

# RE-EVALUATING ETHICAL FOUNDATION OF THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY AND THE NEED FOR MORAL RE-ARMAMENT

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## **Abstract**

*The government of Nigeria at various levels and at different times has initiated programmes at boosting the moral and ethical standards of her citizens. Being conscious of the moral decline and ethical failure of the Nigerian society, General Olusegun Obasanji remarked in his Jaji declaration of 12<sup>th</sup> September, 1977 that “The Nigerian society as at now inspite of our effort since July 1975, is not sufficiently disciplined, fair, Just or humane”. President Shehu Shagari on October 1<sup>st</sup> 1982 during his anniversary, launched Ethical Revolution Committee in the country which was made up of sixteen members. The term of reference included the study of the nature and extent of the breakdown in national ethics and discipline. This work is therefore designed, to chronicle the genesis of this moral and ethical failure in Nigeria, its immediate and remote causes, its effect on the socio fabric of the nation as well as advancing some remedial strategies to stem this ugly tide.*

The government of Nigeria at various levels and at different times has initiated programmes for boosting the moral and ethical standards of her citizens. This is an indication that all is not well with Nigeria morally and ethically. However, to enhance proper understanding of this topic, it will be worthwhile to examine the genesis of this concept. The English word “Ethics” is derived from the Greek word “Ethos” which means habits or customs; it is also a standard or rule. It is synonymous with the Latin word “Mores” from which morals is derived. Morality therefore, is concerned with human character and conduct. Any unacceptable human character and conduct is regarded as unethical behaviour. This therefore, formed the basis of this topic. Some of the questions that agitate the minds are; what is the origin of ethics and moral development? Are there any factors affecting moral development in Nigeria? What is the nature of the ethical foundation of the Nigerian society? Are there any negative consequences and effects of ethical and moral failure on the Nigerian society? Can anything be done to remedy ethical failure in Nigeria? These are some of the questions to resolve in this research work.

## **Origin of Ethics and Moral Development**

Objectively speaking, the concept morality is synonymous with Ethics. These two concepts have been interchangeably used in different occasions to express the same idea and thought. It was the Greeks who first began to give the study of morality otherwise known as Ethics a systematic treatment.

### Academic Scholarship

Isiramen (1991), informed that among human activities, some actions are objectively condemned as morally wrong, such actions are cheating, murder, Incest, Rape, Adultery, Armed-robbery, Embezzlement of public funds, Bribery and Corruption amongst others. All those who fall victims or engage in these vices, acknowledge that they are wrong, such that they often hide to perpetrate them and employ various strategies and techniques that would prevent them from being caught.

The scholar further asserts that, some other actions are also appraised by all as morally good. Some of such actions include amongst others, Fidelity, Hospitality, Generosity, Truthfulness, Love etc. However, there are certain kinds of actions on which we do not have universal agreement as to their wrongness or rightness. Examples of such actions are contraception, abortion, euthanasia, masturbation, smoking, alcoholism and friendship between opposite sexes (Isiramen, 1991).

Now what yardstick or instrument of measurement do we employ to determine the wrongness and rightness of an action? Ethics is therefore concerned with the identification of criteria for examining the wrongness or rightness of the actions of man.

Closely related to the concept of ethics are the terms moral, amoral and immoral. The trio of Ewhrudjakpor, Nwaezeapu, and Egbule, (1997) asserted that moral is essentially the individual's level of ethical standards, that is how good or bad an individual is. It implies "Praise Worthiness". Amoral on the other hand means "not subject to moral Laws. In other words, something that cannot be held morally responsible. Animals and sometimes very young infants are amoral because they cannot be held responsible for whatever they do or be subjected to moral Laws. Lastly, immoral means anything that is morally bad or morally evil.

From the above, there is relationship between ethics, law and level of morality. The relationship is such that the lower the moral and ethical standard of the society, the greater the need for law and its authoritarian enforcement. This explains why people of high moral standard have little need for law.

### **Factors Affecting Moral Development and Ethical Foundation**

There are two broad categories of factors affecting moral development. These factors according to Egbule (1994) are (a) Genetic (Nature) and (b) Environmental (Nurture). At birth the individual is mentally, socially and morally neutral. However, some innate potential that can affect their development might be present. Morally, and Egbule, (1994) informed further that the new born baby has no conscience scale of values or moral conduct. This implies that the individual needs external influence to stimulate the development and realization of their inherited potentials.

- (a) **Genetic Factor (Nature)** The genetic factor affecting individuals moral development include such biological potentials as the hormonal state, genetic inheritance and chromosomal composition.
- (b) **Environmental Factor (Nurture)** The environmental factors on the other hand, include such things as

- (1) Parental behaviour and family background
- (2) Influence of siblings and other close relative
- (3) Societal behaviour and cultural norms
- (4) Peer group socialization and interaction processes
- (5) Individual's religious and spiritual background
- (6) The school and its moral instructional programmes and content
- (7) The use of punishment and discipline as agents of socialization process.

The combination of genetic and environmental factors stimulate and establish solid ethical foundation and moral development. The trio of Ewhrudjakor, Nwaezeapu and Egbule (1997), identified some other concepts in ethical foundation and moral development to include the following

- (1) **Social Learning Theory** This is the application of learning principles to the problems of personal and social behaviour; people learn attitudes and behaviour by observing or imitating models.
- (2) **Socialization Theory** This is the process by which parents, teachers and authority figures teach children the skills and social norms necessary to be well functioning members of society. Some agents of socialization are the family, religious organizations, schools, government organs like the police force, prison etc.
- (3) **Internalization Theory** This means integration of beliefs and attitudes and expressing them by an individual. However, when an individual has been properly socialized and has internalized the social norms, morals and values accompanied by a true psychological and biological development, his conscience will be formed.
- (4) **Conscience Formation Theory** This is a product of biological, social, chronological age- and development of an individual. Psychological conscience is the internalization of parental and societal wishes that are morally acceptable.
- (5) **Theory of Discipline** This implies the ability to conform with accepted rules and regulations of a given group or society. Discipline when used for children, means keeping children in line with the accepted norms of a given environment. The relationship between moral development, ethical foundation and discipline was made clearer by Odebummi (1985) as cited by Ewhrudjakpor, Nwaezeapu and Egbule (1997) to mean the development of faculties of mind, growth of reasoning power and acquisition of knowledge. Infact, discipline is a series of unfolding moral and ethical codes of conduct which direct and channel the individual's behaviour patterns towards societal acceptability.

**An Assessment/Evaluation of Ethical Foundation of the Nigerian Society** Being conscious of the moral decline and ethical failure of the Nigerian society, General Olusegun Obasanjo remarked in his Jaji declaration of 12<sup>th</sup> September, 1977 that "The Nigerian society as at now inspite of our effort since July 1975, is not sufficiently disciplined, fair, Just or humane" (Oroka, 1990).

### Academic Scholarship

Writing about the moral and ethical decline of the Nigerian society, Ubrurhe, (2000) asserted as follows, “This cankerworm has eaten deep into the fabric of the Nigerian Society, and this has been the concern of Nigeria’s successive governments. In order to curb this ugly monster, President Shehu Shagari in October 1<sup>st</sup> 1982 during his anniversary, launched Ethical Revolution Committee in the country which was made up of 6 of sixteen members. The term of reference included the study of the nature and extent of the breakdown in national ethics and discipline and the examination of traditional institutions, customs and virtues of the people: Shagari’s strong belief in the ethical dimension of religion as a means of promoting national development is evident here.

In the same vein, Ubrurhe, (2000), further stressed that the Buhari/Idiagbon regime that toppled Shagari’s regime, initiated War Against Indiscipline (W.A.I.). The Babaginda regime established the Mass Mobilization for Social and Economic Recovery (MAMSER) and the Abacha government, the worst tyrant that Nigeria ever had, established War Against Indiscipline and Corruption (W.A.I.C.). The establishment of these government organs is a veritable indices that moral and ethical ideals have eluded Nigerians.

Isiramen (1998) identified such ethical and moral failures to include tribalism, Armed and Pen-Robbery, Embezzlement of Public Fund, Bribery and Corruption Greed and Dishonesty, Indolence and Negligence of Duty, Political Violence and Murder, Cheating and Profiteering, Kidnapping and Fraud. Others are Dupes, Drug Addicts and Religious Manipulators who engage in killing fellow citizens in the name of God, internet fraud/hacking as well as hired killing. All these actions are branded as unethical behaviours”.

In the light of the above, certain factors have been identified as responsible for these vices, which the duo of Ubrurhe, (2000) and Isiramen (1998) spelt out as follows:

- (1) The problem of good examples
- (2) The growing gap between the rich and the poor
- (3) The presence of sacred cows
- (4) The problem of misuse of power or power abuse.
- (5) Inauguration of poorly implemented programmes.
- (6) The problem of double standard.
- (7) Inculcation of wrong values into our children

Consequent upon the above vices, former President Olusegun Obasanjo established various remedial agencies to curb these unethical conducts between 1999-2007, which included Human Rights Violation and Investigation Commission (H.R.V.I.C). Anti-corruption and miscellaneous offences Tribunal (A.C.M.O.T.) also known as Anti-graft panel and more recently the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (E.F.C.C.). Formally headed by Nuhu Ribadu and currently Mrs. Farida Waziri. So many cases of economic crimes, political corruption and fraud of different types are currently tried in various federal high courts across the nation.

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## **Remedial Strategies to Ethical and Moral Failure in Nigeria**

Considering the negative consequences of the aforementioned vices on the Socio-economic fabrics of the Nigerian nation, it is worthwhile to recommend some strategies to stem these ugly tides.

1. Family background and parental discipline should be strengthened and sustained as people learn attitudes and behaviour by observing or imitating models that is we should live by example.
2. The schools and their moral instructional programmes and contents as well as effective discipline should be strengthened and sustained.
3. The various government organs of socialization and discipline such as the police force and prison services should live up to expectations.
4. The religious organizations should compliment government and the school efforts in maintaining discipline by imposing sanctions through suspension or expulsion of erring members when found guilty of any vices.
5. Effort should be made by concerned individuals and society at large in enforcing discipline as well as bridging the gap between the rich and the poor.
6. Equality before the law should be strengthened to avoid sacred cows and the use of double standards.
7. There should be inculcation of right values into our children as well as discouraging abuse or misuse of power.
8. All Nigerians should uphold self-discipline as a watchword.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion therefore, if the above suggestions and recommendations are doggedly upheld and applied, the Nigerian society will experience a new dawn in moral re-armament.

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