

Social Values in a Reforming Society¹

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Introduction

Values, in the ordinary sense, are defined as *accepted principles or standards of a person*. Social values are therefore the *widely shared* (viz., social) principles and standards in a society. Social values are part and parcel of *culture* which, as we all know, is *the totality of a way of life*². The other contingences of culture include national character, social stratification, moral, religion, mores, and law. All of these dimensions of culture provide the clue to the widely shared principles/standards in any society.

National character is about recognizable and enduring trait(s) that is/are observable in a group or society (e.g. boldness, aggressiveness, wickedness, gentility, timidity, cowardice, etc.). Such traits which derive from the cultural imperatives of any group amplify the core trait(s) in national character. Similarly, social stratification provides insight into the cherished and/or key indicators of social mobility in society. A cursory review of all these contingencies of culture is likely to provide insight into the core social values of a society.

One of the enduring traits of the Japanese is valour which is demonstrated by their reaction toward what they consider to be dishonourable. The Japanese were inclined to commit suicide (i.e., Hara-Kiri) in order to redeem their honour. Hundreds of them committed suicide during the Second World War rather than surrender to the enemy because surrendering would shame their family and country. Japan still has the highest suicide rate among the high income countries in the world today. However, suicide is not socially approved in Nigeria. It is stigmatized and believed to be symptomatic of mental illness. Attempted suicide is a criminal offense in Nigeria punishable by imprisonment. Suicide is, therefore, not an option and is not viewed as the most honourable way out of a dishonourable situation among Nigerians.

Moreover, the study of social stratification sheds light on the determinants of social mobility which in turn helps us to know about the socially approved values in a society. Social mobility may be anchored on *achievement* or *ascriptive* criteria or an admixture of both. The Indian society was founded on a caste system which has always had the Brahmin at its helms and the

¹ Keynote address delivered at the conference of the Nigerian Anthropological and Sociological Association, University of Ibadan, September 26 & 27, 2007.

² Edward Tylor, *The Study of Culture*, London, 1895.

“Untouchables” at the bottom. Upward social mobility and breaking through the boundaries of each caste remains a problem in today’s India despite hundreds of years of formal western education and affirmative action. The recent affirmative action that is conceived to give the members of the lower castes better access to the study of medicine and other professional courses in the higher education system is still being contested by the members of the privileged castes in India.

This paper is about social values in a reforming society. I will attempt to describing Nigeria’s time-honoured social values and including their transformation; examine the how the thrust of on-going reform will impact on core values; and outline the prognosis for the future.

Nigeria’s Core Values

While it is unrealistic in the context of this paper to describe the core social values of the more than 250 or so ethnic groups³ in the country, nevertheless one could focus on those that transcend three of the major ethnic groups. Anthropological reports suggest that the time-honoured social values among the Yoruba, Hausa/Fulani, and Igbo consist of *candour*, *integrity*, and *transparency*. Of the Yoruba, Samuel Johnson intoned:

The ancient Oyo or Yoruba proper were very virtuous, loving, and kind. Theft was rare and also fornication inspite of the scantiness or often times complete absence of clothing to which they were accustomed...

...Yoruba as whole are social, polite, and proverbially hospitable. Licentiousness is abhorred. There are attested cases where a member of a family would be condemned to slavery by a unanimous vote of all the relatives when he has brought disgrace on the family⁴.

Further support for the foregoing is found in the work of Imoagene:

Irrespective of a person’s qualifications, he could not be appointed to kingly title in system one (i.e., kingship) and two (i.e., Chiefs) if he were not a member of the privileged group. Within the restricted circle of eligible candidates, intelligence, moral fitness, open-mindedness etc which candidates had to possess⁵.

³ See Onigu Otite, *Ethnicity in Nigeria*, Ibadan, 1989.

⁴ Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, CSS Bookshops, Lagos, 1976.

⁵ S.O. Imoagene, *Social Mobility in Emergent Society*, Department of Demography, The Australian National University & Sociology Department, University of Ibadan, 1976.

Virtue, honesty, and integrity were not only the preserve of the Yoruba of the olden days. They also transcended other ethnic groups like the Hausa/Fulani judging by Paden's analysis of the legacy of the Sokoto Caliphate:

A summary of early caliphate values, regarding community and authority, might include the following: (1) the community should consist of good Muslims, with provisions for fair treatment of non-Muslim minorities;(2) the purpose of community is to ensure justice, and follow Qur'an and Sunni;(3) the leadership of the community should be vested in someone who has the qualities of honesty, learning, courage, humility... and who is respected for his learning;(4) succession to leadership should be decided by councils of learned people, who would, hopefully, choose the most qualified person (regardless of dynastic linkage); (5) leaders should serve as examples to the people in terms of their action, as well as their words; (6) leaders are personally responsible to God for their actions⁶.

The Igbo people of the good old days were also by no means different from the Yoruba and Hausa/Fulani as amply shown in the following extensive quote from the work of Olisa (2002):

Igbo values of life consist of material ends such as children, wealth, health and so on, as well as non-material ends such as harmony with the gods and with fellowmen. As has been mentioned, the Igbo accept without question the participation of the gods and ancestors in the affairs of men, in their malevolence when offended by men and in their benevolence when appeased or pleased. Because of this, most political roles or ritual roles are expected to maintain a constant good relationship between community and the supernatural powers who hold decisive influence, for good or for bad, over the vital things of life – crops, health, productivity, and fortune.

The first deduction from these basic propositions is that performers of political roles are not expected to gain materially, in an appreciable measure, from their functions (emphasis mine). Thus, the Okpara's material emoluments, such as labour service from his people, and shares of certain animals killed are well-known and established by custom. His duties do not place him in an economic and social position much different from the rest of the people.. the same applies to the Ezeani, the medicine men, and even the titled persons, for the latter's wealth is not acquired by virtues of their leadership position but before they assumed the position. In other words, political office is not

⁶ John N.Paden, *Ahmadu Bello Sardauna of Sokoto – Values and Leadership in Nigeria*, Hudahuda Publishing Company, Zaria, 1986.

materially lucrative in Igbo traditional society, nor does it confer exceptional social privileges on the holder, except the influence he wields as representative of the gods and ancestors.

It is no wonder then that one of the norms expected of office holders is absolute ritual purity and political integrity; no one who has been found guilty of grave abomination can hold public office, the same applies to reprobates or other criminals⁷.

There is, therefore, a convergence on the social values that are dearly cherished among the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. It is also not farfetched to suggest that honesty, probity, and candour were embraced by all the other ethnic groups in the country in from time immemorial. No anthropological work has portrayed any of Nigeria's ethnic groups as consisting of a bunch of reckless and dishonest individuals.

Extant Social Values

The foregoing time-honoured core social values are now in short supply in Nigeria today. Nigeria is listed among the most corrupt countries in the world today, occupying number 157 in contrast to Ghana which is number 70 in ranking of countries worldwide⁸. Nigeria has earned a despicable reputation for all manners of fraudulent practices and robbery. A recent report suggested that ₦4.6 billion naira was lost to robbery and fraud in the banking sector alone in 2006⁹. Every Nigerian who carries our recognisable green passport is suspect anywhere around the world, prompting the current administration to launch an initiative aimed at rebranding the country. The atrocities of the Yahoo boys and may be girls and especially of the 419 fraudsters are well-known!!

The mere invitation in the olden days to respond to a complaint or a charge at a police station for a minor offence brought shame to individuals and their families in Nigeria. Alas, that is no longer the case in Nigeria today. Those who are convicted for serious crimes of theft, armed robbery, misappropriation of public funds, etc. behave as if they are heroes and heroines in their community. Known ex-convicts, forgers, fraudsters, robbers, etc carry on with arrogance and are likely to be honoured by their community, religious bodies, clubs, associations, and/or even the nation!

Families are breaking up too frequently. Housewives and girl-children are succumbing to commercial sex in order to survive. This is unlike the past when virginity occupied a centre-place prior to betrothal. Nigeria's modern girls and women proudly adorn themselves with wears that expose sensitive parts of

⁷ M.S.O. Olisa, "Igbo Traditional Socio-Political System," In G.E.K. Ofomata ed. *A Survey of the Igbo Nation*, Africana First Publishers Limited, Onitsha, 2002

⁸ A total of 170 countries are listed in the index.

⁹ See Statement by Kola Olugbodi, Managing Director of Background Check International in *The Guardian*, Friday September 2, 2007, p21.

their bodies in order to show that they are abreast of the fashion in the western world. Yet such indecent exposure was regarded as an abomination in the past. There is ample evidence that the men folk are no longer capable of playing their accustomed role in the familial unit and community while significant numbers literarily turn a blind eye to the unsavoury behaviours of their wives and children because of their precarious economic status and situation.

The educational system has been gravely affected by all sorts of vices which include corruption, cultism, sexual harassment, and brigandage while the erstwhile guiding philosophy that diplomas/degrees should be awarded taking character and learning into account no longer matters. Lecturers who used to be above board now spearhead all sorts of atrocities while students who ought to be motor park touts have somehow found their ways into the universities with fake credentials.

Oyenuga, one of Nigeria's highly esteemed professors, summed up the difference between yester years and today in an interview marking his 90th birthday:

Oh, my son, they are quite apart! In 1951, you could rely on people. If people got stranded and they came and knocked at your door, you would open for them without fear. You would entertain such a person and house him overnight. You can't do that now. You never know who is an armed robber now. You never know who is merely pretending to be in trouble or danger. There is world of difference and Nigeria has changed so much for bad from what we know.

Even in academic, we used to do our work without motive. Whomever I could help, I helped and I taught my students with all sincerity. I blamed those who did not do well. Now people don't do that without asking for money. Today, you can't go out without a lot of prayers. Our society has changed. The devil has taken control of our society. People are looking for money and money and money at all cost and irrespective of the source or sources.

So there is a wide difference between what is obtained today and in the past. For our present day politicians, it is worse. They are in ocean of money and they are making it even to satisfy four or five generations to come. Money has changed us. I will not say from human beings to animals, but from godliness to ungodliness.¹⁰

Virtually all our social institutions including the religious institutions are infected by corruption and fraud. Prophets, pastors, and imams are multiplying in numbers and commanding large followership. Yet, there is no evidence of

¹⁰ Victor A. Oyenuga, "God Has Been Gracious to Me," *The Guardian*, Sunday April 8, 2007, 35.

impact on social values. Indeed, decadent values have also spread into religious congregations in the country judging by various reports such as the following in one of the authoritative soft magazines:

Tongue are waging in Edo State over the sex scandal that rocked the leadership of Edo Christian Pilgrims Welfare Board in the Holy land in Israel. Investigations revealed that at the centre of the sex scandal is a prominent Bishop of a very popular New Generation Pentecostal Church located in Etete Area of Benin, City the state capital. It was learnt that while in the Holy Land on a pilgrimage, the Bishop instead of visiting the places of interest at the Holy Land was busy in the hotel sampling some female pilgrims one after the other. It was also learnt that apart from having various rounds of sex with female pilgrims, the Bishop also collected the sum of over N400, 000 each from the female pilgrims¹¹...

These examples underscore the fact that traditional Nigerian core social values have undergone tremendous transformation over the years and in its place are values that are rooted in dishonesty, fraud, brigandage, and total disregard for decency. Ethics have been thrown into the winds in family, community, and governance. Any behaviour pattern most *especially any that deviates from honesty, candour is regarded as normal*. Consequently, it is generally believed that children/youths find it difficult to distinguish between *good and evil* while good parents struggle hourly and daily to dissuade their children from absorbing the bad examples that transcend Nigerian society or to think that the bad examples around them are worthy of emulation.

Nowadays, Nigerians are remarkable for their neurotic need for money and power and are also inclined to disregard intellect and the sanctity of life as shown by murders of both the ordinary citizens and the highly placed ones that remain unsolved. All of these disreputable *neurotic needs* have supplanted the core values of our forebears which consisted candour, honesty, integrity and decency.

Factors Accounting for Change in Social Values

Various theories have been propounded to explain the change in Nigeria's core values. Some writers have simply heaped the blame on the military, arguing that prolonged military rule reshaped core values. Others draw attention to the collapse of the institution of the family in society, while another group has linked the change to long standing injustices and bad governance. A few is inclined to link the drift towards all sorts of vices to the failure or ineffectiveness of our religious institutions and leaders. Others have blamed successive leadership for the change in core values.

¹¹ City People, May 30, 2007, p26

The collapse of our core social values could be examined in the context of the historical and socio-political development of Nigeria since 1960. The combined effect of the civil war and prolonged military rule impacted on Nigeria's core values, changing the trajectory of the country. The Nigerian Civil War created a new wealthy class that was largely drawn from the rank of assorted contractors who supplied arms, ammunitions, equipment, food rations, vehicles, etc to the Armed Forces during the war. These wartime emergency contractors with little or no education inflated the contracts for supplies, amassing considerable wealth within the shortest period of time. These emergency contractors emerged as a force to be reckoned with in the society by virtue of their wealth - a new social class of *nouveau riche* that began not only to flaunt their wealth but to transmit the message that money is more important than education or other non-monetized but highly cherished social values.

Prolonged military rule gave the new social class ample opportunity to consolidate its hold on Nigeria. Military rule was characterised by a remarkable degree of arbitrariness in governance. Those who were very close to the top brass in the Armed Forces made lots of money through the award of assorted contracts that they were doled out during their era. In no time, the members of the new class began to flaunt their new found wealth in society; and also instilled into the Nigerian psyche that money *regardless as to how it is or was made* is presumably much more important than traditional core values of virtue, honesty, candour. The new class, therefore, set into motion the total transformation of Nigeria's traditional core values. Intellect, candour, and honesty were gradually relegated to the background while money began to *speak in communities*.

Every sector of the society began to imbibe the new value-system that was engendered by Nigerians whose source of wealth was doubtful. As an example, university lecturers who used to take pride in simple, austere life style began to look over their shoulders, believing that they would never earn respect in their community unless they are as wealthy as spare part vendors or emergency contractors. Quite a number of them nowadays are determined to build huge mansions in their hometowns as evidence of success. Indeed, they are inclined to think that they would not earn respect in the "eyes of the members of their community" (or as much respect as non-literate wealth business men and women) if they fail to erect the kind of mansions that they build in their villages/towns.

Surprisingly too, the religious institutions also began to accord greater deference to the wealthy than to the lowly that are often noted for their meekness, honesty, candour, and integrity. They were/are inclined to honour individuals largely because of their financial contributions. Christian and Muslim religious institutions doled out various honours, including knight-hoods, to the "wealthy guardians of the faith".

The behaviour of the new class has also influenced other mundane aspects of social life, such as fashion and general comportment. The evidence is amply shown in the popular media (*viz.*, glossy magazines, newspapers, television,

etc.). Critical observers are astounded by the level of degradation in the name of fashion - outlandish embroidery which displays poor sense of fashion, etc. including blatant display all the sensitive parts of the body of women/girls to the public in the name of fashion.

Modern day Nigerian girl-children, women and even men are also inclined to bleach their skin in order to be westernized or modern. The aim is to look more and more like White Europeans than black Africans, and all manners of chemicals are used in order to look "good". Yet, there is abundant evidence to suggest that bleaching is extremely harmful to the body. The question is what has become of our self-concept? Will White Europeans darken their bodies in order to look like Black Africans? Does this habit/trend not desecrate our gracious and beautiful black colour?

The new social class that was created by the Civil War and prolonged military rule literally bought its way to fame, power, and honour which it achieved using a variety of ingenious devices. Nigeria is one of the most creative environments for all sorts of awards in the world today. Nigerians are extremely good at inventing various awards, most of which are self-sponsored or spearheaded by faceless individuals and bodies. The aim of these awards is to draw the attention of an incredulously gullible public to doubtful achievements of generators of wealth.

The media that are expected to play the role of watchdog have also succumbed by giving full coverage to the award-giving ceremonies. They do so under the pretext of generating money for their proprietors. Secondly, musicians are not left out of the business in Nigeria. They produce records in praise of the nouveau rich Nigerians. Thirdly, the new class enjoy the support of traditional institutions. They garner all sorts of chieftaincy titles from innocuous and/or important chiefs/communities. By and large, the media, working in tandem with assorted award-giving agencies as well as with musicians and traditional rulers, have therefore helped the new class to consolidate its hold on Nigeria.

To sum up, wealth assumed the basis for social esteem and social mobility in Nigeria. Unlike in the past when the Nigerians only showed deference to the wealthy whose sources of wealth were transparent, this was no longer the case by the end of the Civil War and prolonged military rule. It no longer really matters how money is made. Professor P.P. Eke¹², one of our distinguished social scientists, aptly explains the general acceptance of those who corruptly enrich themselves in our society by his theory of the two publics. In a lay person's language, the theory means:

All is fine in our society if you go to Abuja to steal money and you return to your town or village to do yourself and your people well. To your people it is their own share of the national cake that you have

¹² P.P. Ekeh, "Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1975.

appropriated and they always feel that you deserve to be honoured and not abused for theft. The money which all other Nigerians know you have stolen is after all the share of the national cake of your own people.

Impact of Change on Social Values

The new values contributed to the breakdown of Nigeria's institutions. The various institutions crumbled within a period of five decades of political independence despite periodic purges in the public service. Nigeria's Railways, Airways, Shipping Line and various other institutions were bankrupted within a short period. Corruption and dishonesty waxed strong in all sectors of the society. The leadership of the various institutions was now being drawn from a class of incompetent, unimaginative, mischievous, unpatriotic, corrupt, and dishonest individuals. The debt portfolio grew and it was argued at one time that a handful of rich Nigerians who had misappropriated public funds could easily have paid off all the country's foreign debts from the personal fortunes that they stored away in overseas banks. Happily, the erstwhile Administration succeeded in negotiating the cancellation of Nigeria's huge foreign debts.

Response to the Collapse of Traditional Social Values

The erstwhile Administration initiated reform to tackle these challenges in the Nigerian polity. The guiding philosophy was anchored on the widely circulated policy document, the NEEDS, which was launched in the fifth year of its tenure¹³. The centre-piece of NEEDS is the gradual disengagement of government from all businesses including the social sector. The buzz expression was that *government has no business in business*. At the same time, the government was determined to shift the burden of social sector programmes like education and health from itself to the public at large. The drafters of the policy document also pretended to be mindful of the need to safeguard equity.

The primary goal of government policy was to privatize and/or commercialize state-owned companies and parastatals in which it had majority shares. Major organizations like NITEL, Nigerian Airways, NEPA, Hotels (e.g., NICON Hotel), etc. in which Government had substantial stake were sold to investors. Government monopoly in these organizations was called into question.

Another key element of the policy was the monetization of the benefits of government workers. The Federal Government sold off its landed property and houses, monetizing as well housing allowances, etc. Second, attempts were made to "right-size" the workforce (i.e., get rid of certain cadres of staff in order to promote efficiency in the public service). Those that were retired or dismissed from service included drivers, cleaners, caterers, gardeners, clerical officers, domestic servants for senior civil servants, etc. Senior level officers

¹³ National Planning Commission, National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), NPC, Abuja, 2004

now receive allowances in lieu of their drivers and domestic servants. Finally, the regime sought to attract foreign investment, promote self-reliance in the population, and tourism.

Side-by-side was the regime's determination to bring probity into governance and public sector. Various organs like the EFCC and the ICPC were created to tackle corrupt practices among politicians, civil servants etc. Allegedly corrupt individuals were/are apprehended daily for corrupt practices etc. Thus, the former Administration showed appreciation for the proactive role of the private sector in Nigeria and was determined to promote partnership between the public and private sectors in the various contexts of our existence. It envisaged that corruption in the public sector will be brought under control if the size of the public sector is reduced. Fewer Nigerians would be in a position to take advantage of their position in the public sector and this will ultimately translate into new social values and a conducive environment for rapid development.

Concluding Remarks

In sum, I have defined social values and described Nigeria's traditional core values by drawing from anthropological works on three of the major ethnic groups – Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa/Fulani. The widely shared values of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria in the olden days presumably transcended the nearly 250 ethnic groups in the country and consisted of honesty, candour, and integrity.

However, these core values of yesteryears have now been supplanted by those of dishonesty, corruption and sheer brigandage. The degradation of the core social values could be linked to the combined effect of the civil war and prolonged military rule on our country. The point also was made that the rise of a new class of wealthy Nigerians could be linked to the civil war and prolonged military rule. The values of the new class place great premium on money which has assumed importance, becoming the yardstick for all and sundry. Nigerians began to share the view that wealth, regardless how it is made, is the yardstick for social status. Corruption began to thrive and became the centre-piece of social relations. The response of the authorities has been to down-size the public sector and to establish EFCC and ICPC in order to tackle the crisis in values.

The fundamental issue for many observers is whether the efforts of the erstwhile Administration has yielded positive results and laid the foundation for a prosperous society. In other words, to what extent has or will it restore candour, honesty and transparency into our body fabric? There is a general feeling that the leadership that spearheaded reform lacked sincerity in its implementation. This appraisal stems from the fact that the erstwhile administration failed to show great appreciation for three critical factors in any reform agenda in a country that is mired in corruption and various anti-social vices. These are: *the rule of law, ethics in governance, candour in the conduct of public affairs.*

The rule of law is fundamental to the entronement of social justice in society, while ethics are vital in governance. A situation in which only the perceived enemies/opponents of the erstwhile Administration that spearheaded reform were targeted by EFCC and/or ICPC, while other seemingly corrupt public functionaries were untouched, sent mixed signals to the community. Similarly, a situation in which most Nigerians were/are of the view that the public institutions which were sold by government were bought by the functionaries, who were in charge of their sale, also betrays the much cherished traditional core social values of candour, integrity, and honesty in the conduct of public affairs.

It is undeniable that efforts of the erstwhile administration sent mixed signals to Nigerian youths, who nowadays can hardly distinguish between honesty and transparency, on the one hand, and dishonesty, corruption, sheer brigandage, on the other. The efforts and claims of EFCC and ICPC have demonstrated to Nigerian youths one could get away with serious financial crimes as long as an individual is well-connected with the powers that be in society. Such is likely to undermine the sustainability of the reforms.