MORALITY AND SOCIAL ORDER IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA

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Abstract

We cannot evade the fact that Africa is in dire need of sustainable development. Yet as the minutes of the twenty-first century tick away, we seem to be still far from the desirable development results. Many reasons account for this: bad leadership; ethnic conflict; political crisis; corruption; dearth of scientific and technological development; religious crisis and many more. All these reasons are interconnected. How? We cannot talk about sustainable development without a desirable social order. Then how do we achieve the desirable social order that will serve as the necessary condition for development in Africa? This work provides an answer by examining the role of morality in achieving the desired level of social order in Africa. It is our contention that if we internalize certain precepts of morality, some which are universal and some which are culturally based, then it would be easier to provide solutions to our problem in Africa. The state and those in leadership position have the task of providing an environment conducive to the application of moral values that will engender social order, and which can serve as the basis for sustainable development in Africa. And since morality strives at human well-being which presupposes the well-being of the moral agent and the others in society, then the proper appreciation of moral values and their application within the context of the larger society will be a valuable avenue for achieving social order.

The Problem of Social Order in Contemporary Africa

Any rational individual will prefer a society in which there is order as against a society in which there is disorder. This is because it is in a state of social order that an individual can carry out his projects and realize his goals, goals which provide the necessary condition for the attainment of the happy life which Aristotle refers to as the highest good, the *summum bonum*[1]. Africans are not exception in this regard. Although no human society is perfectly insulated against social disorder in its various manifestations, due to certain peculiar traits of human nature, which Hobbes refers to as 'instincts of self-preservation', our experience in Africa depicts a continually retrogressing society where most moral values, necessary for the sustenance of the modern state, have been bastardized and compromised due to a plethora of reasons.

A cursory but critical look at our African society shows that the social order necessary for the anchoring of development is lacking. This can be seen when we look at various areas of human endeavor. Our use of social order in this context must be properly defined. Social order can be taken to mean: first, the arrangement or state of things in the society; second, the proper functioning of societal institutions; and third, political stability. It is in the second and third perspectives that we are emphasizing in this work. In a broad sense, the concept 'social order' is used to refer to the harmonious functioning of different facets of a society such as the political, economic, religious and scientific and technological institutions. It is through the harmonious functioning of these different institutions that there can be development in any human society.[2]

What are some of the underlying factors that have contributed to the social crisis in Africa, which is mired in civil wars, poverty, disease, illiteracy, child labour, corruption, political ineptitude and economic disintegration and disorientation?. The economic, political and religious spheres easily come to mind. Vices such as corruption, bad leadership, election rigging, fraud in public offices, inequitable distribution of national resources and so forth have been the albatross around the neck of African development. On leadership, Kalu focusing attention on Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, notes:

The central problem in Nigeria has been the lack of public leadership

nurtured by the core values of an indigenous elite across the national landscape - political, civil society, cultural, religious, educational and in many instances, family. The absence of public leadership is directly related to the absence of national dialogue on what Nigerian identity should be about and how the different nationalities that were brought together by colonialism should live together productively.[3]

It is instructive to note that various African statesmen and scholars have described the scenario painted above in various ways, even though most African statesmen are also guilty and responsible for the state of Africa's decadence. Robert Mugabe, in his *Daily Times Lecture* (Jan. 1991) has this to say:

Africa is now home to the world's largest number of least developed countries. The continent further boasts of the largest refugee population in the world. Furthermore, it is a theatre of endless conflicts, civil strife and gross human right abuses. Whereas standards of living in other continents have risen over time, in Africa, present standards of living are not better than they were two decades ago. High unemployment, inflation, civil strife, poverty, refugee crisis, desertification, disease, malnutrition - the list is endless - appear to be the only legacy the continent is capable of passing from one generation to the other.[4]

Much as insightful as Mugabe was on the African predicament, he himself seemed to have fallen in the same abuses about a decade later due to the violation of human rights and various repressions against the opposition in his country. The democratic space in Zimbabwe seems to recede on daily basis.

Some scholars have even seen the problem mainly from the lack of moral basis of the leaders to govern the people. For instance, Oladipo[5] claims that lack of legitimacy of government in post-colonial African states has made the government rely solely on force and manipulation or deceit to secure the support and loyalty of the people, which ought not to have been the case. With this scenario, the people are denied the opportunity of freely participating in the determination of the events that affect their lives. The foregoing line of thought is aptly complimented by Udo Etuk[6] when he suggests that there is an urgent need in Africa today to restructure or reform our institutions in such a manner that makes the harmonization

of interests in the various African societies possible. According to Etuk:

> What is required for Africa to develop is more than the acquisition and application of scientific knowledge. Development has an ethical component which Africans could neglect at their own peril.[7]

Perhaps what is meant to be emphasized by Etuk is that sustainable development should not be thought as a mere catch-up through scientific and technological advancement, but more fundamentally, that development should be predicated on human values. Although we can still make an allusion to the problem of ethnicity and class stratification as major causes of underdevelopment and social crisis in Africa, the underlying factor seems to be the loss of our ethical identity in Africa.

The Notion of Moral Values

In any human society, social interaction would not only be difficult but impossible if the people do not have a sense of right and wrong. This sense of right and wrong is important if the individual is to have the good life. In striving towards his own welfare or self-interest, the individual is also aware that the welfare of others is as important as his and therefore must act in such a way that will ensure not only his own well-being but the well-being of the society in which he finds himself.

Human beings cannot just accept the natural world as it is, they need to compliment it with an idea of their own self importance and self preservation, hence the need for morality. Russell put this in a comical manner when he writes:

> The great world as far as we know it from the philosophy of nature, is neither good nor bad, and is not concerned to make us happy or unhappy. All such philosophies spring from self-importance and best corrected by little astronomy.[8]

While we may not join issue with Russell concerning the role of astronomy in correcting such philosophies of good and bad, happy and

unhappy lives, it is true that due to our instinct of self-preservation, space must be given to self-importance since it is when we regard ourselves as such that the goal of self-preservation can be attained. The circularity of our argument notwithstanding, mankind cannot gloss over good and bad conduct as well as happy and unhappy life without putting their own existence in jeopardy. Hence, the need for morality in any human society. Since we live together, a sense of right and wrong, good and bad are germane for the sustenance of society. An action is thus moral if the consequences, either positive or negative, will affect the well-being of others even though actions that threaten the self or agent are also considered immoral. It then bears pointing out following Pettman that:

> Morals are social products, held out of habit and self-interest to be sure, but motivated also by emphatic urges like love, and a sense of what is right and due. Human beings learn to prefer particular ways of relating to each other and standards by which to assess their relationships and to endorse or censure what appear to be sociable or anti-social acts, as part of the general educative process whereby they assimilate expectations of how the world is meant to be.[9]

From our extensive reference to Pettman, we easily discern that morality is born out of the needs of society, to protect interest of members through emphatic urges like love and honesty. In arriving at this situation, education also plays a vital role in the transmission of moral values from one individual to the other and from generations to generations. The ultimate aim would be human survival which depends, not the least, on reciprocal obligations which are situated in certain communitarian values which make this goal possible. So what we call morality itself is embedded in the whole idea of community.

Moral values then encompass those ingredients that would make a moral situation achievable. They would include such values that would not only make self-preservation possible, but also such values that would ensure the preservation of others by enlightened self-interest on the part of various individuals. They include honesty, avoidance of greed, avoidance of lie, trust, keeping of promises when we are not presented with a dilemma, altruism, that is, placing others first, love and obedience. Although the list is inexhaustible and may vary from culture to culture, the importance of this nexus of values lie

in the fact that they help in ensuring human well-being.

Although moral values may vary from culture to culture, there is a sense in which we can talk about the universality of morality. The primary consideration for this is the rationality of man. In this regard, when we say that man is a rational being, we are implying, according to Sogolo, that there are certain things shared in common by mankind, and if these traits such as love, self-reflection, honesty, sympathy and so forth, are absent in any human group, there will be doubt as to whether that group is human at all.[10]

The thrust of our argument concerning the universality of morality is that moral value the world over, in spite of variations in norms or mores impose similar restrictions on individuals in all societies. In other words, the goals of morality are primarily the same. These goals are the ultimate values of life and they are ends in themselves. For example, such goals include human happiness, human survival, human well-being, order and harmonious society.

Furthermore, since moral issues arise when people's interests and well-being conflict (for example in the case of theft, rape or murder) such conflict could only be resolved by maintaining an impartial point of view in these matters. Accordingly, when we are not partial, we act normally the way judges, referees and umpires are supposed to act.[11] An impartial person who does not favour the interest and well-being of the person or group over the interest and well-being of another person or group on the basis of considerations that are irrelevant to the issue at hand would be preferred in any society.

The universality of morality, therefore, presupposes primarily that all human societies have a sense of right and wrong which guides their everyday existence and interaction with one another and not that all societies share the same moral norms even though one cannot rule out the possibility of some moral norms which cut across cultures.

Moral Values and Contemporary African Society

Our use of the phrase "contemporary African society", while not implying that there is a uniformity among various African societies

concerning their approach and reaction to the issues of knowledge, religion, socio-political organization and reality as a whole, is appropriate here in the sense of the universality of moral values and for the fact that most African societies are deeply enmeshed in similar moral disequilibrium that has made purposeful leadership, good governance and development daunting tasks. Let us note also that social, communal and ethical values are intertwined in such a way that one cannot talk about one without the other. This simply underscores the fact that moral values have social origins.

Bewaji poignantly describes social basis of morality thus:

> It is the social milieu in which competition for the scarce resources of the environment takes place. But it is not only the resources of the environmental that are scarce. The human resources of love, patronage, recognition, compassion, companionship, etc are also scarce and require deliberate efforts in both their generation and equitable distribution. Here lies the crux of the moral responsibility of society to its members and to itself. And this fact is represented in numerous ideas in African thought.[12]

The extensive passage from Bewaji has a lot of implications for contemporary Africa in the sense that we in Africa are not only experiencing the dearth of material resources needed for development, we also lack the moral resources to manage the little resources we have due to what Olusegun Oladipo has described as "moral dislocation".[13] The present situation is sharply in contrast to what prevailed in traditional African societies in which brotherly concepts such as Ubuntu flourished. For emphasis sake, let us take a look at the traditional Yoruba moral universe.

Traditional Yoruba society achieved considerable social-political order due to its strict adherence to certain ideals of life based on ethical values shaded with religious overtones. These social ethical values include emphasis on character (*iwa*), opposition to selfishness (*imortaeninika*n), tolerance (*ifarada/amumora*), condemnation of wickedness (*iwabuburu*), truthfulness and rectitude (*Otito/Ododo/Otito inu*), condemnation of stealing (*Ole*), opposition to hypocrisy (*agabagebe*), and covenant keeping (*mimule*). Other social values include sharing, mutual aid, support, co-operation, religious tolerance, interdependence, solidarity, reciprocal obligation, and selflessness.[14]

In the Yoruba moral universe therefore communal well-being was the main focus of an individual's action. Little surprise then that Mbiti asserts:

"I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am". While this statement is not to be seen as depriving the African of his or her personhood and individuality, it underscores the point that there was a deep link between the individual and the community in traditional African societies. The Yoruba individual acts with an unconscious notion of communal interest.[15] It goes without saying that communal interest is lacking in the contemporary relationship between the society and the individual. Let us note that in traditional Yoruba moral Universe, individuals strive to have *iwa* (pleasant character) acceptable to the community, thereby striving to reach the target of an *omoluwabi* (a well-behaved and morally upright person).

One then cannot go too far in linking morality with social order. It is true that social order exists to provide the multifarious needs of man which are necessary for a fulfilled happy life conducive to development. It is also true that social order is a condition in which society is organized to effectively provide for the needs of man. Granted that this is the case, how do we in Africa ensure the desired social order? This is where morality comes in. Interestingly, morality leads to the sustenance of social order and social order can enhance not only the internalization of morality, it can also enhance its application. To provide answer to our myriad of questions, we must consider what has made a sustainable moral order difficult in Africa.

Let us note again that this moral order is predicated on certain values described variously as communal, social and human values. According to Sogolo, human values can be taken to be essentially natural and universal simply because human nature itself is universal. He puts human values thus:

> Human values are intrinsically designed to fulfill man's goal of individual and collective survival. Therefore, the human tendencies to pursue virtue such as peace, care, justice, truthfulness etc are naturally embraced to ensure the well-being and survival of human kind.[16]

The question again is this: what has made the internalization or application of moral or human values difficult in Africa? The answer can strictly be situated within our socio-political and economic sphere. The state of moral values in Africa has been exposed to unfavourable economic

pressure, political competition with its attendant vices such as corruption, violence, ethnic cleansing, injustice in the allocation of natural resources. It would take an angel to be moral in a situation in which survival in the political sphere is not guaranteed and in which the political space devoted to justice, freedom and equality continues to recede on daily basis.

In many of the African nations, especially Nigeria, survival for the ordinary person is becoming extremely difficult. It is an unending competition in the face of deprivation, scarcity and frustration. Individuals then yield easily to the Darwinian imperative of 'survival of the fittest'. In any situation where this maxim operates, the "moral precepts" in such a society would not be ones that encourage the desired level of social order that can aid, promote and sustain development.

The economic policies of most African states are predicated on the capitalist economic ethos, which our leaders, for lack of critical temperament and vision, 'accept hook, line and sinker' without considering the peculiarities of development economies which require certain government assistance in terms of the essential welfare facilities. Such concepts as deregulation, market forces, liberalization, privatization and commercialization are forced on the people when they are not sufficiently prepared for such challenges. And the results are obvious - increased poverty, increased dread, immorality, lack of empathy and loss of solidarity which is expected to be fostered by a society.

On this abrogation of the role of the state in Nigeria, Sogolo opines thus:

> Given the prevalence of poverty, increased tensions, violent and related social disorder, Nigeria is in need of moral rearmament. Traditional African societies thrived on a system of collective values which was severely disorganized by colonialism and its attendant value system essentially defined by extreme individualism and cut-throat competition that are inherent parts of capitalism.[17]

This crisis is not one that can be solved either by social legislation or military coercion, according to Sogolo, but the solution is to be sought through:

> The evolution of an equitable system of distributive justice and the

installation of a social order that guarantees the full expression of all the values endowed in us by virtue of our humanity.[18]

We can then see that morality, in the form of the desired form of moral relationship exhibited through moral values, involves not only the internalization of moral values but the existence of a strong and viable social basis on which these moral values can be nurtured.

Added to our list of the encumbrances to the attainment of moral ideals in contemporary Africa is the problem of urbanization which has led to overpopulation in cities, thereby making individuals to be less concerned about common welfare in their bid to survive in an increasingly unsympathetic urban environment. Furthermore, globalization has brought its own problems. While we are not oblivious to the fact that globalization is a necessary phase of human evolution, which is not bad in itself, we in Africa have made fetish of the globalization trend, thereby to the detriment of certain humanistic African cultural values. On daily basis our youths are fed with violent films, sexual profligacy, language acculturation to the detriment of indigenous language that can promote authenticity and growth. The loss of salient aspects of African languages through globalization has also led to the loss of the cultural values of the people that promote such values as integrity, hard work, honesty, solidarity and so forth. What can we then do to reverse this trend?

Moral Values as the Basis for Social Order

We cannot forget Socrates so soon, for according to him, "the unexamined life is not worth living". Granted this we must re-examine our moral pedigrees from the individual and state perspectives if we are to ensure the desired level of social order that will promote development in Africa. Morality presupposes human well-being both at the societal and individual levels. If this is the case, moral values are not ends in themselves as such, but tools which should be tailored towards arriving at our goals Let us make a disclaimer at this juncture. It is not that Africans do not understand what it means to be moral and what moral values are all about. It is rather that, that in spite of their knowledge of morality, the state of

things is not as desirable as it ought to be. The non-application and non-internalization of these moral values have been due largely to the inaction of the states in Africa that have foisted undue political and economic pressures on the individuals, who then have no choice but to resort to unethical means of attaining livelihood and survival.

Furthermore, we cannot overlook the role of the government and state in promoting social order which will make the proper application of moral values possible. Government must derive its legitimacy through the people, as opposed to the current situation, where government derives power through the military coups, kangaroo elections and one party dictatorships, that have become the trademarks of most African states. This is buttressed by the fact that leadership successions through democratic process have become so difficult that most African leaders are replaced in office through coup d'etats or sudden deaths.

In a similar vein, government economic policies should coup d' états allow the unfettered development of the weakest individual in society. This seems to be the major pre-occupation of Rawls in his A *Theory of Justice*, where he argued that the state has the obligation to protect the interest and welfare of the less well-off in society.[19] The essence of the foregoing is that since we cannot reverse the movement of capitalism in most African states, with some of its perceived threat to economic dependent ones, government can continue to foster such measures that will make it possible for the ordinary citizens to enjoy the benefits of life. Multinational corporations who are seen as the agents of development in this epoch of globalization and privatization should do more in their host communities to alleviate the sufferings of the people. It is when government and multinational corporations embark on such positive gestures that life can become meaningful and moral for majority of the populace.

Finally, the solution to our moral problem and social order would then require readjustments in our attitude towards wealth, democratic values such as justice and freedom, and governance and the necessary educational orientation, which is not predicated on the fetish of material development which governments in Africa tend to encourage. Rather, it should be based more fundamentally on educational orientation, both at formal and informal levels, that develops human mind to strive for excellence, integrity, justice and happy life based on reciprocal obligation, not only among individuals

but also between the state and its citizens. This, we think, is our major challenge in Africa in the twenty-first century.

ENDNOTES

[1] See, R. Mckeon (ed.), *Introduction to Aristotle* (New York: The Modern Library, 1947).

[2] Olatunji A. Oyeshile, "Communal Values, Cultural Identity and the Challenge of Development in Contemporary Africa", *Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 3, (Fall 2004), p.295.

[3] Kelechi A. Kalu, "Echoes of Instability: Implications for state, society and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria", *The Constitution*, vol. 5, No. 1 (March 2005), p.3.

[4] Robert Mugabe, "Africa in the New World Order: Europe 1992 and Beyond", a *Daily Times* (Nigeria) Special Lecture delivered on Jan. 9, 1991, and published in *Daily Times* (Jan. 10, 1991), p.22.

[5] Olusegun Oladipo, "Introduction" in O. Oladipo (ed.), *Remaking Africa: Challenges of the Twenty-first Century* (Ibadan: Hope publications, 1998), pp.8 - 12.

[6] Udo Etuk, 'Ethical Conditions of Development in Twenty-first Century Africa" in O. Oladipo (ed.) *Remaking Africa: Challenges of the Twenty-first Century* (Ibadan: Hope publications, 1998), pp.276-291.

[7] Olusegun Oladipo, "Introduction", p.12.

[8] Bertrand Russell, "What I believe" in *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961), p.371.

[9] R. Pettman, 'Moral Claims in World Politics", in R. Pettman (ed.), *Moral Claims in World Affairs*, (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p.19.

[10] G.S. Sogolo, *Foundations of African Philosophy: A Definitive Analysis of Conceptual Issues in African Thought* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1993) p.15.

[11] E. Barcalow, *Moral Philosophy: Theory and Issues* (California: Wadsworth pub. Com, 1994), p.15.

[12] John A.I. Bewaji, "Ethics and Morality in Yoruba Culture" in Kwasi Wiredu (ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy* (UK & USA: Blackwell publishing Ltd., 2004), p.397.

[13] See Olusegun Oladipo (ed.) *Remaking Africa*.

[14] Olatunji A. Oyeshile, "Traditional Yoruba Social-Ethical values and Governance in Modern Africa", *Philosophia Africana: Analysis of Philosophy and Issues in Africa and the Black Diaspora*, vol. 6, No. 2 (August 2003) p.83.

[15] *Ibid.*, pp.83-84.

[16] Godwin Sogolo, 'Philosophy, Human values and Social Order', A keynote Address presented at the 30th Anniversary Celebration of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, (16th Sept. 2004), p.3.

[17] *Ibid.*, p.17.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).