REASSESSING AND EVALUATING THE METHODS OF COMMUNICATING ETHICAL VALUES IN AFRICA

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Abstract

This paper reassessed and evaluate the methods of inculcating ethical and moral values in Africa. Hitherto, traditional African society had always passed on ethical and moral values to the next generation through story-telling, proverbs, moonlight play and imitation. However, with the incursion of Western views and philosophies, contemporary African society has continued to be inundated with complex ethical and moral principles alien to her culture and cherished values. Using descriptive phenomenology, the work found out that, the values of respect for elders, chastity, truth-telling, obedience, innocence have been replaced with excessive watching of television, social media engagement, cultures of nakedness, quick wealth syndrome, drug addiction, premarital sex and all forms of crimes witnessed among young Africans. Thus, African society is constantly losing most of its ethical values and principles. The research recommends the use of traditional methods of inculcating moral values; while not neglecting the positive impacts of modern methods. The religious and traditional leaders, family heads and teachers at all levels should all work to ensure that moral sanity is restored to Africa.

Keywords: Ethics, Morality, Values, Culture, Tradition, African Society.

Introduction

The importance of ethical and moral values and principles to a society cannot be over-emphasized. No society can thrive if the values that define its existence and make it strong are not stable and effectively communicated. Societies are built on values and without them, there will be chaos everywhere, as people will not know their right from their left, in terms of behaviour expected of them. Unfortunately, the moral views of many Western societies have become that of 'relativism', an ethical theory that supports no absolute truth or validity in any point of view; rather points of view have relative, subjective values according to differences in perception and consideration (Porter, 1988). This view has permeated African societies as well.

The degree of moral degeneration witnessed on a daily basis in Africa has reached an alarming level. African culture and religious practices, through which moral values and principles are communicated to the younger generation have been negatively influenced

by views and values alien to it. Thus eroding the cherished values that have distinguished her from other climes ever since.

Methods of communicating ethical and moral values go a long way to determining how these values are effectively appropriated by the younger generation. In traditional African society, there was no formal means of passing on ethical principles as we have in the contemporary time. There were no schools where people were taught how to live, interact, or learn the dos and don'ts of society. Ethical principles are more or less communicated informally daily as people interact in the community and as the younger ones watch the activities and behaviours of the elderly ones. Furthermore, proverbs, myths, fables, and folktales are equally means through which religious and ethical principles are passed on. Other ones include oral traditions, play, storytelling and songs, apprenticeship and imitation (Nwankwo, 2018).

On the other hand, a formal mode of communicating moral values has emerged with the invasion of schools and modern technology. Thus, in contemporary African society, young adults and children are taught moral and ethical values in schools. Different stages of learning have enshrined moral teachings in their curriculum. The use of technology can also be instrumental in inculcating moral values. However, it comes with its shortfalls. The influence of technological given has negatively affected the moral upbringing of children in the society. This is because, using technologies such as television, mobile phones and social media apps, many young Africans have rather learned immoral acts when not properly supervised by adults.

The major aim of this research is to re-examine the most effective method of communicating ethical values in African society. Through descriptive phenomenology and the use of secondary sources, the work underscored the importance of engaging traditional methods of inculcating moral principles in contemporary society and not neglecting the positive impacts of modern means. It recommended that Africans should get back to their root in educating children and young ones on the moral values that had sustained the society such as folktales, stories, proverbs and traditional songs among others.

Delineating The Key Concepts: Ethics, Morality and Values

Ethics relates to the theoretical study of right and wrong, good and bad, and acceptable and unacceptable behaviours of a given society (Kunhiyop, 2008). Ekennia (2003, p.3) noted that "it is that branch of philosophy that studies the principles of right and wrong in human behaviour." The criteria of knowing whether an action or judgement is right or wrong, morally good or morally bad is provided by ethics. It is the science of morality.

Morality, etymologically derives from the Latin word *'mos'* meaning custom or usage; on the other hand, is the actual behaviour. It is the living out of what one believes to be right and good (McClendon, 2002). Morality, according to Okere (2006, p.38) is "that quality

of human life by which it can be described as good or bad, good in the sense that it must be done, or bad or evil in the sense that it must be avoided." Iroegbu and Echekwube (2005, p.38), understood 'morality' to mean "the conventionally approved rules of behaviour in the society. Morality is a spiritual dimension of human action. It is that which distinguishes humans from animals. While humans have morality, animals don't."

Values, according to Obaje (2018, p.113), "pertain to a desirable end, states or mode of conduct that guide the selection and evaluation of people, events and behaviour." Values are points of reference and are the primary determinants of social behaviour. Furthermore, Kunhiyop (2008, p.5) noted that values, "are the underlying fundamental beliefs and assumption that determine behaviour." Nwankwo (2018) citing Obi (2014, p.250), understood the value to mean, "that which could be regarded as "the moral or professional standards of behaviour, principles, morality that we can hold, respect, cherish and adopt." In other words, our choices are a reflection of our values which could restore social order. Examples include: respect for elders, humility, punctuality, obedience, discipline and justice among others. In the next sub-heading, the research will consider the few ethical and moral values cherished in African society.

Ethical and Moral Values In Africa

African societies are known to have a strong regard for ethics and moral values. Some of the values cherished in Africa include: truthfulness, innocence and justice, a sense of respect for elders and authorities, obedience, honesty and sincerity.

Truthfulness

Iroegbu and Echekwube (2005) defined 'truth' as life. This assertion corresponds with the understanding of Obi (2013) that, "truth is life and truth is bitter. Furthermore, truth heals, liberates, and removes prejudices and fear" (p.9). Truth in general is conformity between thought and thing. If our thought is conformed to things as they are, we have logical truth, the opposite of which is error.

African philosophy affirms "like father like son, like mother like daughter." Each parent makes a very honest effort to train their children to be truthful, just and fair, by not showing any preferential treatment to anyone. Tell them a story that will empower them to speak the truth and be honest at all times. Great reward is always awarded at such times and events when one is bold enough to speak the truth in the house (Obi, 2013).

Truth-being and truth-telling is a test of life and morality. This virtue needs to be inculcated into the children through their parents and elderly ones in the family. Children have the right to know and be nourished by their parents through the value of truthfulness (Nwankwo, 2018).

The family is the only significant social institution charged with the responsibility of transforming a biological organism into a human being, having taught him/her to speak

and play out many social roles (Iwuchukwu, 2008). The parents in the family are responsible for creating an enabling environment where truth and honesty reign, to enable African children to be nurtured in such a manner.

Innocence and Justice

Innocence means keeping one's hand clean. It is a mark of social honour and religious piety; while justice means judging righteously. Societal cohesion rested on justice and any injustice and or grave unfairness destroyed confidence and commonality both in the family and the larger community (Nwankwo, 2018).

There were natural communal roles of customary law in that if man failed to render justice, the gods would render it. All therefore took care to ensure that each person received his or her due. To inculcate this value into the children, the parents should achieve this by punishment and reward. A child who always speaks the truth and is hardworking should always be rewarded. When this is done on a monthly or annual basis, children are to know why such rewards or prizes are given or awarded (Nwankwo, 2018).

Sense of Respect for Elders and Authority

Iroegbu and Echekwube (2005, p.22) noted that "respect for elders, seniors and officials, was a pre-eminently valued social phenomenon." This value has its roots in the family and especially, the larger society. Even the ordinary politeness of greeting these elders was so important as to constitute one of the tests of goodness of character. A child who did not spontaneously greet his seniors was judged to be bad-mannered.

In the words of Conton (1966, p.21), "Africans generally have a deep and ingrained respect for old age, even when we can find nothing to admire in an old man, we will not easily forget that his grey hairs have earned him right to courtesy and politeness." The elders are respected for many reasons in Africa. They are believed to be the teachers and directors of the young. The words of elders are words of wisdom.

These and other moral, social and religious virtues were determinants of the levels of formation, good sense and education, one has acquired in one's community and family. The child was trained to be conscious of the laws, taboos and sanctions of the land. He was made to observe them meticulously.

Obedience, Honesty and Sincerity

Children are taught to obey first and foremost God and, secondly their parents and the constituted authority. This is one of the cardinal virtues cherished in African society. Obi (2013, p.9) said, "One should obey his parents always unless when their command leads to sin. For instance, if they (parents) command the child to steal, commit abortion, to adore idols, to mention but a few." Whatever is against God's law, the Nigerian constitution, any constitutional authority and African custom must not be complied with.

Honesty, especially when entrusted with a position to represent the people and the community is paramount in African traditional setting. Honesty and sincerity were rigorously demanded in both children and mature adults. Both were together the test of inner and outer integrity.

Traditional Methods of Communicating Ethical and Moral Values in Africa

Under this sub-heading, the work will examine a few of the various methods of communicating ethical values in Africa, like: oral traditions, story-telling, songs, moonlight play, imitation and apprenticeship.

Oral Traditions

Oral tradition according to Degh (1994, p.31) "referred to as the transmission of cultural material through vocal utterance, was long held to be a key descriptor of folklore." Idowu (1973, 85), emphasized that "these oral traditions constitute the scriptures as well as the behaviours of African traditional religion." No one would be able to understand what African religion, culture and morality entail if not what is taught through the vehicle of oral tradition.

They are messages that are transmitted orally from one generation to another. The messages may be passed down through speech or song and may take the form of folktales and fables, epic histories and narrations, proverbs or sayings, and songs. Oral traditions make it possible for a society to pass knowledge across generations without writing. They help people make sense of the world and are used to teach children and adults about important aspects of their culture. Through oral tradition, Africans communicate both religious and moral values and principles to their children and adults (Nwankwo, 2018).

Oral tradition guides social and human morals, giving people a sense of place and purpose. There is always a lesson or a value to instil, and the transmission of wisdom to children is a community responsibility. Parents, grandparents, elderly people and relatives take part in the process of passing down knowledge of culture and history.

Storytelling and Songs

Storytelling and songs abound in African life and literature. It could be referred to as folk stories. Storytelling is related to traditions; because it is through storytelling (whether it is folklore or fables) that oral tradition is concretized. Storytelling is an important shared moment and event with people sitting together, listening and even participating in accounts of past deeds, beliefs, taboos, and myths of the people.

Nwala (1985, p.73) observed that "from the stories, an insight into several basic beliefs of the people is gained." These stories equally play a didactic role. They are used to instruct while amusing at the same time. Generally, the stories have moral overtones, stressing one virtue or the other. They stress the contents of traditional custom and hence are

important means of ensuring that culture is passed on and upheld from one generation to another."

Obi (2014), noted the importance of songs and stories through which characters of African children are moulded. He said that "at early childhood, each child is exposed to a variety of valued songs, stories, proverbs and sayings, directed by the mother or the aunt and conveyed at the fireplace or after the evening meals, which aim at reducing the conflicts of immorality or indiscipline" (p.42). The songs, stories, proverbs and sayings contain simple but clear messages of dignity and respect as well as embodied moral teachings. These stories and songs which teach religious and ethical principles to the people (mainly children and youths) are most especially, during the moonlight plays and concerts in Africa.

The Moonlight Play
Igwe (2013) expounded the practice of moonlight play in certain African communities. He accentuated that, "before the age of electricity in African communities, the moon electrified the night skies over small towns and villages." At night time, when there was a full moon, it was a lovely sight to behold. The children were gathered together in the courtyard around the mothers, fathers, and other family elders. The children were introduced to all sorts of plays, jokes, myths, legends, customs, and traditions. Wisdom and morals were inculcated in them; and the children learned acceptable norms through storytelling, dances and choreography.

Other activities during the moonlight play include solving riddles and puzzles, hide-and-seek games, action songs, tongue twisters and whistling, and breath control games. Unfortunately, with the arrival of radio, television and recently computer and mobile phones and other internet facilities, some of these games, plays and songs have gone into extinction (Nwankwo, 2018).

Apprenticeship and Imitation
Ethical principles and values are communicated through another vehicle known as apprenticeship and imitation. These are traditional means through which people learn how to behave or act by simply attaching themselves to others or by way of imitating others. Through this apprenticeship and imitation, younger people and children are entrenched in a set of customs, norms and traditions that are shared in the community.

Historically, Africans hardly had any form of formal training in terms of communicating ethical principles. There were no schools or books where moral behaviours were taught and learnt or studied. Moral training took place daily under the watch of mature adults, parents and elders in the community. In this form of training, the apprentice (children) received continuous mentoring and constant teaching and corrections from the masters/parents, from whom they learned how to talk, greet, respect, honour and do things rightly in the community (Nwankwo, 2018).

Modern Methods of Communicating Ethical Values

African societies like other societies in the world have transited in several issues. New ways of doing things have emerged due to the level of technological advancement and enlightenment seen everywhere. These have equally affected the ways through which moral principles are communicated to the younger generation. Today, moral values are learnt through formal school curricula, the internet and social media platforms, among others.

Inculcating moral and ethical values through school curriculum

Akrima (2023), identified school curriculum as a means of transmitting moral and ethical values in society today. Through subjects like Civic Education, Religion and Ethics, societal values and principles are passed on to the younger generation and human character and personality are formed. Through these subjects taught in school, students learn about their rights and obligations, society's expectations and boundaries they should not cross. In religions and ethics, students learn about God and gods, taboos and sanctions, morality and values of the people, things to do and those to avoid. Educational institutions have provided another means through which values are communicated in modern times.

Advanced Technology and Social Media Platforms

The involvement of available advanced technology and social media platforms has aided the communication of ethical and moral values in African society. Mawardi, (2023) noted that technological applications, interactive games, and multimedia content are some examples of technologies that can be used to strengthen students' understanding of moral values and ethical principles. According to Zakwam, (2024), there are applications specifically developed to convey moral concepts interactively and engagingly today. Thus, students can learn about the implications of the various moral choices they make in realistic but safe situations (Chiang, 2021).

African societies, need to explore these modern methods of communicating moral and ethical values in training the younger generation. Children need to be trained to consider moral values in their actions, as well as to make responsible and ethical decisions in situations they encounter at any time. The use of technological provisions in the school curriculum also demands an active role from teachers and educators. They are not only the deliverers of the material, but also the role models of safe and responsible behaviour. Teachers should be able to present the material in an interesting and relevant way so as not to defeat the purpose of utilizing such means of communicating moral values (Mariana, Wakhudin, Rachma, 2024). Else the danger of allowing children to explore these methods will outweigh the essence of using them to communicate moral values.

Assessing the Methods of Communicating Moral Values: Implications

The traditional and modern methods of inculcating ethical and moral values in African society have helped a great deal in educating children and young Africans on the values

the people are known for. Unfortunately, with the emergence of technology and its accessories, the traditional methods of communicating moral values have gone down the drain. Nwankwo (2018), noted that African society has been influenced by negative Western ideologies, philosophies and values. These values are dished out through available technologies exposed to both children and adult Africans, like the television, internet and social media platforms.

Many African scholars have lamented the bastardization of African values and morals. They blamed this on modernism. The speed at which moral values erode the society was described by Ekwuru (1999, p.11), "as a revolutionary event, quite unprecedented in the history of the people." To him, the experience of colonialism constituted a watershed in the evolutionary process of the Africans. In the same vein, Nnawuihe (2005), lamented the neglect and demeaning treatment given to some cultural heritages and values in Africa. To him too, this is the result of negative Western influence on African culture.

The result of this whole process according to Ekwuru (1999, p.32) is, "the forceful imposition of alien cultural modes and forms which was the tragic infliction of all sorts of conflicts on the African social character." Uwalaka (2003, p.91) noted that "there is in recent time, reversal of the great cultural values and traditional ethical norms which had always stood African societies in good stead." The Western idea of individualism has dominated the focus of many people in Africa.

In the family, children and adults are constantly exposed to watching movies and television programmes that are morally debasing. People are constantly forced to watch naked ladies used in advertisements for one product or the other. Explicit sexual acts flood African movies, even the ones performed by the African people. They try to copy the English movies and thus inculcate immoral behaviours to the youths and children (Nwankwo, 2018).

The internet and other modern technologies have done more harm to our children and youths in Africa than good. These gadgets have alienated them from the community. People are seen spending hours on their cell phones, browsing the internet and most of the time watching pornographic and explicit sexual content. These menaces have done more harm than good to the society.

Children and youths find it difficult to respect, greet and honour their elders and seniors, Disobedience, lies, dishonesty, insincerity and lack of love or misguided love, premarital sex and abortions, are constantly on the increase. Parents are always out there in search of greener pastures, while their children spend hours at school and return, only to be taken care of by the house help. These have affected the good moral dispositions of the society. There is a great need to revert back to the root.

Going Back to the African Root

The African people need to avoid ever being victims of colonial exploitation, oppression, colonization or neo-colonization, and other negative influences occasioned by modernism. To do this, there is a need for the restoration and renaissance of the abandoned traditional means of communicating ethical and moral values. In fact, the solution to moral flight in our society today is predicated and dependent on the restoration of the authentic moral norms and values in Africa and a saner means of transmitting them to the next generation.

Obi (2014), emphasized the importance of Africans going back to their root in terms of engaging traditional methods as outlined earlier in this work. He went on to ask, "How many parents today create time to tell their children stories or teach them those traditional songs that teach morals?" "Are there homes in Africa today, where people still come out in the night for moonlight plays?" Unfortunately, cell phones, computer games, internet surfing, television watching and other activities have engaged African children during the night hours. At times the parents won't even have the opportunity to teach their children due to the type of jobs that engage their time from morning till night. A quick return to the cultural practices that enhanced communicating moral values, has become very essential today.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The essence of effective communication of ethical and moral values in Africa, cannot be over-emphasized. Traditional and modern methods of transmitting values were assessed, to underscore the need to adopt a more effective means. While ethical values could be passed on through school curricula in contemporary times, it has many negative influences on the ethical and moral values of the African people. Traditional methods such as oral tradition, story-telling, songs, proverbs, apprenticeship and imitation, and moonlight plays, contributed immensely to moulding the character of children. However, with the incursion of technology, these methods have been relegated to the background. The result of this is that the values of truth-telling, respect for elders, innocence, sincerity and purity, have rather been eroded from the society. To restore these values, the paper recommends the following:

❖ African parents should endeavour to create time and communicate ethical and moral values to their children.
❖ The need to revive the traditional methods of communicating moral values should become the concern of the elderly in African communities, as this is considered the most effective method. Televisions and cell phones should not replace the values of story-telling, apprenticeship, proverbs, and songs, through which ethical and moral values and principles are inculcated.

❖ While communicating moral values through school curricula is good, teachers should ensure effective supervision of students

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