state has historically been characterised by an elite class that exploits the general population for personal gain, thereby perpetuating poverty and inequality. In spite of Nigeria’s considerable oil resources, a significant portion of its populace endures extreme poverty, a condition exacerbated by the exploitation evident in the misappropriation of oil revenues over the years.

Furthermore, Okeke (2018) argues that oppressive laws and practices that suppress dissent and marginalise vulnerable groups serve to entrench repression in the populace. The state’s disregard for social justice and human rights is exemplified by the excessive force employed by security forces to suppress protests, such as the 2020 #EndSARS demonstrations. This systemic oppression exacerbates poverty by hindering residents’ ability to advocate for equitable resource distribution and accountability. Ultimately, Nwankwo (2020) emphasises that poverty in Nigeria constitutes a crisis of social justice, transcending mere economic considerations. He argues that inadequate access to superior healthcare, education, and employment prospects, disproportionately affects those in poverty, perpetuating a detrimental cycle of deprivation.

When read in the Nigerian context and in line with the ideas of ACH and critical social theory, the biblical text and Rawls’ framework on justice challenge various kinds of social injustices, including oppression and suppression of the masses by a few political elites. It also challenges the political stranglehold on ethnic minorities on whose lands sits the main foreign exchange earner – crude oil, and the evil of the entire justice system being under the control of a corrupt

ruling class. It demands a change in the social structure that perpetuates human rights abuses in variegated forms and interrogates the almost established system of bribery and corruption of judges and workers in both the public and private sectors. Deuteronomy 16:20 and justice as fairness in the orientation of ACH and critical social theory reject the injustice in the allocation of resources and the marginalisation of sections of the nation in infrastructural developments and call for distributive justice as an alternative. It questions the general breakdown of law and political order in the country and the untold levels of violence that make parts of it uninhabitable. It seems, in all circumstances, that the pursuit of justice is the appropriate alternative to all the unfavourable social conditions in Nigeria.

Brueggemann's (1997; 2002) observation that Deut 16:20 and other biblical texts like it are calls to defend those who are marginalised is apposite in this regard. Again, Block's (2012) argument that the text's emphasis is on impartiality poses a challenge to contemporary Nigeria's corrupt political and judicial systems. These interpretations align with Rawls' insistence on deliberate policies that favour vulnerable groups in societies as a matter of fairness and justice. The principle of EBL and the idea of Deut 16:20 envision a society in which justice is not only available but also accessible, while equity remains a non-negotiable element.

Conclusion

There is no overstating the fact that justice is inextricably connected to a virile political order in any society. As this study has effectively shown, the essence of Deut 16:20 is justice and fairness. It was envisioned as the foundation of communal living for Israel. Contextually, the text buttresses the importance of appointing just and uncompromising people in positions of leadership. Yahweh reserved the prerogative of fulfilling the blessings of the covenant and establishing the nation of Israel on the condition that the people maintain the obligation of justice and righteousness. The interpretation of this text, within the theoretical framework of justice as fairness proposed by John Rawls, enlivens the understanding of contemporary social justice concerns in Nigeria. When seen as a timeless plea for egalitarian communities, Deut 16:20, in the frame of Rawls' justice as fairness challenges governments and other stakeholders across the globe to mitigate the plight of vulnerable groups. The reading supports the call to urgently address social issues as a priority for sustainable development and the establishment of a just political order in Nigeria, in line with the demands of ACH and critical social theory. The paper therefore calls for changes in the social structures that entrench unfavourable conditions in the nation. It is the government's responsibility to demonstrate a sustained commitment to democratic principles through sincere political and institutional reforms that foster justice. Particularly, there is the need for policies that target the root causes of mass poverty and other pervasive social injustices, especially among the disadvantaged population. Only through reforms that favour the disadvantaged masses can the nation hope to realise its democratic aspirations and secure a fair society for all its citizens.

Conflict interest(s)

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Ethical considerations

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