

## **The Dynamics of Moral Formation in the Modern Igbo Society: The Nnewi Experience**

Emmanuel Ajakor & Immaculate Amara Ojukwu

### **Abstract**

*Morality is a fundamental value in human life. Without stable moral order no true human development can be realized. With conflicts, tensions, theft, disputes, wars, corruption, drug abuse, alcoholism, prostitution, laziness and violence, nothing substantial can be done as far as societal development is concerned. Different forms of immorality and abuse of human rights endanger the community's moral order and so hinder human development. In traditional African society, elders were the agent of moral formation. These were people of outstanding moral conduct, highly respected and who have undergone all necessary rites of passage from childhood to adulthood. Traditionally, elders used different rites, wise sayings, proverbs, riddles and traditional customs and traditions to impact moral values. However, today the society has shunned its elders especially when it comes to moral instruction. The advent of Christianity, western education and money economy affected Igbo cultural heritage, specifically the Nnewi culture that placed more on moral values and custodians of moral formations. Igbo communities have become facilitators of moral decadence. Using cultural discourse Analysis, the study discussed the dynamics of moral formation in the present Igbo society. The paper recommends that values inherent in the various moral standard to be models for interpersonal relationships rather than projecting ideologies that only arouse tension.*

**Keywords:** Morality, Igbo, Society, Culture.

## **Introduction**

Mohandas K. Ghandi, the father of Indian nation once says “The things that will destroy the world are: politics without principle, pleasures without conscience, wealth without work, knowledge without character, business without morality, science without humanity and worship without sacrifice. The theory that man is a product of his society is not far from the truth as the process of individual character development derives a great influence from then values of the society in question (Albinus 2012). Prostitution, armed robbery, fraud, terrorism, kidnapping, ritual killing, street fighting and similar vices are now prevalent. The phenomenon of moral decadence among the young and old has reached unbearable level.

The information being broadcasted to the public are most times not being censored. People come across this information such as war films, pornographic scenes, drug addiction and trafficking scenes etc, usually try to practice them directly or indirectly. Therefore, the media should scrutinize and deliver sound information that can be useful for the moral development in the community. Some aspects of the traditional values and morality have been influenced by the processes of modernity that are passing through the African societies. Some values and morality are wearing new frames in order to grapple with the increasing socio-religious problems of the contemporary society. It has therefore become very necessary to search for ways through which the moral challenge posed by the current tide of globalization sweeping across Igbo land can be met through resilience of its numerous traditional moral values. African culture is embedded in strong moral considerations. It has a system of various beliefs and customs which every individual ought to keep in order to live long and to avoid bringing curses on them and

others. Adultery, stealing and other forms of immoral behaviours are strongly discouraged and whenever a suspected offender denies a charge brought against him, he would be taken to a soothsayer or made to take an oath for proof of innocence. In Nnewi for instance, ordeal is used as a method of crime detection in the olden days. The soothsayer who specializes in it sets a pot of boiling oil, drops a stone into it and asks the suspects to attempt to retrieve the stone. The guiltless can reach to the bottom of the pot and retrieve the stone without the hair on his arms getting burnt. But when the culprit approaches the pot, it rages and boils over in a manner that even the most daring criminal would hesitate to make an attempt at retrieving the stone. The fear of being made to go through such ordeal or to be stripped naked and taken round the community as in the case of stealing, adequately checks crimes of some sort. African proverbs and wise sayings have a rich repository of wisdom. The proverbs warn the African against evil conduct and, according to Mbiti (1977), African culture has a moral code that forbids doing harm to a relative, a kinsman, an in-law, a foreigner and a stranger, except when such a person is involved in an immoral act; and if that is the case, it is advisable to stay away from such an individual and even at death, their corpses would not be dignified with a noble burial in a coffin and grave.

### **Nnewi Cosmology and Experience**

Prior to the advent of western education, the indigenous people of Nigeria had certain cosmological ideas, which formed the basis of their system of values. Central to the Nigerian's view of the world, and the place of man in it, was the belief that the universe was peopled by spirits, some great, some small, some benevolent, but many more were malevolent. All of them were capable of swift and often vindictive anger. The Supreme Being, *Chineke*, the

*Ezemewi, Ana, Eze* and also *the Ele*. A host of other deities and spirits either inhabited or were guardians of land, sea, and air as well as everything in them. Just as in other parts of tropical Africa, the Nigerian air was swarming with these spirits and supernatural powers. Christianity was introduced by the Europeans in 1885 and many Nnewi people now practice Christianity. Most Nnewi brought up in the villages have at one time or the other smelt a spirit or spirits. The air of mystery pervaded the Nnewi atmosphere far more oppressively when the Christian message was first introduced than is the case today. Apart from the deities is the belief in ancestral spirits. This belief finds expression in various ritual practices connected with the ancestral shrines and subsidiary belief in reincarnation. The closeness of the ancestors' spirits helps to support the strong kinship attachments so common in Nnewi. These beliefs provide the moorings of the traditional Nnewi culture. They provide the framework into which the beliefs in witchcraft, charms and magic must fit in. They explain the respect paid to certain elders and traditional rulers who form the visible link between the living and the death, and justify the myths about man's relationship with the universe. They make sense of the values of the traditional Nnewi community. The cataclysmic erosion at 100 foot road is claiming more buildings and properties and the people are feeling less concerned especially the politician, no moral consciousness since it has not affected their loved ones.

Chinua Achebe recounts his reminiscence before the coming of the White men on Igbo life scripted through his most popular novel, *Things Fall Apart*, taught us about the dint of hard work and quest for dignity that characterizes and orders Igbo life. Before things started falling apart, a typical Igbo man is known and seen as his brother's keeper. What concerns the others, concerns another. Togetherness was the basic necessity for development and

progress in Nnewi community and these transformed immensely the life of the people. They relied so much on collective efforts for survival and achievement. These communal living find expression in words, names, or phrases like “*gidigi bu ugwu eze* (a trooping crowd is the king’s dignity), “*ibu anyi danda*”(loads do not weigh ants down), “*agbakoo agbakoo nyuo mamiri ya agboo ufufu*” (when people urinate together, it foams very well), “*igwe bu ike*” (strength comes from the kinsmen), “*onye ahala nwanne ya*” (nobody should abandon his brother), among others.

Again, Nnewi people has a kindred spirit, they have strong tradition and culture (taboos), which everyone frowns at whenever they are violated. These taboos cut across killing somebody, stealing, promiscuity, kidnapping, sorcery and so on. Everyone is cautioned from childhood to desist from such acts that are offensive. They believed that life is greater than wealth and so such names like ‘*nwakaego*’, ‘*nwabugo*’, ‘*nwanneka*’, ‘*nwabugwu*’, ‘*nwabueze*’ and as such, their care and respect for every creature provokes love amongst them; thereby unity is assured in the community. They are hardworking people who do not believe in short cuts in money making unlike the current situation.

Over the years, Nnewi has recorded enviable achievements through self-help and collective effort. This life style has preoccupied their minds for many years of existence. But today, these ethos have been totally overtaken by irrelevant foreign alternative which have made them aliens in their father land.

### **The Concept of Moral Formation in Igboland**

Moral Values are fundamental in all human societies and in human actions and activities. Generally, morality originates from religious considerations, and so pervasive is religion in Igbo culture that the two cannot be separated. What constitutes moral code of any

particular Igbo society the laws, taboos, customs and set forms of behaviour - all derive their compelling power from religion. Thus, morality flows out of religion, and through this the conduct of individuals are regulated; and any break of the moral code is regarded as evil and punishable. An Important fact about the rules which constitute the ethical code of Igbo societies is that they are usually integrated into a unified system, and to understand the ethical code no rule can be considered apart from the system as a whole. The only desirable ideal is social harmony and peace for the good of man and society. Most of the important virtues are either couched in proverbs or expressed in the form of a folk-tale with a moral to it. The proverbs may serve as prescriptions for action or act as judgment in times of moral lapses. Proverbs are often cited at an appropriate times during an argument, can settle the dispute instantly, for the proverbs are believed to have been handed down by the ancestors and predecessors to whom we owe our communal experience and wisdom.

### **The Dynamism of Moral Formation**

Dynamism, as the topic suggests projects and focuses on the varieties, and practical manner where by the Igbo people could make their culture and language come into life in every aspect of life. The Igbo tradition establishes a code of conduct or moral code embodied in *Omenala* – customs. *Omenala* is the corpus of most of the legal, social, moral and ritual norms of Ndigbo. In *Omenala*, *ajoihe* is anything that is considered evil whether physical or moral, as fortune or deliberate fault, while *mmehie*- transgression is a moral fault. Ndiigbo distinguishes two kinds of moral faults, namely, bad behaviour or *ajo omume* which consists of breaches of rules of etiquette and social conventions. Other minor faults as Joseph Amaegwu posits, such as: not greeting elders, laziness,

unhygienic habits, gossiping do not carry any specific sanctions, but they are generally condemned. Ajo-aru- bad deed is another moral fault. It is a deliberate transgression of serious moral norms of the society. It has three qualities, it is deliberate, it flouts the laws of the land; and it carries some social or mystical sanctions or both.

The Igbo tradition and customs hold the following in high esteem: respect for elders, truth, and respect for life Through the periods of slavery and colonialism, neocolonialism and imperialism, and now globalization, the western worlds' view has been imposed upon most of mankind; and Nnewi people merely see themselves as struggling against many odds to liberate their minds, attitude and communities from such a related entanglements because their customs and needs are much different. Many people, especially the disadvantaged, experience this as something that has been forced upon them rather than as a process in which they can actively participate. Some see it in terms of the economic agenda of powerful nations dominating the world. Hence, Pope John Paul II emphasizes that: One of the Church's concerns about Globalization is that it has quickly become a cultural phenomenon. The market as an exchange mechanism has become the medium of a new culture. Many observers have noted the intrusive, even invasive, character of the logic of the market, which reduces more and more the area available to the human community for voluntary and public action at every level. The market imposes its way of thinking and acting, and stamps its scale of values upon behaviour. Those who are subjected to it often see dynamics of moral values as a destructive flood threatening the social norms which had protected them and the cultural points of reference which had given them direction in life.

In furtherance to the above, many individuals of sterling quality have made contributions in this regard and argued that for the concept of globalization to be worthy and meaningful, it has to be humanitarian in its approach and detail. Thus, its concern for humanity must not be negotiable. It is necessary, therefore to insist that globalization like any other system be at the service of human person, it must respect fundamental human values, self solidarity and common good. Here ethics demands that systems be attuned of the needs to man, and not that man are sacrificed for the sake of the system. What this connotes is that man in his wisdom should continue to affirm that ethical discernment in the context of globalization must be based upon two inseparable principles including: First, the inalienable value of the human person, source of all human rights and every social order. The human being must always be an end and not a means, a subject and not an object or a commodity of trade; secondly, the value of human cultures, which no external power has the right to downplay and still less to destroy.

Moral dynamism must not be a new version of colonialism. It must respect the diversity of cultures which, within the universal harmony of peoples' are life's interpretive keys. In particular, it must not deprive the poor of what remains most precious to them such as, their religious beliefs and practices, since genuine religious convictions are the clearest manifestation of human freedom. Despite the diverse cultural forms, universal human values still exists and they must be projected as the guiding force of all development and progress. Hence, Agbakoba (2005) said that: It is becoming increasingly clear that it is necessary for the world to have a global ideology that would provide for and project justice and respect for the persons and communities as well as

provide a basis for the minimizing and resolving of conflicts locally and internationally.

### **The Resilience of Igbo Traditional Moral Values**

Nnewi traditional moral values-: truth (*Eziokwu*), justice (*Ofo*), *Hard-work*, tolerance etc, are universal and can meet the criteria for universal values. Let us examine these moral values with special reference to Nnewi town.

**Truth (*Eziokwu*):** For the Igbo, the truth is the major strand that welds society together. Without truth there was no need for human society. The trust built in Igbo society lies mainly in the ability of the individual members to tell one another the truth. Thus, it is obvious that the pillar stone of every community is telling the truth. Thus the Igbo say: “*eziokwu bu ndu*” (“truth is life”). On the other hand “*onye okwu asi*” (“a liar”) is someone who negates this life principle which the truth gives. Truth has its own reward. “Be truthful, do good. Be truthful, do good. It is the truthful that the divinities support”. Embodiment of truth in our actions both in private and public affairs stand the chance of dealing with embezzlements of public funds, sale of fake drugs, human trafficking, and the lapses in our judicial systems among others.

**Justice:** Justice is an important notion in Igbo traditional morality. The Igbo religious symbol for justice is “*Ofo*”. This is not a spirit but the symbol of authority which descends from the ancestors, a guarantee of truth, and sometimes part of the regalia of the Umualusi (Spirit). As the embodiment of the spirit of ancestors, it is ever reminded that ‘*ndu*’, the supreme value, requires justice so as to even this ‘*ndu*’ out of all members of the community. A popular proverb in Igbo says: “*Ejim ogu, ejim ofo, ofo ka ide ji*”

*awa ala.*” Translates: I hold ‘*ogu*’ in one hand and ‘*ofo*’ in another; it is through the powers of ‘*ofo*’ that the soft rain water furrows the hard ground.” This reminds the community of the power of justice which in its nature is believed to involve transparent honesty, innocence and fair play, the rain like justice may seem weak, but it is capable of leaving its mark on the ground. So can a man who observes the difficult job of pursuing ‘*ndu*’. Hence, an overused proverb among the Igbo says: “*Egbe belu, ugo belu, nke siri ibe ya ebena, nku kwaa ya.*” Translates: “Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch, which ever says the other will not perch, let its wings break off.” This again emphasizes peoples concern for the principle of justice. In the living of ‘*ndu*’ (life), there is enough room for all to ‘perch’ and achieve fully the supreme value. Greed, jealousy, destruction of other peoples chances for making success of life and the lack of the spirit to give and take by which the community could live harmoniously and grow are greatly deprecated by Igbo. The traditional idea of justice frowns at marginalization and the increasing level of poverty as a result of the unjust distribution of abundant natural resources in the society. This has led to persistent conflict in Igbo because they think that they are being marginalized. The Igbo have continued to pressurize the Federal Government to grant them freedom (Biafran land).

**Hard-work:** In the Igbo cultural life, certain Igbo proverbs/adages/aphorisms lay great emphasis on the importance of hard work and the consequences of laziness, and not showing seriousness towards ones work or means of livelihood. Below are some examples:

*‘Ngana kpuchie ute, aguü e kpughee ya’.*

(If laziness/sloth pushes one to sleep, hunger, will wake him up).

*‘Aka aja aja, na-ebute ọ̀nụ̀ mmanụ̀ mmanụ̀’.*  
(The hands that toil/labours shall eat).

*‘Onye ruọ, o rie’.* (He that sows, reaps).

*‘Onye rukarịa, o rikarịa.’* (He that sows more reaps more).

*‘Nkụ onye kpara n’ ọkọchị ka ọ na-anyan’udummiri’.*  
(The firewood one gathers during the dry season would be used during the rainy season).

*‘A ruọ n’anwụ, e rie na ndo’.* (Enjoyment comes after hard work or labour).

These proverbs are used to remind both young and old that there is dignity in labour. Since among the Nnewi people, proverbs make greater impact on the mind than ordinary words. Nnewi people are known for their hustling spirit. Both young and old are not dependant for survival. Nnewi has companies, markets and industries. Any lazy person, dependent on others for survival is looked down upon and considered a failure. Inculcation of these proverbs among the youths is capable of discouraging examination malpractices and the urge to acquire ‘certificate quick syndrome’. In the Igbo community life too, names are given to enable man to be strong and engage him/herself in hard-work for a meaningful life of accomplishment. These names remind one to be full of strength, and avert the negative consequences of exhibiting laziness and weakness towards one’s work. The Igbo man values strength and labours for his survival, sustenance and self-esteem. Names like these show that strength is needed to make wealth: ‘Dike’ (Be strong), ‘Ikedimma’ (Strength is good), ‘Nwadike’,

‘*Odike*’ (Strong ones), *Ikeakor* (Never be deprived of strength), *Ikeazota* (With strength one acquires), *Ikeuba* (Strength to prosper), ‘*Ikedị*’ (There is strength), ‘*Ezeuchu*’ (King of enterprise) ‘*Akubuike*’ (Wealth is strength). Without strength nothing can be achieved. Wealth is obtained by strength and not by cheating, kidnapping for ransom of money; and other corrupt practices.

**Character** (‘*agwa*’): The Igbo conceive of ‘*agwa*’ (character) as providing the means by which man regulates his life to avoid conflict with the supernatural forces and also to be able to live in harmony with his fellow men. Thus, in a system dominated by many supernatural forces and a social structure predominantly authoritarian and hierarchical, the Igbo believe that each individual must strive to cultivate a good ‘*agwa*’ to be able to live a good life in perfect harmony with the forces that govern the universe and the members of his society. This, accounts for the high premium placed on good character. It is always considered to be very important that one does the right things so that one should ensure that one’s good destiny becomes a reality. Thus the character of the person would determine, to some extent, his situation in life. If he is a man of weak character, he could easily become a prey to a philosophy of resignation and idleness. The unique place of ‘*agwa*’ would appear to predispose the people to the tremendous socio-cultural changes that are rapidly overtaking the whole country. Definitely, consistency and steadiness of character together with the corresponding attributes of patience and tolerance are major assets at this time. It is our strong conviction that traditional concepts like ‘*agwa*’ offers positive directions to reduce corruption, fraud, cheating, greed, ethnic conflicts and religious intolerance in Igbo land.

## **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that some aspects of Igbo traditional values and morality have been greatly influenced by the processes of globalization. However, we have seen that there are elements of universal values which are inherent in Igbo traditional moral values for examples: truth (*eziokwu*) for the Igbo, justice (*Ofo*), hard-work and tolerance etc. Thus, despite the diverse cultural forms, universal human values still exists and they must be projected as the guiding force of all development and progress. This approach will no doubt ensure justice and responsibility in moral dynamism. Karl Jung (1969), views man as a combination of technology and causality. This means that man's behaviour is conditioned by his individual and racial history as well as by his aims and aspirations (technology), whereby the past as actuality and future as potentiality direct and influence one's identity and behaviour. The past is for the individual life not only a frame work of reference but also a symbol of unity because one lives on past experiences from which one makes the complexes of choices that creates one's identity. This feeling of identity secures that of integrity, which is itself, a feeling of correctness about one's participation in the community. The experience of a community is handed down to the next generation as a frame work or reference and guide. This frame work of reference is otherwise known as moral values, which is inevitable in every community with a history: a community has a history because it works to survive and possess implements with which it notes so and which latter survives the community. The very fact that moral values could be limited implies that it could be imperfect, and so, it is not only dynamic but also in the process of an unending longing for perfection, most often expressed through an interaction with other values.

### **Recommendations**

- i. Like traditional Africans, we should endeavour to live a morally good life for an objective, such as for the fear of God, or for the fear of retribution or nemesis.
- ii. Our religious leaders should lay emphasis more on holiness rather than on prosperity which is very prevalent these days.
- iii. Societal values should be redefined to include men and women of noble character, and such people should be revered and celebrated regardless of their educational status. This will motivate people to do good.
- iv. Just like we have days for virtually everything of interest, the United Nations can as well set aside a day to awaken or promote moral conscience and good conducts among people.
- v. Also, moral education should be included in schools curricula

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*Emmanuel Ajakor (PhD) is a lecturer in Department of Religion and Human Relations, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.*

*Immaculate Amara Ojukwu is a lecturer in Department of Religion and Human Relations, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.*