

THE DEGENERATING LEVEL OF MORALITY AMONG THE AGBAJA PEOPLE OF ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

*The terms degeneration and morality are used here to describe the moral standard to have fallen to a level that is very low or unacceptable to most people. Morality is concerned with the principle of what is right or wrong, and what is good or bad behaviour. Morality in Agbaja conception involves a three dimensional relationship God, man and the ontological order. A morally good act reaffirms the right relationship between God, man and ontological order while a morally bad act negates and disrupts this relationship. In this study therefore, it is intended to bring together the institutions of morality, the conceptual definitions of the Ancestors, God, the Supreme Being, and the divinities, spirits, *odo* and other masquerade cults. The research was conducted using both historical and descriptive approaches. The data collected were analysed using the phenomenological method to come up with results. Results showed that the Agbaja people have reduced their moral standard below its traditional state. The moral standard has degenerated to an abysmal level. Finally, the paper has recommended among other things that the places and areas that attract immorality in the area should be seriously and consistently addressed in avenues like August meetings, village meetings, kindred meetings et cetera.*

Keywords: Degeneration, Morality, Agbaja Traditional Society, Cultural Values, Contemporary Trends.

Introduction

The Nigerian nation and the various ethnic groups and communities that make up her geographical entity are constantly facing the challenges of Westernization and other concomitant problems. From time immemorial and of course in the pre-colonial times in Nigeria, the traditional African consciousness had been devoid of rancour and bitterness. In the social, political, economic and spiritual planes they were reliable, morally sound people who exhibited evidences on spiritual planes, and they were satisfied and of good living and cordiality. Specifically in the spiritual sphere there were clearly divided lines of relationship between sacred and the profane which apparently was *conventional* (*Suzerian*) there were also definite rules between man and man in the society. The African people especially the Agbaja of Igbo extraction in Nigeria were rich in their cultural (religious) heritage. They were a deeply religious people whose religion was their life and their life was their religion. From the onset of the existence of Agbaja people, they enacted religious laws deeply choreographically in theology which provided morally sanctimonious principle guiding human behaviour. There were therefore taboos or prohibitions for straining away from the laid down norms, was very difficult. This was so because there were taboos against family image, protection, stealing, breaking of covenants and vows, adultery, fornication, rapes, armed robbery, burglary and other social vices.

The objective is to find out the solutions of the morally degenerating issues and make the society a more viable and peaceful place for us to live in when things are put in their proper shapes. There is no more respect for elders and there are different kinds of views which have become the order of the day. This corroborates what Achebe (1981:1) says, thus, things fall apart, the centre cannot hold and the falcon cannot hear the falconer and mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. Through this study no doubt the development of the people will not only be enhance but assured. This discovers that the Agbaja environment is being bedevilled with a higher level of immorality unlike what was obtainable among the fore-fears. In other to address this finding, the research aims at bringing the institutions of morality among the Agbaja people and Africa at large, which are fundamentally, the Supreme God, the ancestors, divinities, spirits, other traditional cults, e.g the *odo* and other Masquerade cults, the human secret cults, the *Ogwu/Agwu* (special spirit for medicine) and so on, The study anchors on historical and descriptive methods of research. The study also used phenomenological method of data analysis to enable the research to come in terms with the aims and finding in the study. The study applied the use of primary style of data collection basically the use of oral interview; Secondary sources were also adopted which include: text books, internet, and dictionary. It was recommended that areas and sources of immoralities in the area must be seriously and consistently be addressed. For example the activities of people that operate within the 9th mile corner and other related places.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of clarity and proper elucidation, the following key concepts will be defined: Morality according to Hornby (1974:918) is concerned with principle of right and wrong behaviour. The term "morality" is derived from the plural form of the word mores meaning moral and manners. It is used to mean the generally accepted code of conduct in a society or within a sub-group of society. It is used to mean the pursuit of good life, thus it is a way of life a set principle and certain attitude and behaviour towards fellow men. Morality is an

integral part of religion because both emphasize on human personality in its relationship and are birth concerned with conduct (Agha, 2003:40). Fagothey (1953:17) also defines morality as that quality in human acts which is called right or wrong, good or evil. It is a term used to refer to the goodness or badness of human act without specific or much deliberation, of which morality has its base on religion. It is a truism that disrespect for religion will automatically lead to destruction and disrespect of morality also leads to some destruction. Givertz (1968:44) observes that no study of a society can live without morals. In the words of Obichukwu et al (2020:153), immorality has also influenced even the Church. This means that morality is degenerating also everywhere. Unlike major world religions, traditional religion has no founder it is native and indigenous to the African / Igbo people whose cultural consciousness are written in the mind, folklores myths, legend, proverbs, everyday speech, pity-saying, songs and dances. Therefore, this is used to refer to their religious system which has been handed down from one generation to another. It is in this conceptualization that Ojike in Onyeidu (2002:130) aptly and summarily defines it as *Omenani*, the people's way of doing things in their land. Degeneration according to Mr. Francis Oga (personal communication, 5 August, 2020) is a condition of losing fame, and status, and integrity. This is what the study means as degeneration.

The People of Agbaja Land in Enugu State, Nigeria

Agbaja according Mr. Augustine Udeh (Personal communication, 9 April, 2011) as the name implies is fondly given to the people living within a segment of the Western part of Enugu State, because of the fact that they are not very good at staying far from their ancestral home. At a time circumstances prompt them to live home, they must always locate settlements, and equally situate their brothers at their ancestral home. Mr. Ifeanyi Ojukwu (personal communication, 30 June, 2017) adds that in some cases, brothers who live far from one another find it difficult to meet one another during the rainy season when everyone must be busy with farm work, until the dry season comes. Ozo Kenneth Adichie (personal communication, 1 May, 2017) concludes that it is this experience of distant relationship between brothers that the people refer to when they use the term Agbaja (*Agba-je-ozo*) meaning not reachable, always unable to be reached in close intervals except by the end of the year or emergency. Surveyor Maduegbuna Stanley (personal communication, 2 May, 2017) posits that the people of Agbajaland are those living in Udi and Ezeagu, Local Government Areas of Enugu State. The People today share one Federal Constituency known as Udi / Ezeagu Federal Constituency. The two local government areas have 20 electoral wards each. The Udi people have two seats in Enugu State House of Assembly (legislative Arm) some of the Udi Ngwo brothers belong to Enugu North Local Government Area of Enugu State. The two local government areas have more than 40 autonomous communities each. In fact, the history of the Agbaja people is too voluminous to be exhausted here, considering the nature of this research.

Enugu state on the other hand, is one of the five states in the Eastern region of Nigeria. It is assumed to be political Headquarters of the Igbo of the South-East, Nigeria. Enugu State has 17 Local Government Areas, with 260 electoral wards. She shares boundaries with other South-Eastern States which include: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi and Imo States. She also shares boundaries with Kogi, Benue and Delta states at her Northern and Western boundaries. The people share similar cultures and traditions among themselves according to Ozo George Okechi (personal communication, 6 May, 2017). This map can help to explain more?



Nigeria is a name gotten from the two words Niger and Area. It was given by Flora Shaw who later became the wife of Lord Fredrick Lugard according to Dr. Nwankwo Benjamin (personal communication, 21 June, 2017). Nigeria has 36 States and a Federal Capital Territory, situated at Abuja. She has 774 Local Government Areas. This map will help to explain the geography of the country.



Institutions of Morality

There are so many institutions that protect morality in Igbo/Agbaja communities. Okwueze (2003:74) identifies such institutions as, the family, village agents like the age grade etc. It is on the background of the village agents that this paper has been designed to concentrate on the following agents of morality in the Agbaja village or community settings. These chosen morality agents are spiritually orientated. Man as a social being is brought up, nurtured and trained within the norms and values of the society. God is regarded as the ultimate guarantor and originator of morality. These norms and values in the society consequently translate to moral principles that undergirded human actions in the society. At the foundation of the society's moral behaviour is God-the supersensible reality who is the guardian and originator of morality. Given that God is at the root of morality in Igbo land and Agbaja in particular,

there are modes of behaviour which crystalize into principle in consequence of which each person finds himself compelled, constrained to live in conformity with norms or principles laid down by the society. The various means which serve as foundations in which morality is observed are in other words, considered as custodians or agents of transmission of moral norms in Agbaja society.

God the Supreme Being

The concept of the Supreme Being is general in African Traditional Religion. God is real and unique to the Africans. He is believed to be the absolute controller of the universe. The clear-cut belief in the Supreme Being by Africans is seen well in the names given to him by Africans. What the people believe God to be is enhanced in the meaning of the name they call Him. The Principal God of the Igbo is "Chineke" or Chukwu" the first means the creator God while the second means Great God. Among the Agbaja people and other Igbo communities the name "Chukwu Okike Abiama" is usually used for the Supreme Being (Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004:34). Agbaja people believe that the creator is something one knows without being taught, one only needs to come to the age of reasoning in order to realise this. This is to say that the belief in Supreme Being in Igbo religion as well as African Religion is automatic. Mbiti in Gbenda (1997:28) observes that all people in Africa, without a single exception, have a notion of God as the Supreme Being.

In Agbaja land, man looks at God and nature from the point of his relationship with them. This idea of God being the father of creator in general is reported among other African people, some of whose only major personal names for God simply means "father" (Mbiti 1969:48). The fatherhood of God also comes out in prayers, indirectly that people consider Him to be their personal father with whom they can communicate. The image of God as father is confined only to patriarchs' societies and that the female (God of fecundity) image as mother is confined only to matriarchal societies, where female status is subordinated to the supreme patriarch order Agbaja is not an exception.

Moreover, attributes of God shows that God is the foundation of morality thus He is the creator, omnipotent, omniscience, judge, immortal and his transcendent and immanent nature who our people really think that there is God and He is the super-sensible reality. These qualities ascribed to God, have built in the people's consciousness what is morally right or wrong, good or bad as the case may be.

Ancestor

Parinder (1954:57) interestingly notes that it is impossible to grasp the meaning of the religious foundation of Africa without going through thoughts area occupied by the Ancestors. Subordination is owed to God by all creatures on account of the rank God holds as the first of all existence, as ancestors par excellence (Magesa, 1998:51). Among the Agbaja people, it follows therefore, that by their right of primogeniture and proximity to God by death, God has granted the ancestors a qualitative and more powerful life force over the descendants. Ancestors and ancestress are the positive men and women who originated the lineage clan or ethnic groups and who provide the people with their sound integrity. It seems that they laid the foundation before they died, since they are the founders of the clan. According to Ugwu (2004:66) they form a chain through the links of which the forces of the elders in the universe to spiders web, then in day-to-day life. The Agbaja people believed that it is their forefathers

who died long ago. In Agbaja town, to ensure that nobody or nothing destroys or destabilizes their families, they act moral police, discipline their erring children and grant security and protection to their families. Agbaja people believe that ancestors are givers of knowledge of medicine. The ancestors constitute invisible judiciary for their living. In serious cases of land disputes, disputes over economic trees between close relations the elders call on the ancestors to witness and deliver judgement. In Agbaja land they are called to witness oat taking rite. The Africans believe that their dead relations can incarnate in their grand sons, daughters, etc. All these subordinated roles of the living dead among the Agbaja people, promote morality because the living do not want to provoke the anger of the worthy dead. Generally, before one qualifies to be an ancestor, he must have lived a good life and died a good death and lived relatively matured life before dying. Agbaja people are not an exception.

Odo and other Masquerades' cult

Odo is believed among the Agbaja to be a dead man or woman who has come back to earth to stay for a short time among the living especially with his own family members. Every odd year is an Odo year eg; 1971, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1979, 1981 etc were Odo years. The first six seven months of an Odo year is almost exclusively devoted to the worship of Ancestors, mostly men occasionally woman, who have come back to visit the living.

An Odo year is a year of play and happiness especially for male citizens of the towns. The sentimental attachment to the Odo among the people of Agbaja, both men and women is so high that even Christians, literate and illiterate people of the area look forward to it with longing and favour all participants in its festivities with more or less an equal amount of ardour. Its music in the ears of most Agbaja males brings up the tradition. Odo is the highest traditional perfection of affected Agbaja communities' art, and culture. Odo is not music per se, but also performs the functions of language as an art and as a vehicle for culture transmission and perpetration. Odo and other masquerading cults in Agbaja attend to immoral behaviour of any indigene of the respective communities. Children who misbehave are corrected with use of Odo and other masquerade cults.

Origin

Tradition had it that Odo simply walked into the affected towns of Agbaja. For the Abor people, at Ugwube, Ugwunani he met a woman carrying her three-year old male child in the back. Fear gripped the woman so that when the Odo asked her to call him 'Odo' the women could not. The small child on her back fearlessly called him "Odo". The Odo there and then decreed that only males could be his priests and only males see him naked in his groves-Obu and music house. The first Odo lived at Ogwube but when Ogwube people could not keep its taboos, it left for Ozala Ishiemeke in Abor. That is where the first sacrifice to Odo at Ozalla is done by Ogwube people and why Ogwube people have to enter the gate of Odo grove before any other person could enter. Other communities in Agbaja e.g Ngwo, Neke/Oyofo that observe the Odo cult have their respective historical origin of the Odo cult.

For the Abor people, They are more emotionally stirred and committed to the first return and the going back of the Odo. People who live far and near rarely deny presence on these occasions. In this way the Odo ancestral cult has helped to bind the people together. As the Abor people have their own history of Odo, other communities like the Ngwo people in Udi

and Enugu North Local Government Areas, Neke/Oyofe in Ezeagu Local Government Area etc also have their Odo history or observances and its related masquerading cults are regarded as the founder of morality in Agbaja because they are not ordinary masquerade because of their very deep occult principle and practices. Consequently, it is regarded as a god since Odo and other masquerades cults assume spiritual features or characteristics.

Recommendations

1. There is need of rebranding the youth so as to hearken to the laws and norms of Agbaja communities and the wider society at large.
2. The Agbaja people should create awareness for our people about the impending dangers associated with of our children living without standard moral consciousness.
3. Town unions should stipulate and enforce laws to help reduce evil and other vices.
4. The Odo adherents and other elders should always remind the Agbaja people the importance of every traditional agent of morality among the people.
5. The people should be aware of the fear of God (unknown) and abide by the norms and values of the societies.
6. Activities of semi-urban cities like 9th Mile corners, Eke Ugbo in Akama 'Oghe, Afo Iwollo Oghe etc, should be moderated by the Local Government authorities within these areas.

Conclusion

The conclusion reached in this research is that moral life has degenerated among Agbaja people of Enugu State from what it used to be in the olden days. This has been discovered to be as a result of some degenerating level of morality which is caused by technological innovations that have forced them to adopt mechanism that are considered to be immoral against other institutions of morality that help to foster morality as found in this study such as Odo, Ancestors, Divinities which also help in bringing up morals standards of the Agbaja communities. Generally speaking, the society should be able to applaud good character and condemn immoral behaviour in order to foster trust in interpersonal relationships which can only be achieved with good behaviour. This will definitely enhance acceptable moral goodness and conduct in Agbaja and other Igbo communities.

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Interview

Mr. Francis Oga, 79yrs, Ebonyi State retired Head Master, 5/8/2020

Mr. Augustine Ude, 84yrs, Udi L.G.A, retired Vice Principal, 9/4/2011

Mr. Ifeanyi Ojukwu, 56yrs, Ezeagu L.G.A, Farmer, 30/6/2017

Ozo Kenneth Adichie, 90yrs, Udi L.G.A, Farmer, 1/5/2017

Surveyor Stanley Maduegbunam, 70yrs, Ezeagu L.G.A, retired Civil Servant, 2/5/2017

Ozo George Okechi, 58yrs, Udi L.G.A, Civil Servant, 6/5/2017