

Moral Degeneration and its Socio-Economic Implications in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

From the beginning of civilization, the problem of man in his environment has been mainly that of immorality in all its anti-human segments. Man has destroyed himself and nations have collapsed for lack of moral strength or the enthronement of various unethical, fraudulent problems. This paper examines the sources of moral degeneration in Nigeria and the effect on the socio-economic experiences of Nigeria. It also prescribes those things that can help, to a large extent, give solution to this anti-developmental problem in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

From antiquity or from the beginning of the peasant society, especially, societies have been faced with various problems that seem to defy solutions. Depending on time and space, these problems are generally ideological, political, social, religious, tribal, racial and ethnic. They can also be economic, matrimonial, psychological, medical, among others. If one looks at these problems philosophically, it will be seen that they are mostly tied to ethical problems or moral breakdown within the individual and the state.¹

MORAL PROBLEMS IN HISTORY

It is important to state that by about 500 B.C., some moralist emperors, poets, writers and philosophers in China and Greece, particularly, had made themselves the conscience of the people by preaching against those experiences or behaviours that could bring about moral decadence. One must here specifically use the Greek philosophers as examples. Perhaps, the notable force on the promotion of sound moral values among the youths and the supremacy of ethics in politics or leadership were the Greek or Athenian philosophers: Aristotle (384-322 B. C.), Plato (427-347 B. C.) and Socrates (469-399 B. C.), among others. Socrates was eventually arrested, tried and condemned to death "on charges of heresy and corrupting the minds of the young".² According to Hugh Tredennick, his death "forms one of the most tragic episode in the history of Athens in decline".³

Unethical problems, caused by moral degeneration, also led to the fall of many civilizations, kingdoms and empires. A very good example was the Roman Empire which was, at the peak of its civilization, the most powerful in the world.⁴ The Roman Empire was so powerful that no other empire could conquer it. That is, the empire was not defeated or conquered by any external army or empire. It was conquered by itself, very unfortunately, through inevitable internal disintegration caused by unspeakable unethical or immoral practices. The Roman example still abounds today at individual and state levels. If not, the present "self annihilation" through various anti-social practices would not have remained with us. Governments also would not have been collapsing, particularly through coups or other means. It should be pointed out, however, that the Athenian example is not exclusive to this discussion. All over the world, there have been great men and women of honour such as the social philosophers, humanists, artists, poets, political and religious leaders, great thinkers and other highly respected personalities who have devoted their lives to the promotion and sustenance of moral values.⁵

These are people, like Bertrand Russell and Lewis Mumford, who practised what they preached, according to the cliché, or lived by what they believed in. Such people have sacrificed their material enjoyment, freedom and lives in defence of moral values. Jawara Neru and Nelson Mandela are very good examples. In Nigeria, today, we also have the defenders of moral supremacy, in the West, East and the North. Unfortunately, however, the humanistic echo of these moral progressives seem to be ignored, or is being suppressed, by opposing forces of some unprogressives who also accuse their critics of unethical behaviours. One may ask a question: Why is it that Nigeria is still unabatingly oppressed by various unethical problems despite daily appeals from government, religious and other quarters? Even if it is not possible to completely eliminate anti-moral experiences, can they be drastically reduced? Is it necessary to continue to campaign against the things that bring about moral degeneration when, at the moment, the situation seems to be getting worse? That is, is moral degeneration preventable in Nigeria? All these questions will be answered naturally in the course of this discussion.⁶

SOURCES OF MORAL DEGENERATION

Though addressing here the factors for moral degeneration in Nigeria appears to be common-place or a literary cliché, one cannot but expose these factors as long as they continue to constitute the impediments to one's safety, happiness, progress and peace of mind. The anti-social problems cannot be ignored unharrassed with wisdom and prayer as long as they continue to increase, even with more brutish offsprings. Moreover, like the above discussed Roman Empire which succumbed to immorality and other vices as a way of life, Nigeria cannot be allowed to be fettered for moral and, therefore, socio-political disintegration by keeping mute. Perhaps one Yoruba adage can be made lucrative to this discussion:

There is no hope for victory if one stops addressing the negativity of an evil thing. The very moment one stops condemning an evil action that constantly repeats itself, mainly because it refuses to stop, that moment, the person also becomes not only part of the evil but also its messenger. This is because that person has been defeated by evil action.⁷

This shows that there is every hope for victory as long as one does not surrender to the rather obstinate presence of evil or destructive experience of what can bring moral degeneration.

However, moral degeneration or the outright rejection of moral values, in Nigeria could be generally grouped under four broad factors, some of which can interweave with one another: fraudulence, satanism and hedonism or epicureanism and militancy.⁸ Under fraudulent activities are examination malpractices which are now hydra-headed in technique or method. Hundreds of college or university students are dismissed yearly for this anti-moral action. In fact, the secondary institutions are not exempted from this fraudulence, as seen during Joint Admission Matriculation Board (JAMB) examinations. There is also fraudulence in some sporting events through doping, match-fixing and over-age players; a form of cheating, like in the examination malpractices. There are other forms of cheating through forging of signature for monetary gains or certificate acquisition, for example. Evidences abound on various bank fraudulence which also takes the form of duping or what is now known as 419. One should not forget that many Pentecostal churches in Nigeria are organized for financial gains. Without any sound spiritual backing, such churches use foul means to engage in dubious activities that have great moral implications. Of course, what about the importation of fake drugs?

Among other fraudulent activities that add to moral degeneration is the presentation of fake papers or document for personal or collective gains. It is on record, for example, that many students have used fake certificates, transcripts and testimonials to gain admission into tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Very unfortunately, however, many of these students are usually located and dismissed particularly in their final years. Many people, particularly contractors, have been able to illegally secure contracts from government and private organizations with fake papers. Those with genuine papers have taken money without executing their jobs. There is another fraudulent practice that is common in the colleges and universities. This is plagiarism that is usually considered not only a theft but also an academic crime among both staff and students. Though not all cases of plagiarism have criminal, fraudulent intentions behind them, because many people, for lack of research competence, have been trapped by this. Plagiarism is still rigidly seen as a fraudulent method of acquiring knowledge.

Moral degeneration is also caused by satanism. Under this category are cultic activities in higher institutions and within the society. It is believed that cultists are engaged in, or forced by environmental or emotional factors to engage in, various ritualistic and deadly activities that are not in agreement with modern social order. Under Satanism is also cannibalism that is reported to be practised in some Nigerian societies. There have been many reports in the media to this effect. Money rituals which also demand human sacrifice are part of the satanic aspect of moral degeneration. There are various reports of missing people, and many suspects have been arrested in connection with this. Many Nigerians have also taken mammon worship to a satanic level; in that they can go to any length to achieve their material intentions. Under satanic influence is also assassination which now seems to be a socio-political culture of Nigeria. It is on record that many Nigerians have been assassinated, particularly for political, ethnic or tribal reasons.

Under hedonism are a variety of moral vices that harbour moral degeneration.⁹ The hedonists, with highly epicurean tendencies, are generally in pursuit of pleasurable or material gains. The implication of this is that any method, good or bad, is employed to get their satisfaction. Though not all hedonists are criminals, they are generally found to be armed robbers, thieves, smugglers, pirates, rapists, sex maniacs, drunkards, pornographers, kidnappers, dupes or 419 and drug pushers. Militancy is another problem caused by overall societal moral degeneration among the militants and their claimed oppressors. Their activities are a disastrously

destabilizing protest against what they revolt against. Unlike the criminals, there is an intentional vandalism of public or private infrastructure which they see as part of their oppressors' machinery.

MORAL DEGENERATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

It is very clear that the greater the social vices of a nation are the bigger and more magnifying the problems of that nation. Though Nigeria, as a developing nation, is struggling dynamically to achieve its developmental goals, the problems created by various unethically social vices, discussed above, cannot but be nightmarish to progressive development. For example, foreign investors tend to be jittery in their intention to start business in Nigeria. The reasons for this are not far fetched. There is the fear of falling into the hands of dupes (419) during an initial business arrangement. Like other industries, the problems of electricity supply which appear to be intractable, presents enough fear. Armed robbery constitutes enough menace while cases of kidnapping are viewed with great discomfort and unease.

Some of the above discussed social vices also affect tourism, thereby robbing Nigeria of some capital which would have accrued from this. The economy of Nigeria has been tremendously weakened by hundreds of fraudulent people who daily pirate the works of the artistes and writers who are the worse for this. The Copyright Commission, in spite of serious efforts to check this fraud, has not been able to achieve its objectives despite over two decades of war over piracy. For this reason, many creative artistes have been pirated out of business. Smuggling has also led to the total collapse, or weakening of many industries. Though the government also has stiff laws against the importation of certain items, the smugglers have rendered this law ineffective through their nefarious activities. Nearly all the textile industries in Nigeria have collapsed because of smuggling, and the economic implications are very obvious.

Nigeria is also littered with inferior smuggled or imported goods that do not merit the inflated cost of these products. For example, many electronic and other contrivances have not been able to give the type of performance expected of good quality products. For various manufactured or fraudulent reasons, many government workers also do not render the full service expected of a day's job because they rarely stay on their jobs; going about other private businesses. Unlike the private ventures, money collected by workers in government enterprises rarely finds its way entirely into government purse.¹⁰ This is because fraudulent practices will not make these workers render the correct account. According to an informant, this was why Toll Gate was dismantled in Nigeria, because more than half of the money collected in each Toll Gate usually went into private pockets. There are more economic implications of moral inadequacies, but it is good to also briefly discuss the social aspects.

For example, many Nigerian youths have been wrongly lured into accepting such lifestyles that can, at best, be injurious to their present and future aspirations. Such lifestyles include smoking, "drinking", obsessive womanizing and cultism, among others. Fake drugs have also damaged the biological systems of many people, while many have lost their lives because of this. There is now, also, little room for recreation because of many unpredictable situations which include theft, car snatching or even assassination. Night clubbing, for these same reasons, among others, seem to be a forgotten experience. On the campuses of many Nigerian institutions, social events are made to stop at 6.p.m., whereas in the distant past, many of these events used to be an all-night affair. There are more social implications of moral degeneration, but these cannot be accommodated here.

TOWARDS REINSTATING MORAL VALUES

Despite the fact that this article has loudened the enormity of ethical problems in Nigeria, and though this may make one think that there is no solution to these depressing problems, an attempt will be made here to proffer possible solutions. According to Bertrand Russell, "the things that make human life miserable are preventable, and the ways of preventing them are known".¹¹ For this reasons, therefore, it is important to present what will prevent moral degeneration or drastically reduce the erosion of moral values in the Nigerian society. This must definitely start from childhood, from home with parents. Right from childhood, children should be well exposed to all elements of cultural traditions that teach people's etiquette and other norms. At this stage, there is need for corrective and not destructive discipline"¹² as well as parental love that is devoid of unnecessary pampering. This period, a child should be encouraged to naturally develop interest in what parents or older children do. Story telling or didactive television programmes are also important means of making children form good habit.

In the primary school, teachers should see themselves as agents of moral values by emphasizing the importance of all those things that are either destructive or constructive to one's life. Pertinent educative stories as well as literatures that feature various heroic exploits of great Nigerians or Africans should be provided. As an attempt to further induce or inspire pupils, prizes that reward various levels of moral excellence should be

constantly awarded to deserving pupils. It is not the preciousness or quality of such prizes that really matters; it is the motive. Prizes can even be in forms of lead pencils, biro pens and school bags, among others.

The secondary education should be taken very seriously by parents. That is, proper, monitoring or guidance of their children become important when these children enter secondary school where their characters begin to be formed either positively or negatively. It is where, for the first time, they are exposed to many mischiefs of those students who have not been properly brought up at home. The teachers, at this level, should also help to instill discipline in line with those of the early mission schools. The church, particularly in their Sunday Schools, should intensify efforts to put children, young boys and girls on a sound spiritual lane. The Muslims should also act similarly.

The government, no doubt, has a major role to play in checking moral erosion by providing the necessary infrastructures that can make life more comfortable for citizens. Prison conditions should be reformed for better comfort and moral as well as practical training that can make ex-prisoners become better citizens should be intensified. The police force should also be modernized to effectively meet the demand of the contemporary scientific police operation. Though the government alone cannot provide the infrastructures for Nigeria's work force, as above stated, the socio-economic environment should be made very infrastructurally fertile and safe for entrepreneurship and job creation.

The cultural environment is a great determinant of one's values; which is why some people cannot afford to behave anti-socially in an environment that produces them. Tradition is a factor in one's upbringing, because it has all the prescriptive laws of moral ethics that are naturally entrenched and rigidly followed. In this regard, every effort should be made by schools and colleges to introduce courses that are culturally based. By doing this, one will see how materialistic pursuit is seriously relegated for human ennoblement and meritorious achievement. The print and electronic media should also have a policy to constantly feature documentaries on the events that are socially, politically and historically inspiring to the contemporary Nigeria. These should focus, very necessarily, on good governance and leadership qualities. The heroes of Nigeria's nationalism, military exploits in the 19th century, particularly, various professionals with unequalled achievements and, generally, men and women of honour can be presented as an inspiration to our modern age.

CONCLUSION

Considering all the above discussions on moral degeneration, it is clear that the entire Nigerian society has a role to play. While one can conclude that moral degeneration is also the creation of a society that is yet to fully play its expected role, the fact that there are avenues for social redress or change makes one see the situation with great optimism. However, despite the present threat of moral degeneration in Nigeria, there is every hope for a highly livable and prosperous Nigeria.

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3. Ibid.
4. See *AWAKE*, April 2007, p. 3.
5. For more Knowledge of this discussion see Robert Nisbet, *The Social Philosophers* (New York: Pocket Books, 1982); DJO' Connor, *Aquinas and Natural Law* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1967), Bertrand Russell, *Has Man a Future?* (London: Enguin Books, 1961), Scobey, M, Graham, G. (eds.), *To Nurture Humanness* (New York: NEA, 1970). Lewis Mumford, *The Condition of Man* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.).
6. Answers to these questions are readily supplied by the print and electronic media through essays and features that frontally address the problems of moral values in Nigeria.
7. This is a very common Yoruba adage.
8. Series of interviews which crossed cultural boundaries were conducted with both literate and illiterate communities between 2007 and 2010. This was part of my research on the economy of Ekiti in the early post-colonial period.
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