African Social Values and The Contemporary Issues of Respect and Cooperation in Nigeria's Educational Process

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Abstract

The interdependence of social values and education is mutual because one promotes the other. Whoever passes through the process of education is expected to acquire social values which will differentiate him/her from those without the opportunity. Thus, better social behaviour is expected from educated individuals, although there may be exceptions. In other words, the knowledge acquired from schools should expose recipients to live rightly and harmoniously with others around them. This philosophical piece therefore examines African social values in relation to respect and cooperation as well as its place in the contemporary African society. The need for Teacher Education practitioners especially, in Nigeria to lay more emphasis on the affective domain of learning as recommended in the paper suggests a possible turn-out of learners from schools with better attitudes and display of characters necessary for desired growth and development of the society.

Key words: Social values, Respect, Cooperation, Education.

Introduction

One of the ways to advancement in any society is in the cultivation of minds to possess noble characters which can assist in the realisation of certain social values necessary for development. This discloses that certain social values are required if individuals are to acquire and demonstrate high moral principles which can bring about desired social growth. Oladipo (2009:29) noted that no process of development can achieve its best unless it is based on the recognition of common humanity. By common humanity, this means each society have shared values that made her distinct from others. In the words of Nyasani (1997:56-57), African and European minds are products of unique 'cultural edifices' and 'cultural streams' that arose from environmental condition and long-standing cultural traditions. Within the African cultural streams, Nyasani claims that there are psychological and moral characteristics which pertain to African identity, personality and dignity.

Africa and Social Values

An important characteristic of African life about which scholars of African phenomena seem to show a consensus and which grows in part out of moral philosophy is altruism. Another is the African group living or collective life as reflected in African personalism, which is an emphasis on wholesome human relationships among members of the group at whatever expense and efforts including personal sacrifices of various forms (Sofola, 1978:67). In other words, Africans are noted for good human relationship and takes this with such tenacity that if sacrifices are required to sustain this relationship, they do not hesitate to make it. In the African community, people hold the view that the welfare of each person is dependent on the welfare of all which makes everyone to be inclined to work for the good of all, this always include the person's own good as well. This is inculcated in every African child through various moral instructions during the process of socialisation in order to impart this in every member of the community. Gyekye (1996) noted that in the cultures of African people, socialisation is considered basic to human nature and most adequately expressed in the community life, which makes it difficult for the human person to live in isolation from others. This reveals that social relationships are essential for the survival of every human person particularly, in Africa, and according to Gyekye, no one is self-sufficient therefore, no one can in isolation function adequately in the social context.

In African aesthetics generally, the quality of beauty is also applied to the social relationship of the people. Makgoba (1997) argued that throughout the African diaspora, peoples of African descent

> are linked by share values that are fundamental features of African identity and culture. These for example, include hospitality, friendliness, the consensus and common framework-seeking principle, …… and the emphasis on community rather than on the individual. These features typically underpin the variations of African culture and identity everywhere
> (Magkoba, 1997: 197-198).

This corroborates Gyekye that in African community, the principle of dependability on one another is inevitable. Makgoba believes that the personality characteristics inherent in African mind seems to reveal itself in a somewhat dramatic way. These three areas according to him appear to serve as important landmarks in the general description of the phenomenology of African mind (Makgoba, 1997).

Many African scholars regard African concepts of the individual and self to be almost totally dependent on, and subordinate to social entities and cultural processes. Mbiti (1969) believed that the individual has little leeway or freedom for self-determination outside the context of the traditional African family and community. According to him,

> whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say; 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore, I am'. This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man (Mbiti, 1969: 109).

What all these portend is that in the African (social) setting, an individual has limited opportunity to survive without collaboration, cooperation, relationship and partnership with others around him. It is imperative to note however, that the individual, although originating from, and

inextricably bound to his family and community, nevertheless possesses a clear concept of himself as a distinct person of volition who has the ability to make conscious choices or decisions. However, it is from this combined sense of personhood and communal membership that the family and community expect individuals to take personally enhancing and socially responsible decisions and actions. Although Gyekye accepts that the dominant entity of African social order is the community, he still believes

> it would be more correct to describe that order as amphibious, for it manifests features of both communality and individuality ……. African social thoughts seeks to avoid the excesses of the two exaggerated systems, while allowing for a meaningful, albeit interaction between individual and the society (Gyekye, 1988:31-32).

Senghor (1966) in agreement with Gyekye regarded traditional African society to be based on the community and on the person and in which because it was founded on dialogue and reciprocity, the group had priority over the individual without crushing him, but allowing him to blossom as a person.

The Yoruba (in Nigeria) maxim 'human beings are my clothing/coverings' (that is, 'eniyan ni aso mi') and the South African maxim 'a person is a person through persons' ('umuntu ngumuntu') express the notion that is common to all African languages and traditional cultures (Shutte, 1998). They are concerned both with the peculiar interdependence of persons on others for exercise, development and fulfilment of their desires that is recognised in African traditional thought, and also with the understanding of what it is to be a person that underlies this. This invariably gives the understanding that as important as individual is, the African person will find it extremely difficult to act outside the context of his community. This is supported by Nyasani (1997) who confirmed that the African hardly knows how to act outside the context of his community's prescriptions and propositions. For Nyasani, the existence of the individual in African society is a "quasi-dissolution into the reality of others for the sake of the individual's existence".

Everything boils down to 'me' in the 'we' or rather to the survival of the self through the enhancement and consolidation of 'we' as a generic whole. This means that the individual achieves his aims within the confine or framework of society's hankers. Thus, in Africa, the individual will go at all lengths to ascertain the condition of the corporate 'we' and to play his part when necessary to ensure the balance of wholesomeness. This becomes possible through moral values which Gyekye said are those forms or patterns of conduct that are considered most worthwhile and therefore cherished by the society. They constitute not only principles of behaviour but also goals of social and individual action (Gyekye).

From the foregoing, the importance of the social value of cooperation in the African social circle becomes evident. This implies that the exclusion or absence of this social value from the daily activities of people in the society can signify the herald of egoism which encourages the pursuit of personal welfare at the expense of others and thus neglect the sanctity of respect for others. This completely negates the basis of existence in the African diaspora hence, the necessity of the social value of cooperation in the Nigerian society.

It is highly significant to re-emphasise that generally, Africans recognise the need for non-material values of respect, cooperation, kindness, compassion, generousity, love and peace among several others simply because of their competence, adeptness and knack in establishing harmony in the society. It can be said that since Africans recognise the dignity of the human person and consequently hold a deep and unrelenting concern for his welfare and happiness, carrying out what will promote and ensure this welfare becomes appropriate and considered as moral obligation. Gyekye (1996) noted that the recognition of the value of humanity is intrinsically linked with recognition of the unity of all people whether or not they are biologically related. Human beings need assistance from one another through cooperation and mutual inter-relationship, but this can be hardly achieved or demonstrated when man lives a solitary life. The practical transformation of this idea leads to such important social and moral values as cooperation, respect which is said to be reciprocal, hospitality, generousity, concern for others, and even communal feeling.

In all, one can see that these values are very essential and form the bases for the pursuit of general well-being in the society. In as much as these values are preserved and practised in our societies, social harmony will be attained. This is the hallmark of the ideal society. Thereafter, socially desired progress and development will follow. Thus, the social morality and values of the African society enjoins members to seek the good of the society as a whole, for in so doing, they not only seek their own good but also a firm basis for their own lasting happiness. Hence, the highest good, according to African moral thought is the welfare of the entire community.

The Process of Education and Moral Inculcation

One major essence of education as severally highlighted is the inculcation of moral values through the awareness of moral actions by learners via the contents of various school subjects. The realisation of the right actions/attitudes of respect, cooperation and other values is very necessary in making learners morally conscious. Several objectives are stated for every topic taught in the class, these always include the application of such contents in the society. The process of education is expected to impart in learners the importance of the values of respect and cooperation as they are expected to interact with others in their society. When learners realised the necessity of respecting and cooperating with others as sin qua non to social development and peaceful co-existence, they will no longer be ignorant of the type of actions and decisions that can make them attain ethical standard. Thus, rational justification of moral issues in the society can be a reality since (every) individual(s) can determine independently whether or not their actions will be in accordance with the moral principles/standards of the society since the nation's values educational system contains such curriculum.

In many circumstances, individuals often intend to act well but may not be aware which action is right or wrong. Prior (1977) identified one of the problems as rational insight that is, correct perception of the moral parameters of a situation such, as a person's beliefs, needs,

desires, those of others, and the consequences of different actions. When an individual finds it difficult to identify the right moral desires and needs as well as the means of achieving them, there is bound for the problem of unethical behaviours to arise. A further contributing factor to unethical behaviours can be traced to social changes which always create new situations in the society. Enlightenment and civilisation has led to some of these changes and brought about new situations in our societies for instance, slavery. An individual may believe that oppression is evil and genuinely act on this belief but may still oppress others. Similarly, everyone agrees that honesty is virtue, but many are still dishonest even to one's self. This calls for the determination of universally true moral principles.

When there is a belief in some moral sense to which moral issues and arguments present themselves in clarity and to which moral truth is evident (e.g. theft or murder is bad), attaining rationality in such morals will only be a practical issue (that is, ability to be led astray by personal desire(s); consciously refusing to be objective and face certain problems or challenges. This is in itself moral laxity. This is corroborated by Prior (1977) who confirms that such situation

> is only a practical problem, for one knows which problems are moral problems, which solution are rational ones, and what following these reasons would consist if one but had the will (Prior, 1977: 184).

This ultimately asserts that the actual problem in ethics is the will and knowledge. Every individual needs rational insight into situations to determine what is right or wrong as well as the rational insight into one's self to assure that one's moral motives are genuine motives of action. The ability or 'will' to carry out such right actions must also be given consideration. Whichever theories of ethics that applies; emotivism, intuitionism, prescriptivism or naturalism, every moral discourse needs to be rational while autonomy has to be given its rightful place.

Rationality and Autonomy in Ethics

Lanfear (1986) stated that there seems to be a basic conflict between reason and autonomy because a fully rational system leaves no room for free human decision, while a fully autonomous system is arbitrary. Either of these cannot be accepted as desirable for a moral theory. This conflict or dichotomy between rationality and autonomy in moral reasoning is said to be largely due to what Rorty (1979) describes as 'the dogma that only where there is correspondence to reality is there the possibility of rational agreement'. In other words, it is where situations of reality occur that rational agreement will be possible. Lanfear declared that since the emotivists and naturalists alike assume that the dogma is true, its denial offers new and interesting ways to explain how rationality and autonomy can be conceived to be compatible in moral reasoning. Hare (1981) also corroborated the conflict that is, the tension between autonomy and reason. He stated that it is an 'antimony' and believes that one of the main tasks of moral philosophy is to resolve this tension. He further presents an analysis of the logic of moral discourse which he thought was an adequate response to the emotivists who claimed that there is only a psychological connection between moral reasons and conclusions (Hare, 1952). He argued that there is a straight-forward logical connection between non-moral factual reasons and moral conclusions, as long as persons are committed to certain relevant moral principles. Although Hare may not dwell much on how a moral principle is justified, but he has tried to help overcome this conflict by arguing that the logic of moral discourse, along with certain basic inclinations that most people have, force the majority to adopt the same principles about the most important matters (Hare, 1981). He however later remarked that a perfect command of logic and facts would constrain people's moral evaluation so that in practice, everybody would be bound to act the same was (Hare, 1981).

In all these, the requirement of prudence in actions chosen or taken becomes very paramount. If prudence is made a cogent factor in the choice of our actions, then we can universalise those actions according to Kant's categorical imperative, or prescribe actions we believe will make everyone happy. If everyone's critical thinking is right and based on prudence, all preferences of actions as well as prescribed actions would coincide. However, human prescriptions do not coincide frequently simply because human weakness too often beclouds his critical thinking. This view is supported by Hare. It is important that our moral reasoning according to Perry (1976) reach agreement in our autonomous moral views and judgements, so as to foster mutual respect even when we fail to reach agreement. That is, that the characteristic of a particular kind of reasoning performances by individuals has to coincide with others and vice versa which has to be justified by appeal to the purpose of the performance. So, how does rationality and moral autonomy become compatible in moral discuss/argument?

It can be noted that while rationality appears to involve restraints, moral autonomy appears not. Rationality entails actions which may not necessarily be in consonance with one's desires but autonomy does. A consensus therefore needs to be reached to establish the compatibility of moral autonomy and rationality. Lanfear declared that without reason, virtues of character cannot be exercised and that it is only by the exercise of intelligence, we can develop morally principled traits of character and perform them 'according to right reason' (Lanfear, 1986). This is valid as reason and intelligence are vital and required in the development of moral character. Autonomy on the other hand according to the emotivists, is the expression of a considered and thoughtfully developed taste which helps to maximise preference. These preferences are made thoughtfully in relation to moral life styles. Making autonomy compatible with rationality will require individuals developing authentic and objective thought towards their moral lives which develops especially, when individuals are open to genuine and dispassionate moral alternatives. It is generally known that following social moral norms in forming our conventional morality results in utilitarian consequences which are always at the end in our best interests. This is opposed to ethical egoism which is selfish in nature.

So far, we have been able to consider social values especially, respect and cooperation, in relation to morality, autonomy, rationality, and their place in ethical philosophy particularly, in Africa. At the end, it is realised that acquisition of the right knowledge, application of intelligence and reasoning ability coupled with the will to

carry out appropriate (right) actions are very essential in attaining the required ethical standard development that societies desire from individuals.

Teacher Education and Moral Development

Plato identified one major way to inculcate knowledge and morality in learners. This is through the teacher acting as a role model. It is highly imperative to renew the ideal of teacher as a role model to learners. Tales abound where learners took after the life styles of teachers which negate the principles and philosophies of the country's education system. Plato emphasised the need for teachers as examples/models learners should emulate in the process of moral development. The wrong knowledge acquired by learners through various avenues as a result of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) breakthroughs can be corrected in the classrooms. In other words, teachers can serve as sources of correcting immoral attitudes and actions of learners. Instances in examination malpractice can be corrected using or demonstrating his (that is, teacher's) wordas a good example in examination discipline. The mode of teachers' dressing is another avenue. When learners continually find differences in the dressing pattern they occasionally find in the larger society and that of the teacher who they see daily in the classroom, this can distort their idea or sense of good dressing. In other words, where the teacher fails to provide the necessary mentorship for learners through the classroom interactions, such teacher does not qualify to be a practitioner of such noble profession.

Conclusion

The educational process cannot be considered a veritable tool in the inculcation of right moral actions and appropriate social values in learners when the teachers themselves fail to exhibit and practice this knowledge after passing through the process. The negative attitudes and behaviours of both learners as well as school graduates especially, in Nigeria necessitates a reconsideration of the affective domain of learning in the school curriculum by teacher education. Educators generally are over-concerned and often carried away with the high academic performance of learners. The attitudes and behaviours which the knowledge acquired in schools are expected to shape is given little or no consideration.

Recommendations

The 1969 Curriculum Conference encouraged the practice of education and inculcation of knowledge relevant to the society as a nation, this does not preclude exhibition of right moral characters. Therefore, it is expedient that the nation's educational system and teacher education especially, brings to fore, the importance of teaching social values through every topic taught in each subject in the educational institutions, since knowledge acquired by learners will eventually be utilised through social interactions which will be at best when socially valuable actions are carried out. It is when this is achieved that people will no longer cast aspersions on the school; querying the kind of education it gives to her students. Doubts as to ability/authenticity of the school to inculcate good morals to learners will be eradicated.

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