

Re-examining John 13:1–17 in the context of Nigerian political leadership

**Authors:**

Nnamdi U. Ijeudo^{1,2} 
Daniel C. Unachukwu^{1,2} 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, Faculty of the Social Sciences, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

²Department of New Testament and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Research Project Registration:

Project Leader: E. van Eck 
Project Number: 2400030

Description:

The authors are participating in the research project, 'Africa Platform for NT Scholars', directed by Prof. Dr Ernest van Eck, Department of New Testament and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

Corresponding author:

Nnamdi Ijeudo,
nnamdi.ijeudo@unn.edu.ng

Dates:

Received: 30 July 2021
Accepted: 04 Oct. 2021
Published: 24 Jan. 2022

How to cite this article:

Ijeudo, N.U. & Unachukwu, D.C., 2022, 'Re-examining John 13:1–17 in the context of Nigerian political leadership', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(3), a7025. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i3.7025>

Copyright:

© 2022. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

John 13:1–17 presents a style of leadership that is quite different from the traditional understanding and practice of leadership. This model of leadership in John's Gospel is manifested in Jesus' symbolic example of servant leadership, also known as the feet-washing. Feet-washing, generally the responsibility of servants, was seen as a degrading job that even the disciples could not do for their own leader. For Jesus, however, feet-washing is an illustration of humility, genuine love, and service. This article, therefore, is an attempt to critically examine this symbolic act of leadership in the context of John 13:1–17, and its implication on the development of Nigeria. Using the historical-critical exegetical method of analysis, it was discovered that this symbolic act of leadership by Jesus as presented in Johanne pericope is a challenge to political leaders in Nigeria today. The hermeneutics of the study showed that Nigerian political leaders have displayed leadership styles that are based on selfishness, tyranny, nepotism, and tribalism that are an impediment to peace, stability, and national development. From the findings above, it is recommended, among others, that Nigerian political leaders should see leadership as an opportunity to serve and not as a do-or-die affair. This will improve the attitude, quality of life and inclusive growth in Nigeria.

Contribution: This work critically investigates Jesus' exemplary act of servant leadership narrated in John 13:1–17 in juxtaposition with Nigerian political leadership. Such an exegetical work is designed so that the present and upcoming political leaders in Nigeria could learn and emulate Jesus' core qualities, strategies and attitudes that resulted in transforming and improving the lives and well-being of his followers.

Keywords: John 13:1–17; servant leadership; feet-washing; political leadership; Nigeria.

Introduction

It is already well established in the New Testament scholarship that John's Gospel is highly symbolic in its content. Among the various symbolisms found in the Gospel of John, the feet-washing event in chapter 13:1–17 has attracted most scholarly attention. Scholars such as Brown (1966) and Hultgren (1982) interpreted it as a sacramental rite, while the likes of Schneiders (1985) and Bultman (1971) see it as example of humility in service. The latter is what is in view in this work.

Originally, the practice of feet-washing, according to Ngele, Onwunaku and Uwaegbute (2011:27) may have been a form of hospitality in the ancient civilisations, where the most common footwear were sandals. In the same vein, Hultgren (1982) postulated that washing of feet was practically necessary because most people moved about in sandals on streets filled with dust. Therefore, a basin of water was placed at the door-front of most Jewish homes. Upon entering a person's home, the poor would wash their own feet, while the rich would have a servant for washing their feet (Uka 2013:69). This act of feet-washing can be found in different places in the Old Testament such as Genesis 18:4; 19:2; 24:32, 43:20, etc., and it is basically the duty of a slave.

With this understanding, the disciples of Jesus may have regarded feet-washing as too degrading that they did not consider doing it for their master. No wonder Peter, 'guided by a false scale of moral values' according to Barrett (1976:860), was shocked and immediately reacted upon seeing his Master and Lord assume such a demeaning position of a slave. Jesus, on the other hand, probably did not see the disciple's bewilderment and question as a hindrance, but rather as an opportunity to inaugurate a new model of leadership that is anchored to love, humility and service.

From the foregoing, it is clear that leadership entails a leader placing the need of others before his or her own. It is a humble service which 'places the interest of the people first before one's

Note: Special Collection: Africa Platform for NT Scholars, sub-edited by Ernest van Eck (University of Pretoria).

interest' (Nze 2013:46). This is exactly what Jesus exemplified in John 13:1–17. But unfortunately, Nigeria, since its independence in 1960, has been struggling with the problem of political leadership; and this has plunged the nation into ethnic disharmony, chaos, underdevelopment and constant secession threat in some parts of the country.

There seems to be no sincere commitment on the part of the political leaders to manage both the human and mineral resources of the country in a way that it would improve attitude, quality of life and inclusive growth in Nigeria. A renowned literary heavyweight, Chinua Achebe (1984), made a grim observation on the ongoing. According to him:

There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land, climate, water, air, or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to their responsibility, to the challenge of personal example, which is the hallmark of true leadership. (p. 1)

A quick and cursory look at most of the political leaders that have ruled Nigeria from 1960 to date, shows that selfish, high-handed, tribalistic, and opportunistic small money-minded people have been masquerading as leaders over time. This is undoubtedly the reason why Ngele et al. (2011:26) likened leadership in Nigeria to 'a game of hawks and kitten'.

It is pertinent to state here that lack of good leadership qualities like that of Jesus has made Nigerian political leaders adopt attitudes and policies that have thrown the country into a state of confusion, disunity, underdevelopment, and crises. However, if Nigerian political leaders could develop the love and humility in service like Jesus, it will, to a reasonable extent contribute to nation building and improved quality of life of her citizens.

Against this background, this work, amongst other objectives, would critically investigate Jesus' exemplary act of servant leadership narrated in John 13:1–17 in juxtaposition with Nigerian political leadership. Such an exegetical work is designed so that the present and upcoming political leaders in Nigeria could learn and emulate Jesus' core qualities, strategies and attitudes that resulted to transforming and improving the lives and well-being of his followers.

The work is carefully organised in five sections. The first part discusses the socio-historical context of John 13:1–17. The second section focuses on the exegesis of the text of John 13:1–17. The third section deals with the literary device in John 13:1–17. The fourth section centres on the structure of John 13:1–17. The fifth and final part hinges on the hermeneutics of John 13:1–17 in the context of Nigerian political leadership.

The socio-historical context of John 13:1–17

In biblical scholarship, one of the most effective ways of gaining proper insight to any biblical passage is by

examining its socio-historical context. Hence, a critical look at Jesus' act of feet-washing in John 13:1–17 shows that something may have happened that prompted this episode.

As regards to why Jesus, the Master and Messiah, had to take the position so degrading as washing the feet of his followers, John did not explicitly tell us, but it can be assumed from the optic of Luke's parallel account of the Last Supper in 22:24–30, that there may have been a tussle for position as per who will become the leader when their Master is finally taken away. In addition, Guthrie (1994) observed that in the ancient world, humility was greatly despised and was seen as a sign of fear and weakness. This perception of humility was probably what was obtainable during the time of Jesus. No wonder selfishness, ego and pride, which are all core antithesis of humility, gradually made its way to the heart of the disciples. Each of them struggled to be the Master's favourite and to hold the highest possible position in their Master's kingdom. So, within this ego-based background, Jesus embarks on an exemplary act of servant leadership which eventually became a model of leadership for his followers.

Literary device in John 13:1–17

In many ways, the Gospel of John remains an embodiment of mystical ideas. In each chapter of the gospel, the writer often hints at certain ideas and yet he never explicitly tells its readers the underlying meaning. Although the narrative appears to be very simple and straightforward, one however feels as though the writer is indirectly pointing at deeper truths. According to Guthrie (1994:28), 'any study of Johannine works that ignores the literary form, device, and mode of Johannine revelatory language will always miss the mark'. Since the pericope under examination is Johannine, it warrants for a closer look at the literary device in order to properly understand the passage.

However, to deal adequately with all the literary devices utilised within the pericope is simply too large a task. Therefore, this study will focus on the most prominent literary device in the text which is symbolism. Almost all would agree that Johannine literature is rich in the use of symbols. It is pertinent to note that symbolism can assume different forms in literature. In general sense, it can be used to describe an object representing another, and to give an entirely different meaning that is much deeper and more significant. And in some specific cases, someone's action, speech or even certain occurrences may have a symbolic value. For instance, 'nod' may be a sign of agreement or approval. Nevertheless, it is important to note that symbols do shift their meanings depending on the context they are used in.

In John 13:1–17, the meal probably symbolises togetherness, communion, unity. Eating together symbolises sharing and

inclusiveness (Kostenberger 2009). Feet-washing possibly symbolises self-emptying or selfless service to each other in a humility (Coloe 2004; Henry 2006). It can be seen as putting others above self. However, it might entirely have another layer of meaning which is sin-cleansing (Barrett 1976; Schneiders 1985).

Another symbolism that is worth noting is in verse 10, where Jesus avers that if the foot is clean, then the whole body is clean, but not everyone is clean. He was undoubtedly referring to Judas Iscariot. Remarkably, when Peter protested against Jesus' feet-washing, Jesus wisely informed him that without his participation in feet-washing, he (Peter) would have no part with him. In response, Peter accepted this offer wholeheartedly, and even asked Jesus to wash his hands and his head. Peter in this context symbolises or rather represents the spokesman or the leader of the group, and his misunderstanding is a literary technique leading the reader to the deeper symbolism of the story.

The structure of John 13:1–17

The text John 13:1–17 is divided into three parts (1–5, 6–11, 12–17). The first part (1–5) serves as the background of the text that presents Jesus' act of exemplary leadership otherwise known as feet-washing event. With this act, Jesus showed self-awareness. He knew that the Father had put all things under his care (see v. 1).

The second section (6–11) presents an interesting dialogue between Peter and Jesus. Peter protested and rejected Jesus'

offer to have his feet washed, (v. 8). It is probable that Jesus began to wash the feet of his disciples without any special order. Peter calls Jesus Lord, but objects to the lordship of Jesus exemplified in the action of feet-washing. Since this is a technical wording of John, the dialogue shows lack of understanding, and at the same time indicates the new teaching of Jesus which brings about the revelation of his messianic identity.

The third and final part (12–17) reveals Jesus as a model of servant leader for his disciples to imitate and follow. Jesus told his followers to wash one another's feet, (vs.14). In the act of feet-washing, Jesus wanted to teach his disciples how to love and serve one another as he has loved them. Jesus casted a vision for the future as to how his disciples should live when he is gone and said that this affection for one another must endure to the end (Belsterling 2006).

In a nutshell, the structure of John 13:1–17 is presented in following three parts (see Table 1):

1. Verses 1–5: Jesus' act of feet-washing.
2. Verses 6–11 Jesus–Peter dialogue and the interpretation of the feet-washing.
3. Verses 12–17: Jesus calls for imitation of his leadership.

The exegesis of John 13:1–17

Translation of the text

Solving textual problems in John 13:1–17

The text John 13:1–17 has three textual problems, though there are other minor variants. Verse 2 alone contains the first two

TABLE 1: Translation of the text.

Greek (N/A)†	Researchers' translation
Verse 1 Πρὸ δὲ τῆς ἑορτῆς τοῦ πάσχα εἰδὼς ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὅτι ἦλθεν αὐτοῦ ἡ ὥρα ἵνα μεταβῆ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου πρὸς τὸν Πατέρα, ἀγαπήσας τοὺς ἰδίους τοὺς ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ, εἰς τέλος ἠγάπησεν αὐτούς.	Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.
Verse 2 καὶ δεῖν του γινόμενου, τοῦ διαβόλου ἤδη βεβηκότες εἰς τὴν καρδίαν ἵνα παραδοῖ αὐτὸν Ἰούδας Σίμωνος Ἰσκαριώτης,	During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him,
Verse 3 εἰδὼς ὅτι πάντα ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ ὁ Πατὴρ εἰς τὰς χεῖρας, καὶ ὅτι ἀπὸ Θεοῦ ἐξῆλθεν καὶ πρὸς τὸν Θεὸν ὑπάγει,	Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God,
Verse 4 ἐγείρεται ἐκ τοῦ δείπνου καὶ τίθησιν τὰ ἱμάτια, καὶ λαβὼν λέντιον διέζωσεν ἐαυτόν.	He rose from the table. He took off his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist.
Verse 5 εἶτα βάλλει ὕδωρ εἰς τὸν νυτήρα, καὶ ἤρξατο νύττειν τοὺς πόδας τῶν μαθητῶν καὶ ἐκμάσσειν τῷ λεντίῳ ᾧ ἦν διεζωσμένος.	Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.
Verse 6 ἔρχεται οὖν πρὸς Σίμωνα Πέτρον· λέγει αὐτῷ Κύριε, σὺ μου νύττεις τοὺς πόδας;	He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, do you wash my feet?'
Verse 7 ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ Ὁ ἐγὼ ποιῶ σὺ οὐκ οἶδας ἄρτι, γνώση δὲ μετὰ ταῦτα.	Jesus answered him, 'What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand'.
Verse 8 λέγει αὐτῷ Πέτρος Οὐ μὴ νύττεις μου τοὺς πόδας εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα. ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς αὐτῷ Ἐάν μὴ νύττω σε, οὐκ ἔχεις μέρος μετ' ἐμοῦ.	Peter said to him, 'You shall never wash my feet'. Jesus answered him, 'If I do not wash you, you have no part with me'.
Verse 9 λέγει αὐτῷ Σίμων Πέτρος Κύριε, μὴ τοὺς πόδας μου μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰς χεῖρας καὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν.	Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!'
Verse 10 λέγει αὐτῷ Ἰησοῦς Ὁ λελουμένος οὐκ ἔχει χρεῖαν εἰ μὴ τοὺς πόδας νύττωσθαι, ἀλλ' ἔστιν καθαρὸς ὅλος· καὶ ὑμεῖς καθαροὶ ἐστε, ἀλλ' οὐχὶ πάντες.	Jesus said to him, 'The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you'.
Verse 11 ᾗδρι γὰρ τὸν παραδιδόντα αὐτόν· διὰ τοῦτο εἶπεν ὅτι Οὐχὶ πάντες καθαροὶ ἐστε.	For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, 'Not all of you are clean'.
Verse 12 Ὅτε οὖν ἐνιψεν τοὺς πόδας αὐτῶν καὶ ἔλαβεν τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀνέπεσεν πάλιν, εἶπεν αὐτοῖς Γινώσκετε τί πεποίηκα ὑμῖν	When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, 'Do you understand what I have done to you?'
Verse 13 ὑμεῖς φωνεῖτέ με Ὁ Διδάσκαλος καὶ ὁ Κύριος, καὶ καλῶς λέγετε· εἰμὶ γάρ.	You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am.
Verse 14 εἰ οὖν ἐγὼ ἐνίψα ὑμῶν τοὺς πόδας ὁ Κύριος καὶ ὁ Διδάσκαλος, καὶ ὑμεῖς ὀφείλετε ἀλλήλων νύττειν τοὺς πόδας	If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.
Verse 15 ὑπόδειγμα γὰρ ἔδωκα ὑμῖν ἵνα καθὼς ἐγὼ ἐποίησα ὑμῖν καὶ ὑμεῖς ποιῆτε.	For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.
Verse 16 ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, οὐκ ἔστιν δοῦλος μείζων τοῦ κυρίου αὐτοῦ, οὐδὲ ἀπόστολος μείζων τοῦ πέμψαντος αὐτόν.	Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.
Verse 17 εἰ ταῦτα οἴδατε, μακάριοι ἐστε ἐάν ποιῆτε αὐτά.	If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

† The Greek text used here is culled from Aland et al. (2006).

main textual problems, while the third is seen in verse 10. The researchers' concern here is to determine the best possible variants or readings to be adopted in this exegesis.

Verse 2a has the following textual problem:

γνωμένον: This is the reading adopted in the text and it has the support of 4th century CE codices such as \aleph^* (Codex Sinaiticus, the superscript \ast means the original reading of the manuscript), and B (Codex Vaticanus). Other supports came from W (Codex Washintonianus) dated 4th/5th century CE, L (Codex Regius) dated around 8th century CE, Ψ (Codex Athos) which is dated around 9th/10th century CE, the testimony of Origen and other minuscules such as 070, 579, 1241.

The variant includes:

- γενομένου, which has the support of P⁶⁶ (Papyrus 66), \aleph^2 (Codex Sinaiticus, the superscript ² means second corrector) of 4th century CE, A (Codex Alexandrinus) which is dated 5th century CE, D (Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis) dated 5th century CE, Δ (Codex St. Gaul) dated 9th century CE, Θ (Codex Tbilisi) dated 9th century CE, Uncials like 0141, 0233, etc., Families such as f¹, f¹³, Minuscules like 28, 33, 157, etc., Byzantine manuscripts, etc.

Verse 2b has the following textual problem:

Ἰούδας Σίμωνος Ἰσκαριώτου. This reading, which is adopted in the text, has the support of L (Codex Paris) dated around 8th century CE, Ψ (Codex Athos Lavrensis) dated 9th/10th century CE, Minuscules like 070, Uncials like 1241, and Lectionary like l 813.

The variants include:

- Ἰούδας Σίμωνος Ἰσκαριώτης, which has the strong support of: P⁶⁶ (Papyrus 66) dated 200 A.D. Being a papyrus document of course makes it more closely to the original writing. \aleph (Codex Sinaiticus) dated about 4th century CE. Scholarship considers the Codex Sinaiticus to be one of the best and reliable Greek texts of the New Testament. B (Codex Vaticanus) dated 4th century CE and it is also a heavyweight document in biblical scholarship rated alongside codex Sinaiticus. This variant also has the support of lectionary like l 859.
- Ἰούδα Σίμωνος Ἰσκαριώτου, This variant is supported by A (Codex Alexandrinus) dated 5th century CE, Δ (Codex St. Gaul) dated 9th century CE, Θ (Tbilisi) dated 9th century CE. Other support came from Uncials like 0141, 0233, etc., Family like f¹, Minuscules like 28, 33, 157, 180, etc., and also the testimonies of Origen^{lat1/5}, Hilary Augustine^{2/4} which however omitted Σίμωνος Ἰσκαριώτου.
- Ἰούδα Σίμωνος ἀπὸ καριώτου, has the only the support of D (Codex Bezae) dated 5th century CE.
- Σίμωνος Ἰσκαριώτου, is supported by f¹³, uncial like 1505 and lectionary like 590.

Verse 10 has the following textual problem:

- οὐκ ἔχει χρεῖαν εἰμῆτους πόδας νίπασθαι. This is the reading adopted in the text and is strongly supported by B (Codex

Vaticanus) dated 4th century AD, C* (Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus), a 5th century CE. The manuscript is called Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus because the pages were washed; removing most of the ink and reused for another text, and the text that was written on the recycled pages is known as palimpsests. The superscript \ast means the original hand of the uncial manuscript. Other codices that throw their weight to this reading are: W (Codex Washington) dated 4th/5th century CE, Ψ (Codex Athos) which is dated around 9th/10th century CE and the testimonies of Origen, Ambrose^{3/6}, Jerome^{1/3}, Augustine^{4/12} etc.

The variants include:

- οὐχρεῖαν ἐχειμῆτους πόδας μόνον νίπασθαι, is supported by Θ (Tbilisi) dated 9th century CE and the testimonies Ambrose^{1/6} and Quodvultdeus^{1/2}.
- οὐχρεῖαν ἐχειμῆτους πόδας νίπασθαι, has the support of C³ (Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus) dated 5th century CE; and the superscript ³ means third corrector; Δ (Codex St. Gaul) dated 9th century CE, uncials like 0141, 0233, Family like f¹ and Minuscules like 28, 180 etc.
- οὐκ ἔχει χρεῖαν νίπασθαι, has the support of B (Codex Sinaiticus) dated about 4th century and the testimonies of Origen, Tertullian, etc.
- οὐχρεῖαν ἐχειμῆν κεφαλῆν νίπασθαι εἰμῆτους πόδας μόνον, is only supported by D (Codex Bezae) dated 5th century CE.

Adopting reading for textual exegesis

Because of the different variants for the problems in verses 2 and 10, it is pertinent to adopt a suitable reading for the textual exegesis. Hence, in the first textual problem in verse 2, the researchers adopt the first reading (γνωμένου) in the text based on the character of its manuscripts support, that is, the date and character support of the witnesses it has. In the second problem in verse 2, the reading that has Ἰούδας Σίμωνος Ἰσκαριώτης, is adopted because its manuscript supporters are heavily relied on when compared to other readings. In the textual problem as contained in verse 10, the researcher adopts the first reading (i.e. οὐκ ἔχει χρεῖαν εἰ μὴ τοὺς πόδας νίπασθαι) in the text based on the character of its manuscripts support.

Close reading of the text

Verses 1–5: Jesus' act of feet-washing

The narrative in John 13:1–17 begins with *Πρὸ δὲ τῆς ἐορτῆς τοῦ πάσχα* (Now before the Feast of the Passover) (v. 1). The preposition *Πρὸ* (pro) which is a Greek word for *before* implies *not twenty-four hours before* (Robertson 1930:128). The phrase, *τίθησιν τὰ ἱμάτια*, (took off his outer cloth) in verse 4 literally means put (*aside*) his outer garment. More so, the verb *τίθησιν* (took off) is not originally the Greek word used for taking off one's garment, but it is probably used in John 10:11, 15, 17 and 18 to connote the laying down of one's life.

By laying down his cloth, Jesus foreshadows the laying down of his life. According to Dodd (1953:116), the act of Jesus putting off his garment and then putting them back on in verse 12 shows him as that of the Good Shepherd (or leader) willing to lay down his life for others. The feet-washing episode in verses 4–5 parallels Luke 22:27 accounts in which Jesus infers: 'I am among you as one who serves'. It also points to the confessional hymn of Philippians 2:6–11, wherein the Jesus is portrayed as the one who *emptied himself*, taking the form of a slave. By his act of washing the feet of his followers, Jesus is modelling a leadership style that anchors on love, humility, and service. Unsurprisingly, it was obvious that the implication of his exemplary act would not be immediately understood by the disciples; Jesus further embarks on a more detailed clarification in verses 6–11 and verses 12–17.

Verses 6–11: Jesus–Peter dialogue and the interpretation of the feet-washing

It is most likely that Jesus began to wash the feet of the disciples without any special order. So, when it was time for Jesus to wash the feet of Peter, he (Peter) refuses and protests against the feet-washing because he cannot bear the reversal of social roles. Whether Peter's defensive action was generally on behalf of others or solely for him alone is not easily discernable, however, the manner in which he reacted is quite *petrine* in nature. He (Peter) perceived this act as too menial and degrading for Jesus to perform because it was customary in Peter's society for a slave to wash his master's feet. Belsterling (2006) averred that the Peter's confusion and impetuous reaction were not seen as a hindrance to Jesus, but rather as a medium to build and strengthen relationships with the disciples, especially Peter, and also teach them core values of leadership. It is possible that Peter may have remembered this episode on humility when he was writing 1 Peter 5:5–6.

The expression οὐκ ἔχεις μέρος μετ' ἐμοῦ (you have no part with me) in v.8 is very much remarkable. The Greek word μέρος (*meros*) means to share with or be a partner with, and it connotes in this context 'not only a fellowship with Jesus, but also a sharing in his heritage and his kingdom' (Lopinski 2019:89). For Brown (1966), Jesus is doing more than just giving a lesson on humility that the disciples could easily understand; what is involved has theological implications that can be understood only after 'the hour' is over.

Verses 12–17: Jesus calls for imitation of his leadership style

After Jesus finished washing his disciples' feet, he began to address them. Many New Testament scholars have clearly differentiated Jesus' first interaction with Peter from the subsequent discourse Jesus had with the entire disciples. For example, Bruce (1983) strongly argued that the first dialogue with Peter was more of theological explanation and the subsequent discourse that followed appears to be more practical in nature. Brown (1966) pushed this idea further by arguing that after dishing out the theological understanding

of feet-washing, Jesus then beckons on his disciples to imitate his exemplary act in his subsequent discourse. He began by asking the disciples whether they understand what he has *just done* to them (v. 12) which probably appears to them as strange question because he (Jesus) had earlier told them in verse 7 that: 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand'. Nevertheless, while post-resurrection period is implied in verse 7, the seeming fulfilment of this understanding appears to be found in verse 17: 'If you know these things...'

Worthy of note, in verse 13, Jesus made reference to two important titles: *Teacher* and *Lord*. These, of course, suggest self awareness. In other words, his act of washing the disciple's feet in verses 4–5 does not in any way compromise dignity, position and honour, (Michaels 1983). Jesus' explanation in verses 14–16, further indicates that by washing the feet of his disciples he is setting an example of a new leadership style that is anchored on love, humility and servanthood. A leadership model which Newbigin (1982:46) referred to as a radical subversion of the world's order and also of the world's false concepts of wisdom and power. Jesus' injunction in verse 14, coupled with his statement in v.8, forms the centre of his teaching on the act of feet-washing. By saying to his disciples: 'I have washed your feet' and they should therefore 'wash one another's feet', symbolises not just the self-giving love and cleansing as a result of Jesus' death, but also the mutual love, humility and selfless service towards others.

Summary of the exegesis

John 13:1–17 presents a clearer picture of Jesus as the originator and perfect example of servant leader. This model of leadership became clearer and very prominent when Jesus, despite his dignity and honour, stoop so low as to wash the feet of his followers. Such an act was completely sudden and was not expected of him because it was against the social custom of the day. Feet-washing was exclusively reserved for the slaves in those days. Jesus exhibited love, humility and selflessness which are among the core qualities of a servant leader. In the exegesis, it can also be deduced that servant leadership entails exemplary living, mentoring, counselling and even willingness to lay down one's life for his followers.

Application of John 13:1–17 to the Nigerian context

Overview of leadership in Nigeria

One does not have to labour hard to discover that Nigeria ever since her independence from the colonialists in 1960 has been a victim of different political crises, ethnic disharmony, high level corruption, and *epileptic* governance. While working hard to secure the country's independence from the colonial lords, our founding fathers, who obviously were power hungry, selfish and greedy, failed to lay a solid foundation that is based on ethnic harmony, patriotism, unity and love for the country. They instead helped the

colonialists in *stifling* the newly independent entity by completely engaging in ethnic politics and regionalism. This, according to Kwaghe and Ecoma (2016), polarised and plunged Nigeria into political instability.

Immediately after independence, there was a fierce struggle for supremacy over the federal government in the country between the three main political parties namely: Northern People's Congress (NPC), Action Group (AG) and National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) (Meredith 2006). The tussle continued to worsen, hence, resulting in breakdown of law and order, ethnic disharmony, and brutal assassination of the perceived political enemy. Sadly, successive government did little or nothing to remedy the ugly situation probably because of lack of clear-cut vision and purpose for the citizens.

Whilst all these political *show of shame* were going on, the military decided to rescue the staggering nation from the hand of corrupt politicians in a botched *coup d'état*. They promised the citizens *heaven on earth* and assured them of peace and infrastructural development in the country. However, within a short time, Nigerians realised that the intervention of the military was a *curse in disguise*. Ojukwu (2011) adumbrated that the military intervention was completely useless because instead of bringing lasting peace, it fuelled the existing violence which plunged the country into a bloody civil war.

The military reigned for 13 years before handing over power to the civilian government headed by Shehu Shagari. After four years of civilian rule, the military showed up again in 1983. This time they decided to stay in power for 16 years before finally passing the mantle of leadership to a democratically elected government headed by Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999.

Notwithstanding, Adejimi (2005) whose study has been found helpful in the course of this research, made a grim observation of the leadership situation in Nigeria over the years. According to him, majority of those involved in policymaking are excessively selfish, greedy and egocentric, and their actions/inactions have hindered growth and development in the country. This means that most of the political leaders in Nigeria have little or no knowledge of the core qualities of a servant leader. No wonder these so-called past and present political leaders have not been able to effectively harness and maximise the human as well as the numerous natural resources in the country. This is probably why Dowden (2009) amongst other scholars, has described Nigeria as a failed state.

Causes of bad leadership in Nigeria

The issue of bad leadership in Nigeria is an age old problem that is not unconnected to our founding fathers. Right from the time of her independence from the British, Nigeria seems to find it difficult to produce quality and exemplary leaders that have the interest of the nation at heart. The researchers,

however, have identified some of the causes of bad leadership in Nigeria. These include:

1. **Lack of moral and ethical prerequisite:** Nigeria political leaders lack the moral and ethical prerequisite of a good leader. They failed to realise that once they are elected into leadership positions they become public figure and are also a target for people with diverse interests. Their newly attained positions make them prone to all kinds of temptations and unscrupulous acts. Therefore, it is very important for an elected political office holder to devise effective means of putting his or her desires under control so as to avoid falling into temptations. In Nigeria, it is not an overstatement to say that most of her political leaders over the years have woefully failed to portray the requisite core virtues while in office. Therefore, there is the urgent need for the political leaders to re-evaluate their moral and ethical principles because these are the core values that defines a good leader.
2. **Lack of proper and adequate stewardship:** Stewardship is the process of taking care of another person's property. It is pertinent to note that property in this context does not necessarily refer to money and other material acquisitions alone, but human beings as well. A good leader is not one who orders people around or exercise absolute power over them; instead, he or she is the one who takes good care of the people that he or she represents. Most political office holders in Nigeria embezzle public funds, under-represent the people that voted them to power, and make life unbearable for the masses because they lack proper and adequate stewardship, (Ogbeidi 2012). They fail to realise stewardship as an essential ingredient of leadership because a leader who proves himself or herself unfaithful over that which is entrusted to him or her, will find it difficult to excel in the art of leadership.
3. **Lack of patriotism:** To be patriotic is to show loyalty and love for one's country. A patriot is not just one who randomly brags and babbles about his or her country but one who deeply and sincerely cares about the welfare, comfort and well-being of the people living in his or her country. Ogbeidi (2012) intimated that there is no person on this planet who does not belong to a country, hence, it is the duty of all to be patriotic and kind towards one another. Also, a patriotic individual is the one who strives, against all odds, to ensure that his or her country is making progress and that the citizens are also living comfortably. Unfortunately, most of the people who have ruled Nigeria so far cannot boast of being patriotic, instead their actions and policies project them as those who lack the spirit of patriotism.
4. **Lack of discipline and self-control:** Lack of discipline and self-control are amongst the core causes of bad leadership in Nigeria. One does not have to labour hard to discover that both the leaders and the led, since independence of the country in 1960, have been wallowing in ocean of indiscipline, disorderliness and uncontrolled desire for material acquisitions. This is because leaders,

who are supposed to be the example in keeping, defending, and upholding the constitutional laws breaks them at will and still go punished. Most Nigerian political leaders fail to realise that discipline is an essential attribute of a servant leader and without discipline a leader will eventually mislead those following him or her because the followers will always behave the same way as their leaders.

5. **Lack of integrity, vision and purpose:** It is imperative for a leader to have integrity, a clear vision and purpose, which will positively aid a leader to achieve his or her aims and objectives during his or her tenure in office. Integrity implies being faithful, truthful, and honest to do what he or she said he or she would do. Over the years Nigerian political leaders have promised to improve quality of life and ensure inclusive growth in the country if they are voted into power, but as soon as they are elected, they start to deviate from what they have promised. They see politics as a big business venture to acquire massive wealth and fortunes for themselves, rather than a place to serve and make positive changes in the country. For instance, Sani Abacha, who ruled Nigeria from 1993 until his death in 1998, is said to have stolen more than \$20 billion from the nation's treasury which is far above the net worth of all United States presidents combined at that time (Ayittey 2016).

Effects of bad leadership on national development

There is a saying that no nation can develop better than its leadership. This is true because the level of development of any nation is largely dependent on the quality of its leadership.

Unfortunately, the style of leadership which Nigerian citizens can boast of is one which has had detrimental effects on the people. For over 55 years now, the Nigerian political leadership model has succeeded in weakening the country economically and socially; breeding leaders and citizens who are undisciplined, uncultured, corrupt, greedy and criminally minded, who indulge in election malpractices and rigging, examination malpractices and other fraudulent practices. Other consequences of bad leadership in Nigeria include: unemployment; social unrest; importation of fake goods; poor standard of living, poor standard of education, violent and hard-hearted citizens, and increase in death rate.

Ogbeidi (2012) succinctly observed that Nigeria, right from her independence to date, has witnessed its abundant human and natural resources wasted with very little to show in living conditions of her citizens as a result of leadership failure. For instance, under the watch of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and Nnamdi Azikwe, who were the key leaders of the first republic, the country experienced a widespread bribery, corruption and impunity. Ever since then corruption and violence appears to be inseparable from the country's political leadership. Most of citizens and leaders in the

country believe that it is only through corruption and violence that one can make plentiful money within a short period of time.

Furthermore, many people in Nigeria, because of hunger, unemployment, corruption and poverty; all of which are essential *fruits* of bad leadership, are very aggressive and at any slightest provocation can lead to violent actions.

The implication of John 13:1–17 on national development

John 13:1–17 uniquely presents Jesus' act of feet-washing as an example of servant leadership. This style of leadership was demonstrated when he (Jesus), despite his dignity, position and honour, stooped low and washed the feet of his disciples (vv. 4–5). His action was clearly an expression of selflessness, love, and humility. This corroborates the thoughts of Russell and Stone (2002), who strongly believed that selflessness is an integral aspect of servant leadership.

The hermeneutics of the study showed that Nigerian political leaders have displayed leadership qualities that have been anchored on that of selfishness, high-handedness, corruption, and power tussle, all which are against the teachings of Johannine pericope interpreted in the study. In this study, lack of integrity, vision, self-control, discipline, moral and ethical prerequisites amongst others were all identified as the root problems of the political leadership in Nigeria today.

Also, it is saddening to note that people defame, quarrel, kidnap, injure, and even kill just for a leadership position, especially during election periods in Nigeria. No wonder political apathy is on the increase in the country. Most Nigerian political leaders no longer listen or care for those who elected them into office. And this communication barrier has, of course, been a major obstacle to national development.

According to Spears (2009), a servant leader must have the interest of his or her followers at his or her heart just like Jesus. Likewise in verse 6 where Jesus took time to explain his actions to Peter when he was confused and frustrated at Jesus washing his feet in verse 6, the Nigeria political leaders should also show understanding towards their followers by listening to their complaints and public opinions. This was exactly what Jesus did in John 13:1–17.

Furthermore, Jesus showed self-awareness (Okantey 2013). He knew who he was – *the Son of God*, and also that he came from God, and would return to God, (cf. v. 1). Based on this, Spears (2009) strongly argued that a servant leader must have an awareness for history and the future as well as current situations and their impact on decision making. As a servant leader, Jesus was very clear about his origin and purpose on earth, so he strived to carry

his disciples along by making sure they understood the plans for the present time. Nigerian political leaders should also have a clear-cut goal and vision, and should carry their followers along as well.

Moreover, a servant leader uses influence instead of force or violence to make his followers do what he wants. Jesus portrayed this important quality in his response to Peter's initial refusal in having his feet washed. By answering Peter's question, 'What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this', in verse 7, Peter was convinced to accept the intention of Jesus to have his feet washed in spite of Jesus' position and dignity. Nigerian political leaders should strive to choose influence over coercion in dealing with their subordinates.

It can also be deduced from the exegesis of Johannine pericope in the study that as a servant leader, Jesus took exclusive care of the disciples that his heavenly Father put into his care and supervision. This implies that a servant leader must see himself or herself as a steward and keeper, and also work towards improving the attitude, quality of life and inclusive growth within his or her group. Nigerian political leaders should see this amongst others as a challenge and then pattern their lives and actions after Jesus servant leadership qualities to ensure inclusive growth and development in the country.

Recommendations

Our evaluation of the subject of discourse would not be complete if we fail to make some recommendations for the benefit of the ongoing quest for good leadership which will ultimately improve attitude, quality of life and inclusive growth in Nigeria. While these lessons and recommendations may address the global leadership problem, they are particularly tailored to address the Nigerian leadership situation. The recommendations include:

1. Leadership is about understanding the followers, bringing them together, and getting them to work together as a team to reach their potential. Jesus did not even once neglect his followers. Even when Peter, out of ignorance, stubbornly refused to get his feet washed, Jesus took the pain of making him (Peter) understand the necessity of his symbolic action. So, to move the country out of its current state of chaos and underdevelopment, it is the responsibility of those at the top to create an enabling environment where every citizen participates in the nation building process. It is obvious that one of the major problems, ravaging the country today is a result of the leaders' failure to carry the followers along. To alleviate this, those at the helm of affairs should bridge the gap that exists between them and those that elected them into office.
2. Looking at the plight of the masses in Nigeria, it is obvious that those at the helm of the affairs in the country hardly listen to the needs and opinions of their citizens. Far

from this attitude, Jesus was willing to listen and proffer lasting solutions to the confusion of Peter as seen in John 13:6–10. Therefore, it is recommended that Nigerian political leaders should adopt the technique of using the popular yearnings and the public opinions of the electorates/masses to form the basis for policymaking and implementation.

3. To avoid or minimise leadership conflict especially before, during and after elections, Nigerian political leaders must see leadership as an opportunity to serve and not as a *do-or-die* affair. More so, Nigerian political leaders must not see themselves as *winners take it all*, but must learn that the art of governance is a collective responsibility. They should study as well practice Jesus' servant leadership style as in John 13:1–17 for effective growth and development of the nation and her citizens. The relationship between the leader and followers should not be servant to master relationship, but one that must coexist for the common good of the nation.

Conclusion

Jesus displayed a remarkable style of leadership in John 13:1–17 that is based on selflessness, love, and humility. He so humbled himself to assume the position of a slave in order to inaugurate an outstanding model of leadership, and at the same time, setting an example for how his followers should treat one another. A critique of today's political leaders in Nigeria reveals that their characters, policies and actions are still far from that of Jesus' leadership style. It was discovered that political leaders in Nigeria struggle for positions and are also too concerned about stealing for themselves and their families alone. This shows that Nigerian political leadership have long way to go. Hence, the need for Jesus' leadership model exemplified in John 13:1–17, a kind of leadership whereby a leader has the interest of his followers at heart, becomes an imperative for the country to experience growth and development. In order for Jesus' model of leadership to be realised in the contemporary Nigeria, every political leader in the country must be characterised with humility, selflessness, love and genuine passion for unity, peace and progress in the country.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

Both authors contributed equally to the writing of the article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

References

- Achebe, C., 1984, *The trouble with Nigeria*, Heinemann Educational Publishers, Oxford.
- Adejimi, A., 2005, *Optimizing management of design process for effective maintenance of public building in Lagos State*, University of Yaba Press, Lagos.
- Aland, B., Aland, K., Karavidopoulos, J., Martini, C.M. & Metzger, B.M., 2006, *The Greek New Testament*, United Bible Societies, s.l.
- Ayittey, G., 2016, 'Abacha, Mobutu richer than all 44 US presidents', *African Outlook Online*, viewed 24 June 2021, from <https://africanoutlookonline.com/index.php/columnists/george-ayittey/491-abacha-mobutu-richer-thanall-44-us-presidents>.
- Barrett, C.K., 1976, *John in Peake's commentary on the Bible*, Thomas Nelson, Ikeja.
- Belsterling, R., 2006, 'The mentoring approach of Jesus as demonstrated in John 13', *Journal of Youth Ministry* 5(1), 77–92.
- Brown, R.E., 1966, *The Gospel according to John*, Doubleday, New York, NY.
- Bruce, F.F., 1983, *The Gospel of John*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Bultman, R., 1971, *The Gospel of John: A commentary*, transl. G.R. Beasley Murray, Western Printing Services, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Coloe, M.L., 2004, 'Welcome into the household of God: The foot washing in John 13', *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 3(66), 400–415.
- Dodd, C.H., 1953, *The interpretation of the fourth Gospel*, Cambridge at the University Press, New York, NY.
- Dowden, R., 2009, *Africa: Altered states, ordinary miracles*, Portobello Books, Great Britain.
- Guthrie, D., 1994, *The New Bible commentary (21st century edition)*, InterVarsity, Downers Grove, IL.
- Henry, M., 2006, *The Gospel according to St. John. Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA.
- Hultgren, T., 1982, *Footwashing within the context of the Lord's supper*, viewed 24 June 2021, from <https://amnetwork.uk/resource/footwashing-within-the-context-of-the-lords-supper/>.
- Kostenberger, A.J., 2009, 'A theology of John's Gospel and letters', *Journal of Biblical Theology of the New Testament* 4(6), 138–155.
- Kwaghe, Z.E. & Ecoma, C.S., 2016, 'Panorama of Nigerian Political Leadership Since 1960', *Historical Research Letter* 32, 12–24.
- Lopinski, P., 2019, *To wash and be washed: An exegesis of John 13:3–17*, viewed 24 June 2021, from <https://www.mcmaster.ca/mjtm/4-3.html>.
- Meredith, M., 2006, *The state of Africa: A history of fifty years of independence*, The Free Press, Great Britain.
- Michaels, J.R., 1983, *A good news commentary*, Harper & Row, San Francisco, CA.
- Newbigin, L., 1982, *The light has come: An exposition of the fourth Gospel*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Ngele, O.K., Onwuanaku, F. & Uwaegbute, K.I., 2011, 'Exegetical survey of John 13:1–17: Implication of Jesus' servant leadership model for the church and Nigerian society', *Nsukka Journal of Religion and Cultural Studies* 4(12), 50–69.
- Nze, B., 2013, *Training treatise/manual for church leadership*, Josany Press, Port Harcourt.
- Ogbeidi, M.M., 2012, 'Political leadership and corruption in Nigeria since 1960: A socio-economic analysis', *Journal of Nigeria Studies* 1(2), 1–25.
- Ojukwu, E.O., 2011, *Because I am involved*, Spectrum Books, Ibadan.
- Okantey, P.C., 2013, 'Jesus, the originator of servant leadership: A narrational texture analysis of John 13:1–17', *The American Journal of Biblical Theology* 14(22), 1–9.
- Robertson, A.T., 1930, *Robertson word pictures in the New Testament* 1(2), Harper and Brothers, New York, NY.
- Russell, R.F. & Stone, A.G., 2002, 'A review of servant leadership attributes: Developing a practical model', *The Leadership & Organizational Development Journal* 23(3), 145–157. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01437730210424>
- Schneiders, S.M., 1985, 'The foot washing (John 13:1–20): An experiment in hermeneutics', *Ex Auditu* 1(1), 135–146.
- Spears, L.C., 2009, 'Servant leadership cultivate 10 characteristics', *Leadership Excellence* 26(5), 145–165.
- Uka, I.O., 2013, 'The act of footwashing: A contemporary lesson for Nigerian Theologians', *Nigerian Journal of Social Sciences* 9(1), 98–108.