



## A Re-Evaluation of Moral Values in Nigeria in the Post-Colonial Era

**Chinyere I. Madukwe**

Humanities Unit

School of General Studies

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

chinyere.madukwe@unn.edu.ng

Phone: 08035666097

### Abstract

A people's values are veritable means of measuring vital aspects of their culture, goals, and level of development over time. Moral values among Nigerian autochthonous communities in the precolonial times served as a compass for acceptable and unacceptable social behaviours. However, the moral values of indigenous cultural practices have remained dynamic in the face of foreign ones. Thus, man, as a social and self-conscious being, is endowed with the natural capacity to make choices when confronted with the challenges of social change. The intrusion of Western culture into Africa through colonization brought about positive and negative influences on Africans, and globalization has made the effects on African moral values obvious. Through an analytical approach to projecting a counterforce model against the domineering influence of Western culture in Africa, this essay assesses the impacts of Western values on Nigerians and advocates a re-evaluation and relearning of values toward a reformed Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Moral Values, Nigeria, Development, Western Culture, Post-Colonial

### Introduction

The history and the challenges that most socio-cultural groups faced in their march to development suggest the dynamics inherent in such groups. Their subsequent response or reaction to the challenges they faced with respect to natural occurrences like environmental changes, flood and erosion menace, added to man-made factors like politics, civilization, religion, economy and other cultural practices over a period of time and space, have a correlation with their present values and the emergent ones. Thus, generally speaking, man as a social being has continued to live in total dependence on his environmental factors and at the same time in relation to other beings. Within the concept of cultural development, he consciously or unconsciously develops values that act as a guide to the cohesion, harmony, and progress of the society where he lives.

At other times, he may find himself within the bounds of political and social formations that may eventually bring transformation to his long-held values.

With the emergence of Western values, which came with the colonisation of Africa, from the tail-end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there arose a clash of values, that is, Western and Nigerian values. The values of the people of Nigeria came under serious challenge. Subsequently, most of the time-honoured values like chastity, honesty, integrity, filial relations, communality, and respect for the elders have been seriously compromised. In the meantime, there was exacerbation of all sorts of vices like corruption, cheating, arm robbery, killing (for ritual or religious purposes), shameful exposure of the base parts of man (common among young men and women), lack of honesty and truthfulness, perversions both in the high and low echelons of authority. Nigerian people could not have been immune to the existence of the above-mentioned vices during the pre-colonial era, as it is evident, but they became exacerbated in the land due to the new value orientation that centres primarily on wealth and its acquisition, either by hook or crook. The situation is compounded by the development of information technology, whereby the world is turning into a global village. The development of electronic devices like mobile phones, internet systems, and television, though quite beneficial, has been turned into avenues of propagating vices in society. Indeed, looking at the rate of increase in vices in Nigeria, one may be tempted to become pessimistic, but as the saying goes, where there is life, there is hope.

The laws (the constitutions) of most human societies are deemed to be standardized rules governing the behaviours and attitudes of the citizenry thereof, for equitable good governance. It is generally believed that a county's law must have the interest of the people as its goal. Thus, in most laws of various societies, the issue of fundamental human rights is readily enshrined in their constitutions. Laws, except in theocratic states, are man-made, to be used to administer the diverse cultural and religious groups. It is usually secular in nature and implementation. In some instances, the liberal attitude of most of the man-made laws to moral behaviours has seriously contributed to a high level of moral decadence in some societies, as is the case in Nigeria, which gives room for unrestrained behaviours with regard to morality.

According to Enoh (2000), the "families, elders, peer groups and socio-cultural institutions like churches, cultural societies and socialization groups in the villages acted effectively as moral watchdogs". But the development of cities, leading to the migration of young men and women to such places, has weakened the customary norms which subsequently led to increase in the wave of immoral activities like crimes, prostitution and others (Enoh 2000:93). The perspective posited here by Enoh confirms that when people are outside the watch and control of family circles and relations there is the tendency to act and behave outside the acceptable moral codes. But it still does not solve the riddle of why it is usually easy for people to quickly throw away the morals they were groomed with when they find themselves in a new environment. It is our humble view that looking at the problem of moral decay from that angle alone would amount to scratching the surface. However, inherent in Enoh's

conception of the problem is the influence of globalization, whose effect is seen more in the towns (for obvious reasons) than in the villages.

The issue of low moral values being experienced in Nigeria society, has more to do with the decadence that has crept into the fabric of Nigeria autochthonous communities via acculturation during colonial era, which have weakened the traditional moral convention, that the strings of moral backbone that once held the communities to proper moral behaviour has almost snapped. Thus, it goes beyond movement from the village setting to the urban setting, to a problem of fundamental shift in value orientations among the communities, which calls for a relearning process that would help to bring about a change.

Ewhrudjakpor and Okumagba (2005:19) see the problem as emanating from "the contemporary permissive nature of the way of life". The case of young women (in some instances men too), from Nigeria travelling overseas with the consent of their parents, especially from Edo State, purely for economic reasons, is, to say the least, appalling. According to them, it was noted that,

Italian Police admit, that 50, 000 Nigerian New Transnational Commodity (NTC) that is, girls hailing from Edo, Lagos and Delta States are stranded in Europe and Asia between October 25 and November 12, 1999 (2005:19 & 20)

These Nigerian girls, as claimed by the Italian police, have, by their 'trade', denigrated the image of the country. But the point is that prostitution, which was a thing of disdain (in the past), has increased astronomically in Nigeria because of "economic poverty, greed, inferiority complex, dysfunctional homes and collapse of our traditional values" (Ewhudjekpor & Okumagba 2005:24).

Omoregbe (1979) sees ethics (an aspect of morality) as a science of moral values and duties. It is a moral principle that defines the standard of behaviour and norms to which the conduct of man should conform. They are guides of human conduct in directing what should be done and what should be avoided. Ethics abound in most of the social, economic, and professional organizations, making prescriptions on the acceptable rules of what is good and bad. But beyond these rules of ethics or ethical revolution as was once clamoured for, how many Nigerian citizens go about their businesses based on the laid down rules of acceptable right or wrong? Beyond sounding rhetorical, many Nigerians believe that as a Nigerian, "anything or everything goes if you can play along", thereby circumventing the rules. This very well indicates that the challenge of moral decadence in Nigeria has more to do with the decay that came into the system of traditional moral code of Nigeria communities, consequent upon contact with western culture, and would require the process of teaching of aspects of Nigeria moral convention to unlearn the wrong, and for attitudinal change to occur.

### **Moral values: a definition**

Barnouw (1985: 190) sees moral values as "the standards of good and evil, which govern individual behaviour and choices". Moreover, he further opines that "every person is said to have a rank order of value orientations as part of his or her personality. The nature of the rank order is considerably influenced by the culture into which one is born". While Clifford Geertz (1973: 131) definition goes beyond the individual to a group symbols, he also claims that moral values are "what a people prizes and what it fears and hates which are depicted in its world-views, symbolized in its religion, and in turn expressed in the whole quality of its life."

Donald and Blank (1978:39) have different views of the concept of moral values. To them, it is related to being humanistic, which includes knowing, caring, and loving. Hendry (1998:128), in her own assessment, views moral values and ideas in relation to the term "religion" as pervading social life so completely that neither can be clearly separated from the rest of social interaction.

Whatever definition is applied to the concept, the bottom line is that moral value deals with a generally acceptable way of behaviour, whether on the individual or societal level. It is also anchored on religious practices, since religion, generally speaking, has morality as part of its bastion in any society.

Morality in government, in a way, gives the government (authority) legitimacy in the eyes of the governed. It concretizes the acceptance and influence of such government on the populace. The opposite is the case where a government lacks or forfeits its moral authority over the people as a result of certain unacceptable practices like corruption, insecurity, election-rigging, and so on.

Individual or personal morality, on the other hand, can be assessed based on various elements within the social circle. The family, the peer groups, the school, the church, and the general society are part of what contributes to moral formation in any given society. In a situation where the general social-moral values of a given social group are low in matters of chastity, corruption, cheating, and so on, the tendency for the individual to be influenced is certain.

### **An overview of some pre-colonial cultural values in Nigeria**

Most human societies have values, that is, what they cherish and regard as an acceptable pattern of behaviour and conduct peculiar to them. Such values determine their individual conduct and their general world-view. Invariably, societal values cannot be defined or understood outside the context of culture. In other words, it is embedded in our cultural values, ethos, and norms. It remains an aspect of the cultural heritage. Thus, according to E.B. Tylor in Okaro (2009:188 & 189), culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and all other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" It is, therefore, clear that moral values as an aspect of cultural values can best be understood in terms of its relevance

within a social group or community. It also depicts what is acceptable to the social group in terms of moral behaviour, which, at times, can be dynamic in nature.

By and large, the various Nigerian ethnic groups like the Igbo, the Yoruba, Hausa, and numerous others have their generally accepted moral conventions that governed them prior to colonial rule. These values were at the core of these societies. These values were what kept the societies on the move and also enhanced social cohesion. In some societies like Igbo, a violation of any of such values/rules was regarded as a taboo (*aru, nso*) (evil, abomination). Though some of these taboos were rooted in African traditional practices, they helped to bring about sanity and decorum among the people. Prominent among these values are chastity, truthfulness, diligence, communal living, and others, both for the married and the unmarried. In some groups like the Yoruba, because of the sanctity attached to the married institution, and the need to guard against wayward behaviour, the married women were at times placed under some traditional control mechanism (charms). This is as a result of the societal perception of any contrary behaviour and thus acts as a social deterrent on those who would do otherwise. Consequently, Fabarebos (2004:17) opines that "the desire to stamp out, or at least restrain sexual laxity, is no doubt responsible for the use of '*magun*' (spiritual power) among the Yoruba to ensure that every sexual hoodlum receives his due 'compensation'

Another moral value that is on the verge of extinction in some Nigerian societies today is the attitude of disrespect for the elderly. In most traditional societies, age was a time-honoured virtue accorded to older members of the family or community, and it contributed immensely to the social cohesion of the society. It is usually termed as gross disrespect for a young woman or man to refer to an elder by his first name. Rather, appellatives like '*Dede*', '*Iyaa*', '*Mgboo*' (uncle, aunty, and big uncle) were used as a mark of respect and honour to address the elderly among some Igbo groups. It offends the natural sensibilities for a young man to take a share or sit down before an elder does so. These pristine values that helped to bind families, kith and kin and villages together have been seriously eroded by 'civilization'. These days, what the majority of people seem to worship and accord value to is money, not minding how it is made.

In most Nigerian societies, hard work and diligence are virtues well recognized and respected in whatever one does. It is a virtue seen at times during planting and harvesting seasons when young men compete among themselves on the number of mounds and barns they are able to make during the periods of planting and harvesting. This spirit of diligence and hard work engenders success in all areas of work. This is against the near-total indolent attitude among a large number of youths today, with the wrong belief that hard work does not pay anymore. Rather, it is money and 'connections' that count most in Nigerian society today.

### **Colonial link to moral challenge in Nigeria**

The coming of colonial rule to Africa, including Nigeria, in particular from the late 19th century, has been seen as a major factor in the present sorry state of the economic, social, moral, and political values. This was a result of the policy that they put in place in the design to exploit the natural and human resources of the colonized people. In Nigeria, for instance, the indirect rule system and regionalism were in operation. This colonial policy thrived in the division of the colonized people, especially between the educated elite and the traditional institutions. It also widened the gap between the North and the South in political and educational attainments, thereby sowing seeds of discord in the emergent nation. Thus, it thrived in segregation rather than in the integration of the various socio-cultural groups.

But fundamentally, the colonial rule, built on the instrument of force and coercion, was without the consent of the colonized people. In the opinion of Tamuno (1980:393), the "British rule in Nigeria was in the final analysis buttressed by force or by the threat of using it." Therefore, the colonial ideology of forceful maintenance of power was bequeathed to early Nigerian nationalist leaders. The result of this was the subsequent manipulation of the electoral systems and the instrument of state power by the elite to enable it to remain in power. This brought about political and social instability in Nigeria. Thus, tutored on the political culture of exploitation, deprivation and manipulation of the masses, the nationalist leaders, in their bid to maintain the status quo, resorted to corrupt and undemocratic practices. This, in fact, was one of the reasons the leaders of the January 15th coup of 1966 harped on as to why they struck. The alleged case of Nnamdi Azikiwe's misappropriation of A.C.B. Bank fund and the flamboyant lifestyle of people like Okotie-Eboh and others are some examples of such corrupt practices. The military that later came to power in a bid to stop corrupt practices did not live up to their declarations. As events subsequently unfolded, more corrupt practices took place during the military regimes than during the civilian regimes. In his general observation and assessment of corruption in Nigeria and how it has become an institutionalized cultural pattern, Aluko made the following postulations:

At the first stage, corruption and the value-system runs on parallel lines. This leads to the emergence of a counter-culture, which runs counter to the existing norms in the society. At the third stage, corruption begins to enter into the realm of the normative system, a stage of partial institutionalization. At the fourth and the fifth stages, corruption becomes completely institutionalized, it becomes a norm, part and parcel of the culture, while of the sixth stage socialization and (resocialization for the aged) begins and people now accept corruption as a way of life. At the final stage, new forms of behaviour emerge which run counter to the old social order but conforms to the new value system in which corruption has been completely institutionalized and entrenched. The new social order

becomes the yardstick for measuring behaviour. Corruption now governs the society (2000:224)

Thus, the problem has its antecedents in our colonial history. It was, therefore, the corrupt culture instituted in the land that has contributed to the low moral behaviour in Nigeria today. This phenomenon has no doubt facilitated the downward slide in the morality of most Nigerian people. This has also engendered other societal ills like laziness, immorality, armed robbery, money-consciousness, political violence, and other vices in the land. Corruption is the basis of most of the social ills we have in society presently. It has eaten deep into the bone marrow of this country. It is in the category of other debilitating, challenging national problems, like religious bigotry, ethnic chauvinism, and lack of national cohesion. With this, values such as hard work, diligence, chastity, honesty, respect for the elders, and so on have been seriously eroded.

The whole scenario worsens with the continuing influence of globalization through the media. The influence here on moral values is seen more in areas like loose moral behaviour depicted in the way of dressing, sexual perversion, nudity, violence, and so on. The emergence of the Nigerian film and video industry, which is known as Nollywood, an imitation of the American Hollywood film industry, has aggravated the challenge of moral decay in Nigeria today. Through the various films being produced by the film industry (which in most cases expose the body parts of females), the level of moral life of the society has been negatively impacted. This is without prejudice to some of the obvious positive essences of Nollywood, both as a means of entertainment and a purveyor of visual culture.

Thus, the institutionalisation of immoral behaviour and practices seems to have pervaded almost all the strata of society. The bug has so caught the banking industry that today most of the banks, in their bid to maximize profit, indulge in all kinds of unacceptable practices. Prominent among these is the unofficial policy of using young girls and boys as their marketing officers. According to Mrs. Florence Omolola Banji-Alabi, a former banker, "this strange marketing culture is made worse when these ladies are given unattainable targets. This is what gave rise to the sudden indecent and provocative dressing that has now become the way of life of most of these marketing ladies." (The Guardian, Jan. 2010).

#### **Re-evaluation and suggestions towards sound moral values**

In light of the continual erosion of our pristine moral values consequent upon the advent of colonial rule, with the overwhelming influence it exerted on the culture of Nigerian people, especially among the youths and teenagers, the need for a re-evaluation of our moral values becomes necessary.

Citizenship education has thus been canvassed as a solution to the problem of moral decadence in society. Citizenship education, according to Ajose (2001), in Omo-Ojugo M. et al (2009, 4), is specifically designed in content and function to produce healthy, good, and active citizens, wherein a good citizen is seen as

patriotic, responsible, disciplined, and conscientious, morally sound with love for his state.

The Humanities as a field of study were revived with the eclipse of the medieval period (Middle Ages) in history, which brought about the elevation of man "as the measure of all things" according to Pythagoras. Humanities as a discipline is primarily man-centered, with interest in the study of man both from the subjective and historical perspectives. The Humanities, in its effort to "humanize man over and above other creatures," addresses certain inherent peculiar issues in the life of man and by so doing, influences him in such areas as morals, critical thinking, and so on. Through the emphasis on cultures that have a sound moral background, the humanities try to have a positive impact on students, thereby helping them to inculcate good moral principles to face the challenges of life. Furthermore, with the continuous emphasis on those cultural values that address the total development of man, while espousing beauty (aesthetics), arts, and justice, as values that are acceptable and germane, the humanities act as a repository of cultural values. In other words, the humanities as a field of study should be emphasized more in the tertiary institutions in order to help students imbibe good morals within the context of the nation's cultural values.

In Nigeria, from the time of attainment of independence, the country has been besieged by a myriad of problems ranging from the socio-political to the economic. The situation has been worsened by other problems like "corruption, ethnicity (tribalism), loss of value, negative attitude to national issues, lack of patriotism, political gangsterism and a host of other practices..." In a bid to tackle some of the ills in society, the various governments that ruled Nigeria tried different options. These include (WAI) War Against Indiscipline in 1984; National Orientation Agency (NOA) 1993; Mass Mobilization for Self-reliance, Social Justice, Economic Recovery (MAMSER) 1987; Ethical Revolution (1983) and more recently, the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) 2002 and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC). (Omo-Ojugo M. et al, 2009). However, in spite of all these government policies, there has continued to be a big gap between government programmes and the willingness on the part of the government and the populace to implement those policies.

This implies that the solution needs the active involvement of all the stakeholders at all levels of society. That is, the government, the family, and the society at large. The family, as the basic unit of society, has a vital role in this direction. The Bible also recognizes this much when it stipulates in Proverbs 22:6, "Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it." The importance of child upbringing in uplifting the moral standard of society at large cannot, therefore, be overemphasized. This can be achieved with attitudinal change of most parents in realizing that the behaviour of a child mirrors what he/she has received in the home. Care must then be taken to curb the negative influence of the television and the Internet on our children. Parents should be in a position to control and know the kind of

programmes their children watch. Pornography, violent, and horror films must be banned in homes to avoid negative influences on the youth.

According to the sociological view, the problem of moral laxity in society is squarely a social problem requiring nothing less than a social solution. This is true to the extent that society has a lot of influence it exerts on its citizenry. Thus, the widespread corruption is a reflection of the profound changes in the value system. (Aluko, 2000, 224). But the problem with this sociological view of life based on social influence is that it tends to downgrade the power of individual personality vis-à-vis the social influence on his actions. Evidence abounds to prove that even in an over-indulgent, morally decadent society like Nigeria, there is a reasonable number of individuals who hold their integrity. Some examples will suffice at this point. Funso Aina in his article in the Guardian (2010, 51), wrote of two separate incidents that coincidentally happened to him. He first lost his wallet containing some money, driver's license, ATM, credit, and health insurance cards on a public bus. Later, a young man by the name of Christopher Ubabueze picked it up and returned it with everything intact. When he was offered some money and later a lunch by the owner, he refused to accept. Aina also told another story of losing his phone in a taxi. Later one Uchechukwu Omengboji alias 'Gaddafi' found the phone and subsequently returned it to the owner. In these two separate cases, according to Aina, Christopher confessed that he returned the wallet because of his impeccable upbringing, which would not permit him to appropriate what did not belong to him. In the case of Uchechukwu, he also confessed "that one of his friends advised him to keep the phone for himself, but he refused, saying his conscience would not allow him to rest if he did". In these two separate incidents that occurred to Mr. Funso Aina and the responses he received, it becomes clear that individual personality, which is built on a good home upbringing, is a major factor in addressing this problem. In the case of "Gaddafi", we also observe the importance of the human conscience in man's behaviour in relation to choices in life. Though the examples here are few, they give us a little picture of the pattern of behaviour of some people in society.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In this discussion of the re-evaluation of moral values in Nigeria, most of the factors relating to low morality have been laid at the doorstep of the negative influence which the West has exerted on our cultural values and behaviour. To a very large extent, this position is plausible since man as a social being requires the interaction of others, which invariably brings about either positive or negative influences. Though society generally has a major role in influencing man's social or moral behaviour as the sociologist would claim, the fact that man is also "a self-conscious being" must not be discountenanced. Thus, he fully takes responsibility for all his actions and decisions in life.

In their answer to the problem at hand, Ewhrudjakpor and Okumagba suggested that:

Traditional values, which encourage communal living, should be reinvigorated to replace this emerging monogamous lifestyle as a fall-out of globalization in developing nations. (2005, 24),

Odeyemi (2009, 28) insists that the solutions lie with "re-identification of cultural origin, understanding of values and application to the society". "Salvation lies in our culture", he claimed. That we are faced with the challenge of moral decadence does not imply that everything about our culture must be taken hook, line, and sinker. Definitely, we should be in a position to sift the wheat from the chaff. There are some good cultures like respect for elders, chastity, hard work, obedience to leadership, honesty, and others, which we must pursue and uphold. However, cultural practices which encourage immorality (for instance, among the Tivs in Benue State, where a man may wish to offer one of his wives to friends) need a review. Again, the culture of head-hunting is often associated with the Ohafia people of Abia State, which, although it depicts manhood and courage, must also be discouraged since it destroys human lives.

Referring to the unhealthy banking system found in Nigeria at present, which has accentuated the problem of moral decay, F.O. Banji-Alabi, a former banker, proffers a solution to the challenge as to the effect that:

The regulatory bodies must begin to intervene so that morality, etiquette, social and national values are not sacrificed on the altar of crazy modern banking (A. Fanoro, 2010, 18). She further opines that banks should be made to understand that they have "other binding responsibilities to their environment and the society at large." (A. Tanoro, 2010, 18).

In reality, the bottom line is that the virus of immoral behaviours and practices has become pervasive, affecting almost all aspects of the social, economic, political, and moral life of the citizens. No sector is exempt from this deadly problem affecting our society today. From the politicians at the high echelon of power to the common man on the street, the system is corrupt.

The issue of homosexuality, Lesbianism, and same-sex marriage has been a recent issue in the Nigerian public, leading recently to the unanimous passage of a bill by the Nigerian senators banning homosexuality. The passage of the bill banning homosexuality in January 2014, during President Goodluck Jonathan's administration, and its related practices in Nigeria were received with high acclaim and acceptance by the public. But this has not gone down well with Western nations like the U.S. and Britain, going by the objections they raised on the grounds of fundamental human rights. Yet the Nigerian legislature has the right as the elected representatives of the public to make laws for Nigeria, not at the dictate of Western powers. The debate on rights is only a matter of controversy and may depend on what obtains in the local context, culturally and otherwise (Dibia, 2012, 13). In the same vein, a recent event in Lagos, the

commercial city of Nigeria, is quite revealing. According to Tell Magazine, under the caption.

Panorama, it was reported that:

The ladies, old and young, 'packaged' themselves in T-shirts and caps with inscriptions stating the right of sex workers. For the first time, sex workers in Nigeria publicly teamed up with their international counterparts under the name, Africa Sex Workers Alliance, ASWA (2011, 10)

What probably emboldened these ladies and others in their category was perhaps Nigeria's signatory to the International Declaration on Human Rights.

A reorientation of societal attitudes to these issues is imperative. Attitude as has been said is everything and when the attitude of the society changes, things would definitely change. But for attitudinal change to take place, there must be citizenship education, first to enlighten the citizenry on certain things required and expected of every citizen. An enlightened citizenry that has been positively influenced is full of energy, zeal, patriotism, power, and influence to make changes where it is required. This is exemplified by the political revolutions that once took place in the Arab world, which started in Tunisia. The revolutions have positively influenced the political authorities in the Arab world and beyond, thus evidencing positive changes which can be effected through the power imbued in educated and enlightened citizens.

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