

## **Organisational Culture and Ethical Decision Making**

**Turad Senesie**

*Njala University Sierra Leone*

---

**Abstract:** *The Paper presents a case on cultural practices and its implications for decision making by Public Servants. The paper discusses the ethical dilemma faced by the Sierra Leone Chieftaincy Institution and how institutional ethics clash with individual moral interests. The paper concludes that the ethical dilemma faced by chieftaincy institution could be resolved by prioritising cultural practices that serve the general interest while at the same time encourages collaboration with other partners with vested public interest.*

**Keywords:** *Public Servants, Organisational Culture, Paramount Chiefs, Cultural Practices, Institutional Ethics.*

---

### **I. DESCRIPTION OF CASE STUDY**

Paramount Chieftaincy was introduced during the colonial era as an alternative means of governance structure in Sierra Leone. Before the arrival of the colonial masters, Kings and Queens were the leaders who ascended the thrones mostly after conquering territories. The advent of colonialism reduced their powers considerably from being Kings and Queens to that of Paramount Chiefs and territories reduced to chiefdoms.

Chieftaincy in itself is built on culture and traditions of the regions but particularly on the tribal traditions found in the areas. The tribes have various cultural and traditional practices that portray the values and beliefs of the people present in the different chiefdoms. One major characteristic regarding belief is that paramount chieftaincy is meant only for those who belong to the ruling families before the 1961 independence of Sierra Leone. It places a unique responsibility therefore on those elected to uphold the traditional values of the secret societies where significant decisions affecting the chiefdom are taken, and the entire chiefdom is mandated to abide or comply with such decisions without questioning the authority of the Paramount Chief.

Authority of the Paramount Chieftaincy lies in the powers of the secret societies established in the chiefdoms. Leaders of the secret societies help the Chiefs in law enforcement to maintain traditional practices, cultural values of the people, thus maintaining peace in the chiefdoms. The authority of the chieftaincy remains sacred, and when once elected, he continues to be in office till death. This is enshrined in the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone and the Chieftaincy Act of 2009. These two policy documents made the Paramount Chieftaincy a supreme authority in the chiefdoms charged with the responsibility for managing the day-to-day administration of the chiefdom. Protection of their subjects is a sacred responsibility entrenched in the cultural values of the chieftaincy. In the face of adversaries, the chief has a responsibility of providing maximum protection, especially for society members even when they commit crimes outside their jurisdiction. Such role is dictated by the cultural belief of demonstrated solidarity and unity of purpose. Today such practices are confronted with robust national policies and left the chieftaincy in an ethical dilemma.

### **II. ORGANISATIONS CULTURE AND THE CREATION OF ETHICAL AND UNETHICAL POLICIES AND PRACTICES**

Cultures are beliefs shared by group members. It becomes a set of decision-making norms, customs, values and traditions that help to solve problems affecting communities (Kurtz, 2003). Kurtz believes that cultural practices and beliefs could be shared through practices or folk tales as you would find in the African rural communities. The success of such cultural practices influences the creation of ethical policies that serves the interest of the institution. These policies help to direct the focus of established institutions, thus maintaining the cultural dynamics of the people. In spite of all of these, acceptance of such policies requires that the cultural practices are institutionalised and practice over time (Sims, 1991). It should also be noted that preserving such cultural practices pave the way for education and reorientation that propagates ethical behaviour among its members. This is in line with Sims argument that "organisations should create and continue to nurture an organisational culture that supports and values ethical behaviour" (1991. p2). In Sierra Leone, for example, chieftaincy is seen as an institution that does not only supports the sustainability of the secret societies but maintains the traditional values that shape behaviour in the local communities. The traditional role of the institution helps in the maintenance of law and order for the peaceful coexistence of the people. At the national front, it is expected that Paramount Chiefs serve as power brokers should there be conflict that threaten national stability.

Cultural practices vary across societies and chiefdoms as in the case of Sierra Leone. Such variations either directly or indirectly affect the ethical and unethical behaviour of members of an organisation or institution (Bommer M. et al. 1987). The authors argued that factors such as the social environment, the legal framework, job, professional and personal environment could force or change behavioural patterns of institutions. The existence of these factors could “influence the individual perception of the ethical situation, norms for behaviour and ethical judgement among other factors” (Vital S. et al. 1993. p.735). In other circumstances, the absence of moral character on the part of individuals in authority could lead to unethical behaviour that would undermine institutional ethics.

### **III. POLICIES AND PRACTICES THAT PRESENT ETHICAL DILEMMA**

The constitution of Sierra Leone is explicit on the tenure of chieftaincy. Once elected, you are chief till your death. The Constitution, therefore, provides that Paramount Chieftaincy is not subjected to national political will, meaning chiefs need not belong to political parties for their existence. As a traditional institution, chieftaincy in addition to their traditional responsibilities and custodian of culture and traditional practices, the institution is supposed to serve as a power negotiator should there be conflict among competing political parties. This is in contrast to section 74(1a) of the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone, which stipulates that Paramount Chiefs shall elect one of their kinds from each district to represent them in the House of Parliament. It negates the very essence of their establishment as a cultural and traditional institution with its ethical values. Where the party in power, for example, has majority in Parliament, the voices of the chieftaincy representatives would not change national policy focus, thus undermining their traditional responsibility as a power broker that seeks the interest of the people. The institution should be seen as an independent institution with no allegiance to individuals, party or organisations (Kurtz 2003). The involvement of the chieftaincy into national politics where enormous financial rewards are satisfied especially in the African political landscape skewed the focus from institutional ethics to personalised ethical behaviour. Chieftaincy institution in Sierra Leone is therefore caught in a moral dilemma of supporting the political elites as against the traditional values. Traditional systems are supposed to protect the cultural values (Kurtze 2003) as opposed to pursuing national political agenda that interfered with cultural norms of the chieftaincy traditions.

The priority of the institution must be kept at all times. Adherence to the primary role of the chieftaincy institution that is the preservation of the traditional and cultural values should be at the core of ethical practices of Paramount Chiefs. The institutional culture of ownership and the protection of subjects and historic resources are necessary for the discharge of chieftaincy duties. Public servants should also endeavour to adapt cultural practices of their institutions to strengthen their work ethics (Kurtze 2003). National policies could be influenced by the cultural practices so that national policy design and implementation focus on the public interest. It, therefore, creates room for collaboration with other institutions rather than just been glue to internal work ethics.

### **IV. CONCLUSION**

As a public servant, you should not lose sight of the primary goal of you institution. The chieftaincy institution, for example, places emphasis on the preservation of cultural and traditional practices and also serves as a power broker. The involvement of Paramount Chiefs in Parliamentary politics compromised their traditional and national responsibility. African politics is not about service any more but money finding enterprise. The lucrative nature of politics (money power) in the Sierra Leone politics has a significant negative influence on the ethical behaviour of those involved in the enterprise. The ethical dilemma therefore confronting the Paramount Chiefs could be resolved through decision making where institutional cultural practice is prioritised as against their personal interest. Communicating these ethical issues is critical in addressing institutional ethics that affect collaboration among institutions working in the public interest. The willingness to resolving conflict in the discharge of duties of public servants, in this case not only Paramount Chiefs would always help in crossing the lines where ethical dilemma exists.

### **REFERENCES**

- [1]. **American Society for Public Administration (2013)**. Practices to promote the ASPA code of ethics. Retrieved from <http://www.aspanet.org>.
- [2]. **Cooper, T. L. (2012)**. The responsible administrator: An approach to ethics for the administrative role(6th ed.). New York, NY: Jossey-Bass.
- [3]. **Kurtz, R. S. (2003)**. Organizational culture, decision-making, and integrity: The National Park Service and the Exxon Valdez. *Public Integrity*, 5(4), 305–317. Retrieved from the Walden Library databases.
- [4]. **McNeal, G. S. (2010)**. Organizational culture, professional ethics and Guantanamo. *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, 42(1/2), 125–149. Retrieved from the Walden Library databases.
- [5]. **Sims R.R. (1991)**. The Institutionalisation of Organisational Ethics

- [6]. **Vitell S.J, Nwachu S.L., and Barnes J.H (1993).** The Effects of Culture on Ethical Decision Making. An Application of Hofstede's Typology.