

The Traditional Ethics and Moral Decay in Igbo Land, Nigeria

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Abstract

Igbo traditional ethics used to be a mechanism of checking misconduct among the Igbo. However, today the contrary is the case. This anomaly is evident in the high rate of crime in society. Therefore, the paper examined the consequences of abandoning Igbo traditional ethics and its negative effects on moral life of the Igbo. The work used phenomenological approach. It was descriptive and analytical. Both primary and secondary sources were used, like observation and books respectively. The researcher discovered that the prevalence of moral decay in Igbo land was caused by non-observance of traditional ethics. The paper recommended restoration of lofty aspects of traditional ethics which would help in fighting against moral decay in Igbo land.

Keywords: Ethics, Morality, Decay, Decline and Sin

Introduction

The Igbo constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in the country. Igbo traditional ethics is an offshoot of African Traditional ethics that holds sway in the country. In the past,

Igbo traditional ethics used to be a traditional means of checkmating unruly behaviour that was against the acceptable moral code in society. The moral code ensured that there was decorum in society. Nevertheless, since Igbo traditional ethics was neglected and moral code downplayed, there are various atrocities going on in society. Igbo land in particular and the country in general have witnessed an upsurge of crime more than ever before. It is on this note that Elford maintains that:

In the twentieth century, there is one overwhelming feature of that condition which must be so addressed. It is the manifestation of radical evil as evidenced by the fact that human beings have killed more of their own kind in the twentieth century than they did in all the previous centuries added together. This of course, is not because human beings have become necessary so much more wicked; it is rather because the means now available for the infliction of wickedness are so much more lethal¹.

The decline in Igbo traditional ethics has resulted in sophisticated crime that is being witnessed in society.

It is observed that the anomalies generate anxiety and despair in the minds of concerned citizens. This led Yar'Adua who was the Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters in Nigeria to express concern to the religious leaders over the moral decay in society. He attributed the ugly situation to inadequate teaching of religion in schools². Indirectly, Yar'Adua was referring to the inadequate traditional ethical influence on the youths that are being groomed as future leaders of Nigeria. Therefore, the paper examined the consequences of abandoning Igbo traditional ethics and its negative effects on Igbo morals.

Conceptual Framework

Ethics

Ethics is derived from the Greek word *ethos* which literally means wisdom, conduct, culture or way of life³. In other words, it covers every aspect of human life. There is ethics in every department of life. It is a systematic study of moral principles. Ethics is normative science of human conduct that deals with the study of rightness or wrongness of human actions⁴. It seeks to examine human conduct by subjecting every human conduct to the scrutiny of ethics⁵. Ethics is a branch of moral philosophy that deals with values in relation to human conduct. It is concerned with examination of ethical issues like right conduct, good character and fulfillment of life⁶. Ethics is not an abstract phenomenon, rather, it is a customary way of life that is interested in doing what is right, good and mandatory for the welfare of society⁷.

Sin/Evil

Sin is derived from the Greek word *harmatia* which literally means to miss the mark. Therefore, it means to fail to attain a goal or expectation. In the Old Testament, sin implies derailment, a straying and a rebellion⁸. Onah avers that "... the action called sin or evil or crime or offence results when the human act does not conform to a law, whether civil or divine"⁹. Sin is a deviation from the societal norm and standard.

Background of Igbo Traditional Ethics

Igbo traditional ethics owes its origin to creation when God created man with a faculty. Iwe maintains that:

His intellectual faculty makes him conscious and aware of the nature and implications of what he is and does; his free will-power makes him answerable for his freely chosen course of action. It is for these facts

that man is universally recognized as a moral being....¹⁰

The forebears gleaned moral ethics from natural revelation and common sense. Man is a moral being in the sense that he is conscious of his actions whether good or bad. Traditional ethics was handed over to man by the Supreme Being, the divinities and ancestors¹¹. Therefore, Igbo traditional moral laws are divine moral laws. The Igbo traditional ethics is sacred and not man - made. It occupies a central position in the Igbo traditional communities on the grounds that Igbo society is a corporate and communal one. By this arrangement everybody suffers for the sin or evil committed by one man or woman. The gods can punish the entire community due to the sin of one person¹². Man is a political being which makes it expedient for him to abide by the rules and regulations that guide society.

In the traditional cosmology, the traditionalists are surrounded by evil spirit (mmuo ojo), angry gods, revengeful ancestors and destiny evil forces that make it impossible for an offender to go scot free¹³. In most cases, righteousness is measured by success in farming, hunting and trading. Morally upright person is a person who lives in peace with the gods and peace with men. People are encouraged to make purity their watchword which is regarded as a means of avoiding the anger of the gods and ruin of evil spirits. The cult of innocence (Ijuogu) demands that everybody should be innocent in order to be free from calamity, disaster and misfortune¹⁴.

Traditional Ethics and Morality

In the pre-colonial and missionary era, the Igbo had a sense of morality which was showcased in customs, rules, laws, traditions and *taboos*¹⁵. The components of Igbo traditional ethics like law, custom, tradition and etiquette are enshrined in *omenani*¹⁶. The Igbo use the word *omenani* to

describe the Igbo traditional ethics. It is observed that *Omenaani* or *Omenaala* literally means things that are obtainable in the community which are in agreement with the customs and tradition of the people¹⁷. The Moral code (*omenala*) stipulates the *nsọ-ala* (prohibitions of the earth goddesses). The prohibitions are the don'ts of society¹⁸.

Taboo is not an Igbo word, rather, *taboo* is a Melanesian word that means forbidden acts¹⁹. It offers explanation to the rightness or wrongness of an act. Taboo is a restriction or ban that is borne out of the customs of the people. The Igbo traditional moral codes cut across religious obligations to social obligations²⁰. When one considers humans as social beings, social obligations become necessary. The moral codes emanated from the relationship between humans and the divinities. In old days, efforts were made to sustain the equilibrium by the observance of taboos²¹. Usually, violation of a *taboo* leads to breach in human –divine relationship. Propitiatory ritual was done to re-establish peace and reintegrate the offender into divine fellowship (*Koinonia*)²². Propitiatory sacrifice wiped out stigma, pollution and mental anguish. It took care of psychological problems like guilt, despair, inferiority complex, shame and sadness.

Ndiokwere makes it clear that anybody who committed abomination by committing offences like stealing of farm products (yam, cocoyam, cassava and vegetables) goats, sheep, dogs, fowls, coconuts, palm nuts and kola nuts had offended the earth goddess (*Ala*). The offender and the entire community were punished by the earth goddess with calamity, unless propitiatory sacrifice was performed²³. In Igbo land, offences were punished by death, selling the offender into slavery, banishment, ostracism, propitiatory sacrifices and apology²⁴. In most cases, moral codes were enforced by the institutionalization of public opinions, taboos, rituals, physical force and penalties²⁵. The prohibitions

(taboos) in Igbo land include, patricide, incest, killing of sacred animal, murder, women climbing trees, abuse of elders, rules against improper sexual relations (incest), stealing, lying, secretive life, poisoning and witchcraft²⁶. Other abominable acts include malicious destruction of household property, farm, animal products and setting a house on fire²⁷.

It was not every offence that was committed against God. For instance, "... some offences are primarily seen as offences against God, others are against the deities or ancestors. Still others are deemed to be directed against human society and some compromise the integrity of the individual"²⁸. There were major and minor offences. The earth goddess and the ancestors occupied a pivotal position in regulating human conducts due to the latter were closer to human beings more than the other deities. In the divine hierarchy, the earth goddess occupied the second position in the Igbo pantheon. God ranked first among the deities although, He was seen as *Deusotiosis and Deus absconditus*²⁹. It is believed that "Priests and elders who have been initiated into the sacred society called ozo are the exponents of Ala's mind"³⁰. They ensured that there was maintenance of law and order in society. Ilogu states that ancestors are custodians of Igbo traditional ethics when he opines that:

The ancestors are themselves guardians of public morality. They know best what is good for their offspring because in life they had interpreted the mind of the earth goddess. They had laid the foundations of society on goodness, truth and purity, and they would now want such goodness to continue. It is by doing what the ancestors would approve – that is, by being loyal to the traditional code of morality – that the tribe or extended families can survive³¹.

The living dead (ancestors) were accorded respect, giving their prestigious position as the custodians of the tradition.

The Decline of Igbo Traditional Ethics

Perhaps, one of the reasons that led to increase in crime in society in the twentieth century is Missionaries' negative attitude to customs which they described as wicked and abominable³². The antagonism between Christianity and Igbo traditional ethics owes its origin to the missionary activities in Igbo land. Consequently, there is incessant conflict between Christian moral values and Igbo traditional moral values. Apart from Christianity opposing traditional ethics that is not in tandem with Christian faith, there are other socio-political and religious forces that work against the effectiveness of Igbo traditional ethics. Furthermore, Christian ethics, urban industrial values, technology and modernization compete with Igbo traditional morality over supremacy³³.

The Igbo are known for migrating from one region to another. Asalu states that migration means "... the movement of persons from an origin place to a destination place across some pre-defined, political boundary"³⁴. He further submits that migration can be in form of rural-rural, rural-urban and urban-urban migrations³⁵. The Igbo are found in both rural area and cities across the country. According to O'Donovan, one of the consequences of urbanization and migration is loss of traditional moral values ³⁶. Many city dwellers are rapidly influenced by urban values with its attendant moral decay. The rate of crime rose in the 1990s owing to unemployment, economic decline, social inequalities, corruption and inefficient corrupt police and custom forces. There is a claim that some male prisons' wardens rape and impregnate female prisoners thereby, compounding the situation³⁷. It is observed that many organizations encourage the use of condoms and infertility drugs. There are cases of abortion among the youths. The pornographic films, cyber crime, quest for materialism, sophisticated weapons and hard drugs make people, particularly, the youths to be susceptible to various crime.

The Igbo traditional ethics is no longer seen as the product of religion. For some people, Igbo traditional ethics is man-made. Onwurah describes this belief thus:

Some people hold that morality has its origin in society which implies that it is a social phenomenon. This group believes that society, to keep itself alive and its machinery running, evolves a system of self preservation. The sense of “ought” within each person, therefore, is implanted by society. Thus “conscience” which makes us distinguish good from evil is nothing but a product of residual habits introduced by society³⁸.

In this case, people find it difficult to obey code of conduct since they have nothing to do with God. The distinction between morality and religion has resulted in a situation where eternal judgment and reward are greatly undermined.

It is observed that some religions do not regard morality as the object of religion. Rather, emphasis is laid on worship and adoration like rites and prayers³⁹. The Igbo traditional ethics has changed from other - worldly to this-worldly. People are interested in material benefits and here and now. They pay more attention to material wellbeing and lose interest in eschatological bliss. Many people do all sorts of evil in a bid to become rich, since they believe that the end determines the means.

It is discovered that Igbo traditional ethics is not documented for posterity. Ethics of other world religions are written. It is only Igbo traditional ethics that is unwritten. The moral code is passed on from one generation to another orally⁴⁰. Some aids that help human memories like festivals, folktales, myths, pity sayings, proverbs are discarded as fetish, pagan and primitive. In agreement with this view, Agalamanyi quips that tradition and customs are things of the past. As a result of modernism, many people conceive customs and tradition as archaic, outdated and irrelevant in the modern

society⁴¹. Civil laws are made by the senate, House of Representatives, houses of Assembly and local governments which seem to usurp the traditional moral codes. However, one of the weaknesses of enforcing these laws is that law breakers can violate the law and go scot free, particularly, when they are not caught.

The African believes in after-life where judgment is believed to take place in the abode of the ancestors; if the person is not found guilty, he is admitted into the abode of ancestors and those condemned are sent to the town of potsherd⁴². The Igbo have contact with western culture through education which brings so many changes to Igbo world view and moral code. The Epicureans (Greek moral philosophers) taught that pleasure is the *summum bonum* of life. This philosophical position led them to conceive the world as the product of cluster of atoms. The Epicureans were against the Judeo-Christian belief that the human soul was incorporeal substance that survived after the death of the body⁴³. For them, the soul was a material substance that perishes with the body. Therefore, the Epicureans believe that there are no punishment after death, life after death, immortality of soul and bodily resurrection.

Traditional Ethics and Moral Decay

There is no doubt that Igbo traditional ethics has lost grip of regulating people's behaviour in society. This has resulted in all sorts of crime. Balogun describes the situation thus:

The story of government leaders has been a wary story of power sharing, pride, oppression, intimidation, self interest and prejudice. The level of injustice, political, social and economic instability, insecurity of life and property, poverty, gross moral decadence, which manifests itself in arson, armed banditry, assassination, forgery, kidnapping or

abduction, mismanagement of public fund, crime, money laundry, aggression, harassment and oppression of the less privileged, child abuse, rape, drug abuse and terrorism has been on the increase⁴⁴.

It is noteworthy that evil is more pronounced now than when the Igbo traditional ethics held sway in Igbo land.

Many of the anti-social activities were alien in the pre-colonial era. The people lived in a relatively stable society. But, today there are manifestations of crime, particularly, corruption that has defied the efforts of the Police, Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) and Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). Azike observes that:

we read the gory tales of how one of our former military chiefs would order his military accountant/pay master to exchange more than N800m for dollars and other currencies every month end, we have heard about the soakaways and water tanks filled with naira, we have heard about how security details of one high-ranking politician carted away more than N300m cash in one fell swoop; all our money that is stolen at the local government level, embezzled at the state governments, parastatals and all the MDAS. All the pillaging and purloining diverting and misappropriating of funds at various Government Houses, Legislative houses, business houses and kickbacks, all of them are stocked and ware housed in cash in private safes; underground bunkers, store rooms⁴⁵.

It has become a necessity for people to realize that Igbo traditional ethics is the key to arresting these ugly anomalies in society.

The Way Forward

It is noteworthy that Igbo land would have overcome economic recession and underdevelopment if the adherents of Igbo Traditional Religion abided by their ethical stipulations since righteousness exalts a nation (Proverbs 14:34). The Igbo ethics cherishes chastity in marriage and avoids premarital sex. There is no doubt that if the Igbo can borrow a leaf from Igbo traditional moral values of chastity and abstinence from premarital sex, prostitution and abortion in Igbo land will die a natural death. Interestingly, the Igbo moral codes are similar to the Decalogue that usually begins with the formular “thou shall not” (Exodus 20:1-17). Christians are expected to observe the Igbo traditional moral codes the way the Jews obey the Decalogue. It was high time Christians shun the fanatical saying that what they observe is *omenelu* not *omenaala* (observance of heavenly rules takes precedence over earthly rules or laws) which will help the Igbo to be law abiding.

The laws governing the States in Igbo land need to be treated with the sacredness they deserve whether they are promulgated by the houses of assemblies or local governments. It is necessary to be understood by all and sundry that as far as laws are not contrary to good reason, they are divinely promulgated through human agents. Igbo land has a territory that is unified by a common religion (African traditional religion). African Traditional Religion had a remarkable influence on all the ethnic groups in the country prior to the advent of foreign religions like Islam and Christianity. The adherents of these religions are expected to pay allegiance to the core traditional moral values.

There is a necessity to incorporate the lofty traditional moral code in the constitution since the Islamic laws are part and parcel of the 1999 Constitution. The curricula of primary and secondary schools in Igbo land at least, have to accommodate the Igbo traditional moral instructions just like

the Islamic and Christian moral instructions. This will go a long way to produce Igbo people that are balanced in morals. The Igbo traditional moral instructions will complement the Islamic and Christian moral instructions, thereby, producing students and citizens of Igbo extraction with holistic view of moral imperative in the twenty first century (21st century).

It is by God's will that political leaders are elected into positions of honour. It is important for them to realize that they are accountable to God and there is reward or punishment for every act. Therefore, the political leaders will be judged, rewarded or punished accordingly. The Igbo people need political leaders that will rule with fear of God. In Igbo traditional morality, good name is better than riches. The Corrupt political leaders are disappointments and disgraces to their families and communities. The situation in Igbo Land requires reversal of values where selfless service to one's nation is more important than accumulation of wealth. In addition, bribery and corruption, assassination, armed robbery, kidnapping, drug abuse, terrorism, child abuse, rape, money laundry and forgery of certificates are meant to be declared taboos for the people and anybody caught in violating any of the taboos will be either banished, ostracized or imprisoned depending on the offence.

The police, the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) are expected to be alive to their duties. They are expected not to collude with criminals to perpetrate crime in society. The Igbo people in Diaspora are expected not to abandon their traditional moral values despite the influence of urban values and city life. There is need for the government to be responsible and responsive to the plight of the unemployed youths by creating job opportunities for them. It has become a necessity for the political leaders to deal with economic

inequalities that encourage crime in society by giving incentives to farmers, petty traders and artisans.

It is high time the traditionalists put the Igbo traditional moral code in writing to enable the posterity has access to them. People's minds need to be re-oriented to know that there is life after death. Consequently, some churches and other non-governmental organizations are advised to stop abusing the minds of the youths by giving them condoms and other contraceptive

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