

CHAPTER TWO

ETHICAL FOUNDATION OF THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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INTRODUCTION

The present ethical disarray in Nigeria is one topic which has permeated all segments of the Nigerian society. This is because everybody you mention the idea is bound to ridicule you with disarming skepticism, in view of the virtually total immersion of the present Nigerian society in ethical decay and indiscipline. It is an acknowledged fact that lawlessness, disorderliness, indiscipline and crime pose serious problems to the majority of decent and law abiding citizens. The greatest social and economic problem facing this nation today is the breakdown in the National Ethics: morals, morale, discipline, work ethics, social responsibility and general civility. It is in deep consideration for this thought provoking malaise that Chief Obafemi Awolowo in a front page report in the Punch of April 29, 1981 said: *“unless the moral foundations of Nigeria are put aright, we cannot do anything right in this country”*.

In view of this, the concept of norms, values and belief systems are very central to our discussion of the ethical foundations of the Nigerian society.

The Concept of Norms

Norms are rules or pattern of behaviour. Norms define what is expected, customary, right, or proper in a given situation. They are guides to what a person must, may or should think, do, or feel. They are enforced by sanctions, rewards for correct behaviour and punishment for behaviour that is incorrect. Norms are ideal patterns carried in the minds of the participants in a culture as expectations of one's own and other's behaviour.

Nothing is more repugnant to western man than murder and cannibalism; no assertion is less debatable than “self-presentation is the first law of nature”. Sumner (1974) puts it that when the elements of truth and right are developed into doctrines of welfare, we call them mores. He went on to say that the Romans used mores for customs in the broadest and richest sense of the word, including the notion that customs served welfare sanction. The incest taboo, the prohibition of cannibalism or

murder, and the protection of private property are salient norms in western society. Their violation strikes at the roots of social order.

Mores are salient norms in that they are important to the cohesion, and functioning of society. There are also two approaches to the definition of “norms” namely:

- (i) The Idealist Approach and (ii) the Behaviourist Approach

The Idealist Approach defines a norm as an idea in the minds of members of a group or society specifying what certain people under certain circumstances is expected to do (Ekpenyong, 2014). This approach leads to what we might call “ideal norms”. Based on this premise, it is necessary to consider whether “expected to do” mean “ought to do”. Can we say or speak of a norm if the expectation is not carried out?

The Behaviourist Approach maintains that a norm exists if in a given situation, either certain patterns are brought against the person, who omitted the behaviour. An early Sociologist, Sumner (1974) divided norms into folkways, mores and laws or state ways. Folkways and mores are customs and norms of society. Mores are the rules that are considered much more important to the welfare of the society.

Some small-scale societies such as the Bushmen of Southern Africa have only folkways and mores with which to exercise social control over their members. When the chiefs or elders hold court to deal with disputes over land and wives, they are enforcing customary laws, based on tradition and public opinion about norms.

Large scale societies usually cannot rely on customary laws because many people with differing norms live together; written rules are needed to deal quickly with a changing situation and to make clear to everyone what is expected of them. Thus, the political system gradually develops enacted laws (the stateways). The mores may be embodied in an unwritten or a written constitution or body of “Common law” but law is also made about taxes, business behaviour welfare rights etc. The truth of Sumner’s statement that people will not obey the State ways if they conflict with folkways can be seen in the difficulty colonial governments had enforcing their laws when these went against local custom and in the trouble independent government had rooting out corruption and smuggling.

Why Do People Conform to Norms

There are four main reasons people conform to norms:

1. The phenomenon of prestige, which, in this case, is associated with the fact that the group has more power and importance, and ideas coming from it will therefore tend to be accepted;
2. The individual may know no other custom than those of his community;
3. This individual, who does not practice the customs, may be faced with sanctions and
4. The individual wants to collect what may be called “idiosyncrasy credits” against future behaviour.

These four reasons can be regrouped under two main headings:

- (a) The communicating model, and
 - (b) The bargaining model
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- (i) **The Communicating Model:** This approach argues that men conform to norms because others expect them to conform. The major features of this approach are its emphasis on the crucial part played by other people; you conform because you want to be accepted by your social group. In the process of socialization, people “internalize” the norms of their social group and internationalization can be seen as a process whereby the individual comes to “expect” sanctions to follow non-conformity.
 - (ii) **The Bargaining Model:** This is an approach which explains why people conform. Men conform because it pays them to do so.

Values

Values are attributes and standards of judgment about what things are important, desirable and right. Judith Blake and Kingsley Davis (1964), show that values can be interpreted as the reasons we give ourselves for following the rules. Obviously, a society will run much more smoothly if people behave in its social norms and if they can speak about the values that justify the norms by which they live.

Belief System

Central to belief system is religion. Religious beliefs and practices may give confidence in the face of dangers which would otherwise be overwhelming. Some of the sanctions that keep men doing what is expected of them are neither the exterior sanctions of the law of public opinion, nor the wholly interior sanctions of conscience. On the whole, the ethical aspects of religion have grown stronger in the course of human history. Religion thus contributes to the operation of society through the power and authority and sacred meaning which it provides to the support of man’s conduct and to his understanding of his place in the universe. Religious and magical beliefs may serve as social sanctions both through the fear of incurring supernatural punishment if approved norms are breached.

Most religions accept the existence of one supernatural being, God; place great emphasis on the individual, who must follow teachings, accept beliefs and these include ethics or code of conduct, regulating members’ behaviour towards one another.

Social Malady

The incidence of Nigerian ethical decay is perhaps our best known social malady, both in the country and outside it, and has consistently evoked acrimonious discussions among all classes of the Nigerian population. Top leaders of the nation have frequently condemned it, usually with sermonizing charge to the people to do

better. Today, an alarming analogue of Gresham's Law in economics is actively in operation for the social decay of this great nation. Bad money drives out good but good money cannot drive out bad under Gresham's Law, so are the activities of the crooks, cheats, smugglers and anti-social members of our society making life so unbearable for the helpless good citizens that the rate of the latter's conversion to the social side of the equation is now overwhelming.

Nobody hitherto however, has come out with an all-embracing concrete programme of action to finding a cure for this pervasive social malaise of Nigeria, as society seems to be irretrievably resigned to a messy revolt, which the average citizen tends to prophesy in his frustration with this social predicament of ours. Chapter II, Section 22 of the 1979 constitution states that "the National Ethic shall be Discipline, Self-reliance and Patriotism. Non observance of any of the three cardinal tenets of our National Ethics as enumerated in our constitution is a major part of our national malady at present.

Discipline

In any civilized society, fostering of discipline is a necessary condition for the maintenance of order. It is a pre-requisite for the promotion of economic and social development. Turner (1977) states that discipline has three connotations namely:

- (i) As a punishment;
- (ii) As a control by enforcing obedience or orderly conduct, and
- (iii) As training that corrects and strengthens self-control, and self-discipline in the individual personality development.

Adesina, (1980) and Akinyele, (1984) see discipline as self-respect and respect for others. Mbiti, (1974) describes discipline as positive force connected with training not correction, guiding, not punishing, arranging conditions for learning, not just restricting. Good discipline is the life wire of the system. And unless there is discipline in the society the gains from economic development will be furthered away in unproductive and unwholesome pursuits which do incalculable harm to the society. There is therefore every need at this stage to inject a dose of morality into the life of this nation.

Indiscipline

Indiscipline is closely related to corruption. The latter, is in fact, one of the greatest forms of indiscipline in this country. Indiscipline assumes many other forms including the general behaviour of Nigerians refusing to obey even simple procedures such as lining up in queues to board buses or buy petrol, and lack of concern for the weak and others in trouble. Indeed, Nigerian leaders tend to see the problem of Nigeria essentially as one of indiscipline. There is no doubt, that in their general everyday behavior, many Nigerians display a considerably lack of indiscipline, impatience, wanton disregard of rules and regulations and widespread drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, prostitutions, idleness, begging and parasitism in general are very rampant in the society. Dependency is no longer an act for which

people feel ashamed. Contracts, intermediary role in business and other such parasitic endeavours have become a quick means to money-making. Indolence seems to have triumphed over initiative and creativity in our society.

Another aspect of our social ill is the breakdown of the family institution. In most urban areas and some rural communities, the respect accorded to the family is on the decrease. Many parents no longer see their roles as that of guardians of the youth. The atmosphere in many homes is no longer conducive to the proper upbringing of children. The average family is the psychic agency of society, and by adjusting himself to his family; the child acquires the character which later determines the way he is able to fit into his wider social environment. When the family fails in its duties, the child's character cannot be expected to favour the development of a healthy society. One of the major paradoxes of our system is that those who are saddled with the responsibility of managing the affairs of the country turn out to constitute some of the greatest dangers to the security of the country. They fail to see the provisions of basic necessities of human life as necessary foundation for law, order and a disciplined society.

Leadership: Aid to Functional Transformation

The issue we have considered demands the highest possible measure of ethical dedication and discipline. For their satisfactory accomplishment; and consistent leadership by example at all levels is called for. In this case, the burden of initiative begins from the apex of the pyramid, drawn downwards in logical response to the base. It is leadership which itself is, which is seen as and which is believed to be disciplined that can successfully launch a campaign for a return to the life of social discipline in this nation. That is the *raison d'être* for an Ethical Revolution for Nigeria now.

Lack of Patriotism

Our lack of patriotism may be observed in many aspects of our social behaviour. Such attitudes reflect a very low level of patriotism among Nigerians. The approaches include:

- i. Lukewarm attitude to national causes,
- ii. Reckless disregard for the care and protection of national assets and social infrastructure, and
- ii. Lack of respect for those who in various walks of life made valuable contributions to the betterment of our nation.

There is no fellow feeling among citizens as brethren of one nation, everyone is simply rude, angry at everything, and abuse. Nigerians never can take their turn in anything, but must scramble disgracefully to get attention in public places or offices, to take a bus, to board an aeroplane or just to move along the roads – 'always in a hurry' to grab for self and never thinking of the right of others. But the law is that rule that shows the equality of everyone not based on race, sex, caste, or social status, not which shows biases towards politicians and the influential people (Asangausung *et al.* 2023). No laws are diligently enforced for social protection, but

are rather freely compromised for personal gain by those engaged to enforce them. The slogan here is, 'use what you have to get what you want'. The reward system is wrong in that, those who are engaged in honest productive endeavours make far much less than those who cheats on the system via nepotism, corruption and economic crimes against society.

These days, nobody wants to work honestly and diligently for anyone else or organization, with the inevitable result that indigenous Nigerian organizations, with the companies stymied in growth and services are woefully inefficient and ineffective for promoting social and economic progress of the nation. Consider the Nigerian consumer's astonishing propensity to demand imported goods. Owing to inefficient utilities, infrastructural and other services to industries, Nigerian factories are grossly inefficient both in product quality and in the high cost of finished outputs. Consequently, imports from more efficient sources are invariably cheaper and of higher quality making smuggling such an attractive occupation to most Nigerians these days. Since nobody wants to work productively for his pay, galloping, inflation at home combines effectively with the dissipation of our foreign exchange earnings on imports and the bastardization of the Naira through illegal trafficking.

A more accommodating psychological analysis of the Nigerian citizens may reveal another vital angle to his impatience - a somewhat over-reaction to excessive deprivation. For example, a taxi driver whose livelihood depends on carrying passengers on a minimum number of runs a day would feel his very existence threatened if he frequently had to sit three hours on one spot, as often happens in Lagos roads. Whatever his degree on dedication to disciplined citizenship, he might sooner or later consider a trip through the sidewalk as an allowable emergency survival route similar to using a fire exist out of a burning building. Many Nigerians, in a situation of chaos exhibit indiscipline and greedy life: hence distributors hoard commodities to extort higher prices; public officials abuse their position to make money fast to escape poverty for all times, etc.

Need for Ethical Revolution and Preventing Violent Revolution

There is nothing compelling and pervasive as an idea whose time has come. The idea in this is that of a NIGERIAN ETHICAL REVOLUTION. The word, Revolution, imports complete change, sometimes quick in relation to its scope, and sometimes prolonged but far reaching. The use of the word revolution, for limited but quick and drastic change is often a misnomer, because other words, like revolt, insurrection, rebellion etc, may be more appropriate in describing such a change.

When therefore we talk of an Ethical Revolution for Nigeria we mean the deliberate and fundamental change of a long-term decisive impact, to move the nation away from the social, political and economic malaise. The pupils throughout the nation will bear vocal witness to the preaching of our religious leaders reminding us of the biblical and koranic prescriptions for sin, in which the Nigerian society

seems helplessly submerged. A way should be found to place this nation in the mood with a fighting chance to stem the tide of our ethical decay.

National Ethic Committee

- (i) To study the nature, extent and causes of the apparent breakdown in our national ethic discipline, and its ramifications;
- (ii) To determine the impact of such ramifications upon society and the economy, and
- (iii) To recommend measures, immediate and long term which could help to reverse the trend and remote its effects.

Nation Building

The problem of this country before and after the civil war has continued to be economic, emotional, psychological and ethnicity. Year after year, instead of the nation being marked by love and justice, it is filled with vengeance, corruption, and exploitation. The social positive of some privileged Nigerians is over marked with suffering masses. To build up our nation, we must work together, we must weaken the string of discord and do away with sentiments. Two or three, individuals or groups, cannot work together productively when they do not agree. The WAIC is aimed at destroying the ills that plague Nigeria. How can a nation progress when the citizens live in fear? How do we work together progressively when there is no trust for one another? We cannot regard the poor as species of property instead of human.

The current idea is that, development is not only based on what people have, but on what capacity the nation can do to improve their quality of life and that of others. Therefore, development is the desire for improvement and ability to carry out and effect or bring about this change. Besides, skill in this nation needs high moral standard and highly disciplined citizens in order to affect progress. Human beings, whose interest and love for fellow Nigerians show no bounds, are the principal agenda for development because they are dynamic.

For effective building of the nation, different individuals, group of persons, ethnic groups, and states are set up and these take care of the various facets of development which have interrelated roles, all aimed at improving the quality of life of the people. With trust and dependable attitude they form a network of rules which have strong influence on another, for over-all development. This therefore calls for collaboration, co-ordination, and integration. With malice towards none, with love for all, with firmness in the right, with emphasis on what ought to be and not what was, nor what is; let us with God or Allah or Creator in mind bind up the nation's wounds to do what will achieve a just lasting peace ourselves.

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