
DECLINING MORALITY AND ITS ATTENDANT PROBLEMS IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY: THE WAY FORWARD

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ABSTRACT

Traditional African societies, which also make up Nigeria, have always placed great value on sound morality and ethical values in human behaviour and in every form of social relationships. This has been evident in the communal lifestyles and the emphasis on the premise that "I am because we are". Young people were raised from generation to generation to value moral virtues such as the dignity of humanity, the sanctity of life, the dignity of labor, and social relationships, among other things. Traditional Nigerian societies thrived on the foundation of morality because it helped in sustaining peaceful coexistence. The situation today appears to be a far cry from what it used to be, as the nation is witnessing serious deficits in moral values. This has resulted in a plethora of morality-related problems that make survival challenging. Problems plaguing Nigerian society include lawlessness, indiscipline, banditry, cultism, fraud, sexual assault, rituals, thuggery, corruption, drug use, terrorism, insurgency, militancy and the like. This paper discusses these challenges as resulting from deficits in moral values and how they can be addressed through concerted human efforts. Suggestions on how Nigerian society can tackle it are proffered as a way forward from the seeming hopelessness.

KEYWORDS: Morality, Declining Morality, Traditional Nigerian societies and Attendant problems

Introduction

Moral decadence and laxity have become persistent problems facing most countries in the world today. Developing and developed, pious and secular societies are not spared this scourge which ravages nations among both the young and the elderly. It is becoming a very common thing to hear of killings, sexual assaults, rapes, stealing, fraud, kidnapping, drug addiction, and terrorism perpetuated by both the young and the old. Sanga (2022) writes that decadent behaviours such as rape, sexual abuse, drug abuse, school violence, and killings have become common among many youths and children all over the world. These profligate tendencies are not only common among youths and children but are also engaged in by mature adults. The rate at which these behaviours keep occurring and spreading across borders appears to have resulted from moral decadence and a decline in decent values in society.

The common good of man, or the collective interest, appears no longer important as individualism tends to be valued above collectivism. Public goods are easily diverted by serving public officials into private use while lawlessness continues to take the front seat as apparent institutional weakness to enforce the rule of law continues to take the front seat and abuse of human rights and privileges increases daily. Values tend to change with growing modernization, with attendant interests in pleasure and ephemeral fun as opposed to commitment to conscientious endeavours (George & Uyanga, 2014). The collective and positive development of society becomes stressed as the behaviour of many individuals continues to be questionable. There appears to be declining moral and ethical values among many people, a situation that calls for critical attention if indeed a positive change is to be expected.

The Concept of Morality

"Morality is concerned with the idea of right and wrong actions in human beings (Uyanga, 2009). It can be viewed as the principle of human actions that seek to promote mutual welfare, growth, creativity, and meaning in striving for good over bad and right over wrong (Udoidem, 2021). Morality is the duty of benevolence and the obligation to promote the good of others outside of oneself. It comes to the fore when people are involved in social interactions in society and do not operate in isolation. This is because morality primarily aims at facilitating peaceful and harmonious living between men in society (Ekanola cited in Ewelukwa and Anwuluorah, 2012). It is simply being one's brother's keeper and trying to relieve dire conditions for others. Morality exists to promote the common good of man. This common good can be said to be the practice of being human in a society to promote the well-being of collective humanity.

Society exists because men give up part of their individual modes of existence and agree to a social contract which binds them together and prevents them from living in a "state of war" as described by Thomas Hobbes. In his words, this "state of war" would make human life "solitary, brutish, and short" (Bonjour & Baker, 2008). Morality is important in building positive relationships among men because it is a rope that brings cordiality and peaceful interactions in their engagements with one another. It is revealed in its values. Moral values can be defined as cherished norms of actions and ways of life that foster growth and peaceful coexistence in human society (Udoidem, 2021). These values include but are not limited to truthfulness, patience, integrity, responsibility, public spiritedness, respect for human life, justice, fairness, and equality (George & Uyanga, 2014). When exhibited in relationships, moral values give room for growth and positive development. It promotes the idea of working together to achieve common goals as well as a collective need to believe in one another for a strong and supportive society.

Morality in Traditional Nigerian Societies

Traditional Nigerian societies, like many others in Africa, existed as simple communities with rich moral values and heritage (Ibia, 2006). Oral transmission was the means of tutelage, and the emphasis was on communal living and brotherhood. No man was an island, and each society strived to achieve goals of functionalism and character development. Everyone was made to work, and there was no room for being idle in the community. Individuals were hunters, farmers, fishermen, traders, blacksmiths, weavers, wrestlers, and traditional medicine men, as the case may be. Every individual relied on one or more crafts to make a living. Leisure time was also practiced communally as people came together in the village squares, market squares,

and the like to share stories, engage in communal games and sports such as wrestling and other festivals. The sanctity of relationships based on family units was highly valued. Relationships based on common ancestry and those based on social connections, like marriages and friendship, were considered sacred, respected, and valued. These values encouraged communal living and taught men that living in a community or society necessitated living together as one family, sharing cares and concerns.

Stump, cited in Sanga (2022), quotes Aristotle as saying that "he who is unable to live in a society or who has no need to live in a society because he is sufficient for himself must either be a beast or a god." This statement is very true of many traditional Nigerian societies. These societies promoted collective humanity based on the fact that individuals were bound by the principle of sharing. Even when segregation occurred, as in cases with the caste system, where it was practiced, it was a collective decision taken on how such 'outcasts' should be treated. African societies promoted brotherliness and group or collective goals. The concepts of "*Yakammi*", "*Imaan*", "*Ukang nnyin*" (Ibibio), "*Umunna*" (Ibo), and "*Eniamini*" (Yoruba) as used by these groups in Nigeria universalized neighbourliness and was "a philosophy of universal brotherhood rooted in the consciousness of a common humanity" (Udoidem, 2021). These concepts are used to describe relationships with someone who is "like me but not my blood relative" (human beings).

The philosophy of *Yakammi-ism*, *Umunna-ism*, and *Eniamini-ism* captures the internal dynamics of unconditional love for others based on their human worth as one's self. Traditional Nigerian groups, like other African societies, espoused community life, brotherhood, and oneness, using highly valued morality. There were ways of inculcating morality and making sure it was practised by individuals in society. There were various sanctions and punishments imposed to check immoral behaviour among the people. These sanctions and punishments differ from one society to another. In Ibibio land in Akwa Ibom State, murder, stealing, lying, dishonesty, adultery, and character assassination were among the crimes vehemently abhorred by all (Okpo, 2019). Individuals who engaged in them received punishments that were swift, immediate and public. The essence of these punishments was to bring shame and disgrace to the offenders and deter others from committing such acts. In the cases of stealing, the punishment was carried out based on the gender of the culprit and the object stolen. Male clubs (*nka*) disciplined males while female clubs (*ebre*) disciplined females. A male culprit was stripped naked, smeared with charcoal, flogged by men, and paraded around the community for stealing, whereas a female thief was stripped naked, smeared with charcoal, flogged by men, and paraded around the market carrying the item(s) she stole on her head (Okpo, 2019). Thieves were banned from associating with others, especially in social gatherings, and their family members were also branded as "thieves". Murderers were, in some communities, banished from the land for some period of time, even if the murder was inadvertent.

Sanctions across various traditional societies included the swearing of oaths to prove innocence or as an undertaking not to repeat it. Punishments could include banishment or expulsion from that society and a death sentence, depending on the severity of the matter. The place of morality in these societies was priceless and not negotiable.

Moral Decadence in Nigeria today

Today, many Nigerian societies are in a dilemma due to the number of moral problems they face, even in spite of the availability of copious religious and secular values to regulate behaviour. Morality appears to continue to decline greatly. This decadence is being manifested in gross misconduct of individuals in public offices, bad leadership, insincerity in governance, security problems, injustice, insurgency, banditry, terrorism, lawlessness, kidnapping, killing, cultism, sexual assaults, maiming, political thuggery, cheating, stealing, fraud, and rituals, among others.

Leadership crises over the years have resulted in a lot of decadence in the system. Okpo (2019) asserts that leadership failure on a large scale is one of the fundamental setbacks of the Nigerian state. Leadership ought to be about service to humanity. Nigeria today has been variously described as a failed state by many who have associated failure in leadership over the years with moral decadence in society. It is a common phenomenon to read about the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) picking up ex-governors and ex-public officers for one financial misconduct or the other. This is definitely a moral problem. Why would a public servant go into a public office, steal public funds, and divert them for private use? The various sectors of the economy and governance continue to grapple with a lot of daunting challenges while being unable to render the expected services to the people.

Among individuals, there are reported cases of heinous crimes such as boyfriends killing girlfriends, spousal violence and killings, an increase in divorce cases, individuals luring victims (including children) and using them for ritual purposes, extra-judicial killings by security agencies, decay in the judicial system, internet or wire fraud (yahoo-yahoo), kidnapping and abuse of human rights. Declining morality causes leaders who seek positions in government to engage in vote buying and rigging of elections. It is a constant phenomenon to see petitions sent to election tribunals after elections with accusations and counter-accusations of rigging by politicians. With these problems, one wonders if there is any hope for the future of Nigeria. It is so worrisome that Njoku (2016) writes that the issue of moral decadence in Nigerian society has become a controversial one because society seems to lack knowledge of the disparity between what is morally right or wrong.

The Way Forward

Schweitier, cited in Anadi (2008), posits that the prosperity of a society depends on the moral disposition of its members. For Nigeria to move forward, there must be an improvement in the attitudes of people in social relationships. Ethical principles must guide the behaviour of individuals. Appropriate sanctions need to be put in place and appropriately applied to defaulters to deter unbecoming behaviour patterns. Ethical and moral re-orientation programmes need to be intensified to provide a moral road map for the people. Religious leaders need to radically review the teachings of their doctrinal tenets to emphasise more humanism rather than materialism, peaceful co-existence rather than individualism, godly piety rather than cultic radicalism, and human values rather than religious fanaticism.

Mundane values can actually be traced to the adult population. They determine and drive the values that they instil in the youth. They finance the youths' immoral engagements and sustain them in propagating the same. They provide them with model behaviour, which they emulate and transmit to the next generation. Excessive materialism, individualism, god-fatherism,

ethnicity, injustice, bribery, corruption, sexual perversion, lawlessness, human rights abuse, and tribalism, which have eaten deeply into the fabrics of society, are all learnt from adults. Adults need to re-invent the culture of truthfulness, accountability, the rule of law, justice, pride and dignity in labour, respect for the sanctity of life and collective humanity, and encourage the younger generation to emulate. Society needs to review and imbibe pristine African social values and moral codes guided by the observance of rules and the spirit of give and take for the harmonious adjustment of individuals. Teleological (consequence-based), deontological (duty-based) and virtue-based ethical theories must envelope social life. There must be appropriate consequences for failed actions, while individuals must realise that they have duties to themselves and others and try to fulfil them virtuously.

For the betterment of society today, the beauty of communal living and brotherhood must be reintroduced as standard practises for nationhood. As Vandermiati (2004) affirms, brotherhood and family-hood are necessary practises for social and political development. As a developing country, the practice of acceptable social and moral values will foster social cohesion, reduce suspicion and promote cooperation for inclusive co-existence for all.

Conclusion

Declining morality and poor ethical values in our society appear to be global challenges. Almost every nation suffers from one aspect or the other of deficit morality, irrational ethical manners, or both. In Nigeria, the situation appears to have a peculiar strain, given the myriads of moral problems occurring on a daily basis. Being a process of deficit morals, it can be seen as a human weakness which can be addressed using human efforts. The government, individuals, groups, and organisations need to mobilise their resources together to tackle it.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing, the following recommendations are made:

1. Revival of old time values and moral codes

There is need for the revival of culturally-based moral codes and values to guide the behaviour of individuals in the society. This revival will not be limited to the family. Schools, church, and mosque should be involved, subject to existing laws and regulations. Every facet of the society should be guided by its set of acceptable codes of values, ethics and morals. The observance of these morals should be religiously pursued to ensure that every breach is appropriately reprovved and penalised. Although social activities are guided by law codes, many individuals still break such laws deliberately to serve their selfish interests. The problem sometimes lies in the fact such breeches do not attract commensurate punishment if at all justifiable judicial actions are taken against culprits. In the observance of moral values, failure to apply appropriate sanctions should also attract sanctions. Communities, groups, establishments, whether public or private, should as a matter of course, determine own moral values, set up compliance monitoring bodies and provide for strict punishment of defaulters.

2. Role of adults

Acts of immorality and disregard for valued norms of the society are learned behaviour usually observed from the older generation. In considering the extinction of such habits among the youths, it is important for the adults in the society to amend their ways and lifestyle. It is actually their behaviour most youths emulate, especially as these adults may be seen as models who should be copied or even obeyed when used by them in unhealthy engagements. Adults, whether in the home, school, place of work, church or any other setting, should always exhibit exemplary behaviour for the younger generation to imitate.

3. Role of religious groups

It is sad that even in strict religious settings, some form of immoral behaviour is usually reported, in spite of professed piousness. While many such reported cases may not reflect the tenets of the beliefs of such groups, they usually depict the level of moral deficits common in the larger society. This situation therefore places serious burden on religious groups and organisations to enforce strict compliance with their doctrinal values to ensure sanity in the observance and practice of what they profess.

4. The traditional society

Traditional communities may need to review their age-old norms, adopt and enforce aspects that will promote observance of ethical values. Associations and organisations should endeavour to enforce strict compliance with the established norms and values of their groups, especially those that are in consonance with existing and recognised laws regulating behaviour in the society. Mechanisms to enforce compliance with these norms should be set up and conscientiously deployed to ensure that every breach attracts commensurate penalty. Individuals who live above their means should be required to explain the source(s) of their wealth. This way, others would be discouraged from engaging in sharp practices for quick wealth.

5. The government

Various laws and agencies to regulate human behaviour in the society have been enacted and established respectively. Sometimes these institutions of governance themselves may be weakened by the canker of corruption and lack of regard for esteemed values and so become unable to enforce its powers. There is need for renewed ethical re-orientation that should be focussed on sensitising the people on the esteemed values and moral principles that regulate their behaviour. Such a programme should also impress on the people their roles and obligations in ensuring that observed breaches are promptly reported for necessary action by relevant agencies. The government should also revive weak agencies to strengthen them to be able to perform their duties accordingly. Exhibition of honest behaviours by individuals should be recognised, publicised and promptly rewarded by the government. This will encourage other persons to always look out for opportunities to exhibit honest behaviour so as to attract government commendation.

6. The social media

The information communication technology (ICT) has come to facilitate information sharing at a speed never known before. It has virtually reduced the world into a global village such that any event in any part of the world soon becomes easily shared in real time. With so many channels available for the sharing of information, these media can be used by individuals and groups to popularise and encourage the practice of sound ethical and moral principles in any given community. Observance and practice of sound moral principles should be applauded and commended while immoral behaviour should be condemned and denounced widely.

7. Guidance and counselling

The articulation and deployment of moral and ethical principles should also be the concern of Guidance Counsellors in school and non-school settings. As a school service, guidance and counselling should also be devoted to providing information on ethical and moral values to the school community. This service will help the students to learn to internalise these values as they relate with fellow students, their teachers and other school staff. In non-school settings, counsellors should also concern themselves with providing guidance information on how individuals should fortify their business, social and other relationships with honest and morally stimulating interactions. Guidance Counsellors have a responsibility to preach moral principles and sound ethical values to their clients anywhere they render their service. In Nigeria, they need to be recognised and given opportunity to practice in schools and non-school settings.

8. The school curriculum

The school curriculum needs to be reviewed to accommodate ethics and morality education. At all levels of education in Nigeria, moral education should be provided to the learner. It should go beyond being a unit topic in a subject; it should be a subject by itself with expert teachers, textbooks and other study materials. In secondary schools, it should be made a compulsory and examination subject. When the students are taught the values and principles of ethics and morality, they are exposed early to the tenets of morality and therefore be privileged to receive and internalize them at tender ages. At the university level, the study of moral values should be a compulsory general studies course.

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