Changing Values in Contemporary Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Every society is unique in its own respect. This uniqueness derives from the peculiarity of the accepted rules of behaviour in that society. The nature and source of values are appraised as moral precepts that are embedded in the culture of any society. Like the society and culture, values are susceptible to change. Some cultural values in the Nigerian society had undergone sea change as a result of the influence of foreign cultures. However, certain core values have remained unaffected by this wind of change. This article adopts a pragmatic approach in exploring the extent to which change in values in the Nigerian society has occurred. A distinction of the traditional African and Nigerian value system was made from the values in contemporary Nigeria. The various processes of social change are identified as being responsible for the difference between traditional values and changing values in contemporary Nigeria. The paper is organized under four sub-headings: introduction, comparative African values, changing values in contemporary Nigeria and conclusion.

Keywords: Changing values, culture, contemporary Nigeria, norms, cultural patterns and behaviour

INTRODUCTION

All societies whether traditional or modern has evolved, learned and shared guidelines for behaviour by its members. These guidelines are so internalized that they become pervasive. Cultural behaviour pervades all parts of people's life. Aseka (2010) posits that African minds are products of unique "cultural edifices" and "cultural streams" that arose from environmental conditioning and long standing cultural traditions. "Within the African cultural stream, are psychological and moral characteristics pertaining to African identity, personality and dignity." Guidelines to behaviour in society are formal and informal. Henslin (2008:48) opines that every group has "expectations, or rules of behaviour, that reflect and enforce values." Sociologists refer to it as norms. When formal it is translated into law with legal sanctions such as the bill on anti-terrorism. The informal norm is either strictly enforced if it is a core value or not strictly enforced. Haralambos & Holborn (2004: ix) illustrate that in all societies "there are norms governing dress. Members of society generally share norms which define acceptable male and female apparel and appropriate dress for different age groups . . . Norms of dress provide guidelines on what to wear on particular occasions." Schaefer; 2005, Henslin; 2008 and others share the same view. Basically, norms attract punishment for deviance and reward for conformity.

Norms reflect a society's values which are learned from the culture. These three concepts; culture, norms and values are interrelated. What a society considers worthwhile is determined by its set standard of learned and shared behaviour. Culture (learned and shared behaviour) has values (ideas and beliefs) that are guided by set standards. Values have been conceptualized by many scholars. Kornblum (1994:104) define values as "socially shared ideas about what is right." This is an over simplified definition that stresses its positive

aspect. He neglects the shared ideas about what is wrong. Henslin (2008:48) considers values as "the standards by which people define what is desirable or undesirable, good or bad, beautiful or ugly." He explains that values are the bases that guide our preferences, choices and show what we consider important. Schaefer (2005:67) regards cultural values as "these collective conceptions of what is considered good, desirable, and proper – or bad, undesirable, and improper – in a culture."

Values are culture-related and dependent. Schaefer recognizes the existence of values in the context of culture. Although it is a conception held generally yet, it is not uniformly shared. Values influence the behaviour of people within a particular social environment. It serves as a condition or yardstick for assessing human behaviour. Calhoun, Light & Keller (1997:93) equally view values as "deeply held criteria for judging what is good or bad, desirable or undesirable, beautiful or ugly." This definition highlights the distinctive quality of a value system. Values are qualitative standards of behaviour. Haralambos & Holborn (2004: x) view are similar to the one expressed earlier. "A value is a belief that something is good and desirable. It defines what is important, worthwhile and worth-striving for." This definition supports the functionalist view that society is integrated by value-consensus, co-operation, harmony and order are ensured in the society. Ifeanacho (2010:152) succinctly adds that "the value system in any society states in normative terms the premium placed over things, modes of reasoning and behavioural patterns." Values go beyond all situations and affect what people do.

Like most aspects of culture, the value system is non-material. Compared to culture and norm, it varies according to society over time. Values are important in modulating social behaviour. However, they do not have the exclusive preserve for maintaining social order. Certain social forces attenuate the perception and importance attached to the value system. Some events in the Nigerian society had modified cultural traits and values. Colonialism, urbanization and modernization stand out. African traditional values have undergone changes thus affecting social relationships and behaviour. Changing values affect the ideological bases of society.

Comparative African Values

Traditional African societies were controlled by norms whose enforcement (sanctions) worked to maintain order in society. Aseka (2010) attests that "African communities are linked by shared values that are fundamental features of African identity and culture." African societies share fundamental values that guide day-to-day life. These values and norms of communal living were subordinated by colonialism. Blake (2010) examines traditional African values as "a composite set of principles and to extent knowledge and beliefs that are held in high esteem embedded in African societies, and that are deemed worthy of being regarded as the guidelines for human behaviour in interpersonal, group and inter-group communications and relationships." Values are an integral part of African societies. Social relationships were determined by specific values guiding behaviour. For instance, traditional African societies believe in the sacredness of life. Human life belongs to the maker therefore, should not be taken away. There are exceptions to this value such as in war and rituals. Most of these values have been affected by change. In this wise, Gyekye (1996:174) as cited by Lassiter insists there are many:

> *Cultural values and practices of traditional Africa (that) can be considered positive features of the culture and can be accommodated in the scheme of African modernity, even if they must undergo some refinement and pruning to become fully*

> *harmonious with the spirit of modern culture and to function … satisfactorily within that culture.*

Modernization has greatly impacted on the value system. As a result, deviance from these standards is no longer sanctioned.

Ali Mazrui makes a case against poor developmental progress and mediocrity in the African continent. He blames it on the relegation of African values. Also, there is the inability of elites to harness the potentials of western education and African values for optimal performance. Ali (2006) decries how "African elites failed to match their western education with their African values in both their intellectual development and continent's progress." He identifies the African university as a vehicle of western influence on African culture. Lack of progress in the continent is linked to the influence of western values. He uses Japan's technological progress as a parameter for measuring the African continent.

The institution of marriage was guided by certain values in the traditional African society. Marriage was defined as a union between a man and one or more women but foreign influence has drastically reduced the adoption of polygamous relationships. On the other hand, the conceptualization of marriage as a union between two people either of same or opposite sex have been greatly challenged by the predominant African value system. Change in this core African value had met with strong resistance in many African nations. Efforts to change deep-seated values in Nigeria had aroused stiff oppositions. For instance, the Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion in 2003 openly condemned the consecration of a gay bishop in the United States of America. Consequently, they severed relationship with any diocese that supported the idea (The Eucharist, 2010). In a similar vein, the upper house of legislature in 2011 initiated a bill against same-sex marriage or relationship in Nigeria. Also, killing of an unborn fetus is prohibited in the Nigerian society. Calls for the legalization of abortion by the government have come under attack by individuals and religious organizations.

Change in values is a 'product of value generation and diffusion.' A comparative analysis of the 21st and 19th century Nigerian societies would show how much it has changed. Rochon (1998:21) highlights that "changing such values does not mean merely adapting them to altered social conditions but fundamentally transforming the basic categories of thought and perception that make people think in a different way." Diffusion of cultural patterns exerts a form of social influence on people. Contrariwise, Abramson's theory of value change and Inglehart's thesis on intergeneration trend toward post materialism argue that "change comes about predominantly through generational replacement and not by diffusion" (Abramson & Inglehart, 1995). Their proposition that the shift from materialist to post materialist values should occur in any country that moves from conditions of economic insecurity to relative security does not hold water in Nigeria and many African countries. Much emphasis is placed on the economic implications of value change leading to a total neglect of the cultural implication – the perception of ideas.

Values are not peculiar to culture alone. They exist in subcultures and countercultures. Schaefer (2005:69) states that a subculture "is a segment of society that shares as distinctive pattern of mores, folkways, and values that differ from the pattern of the larger society." It is a culture within the larger culture. For instance, a youth subculture can develop among youths who share styles in common which distinguish them from the larger society. Haralambos & Holborn (2004:801) remark that "youth cultures create their own distinctive style: for example, by choosing a style of dress and listening to a particular type of music." The wearing of hipsters with half cut tops is prevalent among Nigerian youths. Similarly, Henslin

(2008:51) adds that subcultures are "the values and related behaviours of a group that distinguish its members from the larger culture; a world within a world." Subcultures provide a common identity to its members. Values, different world view, interests are some of the distinctive features of subcultures.

An on-line study "African Cultural Values" outlines eight African values. The value of sense of community identifies an African by association with his family, kindred, lineage, hamlet, village and community. They have an emphasis on community rather than the individual. The village square is the point of contact for all members. This form of cultural value gives the individual an identity. The association formed by this value is referred to as *gemeinschaft* by Ferdinand Tonnies. The community offers the individual a sense of belonging and security. Property ownership is communal. Sense of community has been affected by change. Communal orientation is now dominated by individual orientation. Similarly, the society attaches more importance to achievement of status as against ascription.

Other African cultural values include the sacredness of life, good human relations, hospitality, honesty, friendliness, morality, time, the sacred and religion, respect for elders and authority and common language and proverbs. Relationship with one another was guided by these values. Rendering help to persons in need was encouraged without expecting any form of reward. Taking good care of visitors and strangers is a striking feature of the African culture. It is expected that people should be hospitable to visitors and strangers alike as no one knows the compound of his in-laws. It was alleged that in some African societies like the ancient Tiv culture (an ethnic group in North central part of Nigeria), they showed affection to their male visitors by asking their wives to keep them warm at night. This aspect of the culture has been jettisoned. The African society places premium on the mutual respect and regard for each other's life. It was also abominable to spill blood unless during the period of war. African's prize life above every other thing. The land and certain deities were regarded as sacred. Libations and prayers were made to them for human protection and property, long life, favourable weather conditions, peace, prosperity and bounty harvest. Some of these values have been mediated by change in contemporary African societies.

Language as a vehicle of communication remains a constituent part of the African culture. The colonization of Africa divided it into different languages. As a result, the indigenous languages were relegated to the background as second language. The lingua franca of most African nations remains the colonialists' language with the exception of Ethiopia that was not colonized. In Nigeria, the three hundred and eighty nine (389) ethnic nationalities have their unique languages and dialects. In the past, learning and speaking of these indigenous languages was de-emphasized by governments and individuals. Most parents prefer to teach their children English language to the detriment of their mother tongue. There is now a retreat back to the roots. Conversely, time or modernization had not been able to vilify the essence of proverbs and adages. Their usage signifies proficiency and the mastery of the language. Literally, proverbs are described as the oil with which the Igbos eats words. They remain an intrinsic nature of the African culture which is indispensable.

Changing Values in Contemporary Nigeria

Ifeanacho (2010:152) identifies materialism as "one enduring Nigerian value." The quest for accumulation of wealth is responsible for the high rate of corruption in Nigeria. Capitalism and flexible accumulation of wealth has influenced the age-long contentment for wealth. People acquire wealth enough for their lifetime, their children, grand children and great grand children. Materialism gives rise to "conspicuous consumption" - an expensive lifestyle

common with the upper class in society. Schaefer (2005:205) reiterates that those at the top of the social hierarchy:

> *Typically convert part of their wealth into 'conspicuous consumption', purchasing more automobiles than they can reasonably use and build houses with more rooms than they can possibly occupy. Or they may engage in 'conspicuous leisure', jetting to a remote destination and staying just long enough to have dinner or view a sunset over some historic locale.*

Nigeria does not manufacture cars but the most expensive and flashy cars are owned by Nigerians. This class of people place order from foreign nations for everything they need. They hold their weddings in five-star hotels and go for honeymoon abroad. The social structure of the Nigerian society is negatively impacted upon.

Corruption is a negative value that militates against the development of the Nigerian society. The nation has not lived up to its expectation as the giant of Africa. There is a disconnection between leadership, the lead and the positive values and attitudes consistent with national goals. Successive governments had made efforts at fighting corruption in Nigeria. These attempts have been hampered by poor execution. Notable of these efforts is the 'War Against Indiscipline' (WAI) programme of the Buhari/Idiagbon regime (December 1983 – August 1985). This programme sought to re-orientate, inculcate and compel Nigerians to behave in ways consistent with established norms. In 2003, the Obasanjo administration established anti-graft agencies in the fight against corruption. They are Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and Independent and Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC). The National Orientation Agency is also a federal government parastatal charged with the function of teaching and enlightening the populace on the national goals and aspirations.

> *Most of the churches preach prosperity and emphasize giving to God. Many lecturers have perfected graft practices that enable them extort money from students. The Nigerian Police have so institutionalized 'Egunje' (collection of money from members of the civil society, drivers in particular), that it has become impossible to eradicate (Ifeanacho, 2010:153).*

This greed for money and material things has worsened the social ills in society. Everybody wants to get rich without any useful means of getting income. Armed robbery, kidnapping and militancy are the order of the day. Sophisticated weapons are used to disarm the security and facilitate loot. A new dimension of the get-rich syndrome is in the use of information technology to defraud people. Cybercrime is an institutionalized crime involving different age groups mostly youth. The get-rich syndrome has further been entrenched into the social system by the quest for titles. The more titles you have, the more you command respect in society. Chieftaincy titles, religious titles and even academic titles show one's class. The effect of materialism on the educational sector erodes the standard enshrined in education. Malpractices in examination are encouraged. Subsequently, mediocrity as against merit is institutionalized. Materialism affects people's judgment and belief of what is morally right or wrong. The dignity in labour, hard work, chastity, respect for human life, etc has been altered over time. Ifeanacho (2010) observes that "materialism contrasts severely with the values which date back to traditional Nigerian society. Labour was not paid but reciprocated. The family provided social welfare for all members. The Nigerian was his brother's keeper."

Such values as chastity and retainment of virginity before marriage are still upheld by religious organizations. Values regarding virginity and chastity are changing as a result of diffusion of lifestyles. Virginity is a mark of purity and honour to a girl and the family; a criterion for getting married. This was a striking feature of traditional social values in Africa.

Africans believed that "the blood of virginity is the symbol that life has been preserved, that the spring of life has not already been flowing wastefully, and that both the girl and her relatives have preserved the sanctity of human reproduction" (Mbiti quoted in emeka.at/african_cultural_values). In the traditional Igbo society, when a virgin was given out in marriage, a white cloth was usually spread on the bed where she would sleep with the husband on the first night. It was expected that during sexual intercourse the hymen will break resulting in the dropping of blood on the white cloth. The rationale behind this was to confirm that the bride was actually a virgin. This traditional value of chastity is also upheld by Christianity and Islam. "Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled" (Hebrews 13:4). Acculturation changes people's perception and acceptance of the traditional values. Virginity is de-emphasized and its loss necessary for ensuring better sexual performance in the girl. Thus, marital and extra-marital relations are affected. Decadence in moral is an obvious consequence of this change in value.

Similarly, prostitution, pre-marital sex, unwanted pregnancy, abortion, health hazards, and death are the aftermath. Increased incidence of separation and divorce are being observed within the country. Perhaps, the unprecedented rise in the cases of people infected with the dreaded Human Immuno Virus ((HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) are issues of global concern. In the same vein, pharmaceutical companies make profits from the manufacture of contraceptive devices to foster this new value of expressing oneself. With the renewed call by non-governmental organizations and stakeholders in the health industry for abstinence from sex, more changes are expected in contemporary Nigeria. May be, the notion that the sexual organs of the body are resources which can be used to get what is needed could change.

On the other hand, traditional African societies relied heavily on the wisdom and authority of parents to take decisions for their children. Marriage was arranged, contracted and consummated by a father or uncle on behalf of the son. The girl to be married was the choice of the parents and not the man. Child marriage was preferred. Polygyny was predominant hence the saying that "the African man is polygamous in nature." These and more have changed over time. Beck and Beck cited in Haralambos & Holborn (2004:531) stress that:

> *It is no longer possible to pronounce in some binding way what family, marriage, parenthood, sexuality or love mean, what they should or could be: rather these vary in substance, norms and morality from individual and from relationship to relationship. The answers to the questions above must be worked out, negotiated, arranged and justified in all details of how, what, why or why not, even if this might unleash the conflicts and devils that lie slumbering among the details and were assumed to be tamed … love is becoming a blank that lovers must fill in themselves.*

In contemporary Nigerian society, the value of church wedding has been imbibed. Marriage is now arranged, contracted and consummated by a man and girl with the knowledge of both parents. Imposed marriages have reduced. People get married according to native law and custom, register it at the court registry and are solemnized in the church/mosque. Young people are allowed to take decisions in matters that affect their lives. The role of the parents is to pray advice and make useful suggestions to the children. However, there are increasing cases of divorce in the Nigerian society. The traditional authority of parents, elders and relatives has been impinged upon by change.

The traditional African family fulfilled the biblical injunction in Genesis 1:28b "be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." The society

favoured high number of children and large family over small family size. Children as free gifts of nature were believed to be catered for by God. Changing values encourage couples to adopt suitable birth control and family planning measures. Modernization and harsh economic realities contribute to the adoption of small family sizes in Nigeria. Couples take advantage of the opportunities offered by family planning for proper child spacing, good health of the mother and child, enough time to plan and enjoy marital life.

"Dressing pattern in Nigeria has radically changed especially at the Southern parts because of education. Traditionally, it was anti-Nigerian for women to wear trousers or long pants in the past" (Iffih, 1998:102). This observation about changes in dressing has equally changed. Wearing of long pants and trousers by females is not peculiar to the south east geo-political zone of the country but the larger Nigerian society. Muslim girls do wear trousers covered with long gowns. In the Christian folk, opinion is divided and many still cling to Deuteronomy 22 verse 5: "the woman shall not wear that which pertains unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment; for all that do so are an abomination unto the Lord your God." This issue has generated controversies and debate between members of different religious denominations in Nigeria. That notwithstanding, contemporary fashion negates the traditional and religious orientation of dressing. Although it has been argued that traditional African societies in pre-modern times had no formal dressing. The dress culture we have (trousers, shirts, suits, skirts) are all borrowed culture from the west. Even the traditional dress codes did not exist in the form they are but are creations of colonial influence. Distinguishing that which pertains to man is basically about the style and not the type of cloth. In Igbo society, men and women tie wrapper but the difference is in the style. In Onitsha, the traditional attire for men of repute is blouse worn over skirt or wrapper at knee length (Ayalogu, 2011: personal communication).

CONCLUSION

Any society that abandons its values and culture is tending towards extinction. Current fashion trend in Nigeria tend towards global influence. More worrisome is the trend of exposing pubic parts (erogenous zones) of the body in the name of fashion. It is pertinent to note that in some African cultures, dancers sometimes use costumes that expose certain vital parts of the body while performing. The case of the Zulu girls' rites of passage to maturity as evidenced in one of the late Brenda Fassie's musical video is a good instance. Young girls who were to be initiated to womanhood danced with bare breasts. Schaefer (2005:66) believes that "standards of proper dress are a common example of informal norms." To curb the excesses of students fashion on campus, some Nigerian universities outlawed indecent dressing on their campuses. Rather than view clothing as having a strong relationship with culture and morals it has become a mark of identity and modernization. Robertson (1987:62) explains that "a man who walks down a street wearing nothing on the upper half of his body is violating a folkway; a man who walks down the street wearing nothing on the lower half of his body violating one of our most important mores, the requirement that people cover their genitals and buttocks in public." Dressing in contemporary Nigerian society shows an expression of the individual in part and largely the subculture as opposed to the ideals of the mainstream culture.

Deep shifts in values affect the role of parents in the family. As a result of harsh economic conditions most Nigerian women neglect their roles as mother for money. The strong personal ties in the family are being altered. The family role in socialization of the child is adversely affected. Business and work impinge on the deeply shared values and beliefs which weld the family together. Work denies parents and children the time to stay together and

understand each other. Care and upbringing of children is left in the hands of teachers and care-givers. Consequently, parents can no longer give good accounts of their children. The gap so created is filled with the indulgence in social vices. According to the Bible (King James Version), "train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6).

Virtually every aspect of the Nigerian value system has been affected by change. Change is constant and sometime results in resistance. To the traditional folks and conservatives changing values are bad, improper and undesirable whereas the liberalists view value change as good, progressive therefore, desirable. The growing influence and adoption of some western values has become a source of concern to many Nigerians. If the building blocks of the society fall apart what shall be the fate of the society? The issue of keeping the aged in the old peoples' home, violence, suicide bombing, etc are some of those aspects of the value system that are seriously threatened. However, the perception and notion of 'African time' by Nigerians should be jettisoned as it undermines the culture of punctuality in the country. It is equally imperative that Nigerians understand and respect the diversity in the cultures and religious beliefs of one another. For now, the direction of value change cannot be determined. The future will unfold the course.

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