



**YOUTH EMPOWERMENT**  
*for*  
**SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT**

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## **Developing and maintaining moral values for youth empowerment in Nigeria**

*Nse-Abasi Akpan*

### **1. Introduction**

The continuing degeneration of personal virtue among the world's societies seems to be emerging as the single most urgent issue of our time. The majority of our youth know very little about moral values. The behaviour of children in this society proves that moral values are hardly even a subject of importance. Today, the violence and crimes in this nation are perpetrated by youths who are unable to handle the pressure and stress of reality. In fact, the influential factor of violence spreads so easily through the television and peer group discussions. It is easily heard of youths taking part in cultism and committing acts of violence without any remorse. The animosity and chaos traceable to children originate mainly from their ignorance of the difference between 'right and wrong'.

The moral crisis which our youths are suffering from has taken an immense proportion. To avert a crisis of identity therefore, the society must respond to the spiritual needs of young men and women, as well as their physical needs. This is necessary when we realize that young people in all countries are the key agents for social change, economic development and technological innovation. As Razali Ismail (1995) points out, "of the more than one billion youth in the world, (18 percent of the world's 120 million) are unemployed while 700 million are underemployed". This figure, according to Razali, is frightening and thus encourages moral laxity and degeneration of personal virtue. So the failure to provide productive employment for our teeming youths is one of the causes of decay of moral values. Apart from the above, in most developing countries, youths are in need of better health facilities as well as better access to education, training, credit and technical assistance and technology.

The problems are compounded when we realize that the basic

institutions of the society no longer perform their functions properly. The family, education, religion and other institutions are no longer encouraged to perform. Children are allowed to do what they like without caution. Parents, teachers and even churches/mosques no longer care for the moral upbringing of the child. Our education in its various forms has not abolished technical illiteracy. There are no laws to protect and strengthen the family while health and other services are lacking. Parents allow their children to do what they like; they do not care about the friends their children keep, the mode of dressing and eating habits of their children, etc. Adults openly take bribes and pervert justice, the state treasuries are openly looted, criminals and cultists are honoured with the highest traditional titles of the land. We operate in a society where everything has fallen apart, and the center can no longer hold.

Even the higher education which was supposed to exert positive influence in terms of changes in students' behaviour has not done so. Emerson puts it that, "Education is what is left after you have forgotten what you have been taught". Presently higher education, according to him, has failed to positively impact on our youths. These failures are in areas of the failure of our students to acquire basic moral values:

**(a) The failure of our students to acquire basic moral values**

One basic value that we shall pick to explain this problem is honesty or integrity. Calhoun (1995), refers to this as the master virtue. It is the one from which others flow. This is the most critical. Today, values are taught in schools as transient and subject to abandonment (Sanford, 2001). This should not be the case. Perhaps our failure to help students incorporate basic honesty into their behaviour is simply a reflection of the reality of our own beliefs and behaviour. Cases abound of students being ignored while cheating or copying in exams, 'sorting', sexually harassing others, administratively deceiving and conniving. The teachers and the entire school system have responsibility for our failure to help students who come to the system without basic integrity to acquire that set of behaviours, and that responsibility begins with who the teachers are and what they do.

**(b) Failure to acquire critical thinking culture**

The major task of higher education is to help students develop critical thinking. If we fail in this task then our students have not

acquired a basic tool needed for successful living in the world today. Students should be taught how to think with analytical skill to avoid becoming professional failures. This implies that they should look at issues and problems and see weaknesses and deficiencies. They must also be taught to see the strengths of the position, practice or people being studied. In our country, the students seem to complete the first part of the task. Thus they see the weaknesses and faults of others and think the task is finished. This leaves them belittling, and being critical of, or hostile to others or their ideas and unwilling or unable to see the positive benefits of critical thinking.

One major effect of our inability to teach this value is that students are so consumed with seeing faults in others that they do not see the faults in themselves. They see no contradiction in violently protesting violence in others. For instance, they excuse their poor performance at an examination but are harshly critical of a poorly prepared lecture by a lecturer. Our educational curriculum has not helped youths to acquire critical thinking skills, which incorporate compassion, charity and patience for others and their ideas.

**(c) Failure of students to acquire a rich and civil culture**

One of the functions of higher education is to create a lifelong love of the finer arts produced through the generations. How well are we doing? How much instruction is being given? How do we enrich the students' cultural values? How do we expose them to the practical aspects of their culture or heritage? How many courses do we teach bordering on the cultural heritage as well as the expected values of our society.

**(d) Failure to acquire the love for service and the willingness to serve**

Though a few institutions of higher learning in the country have programs which are aimed at integrating work and service into their regular curriculum, these programs have received little emulation. Functionality aspect of education is a neglected part of the Nigerian higher education and an attempt to measure the degree to which there is any lasting change in students service attitudes and behaviour is rare. Students should be taught to love service or to feel an obligation to serve.

**2. Conceptual Clarification**

**Morals:** These are 'rules' which people use to guide their behaviour and thinking. They are usually different from laws and should also be differentiated from 'ethics'. Morals arise from the behaviour of the

people. They may be written, may become laws, or even ethical codes. Morals are a code of good conduct laid down in the society to serve as uniform yardstick for the conduct of individuals and groups in the society.

**Values:** These are things that we desire a 'good' that guides our thinking, actions and lives. Values are good ends that we desire, pursue and ought to have. Values are involved in all sorts of areas: moral, intellectual, economic and social values.

**Moral Values:** This is the process of identifying what is right and wrong or what the society desires and sees as good. The challenge to our youths is not knowing what is good or bad, right or wrong but is being able to live according to them. As declared by Elliot (2004) if education does not emphasize moral values, we are "only training a menace to society".

**Virtue:** This is a matter of character. Character is a collection of one's virtue. More than a collection, character is a set of character traits a unified set of good traits. Bas character involves an absence of good traits or even a collection of recognized bad traits, such as selfishness, cruelty, avarice, jealousy, hostility, etc. Elliot postulated that if one developed psychologically one would move towards virtue.

### 3. The Causes and Background of Moral Degeneration in Nigeria

We cannot solve moral degeneration if we treat symptoms only, and fail to look at the root causes and how it came about. To be able to address this challenge as a country, we cannot ignore the impact that our past has had on our present. Though, moral decay started with the colonial masters, it was fully perpetuated by the military regimes in Nigeria. The military legacy not only dehumanized some communities and individuals, but also causes untold damage to our value system.

Militarism created a particular value system, designed to deepen and perpetuate a twisted understanding of values and morality. It created its own way of interpreting the differences between right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust and eroded respect in general, and respect for life and property in particular. It introduced extreme intolerance, and because it had to be maintained through extreme violence, it encouraged violence at every level of society. Honesty and integrity was completely eroded in public life and in our higher

educational institutions. After all, heads of these higher schools were chosen by the military leaders.

Military rule introduced policies and training that changed what is normal to abnormal. Our history is full of records of unchecked aspirations among military leaders and how the system used criminals for its defense and maintenance, and how it brutally eliminated opponents without any reference to the law and how they entrenched a culture of violence. Our youths are therefore carrying out what they saw, see and what is in practice.

Apart from the military, the democratic governments in the previous republics were not fairing better. They continued with the crusade of violence culture, elimination of political opponents, deprivation of human rights as well as encouraging extreme level of intolerance. They have also perpetuated a twisted understanding of values and morality.

The military and even the democratic institutions in the country have transformed education into an instrument of subjugation. It has destroyed good human relations between opponents and members of the different political parties. It is important to recall some of this history and the fact that as a result of these activities, moral values have been completely destroyed. Thus we cannot ignore this bitter past when we seek to work for moral regeneration.

### 4. Ways of Developing and Maintaining Moral Values among Youths

Much as we could blame the past for having contributed to the moral degeneration of our society, correcting these wrongs is now a responsibility for all of us in the country. It is clear that there is a lot that we need to do to address this as a matter of urgency. To some Nigerians, society seems to have succumbed to low moral values and the symptoms are there for all to see: the disregard for the value of human life and property; lack of respect and compassion, illegal self-enrichment in both private and public sectors, and other despicable forms of crime, including sexual abuse.

- (a) Establishment of a firm foundation upon which we can now correct the wrongs of the past. Young democrats should promulgate new laws which will transparently encourage the reporting of sexual crimes, embezzlement of funds, declaration of assets before and after one's tenure in government. Nigerians

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should religiously follow up these laws and not leave them at the disposal of a public servant.

(b) Constructiveness of the intelligentsia: The intelligentsia in our country, who would normally be expected to lead in influencing and shaping how we see the world around us, have appeared to have fallen victims to the times. They should sit up and play their role constructively.

(c) Control of entertainment programmes in broadcast and print media: As Nigerians, we have come to view as entertainment, some of the negative and immoral depictions of life. For example, some serialized drama episodes in our broadcast media glorify violence and criminal activity, giving an impression that this is an acceptable way of life. These episodes and films are very popular with thousands of Nigerians and form their only source of entertainment and information. The long term effects of glorifying violence in the mass media are a cause for concern.

As parents we allow our children to listen to and watch these drama episodes without guidance, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of this culture. Our failure to realize the impact of our actions indicates the level to which we have succumbed to abnormal values. Broadcast and print media have a tremendous influence, especially on young people. Given this reality, the media has a crucial role to play in restoring the moral values of our society and should seriously consider the impact of messages that are being sent out to the public.

(d) Permissiveness and Modernizing Society: The pressure put on children by our permissive and fast modernizing society cannot be over-emphasized. There are painful incidents where lives of young children come to a tragic and premature end in night clubs. As parents, we now compete with many negative social influences as we try to mould adults of the future. Parents should not be too permissive to their children. They should not answer "yes" to all their children's demands, especially to those perceived to have some disastrous consequences.

(e) Review of Curriculum in Higher Institutions: First we have to agree that teaching value is an appropriate role for higher institution. We must agree on what basic values should be taught. May I suggest at least the following:

- Honesty or integrity
- Service or unselfishness
- Appreciation for others and their views of civility
- Refinement
- Work

We must agree at least within individual institutions on how the moral values should be taught. We need to stop thinking that our obligation as a teachers is just to profess a set of facts or theories, and recognize that our true duty is to change lives (Sinaiko, 1998). It is not only to transmit the substance of a discipline but to change behaviour. We must think about and build into the curriculum extensive applied techniques for producing change in each student on each of the core values.

Finally, we must develop feedback loops which will not only allow, but also force us to examine how well we are doing and use that examination to change the procedures we employ to address these central failures of higher education.

- (f) Moral Regeneration Campaign: We must declare the moral regeneration campaign as a major national campaign. All political parties represented in government at all levels must give this matter the urgent attention it deserves. It must become a major priority in our constituencies. This campaign should aim at reaching out to the very soul of our nation. It is important therefore that we should agree to drive it jointly and not use it for political point scoring.
- (g) Mobilization of Society: To eradicate moral decay in our society, we need to mobilize all sectors of our society to work jointly in achieving this goal.

The religious sector must be invited to play a leading role in providing a spiritual and moral revival. After all, this is their main mission in the society. Our pulpits, synagogues, mosques and temples should intensify the preaching of the message of a moral rebirth and renewal in Nigeria and Akwa Ibom State in particular. Nigerians cannot escape this responsibility. There was a time in our history when people would provide guidance to children they did not know. That was the time when the ruling ethic was "All children are my children". We need to revive that spirit. When you see children loitering in streets during school hours, what do you do as adults? When you see children

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cheating in exams, even if you are not the course lecturer, what do you do as teachers? Our young people are more vulnerable to the demands of this new era and the popular culture of the times does not promote good morals.

There is need for parents to watch the music programmes and other popular prim-time programmes, to see the particular culture that is promoted for our youths to ensure that it is not one that continuously promote sex and violence. The values we teach our children will determine the kind of society we will have in the future.

## 5. Conclusion

Since the values we teach our children will determine the kind of society we will have in future, we need to start in our homes and schools to develop new Nigerians who understand what it means to respect and be respected. After all, a youth that is patriotic and has national pride and self-respect is less likely to engage in immoral and anti-social activities. This is a challenge for all youth organizations in this country to begin to instill a new moral ethos in their members. Political youth organizations must give the lead in this regard. They need to promote moral renewal amongst their members, and probably make it fashionable once again to be morally upright.

From the above, it is pertinent that there is a lot that we must do to ensure a moral revival and the nurturing of a new Nigeria with good values of self-respect, respect for one another, respect for human life and property, and, most of all, national pride.

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