

# A Critical Analysis of the Role of Moral Values as a Catalyst for Social and Political Development among People in Nigeria

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**Abstract** - *The modern global dispensation has had its toll on the moral lives of the people and this has brought about a dwindling in the perception of people on what constitute morality. In this regard, there has been series of criminal activities and particularly crimes and violence of different magnitude which today has been the hall-mark of the Nigerian nation. There have been cases of militancy, insurgencies and other criminal groups parading themselves around the country. Hence, this show that moral laxity has become the order of the day. Even those in government are also culpable as many of them are corrupt and inept. The situation is rather pathetic and the average Nigerian feels insecure in his own land. The purport of this is that morality which should have been the parameter for controlling these vices are no longer functioning. Therefore, this paper argues that for there to be sanity in our social and political lives as a nation, we must covet the principles enshrined in our moral values. The paper posited that there cannot be development where morality is not given prominence among the people.*

**Keywords:** *Morality, Moral problems, Nigeria, Social and Political Development, Values*

## INTRODUCTION

From time immemorial, the quest for moral principle is an intrinsic phenomenon which makes social life governable and blissful. As such, every person, irrespective of age, colour, sex or social standing is subject to the dictates of the moral principle. This is because the concept of morality serves a holistic function as it serves as the bedrock upon which the edifice of a truly righteous and egalitarian society rests. Implicitly, moral principles form a fundamental aspect of every culture as it outlines comprehensively, codes of behaviours or conducts for the individual on the one hand, and the society on the other.

However, technological development orchestrated by globalization and civilization have attenuated and grossly affected our moral ethos. This has brought about a breakdown of the social structure on which society rests. Patrick (1998:14) notes that civilization has had and is still having a lot of negative impacts on the life of the Africans, most especially Nigerians. The problem of decline in public morality and national discipline in Nigeria is very alarming. Every sphere of life is not spared by this cankerworm which has eaten deep into every facet of the society. This prevailing situation has been incisively portrayed by Iwe (1991:82) who surmises that “over-concern with

one’s self-importance and pre-occupation with self-aggrandizement naturally lead to total indiscipline or moral decadence from the self to the society”.

Nigeria has experienced and is still experiencing its share of moral laxity and vices especially as depicted in political instability, corruption in high and low places, drug trafficking, smuggling, advanced fee fraud popularly called 419, increasing crime wave, theft, robbery, religious and ethnic violence, unemployment, injustice e.t.c. Abogunrin (1994:5) states categorically that “there was never a time when humanity was so degraded and spiritually blind as is evidence in the madness we see around us daily in Nigeria”. Apparently, therefore, meaningful development has been halted and the nation is in the throes of disintegration.

It is against this background that the paper advocates for the re-orientation of moral values as a catalyst for development in Nigeria. Attention will be placed on some of the moral problems which militate against national development with a view to finding lasting solutions to them. In addition to this, we seek to examine the extent to which a solid moral foundation is indispensable towards actualizing our collective goals for a speedy national growth and development and that this desire for development is

contingent on moral discipline of every citizen in Nigeria both the leaders and the led.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

For the purpose of clarification and better understanding, it is expedient to define and explain basic issues underlying this work. In the first place, the operative words namely- reorientation, moral values and development need clarification. Also, it is apposite to state that the locus of our discussion would be based on the world-view of the Nigerian peoples as an exemplification of moral reorientation in our developmental process. Having made these prefatory remarks, it is essential to clarify these terms in order to understand their meanings.

#### **Morality**

Obasola (2003a: 1) avers that “morality is not an abstract phenomenon but a real and practical means of developing the sense of justice in the people as a prerequisite for social solidarity, welfare and happiness in the society”. It is so crucial, not only to the individual but also to the society at large. Consequently, the imperative of morality is to establish the justifiability or otherwise of an action or to establish whether an action is good or reprehensible. Hence, the hallmark of morality in any human society is to regulate those spheres of life and conduct which no other aspect of human endeavour can curtail. In addition, it regulates the personal and interpersonal relationships of peoples within an established social setup, thereby paving the way for social harmony, which is the harbinger of socio-political development. Therefore, the development of man- socially, politically and economically, will be incomplete without a residue of morality.

Procter (1978:809) describes morality as “something that is concerned with the judgement of goodness or badness of human action and character”. It could also be describe as “teaching or exhibiting goodness or correctness of character or behaviour”. Eliade (1987:1090) defines morality as “conforming to standards of what is right or just in behaviour” while Allen (2004:194) sees it as “right behaviour or moral correctness”. Akanmidu, (1995:35) sees morality as “a set of principle which is derived from customs categorized as best among others and connotes conventional standard of conduct acceptable by the people”. Instructively, morality is a system or set of rules or principles that can be applied to particular cases to guide us as to what to do.

These definitions show that the respect of conduct that people put value upon constitutes morality. The characteristics of such conduct are means of giving others respect and honour, ensuring self-dignity and decorum which are indices of social development. Therefore, morality is concerned with character formation and the distinction between what is right and what is wrong, acceptable or unacceptable with the sole aim of promoting societal goal (Obasola 2003a: 203). This shows that society is safe in as much as morality is entrenched and guaranteed.

#### **Values**

This is sometime synonymous with morality as both are oftentimes used interchangeably. Values share the same meaning with morality as it also depicts the acceptable conduct of behaviour in the society. Oyedepo (1986:16) opines that:

Value...is the study of such concepts as good, bad, desirable, beautiful, ugly e.t.c. and it tends to examine the justification of judgements that involves these concepts, the logic of the argument by which they are supported or challenged.

Dopamu (1993:17) surmises that for the purpose of maintaining law and order which in turn, will enhance national stability and growth, values are respected and such values are the moral worth, principles or standard which the society holds in high esteem. Conformity to these value systems, no doubt, results in an orderly and purpose-driven society which ultimately brings in the desired development in the society.

Values are also the means through which people grapple with the needs and essentials of daily lives, and it is that which people hold dear, what they cherish and what they practice as a member of a society, and that which serves as the basis for social co-existence and cohesion. It is the basis on which sound moral and wholesome judgment is based (Obasola 2003:2). Therefore, moral values are those intrinsic attributes and characteristics which are innate in every person for the actualization and promotion of social order, cohesion and peaceful co-existence which are fundamental indices for growth and development in the society.

#### **Development**

It should be noted that the concept of development is an all-encompassing phenomenon as it relates to the social, political, economic and religious attitudes of

the people (Obasola 2003:207). It has a pervasive use and multifaceted application. It can apply to “growth” and or “progress”. In whichever way it is applied, it has the tendency of measuring the level of growth or progress of a people, socially, economically, scientifically or politically. According to Sanda (1981:121), development conceived as multi-dimensional, referring to positive change which affect the majority and which lie in the social, economic, political, and cultural spheres of societal life. He posits that development entails progress in both economic and non-economic components of societal life (Sanda 1992:10). Hence, any study of development must be concerned with social change which is oriented toward making life better for all citizens. It is in consonance with this that Osagie (1985:129) describes development as:

...the qualitative and quantitative positive transformation of the lives of the people which enhance not only their material well-being, but also assures their social well-being and the restoration of human dignity.

This shows that development can only be achieved where individuals within the society imbibe the culture of inward transformation which will promote societal good. This presupposes that development should be hinged on the moral worth of the people and not only on the economic gain, for if a nation has economic potentials without developing the moral potentials of the people, such a nation will wallow in abject poverty as is the case with Nigeria.

### **Moral Problems Plaguing Nigeria**

It is appropriate at this point to examine the moral problems be-deviling Nigeria as a nation. These moral problems are legion. Oyedepo (1986:16) opines that:

Perhaps the greatest problem facing the nation today is the problem of identification of value. We have lost our value for duty. We no longer regard work and duty as value. We put no value on clean environment stealing and frauds are often seen as normal. Worst of all, we have taught our children to develop wrong values and a bad habit of consumption.

In the same vein, Malomo (1986:20) categorically asserts that:

My perception of our ethical situation is that Nigeria is morally sick ... our moral sickness is however, a unique product of certain unique

internal predispositions and certain external morally pathogenic factors.

No doubt there are myriads of moral problems confronting Nigeria as a nation and if nothing is done to urgently nip these problems in the bud, the nation may sink under its influence. Malomo (1986:23) further attests to those moral problems as follows:

By moral “sickness” of Nigeria, I refer to that pan-national perverse goal, value, attitude and manner of life which in its malignant fierceness is fastly destroying every fibre of life and strength in us, till we now may just collapse and die-any moment- if nothing is done.

It will suffice to examine some of these moral problems.

### ***Crime and Violence***

One of the obvious problems staring Nigerians in the face is that of crime and violence which if care is not taken can lead to apparent disintegration of the country. Abogunrin (1994:13-14) surmises categorically that:

Today organized crime is the biggest business. Organized crime is apparently bigger than the Nigerian government ... organized crime, with its syndicates, underworld racketeering and the mafia, is in control of almost every area of life in Nigeria today. Crime is increasing with such rapidity that we are now close to open rebellion and anarchy.

This is the situation in which we have found ourselves and the average Nigerian cannot sleep with his two eyes closed for fear of the terror by night marauders. The incessant cases of armed robbery attracts in broad day light has been a subject of fear. Even most of our financial institutions have become targets as they are raided in broad day light operations with our security operatives incapacitated. This wave of crime have snowballed into series of kidnappings, terrorist attacks and militancy among our youths who sees this as the only “legitimate” means of making quick money. The issue of militancy has led to the birth of various groups across the nation. These groups, particularly in the Niger Delta, have accentuated the spate of crime, kidnapping, maiming and other atrocities while leaving our security operations agape and helpless. In this regard, Nigerians are suffering from the untoward activities of

these groups of people who have held the country hostage. We now live as hostages in our own land as a result of the uncontrollable wave of crime and violence which have impacted negatively on our development drive.

### ***Corruption***

Corruption has assumed a monumental height as the nation ranks as one of the most corrupt nations in the world. These corrupt practices stem from the various callous, greedy, self-motivated and self-seeking attitudes of our leaders who are only interested in serving their pockets rather than serving the people. These corrupt practices have percolated down to the average man who is eager to partake of the “national cake” if given the opportunity. Governance is now perceived as a “national cake”, and as a means of personal aggrandizement and enrichment.

The case is even worse in the civil service where morale is at its lowest ebb due to poor remunerations and uncondusive working conditions. This has inadvertently legitimized bribery and corruption among the rank and file. Those in positions of authority use this as an opportunity to amass wealth. Recently the salaries of the public office holders were doubled while nothing is done with the salaries of other categories of workers. This leads to Orwell’s assertion that “all animals are equal but some are more equal than others” (George Orwell). In addition, this class of people swell their foreign accounts with the tax-payers’ money of the average Nigerians. Thus Edema (1988:20) asserts that “the governments, without exception, continue to enrich themselves with the nation’s resources while the masses wallow in abject poverty”. Embezzlement of public funds is the order of the day. This led to the setting up of anti-graft bodies by the Obasanjo led government.

### ***Perversion of Justice***

Furthermore, perversion of justice is an endemic moral problem confronting the nation. By virtue of this, there has been an unwarranted and undue detention of innocent people who are put in custody in the guise of national security. Cases of extrajudicial killings abound as innocent people are being killed by the security apparatus set up by the government particularly during the military regimens of Ibrahim Babangida and Sanni Abacha.

Until recently, our law courts and our judges were appendages of the military junta. They were the extension of the military government mechanism of

getting rid of perceived enemies and antagonists. Late Chief Gani Fawehimi (SAN), late Dr. Beko Ransome Kuti to mention a few suffered during this period. Most of our judges have thrown the ethnics of their profession over board in order to maintain their positions. This had serious implication for the hope and confidence of an average Nigerian in the judiciary. The courts which ought to serve as the last hope for the common man, was swallowed up by the monster of the junta. Justice was denied to an average Nigerian and hope in the judiciary was lost. It is not until recently that the judiciary is trying to gain its confidence back.

### ***Cultism***

Cultism is a single anti-social menace that has consistently ravaged the nation. This act of moral decadence has been the cause of the major crises in the nation and particularly on our campuses. Cultism is a contemporary social menace affecting the educational sector in Nigeria. It has become a cankerworm in the Nigerian society due to the traits exhibited by our youths. Most, if not all, the violent crises, killings, torturing, raping, kidnapping, armed robbery e.t.c. are traced to the activities of these cult groups. These cult groups are bonded by an oath of secrecy and are under obligation or other threat to promote the interests of its members even if that interest is not legitimate and this is done without recourse to merit or fear play. The activities of these cult groups are inimical to social and political developments. They are noted principally for arson, burglary, thuggery, killing, gang war, torture, flogging, drug abuse and trafficking. All these are inhuman, unethical, evil and immoral acts which are not based on the interest of national security, public safety, public order and public morality.

### ***Drug abuse, addiction and trafficking***

This is a problem which is particularly gaining ground among the youths in their quest for instant wealth. This problem of drug abuse and trafficking has earned for Nigeria a bad image among the comity of nations. Drugs like cocaine, heroin, marijuana, morphine and substance abuse have become an international menace. These drugs have adverse effect on those who use them. Such effects include: diminished hunger, weakness of the body, nausea, dizziness, hypertension, and increased body temperature, while some of the drugs produce mental illusions, hallucination and over-estimation of an individual’s physical power. Addiction to drugs leads

to criminal tendencies by those who use them. In addition to drug use and abuse, trade in drugs has become an avenue for enrichment for some Nigerians and this has portrayed the country in bad light at the international level.

### **Causes of moral Problems in Nigeria**

At this juncture, it is important to examine some of the causes of these moral vices. These include:

#### ***Break down of the Family unit/lack of parental influence:***

As we all know, the home is the foundation for acceptable behaviour. The quality of this foundation determines the quality of subsequent efforts towards desirable behaviour. There is a breakdown of the family structure due to the individualistic tendencies now exhibited by our people due principally to the economic situation in the country. This has also forced many parents to abandon their responsibilities to their children and to their families for a white collar job that keeps them on the street for a better part of the day. The care of children are now trusted into the hands of "house girls and boys" who in turn will corrupt the children. The end product of this seemingly "abandoned children" is moral decadence.

***Materialism:*** This is a factor which has been responsible for the high level of moral problems facing the nation. It is noted that attention of people has shifted from morality to instant wealth. This desire for instant wealth has led many people to get involved in acts that are inimical to the society not minding whose ox is gored. In this regard, Awokoya (1978:3) states categorically that:

...the type of environment now developing is very materialist. Most people love and worship money because of what it can buy. In the quest for it, kindness, love, justice, social responsibility gets undervalued and the virtues of yesterday are replaced by the vices of today.

This presupposes that attention has shifted from the things which are of value and emphasis is now placed on material gains. These materialistic tendencies have a negative implication for our development.

***Mental set:*** This is a problem which is affecting most Nigerians causing them to behave in a particular way. Osagie (1985:133) asserts:

By mental set is meant an unconscious mental disposition to behave in a particular way irrespective of the circumstance. It is a rigid adherence to a "way" of doing things whether or not that "way" works...These characteristic mental set retards rather than facilitates activity. It leads to apathy in the performance of official duties; it creates inefficiency rather than efficiency, and it complicates rather than simplifies.

This has engendered a lackadaisical attitude among Nigerians in the ways they attend to issues. There is a phenomenon now called "the Nigerian factor" or the Nigerian or African time, which permits lateness in all official responsibilities. This mental set encourages indolence, laziness, confusion, discouragement, apathy and inefficiency in both public and private lives. The sum total of this attitude results in non-charitable attitude which ultimately engenders low productivity and hinders the development of the nation.

### **Effects of Moral Problems**

The sum total of the effects of the moral problems is myriad as a lot of negative consequences are discernible. Among these problems is the stunted economic growth which the country is experiencing due largely to the hyper inflation, low capital utilization and decline in foreign investments. The country is enmeshed in foreign debts and the economy is controlled by a group of cabals who are interested in their pockets. As such, a lot of money is siphoned into foreign accounts while the citizens of the country are being pauperized. No public utility or infrastructure is functioning due to this moral recklessness. In the past one year, power generation and distribution have nosedived throwing the country into complete darkness and forcing lots of businesses to collapse and the resultant effect is unemployment and retrenchment of workers.

In the educational sector, things have fallen apart. Educational institutions which are supposed to be the bedrock of moral instructions have been hit by this cancer orchestrated by poor funding. The rapacity of strikes and industrial actions in our institutions is ferocious. This culminates in half baked students with little or nothing to show at the end of the day. This accounts for the high incidence of cultism in our tertiary institutions.

In the political arena, there is massive instability Nigeria has witnessed more military administration

that democratic governments. Military rule has been the bane of our political system as they have corrupted our democratic values and principles. Series of extra-judicial killings took place during the military regimes and all perceived enemies of the government were executed. Also, it was at this period that fraud of various degrees thrived. Therefore, the ethics of diligence and hard work was thrown overboard. Miscreants found their ways into positions of authority while the intellectuals were hunted. Freedom of the people was suppressed and the Nigerian story became like the proverbial bird that perched on a rope and is being tossed to and from.

There is also the danger of insecurity. Lives of people are threatened from time to time by miscreants and hired assassins. Cases of armed robbery attacks are rampant. Abogunrin (1994:5) surmises that “the loss of the sense of security in human existence today is due to injustice, to violence, to the sinister aspects of the present day politics, to religious wars, to economic problems, unemployment ... etc”. The nation has been plunged into series of violent attacks from different militant groups and this paints a picture of a nation that is incapable of solving its problems.

It is discernible that the failure of moral values is the crux of the problems facing us as a nation and until urgent steps are taken to remedy it, we will continue to wallow in this moral mess. In other words, national growth and developments cannot be achieved given the state of moral decadence staring us in the face in Nigeria. The question we need to ask ourselves is how can we overcome these moral problems and achieve national growth and development?

### **Moral Values and Religion**

It is however, imperative to state that morality cannot be discussed in isolation. To this end, it needs to be examined within precinct of religion. On this note, Adeleye (1988:63) remarks that “religion has helped to promote an agreement about the nature and content of social obligations by providing values that serve to channel the attitudes of a society’s members and to define for them the content of their social obligations”. This presupposes that morality and religion go hand in hand. Consequently, it will suffice to examine some of these moral values as enshrined in our religious systems.

**Respect for Elders/Constituted Authority:** Every religion places emphasis on respect for elders and those in positions of authority by virtue of the fact that they are seen as repositories of wisdom, having had

long years of experience which the young ones can tap from. A Yoruba adage says:

*agba ko si, ilu baje  
bale ile ju, ile d’ahoro*

meaning:

where there no elders, the society rots the head of the house dies, the house becomes desolate.

In the same vein, people are enjoined to respect those in positions of authority as they are perceived as God’s representatives on earth (Qur’an 4:59, Rm. 13:1-7). If there is respect for constituted authority, the problem of political instability or forceful taking over of governance through coup d’état will be a thing of the past and this will accelerate the spate of our development.

**Truthfulness and Honesty:** These are two words used interchangeably and both mean the same thing. It behoves us as citizens of this nation to cultivate both virtues. As far as these moral virtues are concerned, people should realize the need for them to have a reputation for both virtues. Truthfulness connotes a state of reality or factualness. Truthfulness exalts a nation. Honesty is manifested in trustworthiness, truthfulness, sincerity, integrity and fairness. It means the absence of deceit and untruthfulness.

**Impartiality:** This is another moral value which every Nigerian should cultivate. Impartiality connotes not being partied in the treatment that one meets out on others. It means not showing an undue favour to one and neglecting the other. It is the absence of bias, favouritism or nepotism. Impartiality presupposes the value one places on merit, efficiency and productivity while also recognizing the equality of all people irrespective of their state of origin or their religious affiliation. This will bring about increased productivity.

**Loyalty/Patriotism:** Loyalty presupposes truthfulness and faithfulness to one’s duty or obligations. In other words, loyalty connotes owing allegiance to a cause or to someone or better still, to one’s country. When a citizen is loyal to his country and bears allegiance to it, such a person will be described as patriotic. When a citizen pays his tax and performs his civic responsibilities as at when due, he is patriotic. The lack of patriotism is a vice which runs throughout Nigeria and Nigerians will rather be patriotic to other nations rather than their own country. This has robbed the nation of vital support which it deserves, especially when she is faced with opposition. A vivid

illustration here is in the field of sports. Most Nigerians are ardent supporters of the premierships clubs, the Serie A, the Bundesliga, the Spanish La Liga e.t.c and no one supports any of the home grown club sides. Loyalty and patriotism is a virtue which all Nigerians should cultivate.

**Justice:** This is an essential aspect of all social, human, and economic relationships. Social order and peace are anchored on the principle of justice. Thus, in ensuring conformity with the social order and maintaining a high degree of ethical standard, justice and its enforcement is crucial for societal good. Justice presupposes the meting out of appropriate sanction or punishment on erring members of the society according to laid down rules. In addition, justice connotes fair play, equality, especially in the distribution of goods and services or in the implementation of infrastructure facilities. Dzurgba (1993:80) says “justice enables a people to apportion resources, authority, power, rights, duties, liberties, privileges, opportunities, advantages, disadvantages, income, wealth, rewards and punishments fairly according to merits and qualification”. This is an essential virtue which all Nigerians must cultivate on our road to social and economic development.

### **Moral Values: Catalyst for Development**

Fundamentally, a good moral foundation is an indispensable and absolute factor for social, economic and political developments. Our development efforts should commence with the human capital. By human capital, we mean the investment in the moral development of the people who are living in such society. Human capital involves giving the people the right kind of environment to sharpen, develop and actualize their skills which they have acquired over a process of time. The channeling of this skill in the positive direction will bring about a change in the life orientation of the people for maximum benefits. Human capital also involves the moral worth and development of the people. Omorogbe (1990:197) encapsulates this as follows: “moral development is the most important aspect of national development, for there can be no development of a nation if its citizens are morally under-developed or immature”. In similar perspective, Isokun (2003:116) lends credence to this when he asserts that:

A Nigerian society obsessed with that which is scientific without the consciousness of the societal values must be mending her rope of suicide if her search for knowledge discounts

the value on which the Nigerian social order rests.

This shows that the role of moral values in the society for meaningful development cannot be compromised. Therefore, primacy should be given to the acquisition of moral values among the people rather than any abstract projections.

The imperative of moral values is a fundamental tool for social, economic and political emancipation. In this regard, no nation can grow or develop if morality is extricated from the body politic. Thus, without a solid moral base, our social, economic and political development will be in shamble. I shudder to think of a Nigeria of intellectual giants and astute economists and politicians without the relevant moral values as internalized through the socio-cultural orientation as espoused by religion. Therefore, we need to relate our development to our values system. To do contrary is in the words of Isokun (2003:121) “to entrust the safety of the insane man into his own hand which is a recipe for self-destruction”. Consequently, he surmises that:

A scientific modern Nigerian society without a sound social and moral base will be her worst enemy in terms of the human misery, fear, insecurity and barbarism that would be self-inflicted in the process of a misguided scientific advancement.

In similar perspective, Omorogbe (1990:199) opines that “if a country produces” intellectual giants” but who are “moral dwarfs”, it is simply producing obstacles to its own development”. The purport of this is that morality is germane to social growth and development. Therefore, to extricate morality from the Nigerian society is to destroy the very essence of the society, thereby inviting anarchy and disorderliness.

Morality is a necessary tool for the survival of human society. It is vital to the survival of any society because it is the basis of all social structures and institutions. It should be noted that the problems which besiege us as a nation are anchored on non-compliance with or total neglect of moral principles and these have led to the doldrums we are experiencing in our private and public lives. This shows that national growth and development depend largely on the good sense of justice, moral worth and responsibility, conscientiousness, devotion to duty, selflessness, probity and honesty exhibited by the leaders and the led. This will bring about the much needed growth in our national lives.

## CONCLUSION

There is no gain saying the fact that the rate of moral decadence in Nigeria is disturbingly alarming and this has affected the pace of development in the country. In this regard, there is the urgent need for a re-orientation, a re-engendering and a re-focusing on our moral values with the view to actualizing our potentials and harnessing our resources both human and materials, for a greater, purposeful, egalitarian and vibrant society.

As a result of this, all hands must be on deck to actualize this goal. In this regard moral instruction and education must be given a pride of place in all our educational institutions starting from the primary to the tertiary levels. Also, every citizen must imbibe the culture of moral value recognizing that “society as a *sui-generi* is real only to the extent to which the members are instructed and guided by their value system (Isokun 2003:123). This presupposes that every social institution such as the family, the church, the schools and the government must take the culture of punctuality very seriously, we must preach against insolence, violence and other vices which will project the nation in bad light.

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