

Morality and Values in Ibibio Traditional Society

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Abstract

This study examined the moral values in Ibibio traditional society. It presents the fundamental hypothesis of the four cardinal sacred relationships in Ibibio society, character virtues and ethical principles, the social norms and worldview and the significance of Ibibio norms and beliefs governing social co-existence of the people. The purpose of this article is to showcase the rich cultural values of Ibibio people before the advent of European enterprise in Nigeria. Investigation shows that morality and values were the watchwords among the people of Ibibio. The issue of morality has been a predominant one in the minds of the Ibibio over the years. It is on this account that this article tends to showcase what this morality is all about in the perspective of Ibibio culture. More so, in Ibibio, ethics is predominantly anchored on traditional beliefs of Ibibio are hold tenaciously to be their moral values. Therefore, morality is the gateway of a successful living in society; this therefore, gives credence to the values of morality in Ibibio. Therefore, this work recommends that Ibibio people should go back to the former live they lived so as to attract peaceful co-existence among the people of the community

Keywords: Morality; values; Norms; Societal Beliefs, Traditional

Introduction

In the traditional African society, particularly, the Ibibio, morality was one of the guiding elements that engineered the social, political and economic spectrums of the people. The Ibibio community is found in Akwa Ibom State, in the south-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The state is bordered on the east by Cross River State, and on West by Rivers state and Abia State and on the South by the Atlantic Ocean. According to Okpo (2019; 29), morality and values are what defines the culture of the Ibibio people. The prohibition concerning issues like stealing, deception and corruption among others attract societal disapproval and punishment, serving as a deterrent to would- be offenders and thus engendering positive values through abstention. In Ibibio society, a norm is a powerful

social interdiction system relating to any area of human activity or social custom that is venerated and or forbidden based on moral, judgment, religious beliefs and or scientific consensus. The Ibibio has an instinctive knowledge of goodness; she knows the difference between a good thing and a bad one. A good thing is *etinkpŌ* while a bad one is *idioknkpŌ*. Ukpong (2007:95) presents a list of both the positive and negative virtues of the Ibibio. The positive virtues include chastity, hospitality especially to strangers, truthfulness, capacity to refrain from theft, respect for elders, humility, community fellow-feelings, live and let-live, altruism, fairness in judgment, moderation and so on. While the negative virtues are “do not defame” do not gossip” do not laugh at a cripple, hunchback” and so on. Hence, for the Ibibio virtue is the accomplishment of any good behavior or moral conduct and the act of reframing for, immoral conduct. Going by the negative virtues which Ibibio people rejected, according to Ekong (2001:120), include but not limited to the following: selfishness, lying, falsehood, greed, avarice, stealing, adultery, character assassination, dishonesty, witchcraft, fornication, pride, individualism, and gossip. He maintained that virtues are values to be desired encouraged, and enforced, while vices are to be avoided for the good of every member of society as a whole. A virtuous act benefits not just the individual, but the society. These good morals engender the spirit of oneness, solidarity, and peaceful communal co-existence. While the immoral act or behavior is toxic to both the individual and society. Hence, moral life is a life commitment to the development of individual and society.

The Ibibio traditional society, like every other human society, develops a set of norms and values against which behavior within the society. Therefore, Ibibio morality is summed up by the word *Edu* (characters). *Edu* is the overriding trait of a person’s life. It is that which distinguishes a virtuous individual from a vicious one in the Ibibio society. A person with good moral characters acts, behaves, and conducts him or herself in accordance with the positive values of the society. However, the fundamental hypothesis of this research work on morality and values in Ibibio traditional society among others will focus its attention on four cardinal sacred relationship in Ibibio land, character virtues and ethical principles, social norms in Ibibio worldview and the question of what morality is has been a very fundamental issue in the minds of many thinkers in both antiquity and modern times. Great thinkers like Aristotle, Plato, and Confucius have contributed immensely to the definition of what morality is all about. In this essay we will try to examine what morality is by employing different theories and approaches. These different thinkers hold different notions of what morality is. Despite this, they have an agreement that the essence of morality is to create a healthy and peaceful relationship in the society. This is why a philosopher of science like Albert Einstein will say:

The most important human endeavor is the striving for morality in our action. Our inner balance and even our existence depend on it. Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to our lives.

Morality could be seen as the concept of human ethics which concerns matters of right and wrong, good and evil in the society. It is also seen as the quality attributable to human actions by reason of its conformity or lack of conformity to standards or rules according to which it should be regulated. Morality again is looked upon as the sum of socially accepted desires and values in that society.

Webster's New World Dictionary defines morality as:

- a. Moral quality or character, rightness or wrongness, as of an action.
- b. The character of being in accord with the principles or standards of right conduct, right conduct, sometimes specific virtues in sexual conduct.
- c. Principles of right and wrong in conduct.

It is important here to say that the term morality can be defined from dual perspectives which are descriptive and normative senses. In the descriptive sense it refers to a code of conduct put forward by a society, or accepted by an individual for her own behaviour. In the normative sense, morality refers to a code of conduct that given specified conditions would put forward by all rational persons. Mozia describes morality as providing ethical principles that safeguard the right of the individual in the society and points out to him reciprocal duties and responsibilities.¹ Looking at morality from the above perspective, McDonagh (1975:169) describes it as:

a dimension of relationship between people that dimension which is expressed in terms of obligation or duty or call... The relation between situation and principle / rule / values which has been so much debated in recent times is of immediate interest to me in so far as I believe that the debate underlined that our morality is ultimately justified as a respect for persons and not for abstractions such as rule, principle and values.

Suffice it to say here that a discussion of morality does not solely belong to the philosophical domain. In fact, it is said that morality erupted from religion. Morality is the backbone that gives religion its universal strength or power. Morality has been said to be different in the perspectives of religion and philosophy. From the religious viewpoint, morality is associated or attributed to God Himself. According to Emmett Barcalow morality is necessary in any given situation in which people relate and there are possibilities of benefit and harm. The virtue of morality is to imbibe in human behavior

positive values to create conducive environment and peaceful co- existence and to radiate the substantial glory of God. Morality is a practice of virtue. Bertrand Russell opined that morality is the infliction of cruelty with a good conscience. Ernest Hemingway said “I only know that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after.” According to Higgins (1956:42), the word ‘moral’, then, pertains to whatever has a direct bearing on man’s perfect happiness, and the moral aspect of his human acts will be the direct relationship of these acts to his final end.² Morality has been concerned about the cultivation of certain disposition or traits, among which are ‘character’ and ‘virtues’ such as honesty, kindness and conscientiousness.

The Origin of Morality

Etymologically, morality is from a Latin word *moralitas* which connote or depicts character, manner, and proper behavior. Just as man underwent stages of human growth, so also morality developed. Before man reached this present day, moral values had to undergo stages of moral evolution. Morality arises as a result of social abreaction. This begins with social catharsis and ends in social resentment and sometimes to social bitterness. This social abreaction leads to the need for some form of morality as a method of self-control or as a means of controlling those who have no self-control. It is a right - wing response to social abreaction. Nietzsche (1966:82) analyzed this kind of morality as a ‘resentment – based’ morality. Suffice it to say here that in the ancient times when societies were small and stable the important law that existed then was might is right or the mores of the local patriarch. But when changes began to set into the societies, morality was then given birth to. Christopher Boehm opined that morality began when a society of hunter – gatherers punished a member for violating its rules. He submits that social control of this kind is universal. Emile Durchein had a similar conception of social control in the simplest and earliest societies.³

The origin of morality is not universally accepted to come from a single source. Some people are of the view that morality is a facet of man; others argue that origin of morality is from the society and still others believe that religion is the origin of morality.

There are some philosophers, psychologists and biologists who postulated that morality is a product of evolutionary forces and as evidence for continuity with other groups – living organism. Some people opted that moral codes evolved from emotional instinct and intuitions that were naturally selected in the past because they supported survival and reproduction.

In 1982, Christopher Boehm postulated a hypothesis that the incremental development of moral complexity throughout hominid evolution was as a result of the increasing need to run – away from troubles and injuries in a move to open savannah and developing stone weapons. Some theories opine that the increasing complexity was just a correlate of increasing group size and brain size. The catechism of the Catholic Church in a summary form presented the sources of morality to have erupted from three (3) perspectives which are: (a) Object (b) Intension and (c) Circumstances. The morality of human acts depends on the above-mentioned items. These could be called determinants.

The Four Cardinal Relationships in Ibibio Society

According to Inyang, Ankak and Udoekong (2020:64) four cardinal sacred relationship held sacrosanct in Ibibio land, namely: *AbasiUkot*; *AbasiImaan*; *Abasieyeyen* and *AbasiowoInuesiet*.

The above Ibibio words are interpreted thus:

1. *AbasiUkot*: The god of in-laws, which prohibits an Ibibio man from harming his inlaws. According to this beliefs, it is an abomination to hurt or cheat ones inlaws .
2. *AbasiImaan*: meaning the god of kinsman or ally which forbids an Ibibio person knowingly inflicting any harm or ill against his kinsman or ally.
3. *Abasieyeyen*: This is the god of the grandchild. This law emphasizes the sanctity of grandchildren and great grandchildren from any evil devices of the grandparents. In all case grandchildren's infractions are expected to be forgiven by his grandparents unconditionally.
4. *AbasiOwoInuesiet*: This is the god of guests, strangers or visitors. This law prohibits inflicting any ill or harm on a guests, visitor or strangers who is in one's midst whether in one's private residence or in one's community and is in need of shelter or comfort.

Therefore, disregarding the norms regulating relationship with *Ukot* (in-law) *Imaan* (kinsman), *Eyeyen* (grandchild) and *EsenOwo* (one's visitor) attracts communal condemnation and punishment which serves as a deterrent to others and consequently bring about positive values through abstaining.

Character Virtues and Ethical Principles of Ibibio

1. **Beneficence**: This is said to be the first principle of morality because it flows from the popular maxim “do good and avoid evil: This principle of beneficence is it middle in so far as it is partially dependence on its conflict on how one defines the concept of good and goodness. This principle is also understood as “help yourself

and others” The corollary of the principle of beneficence non maleficence which is commonly understood as “do no harm” either to yourself or others. This shares the same characteristic with that of beneficence. The principle of beneficence being the middle principle is the basic for certain specific norms.

2. **Respect to elders:** Ibibio people pay very great importance to respect to elders and greetings as Basden (1966:39) put it:

No man or woman would pass another without exchanging greetings. The health of the homefolk is enquired into... this salutation business is apt to be carried too far at times. Whether on the road or farm, the greetings are often protracted into boredom, although intended to be, and are genuine expressions of goodwill. The ideal seems to be that the more said, the friendlier spirit is manifested, according to the pleasure of the occasion, so is the welcome proclaimed.

If a junior person passes or comes by and elder and fails to greet him (the elder) the latter may turn and greet the former (the junior), if only to tempt him. The junior person would not answer the greeting but would rather greet the elder. Pretending either that he did not notice the elder or forgot to greet him. In any case, the junior person would be rather ashamed and embarrassed. In Ibibio culture, a junior may remove his cap or hat or bow his head while greeting an elder but he is not expected to kneel before him as is the case in Yoruba or Hausa/Fulani culture.

Generally, the Ibibio people treat everyone with equal respect and dignity regardless of gender, ethnic group, nationality, or political affiliation. They respect an established norms, values, and laws of the community in which they are operating. They observe and obey the golden rule: Treat others as you would want them to treat you”.

3. **Integrity:** A typical Ibibio person show personal integrity and tenacity of their convictions by doing what they think is right even when there are pressures to do otherwise. The Ibibio man or persons possess and adhere to high moral principles which in turn draw out the desirable personality that mirrors his or her personal integrity. The individuals that demonstrate integrity are principled and will not sacrifice principle on the altar of expediency.
4. **Hardworking:** another good virtue the Ibibio persons possess is the quality of hard work. According to Umanah (2023: 37) apart from career civil servant, the Ibibiopeople have engaged themselves in, so many occupations to make meaning to their wellbeing. These occupations include fishing, hunting, palm wine tapping, woodwork and crafts.

- (i) *Fishing*- fishing has been an occupation in which both men and women population in the riverine areas, of Ibibio land have engaged over the generations. People residing in the riverine settlement like, Ibiono Ibom, Itu, Uruan, Ini, Eket, Onna, Ikot Abasi, Eastern Obolo, Ibeno etc. are engaged in this occupation. The species of products include tilapia, crayfish, oysters, crabs, tortoise and periwinkles. Some of these products are consumed at home, while greater parts are being sold at the beaches for onward transmission to other states of the federation. Fishing can also contribute to the attraction of foreign investors of (Nana, 2017:203)
- (ii) *Hunting*: hunting has been a traditional occupation of the male folks in Ibibio land this is because Ibibio lies well within the rain forest and mangrove regimes endowed with high vegetation and thick forests. This is natural habit for games like grass cutter, antelope and birds of difference kinds. Hunters who are professionals make good use of the opportunity and make ends meet.
- (iii) *Palm wine tapping* – this vocation is very popular among the Ibibio people. This is perhaps due to the fact that palm win is an importance requirement in every occasion in the whole of south eastern Nigeria. Palm wine is produced from two sources: raffia palm and oil palm trees. The raffia palm wine could also reproduce the popular gin (Ufofob) after fermentation and distillation. They must be capacity building; the exploitation of our natural endowment must enable the people to acquire skills (Nana 2020:208).
- (iv) *Crafts*- the mat weaving industry is very popular in Ibibio land, for example in Itu, IbionoIbom, Ikono and Ini L.G.A. Mat is grown in swamps (*edep*). After the processes of drying and weaving, the finished product is then marketed virtually all over the state and beyond. Women who engaged in this weaving industry use the proceeds to pay for school fees to train their children through educational institutions at all levels. These crafts can also contribute to the growth of local and domestic revenues, for the local companies and the states as well. (Nana, 2017:203)
- (v) *Harvesting and planting*: Ibibio, as an agrarian society, is noted for its dependency on land and its produce. The Ibibio people offer sacrifice before “clearing and planting” to the deities of fertility, asking for peace upon the land during planting season, pleading for fruitful yields of their crops (Nana 2023:148).

5. **Honesty:** This principle speaks about the moral uprightness of a person. The significance of this moral principle can best be appreciated when we think about the opposite of honesty- dishonesty. In Ibibio traditional society, dishonesty was a vicious act that was seriously discouraged. Dishonesty is a form of lying, deception, falsehood, and distorting in the truth in human relationship in society. It is believed that persons that lack honesty will definitely steal and he will not be regarded in the society.
6. **Justice:** This is an indispensable principle through which an ethical person exhibits fairness, impartiality, and fair dealing in the way people are treated or decisions are made. Moral persons, strive to be fair and just in all their dealings. They demonstrate a commitment to both justice and fairness. Consequently, just persons manifest a commitment to fairness, the equal treatment of persons, open mindedness, tolerance for, and recognition of diversity. They ensure that justice and fairness are a crucial part of their decision making.
7. **Service to others:** A typical Ibibio man live a life of service to humanity. This principle is an example of altruism. Altruism means an unselfish concern for the welfare of others with no regard for the cost of oneself. It is a commitment to the service of others. A moral person is not self-centered, but rather he is altruistic in nature, service-oriented person is compassionate, considerate, benevolent, and kind-heart to everyone that come his or her way.

Social Norms and Human Behavior in Ibibio Land

Human behavior everywhere is not governed only by rational decision making, but by the norms of the community. According to Allan and Kate (2006:40) a culture or a society guides the behavior and the thoughts of their members by agreed upon expectations and rules. Norms is a proscription of behavior that affects everyday life. Community norms for instance exist in all cultures throughout the world, and represent a class of informal institutions where traditional, social and religiously governed norms define the human behavior.

Therefore, these norms remain the prime factors that guide conduct and behavior of fellow man in the society. Masaka and Chemhuru (2011:132) opine that norms symbolize the prohibition of an action based on the belief that such behavioris either dangerous or accursed for ordinary individuals to undertake hence caution is required. This is seen in the four cardinal sacred relationship held sacrosanct in Ibibio land, that is *AbasiUkot* (god of inl-aw) *Abasiimaan* (god of kinsman) *Abasieyeyen* (god of the grandchild) and *Abasiinuaesiet* (god of guests, strangers or visitors) which we had earlier discussed. From

anthropological point of view, norm-related prohibitions are largely behavioural in nature. According to Freud (1994:99), the norm's role in any society it exists is to prevent certain behaviour from happening, such as the killing of totemic animals, desecrating sacred places and engaging in certain activities against societal norms. He further pointed out that, prohibitions in every norm can also be conversational in nature of norms encompasses the restriction of people's freedom to talk about certain topics due to social, moral or religious, conventions.

Norms exist in every society and governs how members of such society behave, think, make judgment and perceive their world. According to Eseama (2002:98), the hidden dimension of Ibibio social norms institution revolves around the moral sanctions that help in shaping an Ibibio person. He observes that Ibibio people have an obsession with the desire to inculcate right ethos in an individual. And social norms are among a number of methods through which the character of an individual is shaped in Ibibio cosmology. Norms in Ibibio is teleological in character in that they involve sanctions that are meant to inculcate the most appropriate traits in a person that would make him a worthy member of the community.

Similarly, according to Chigid (2009:174), the avoidance rules in these norms are restrictive and not directive in the sense that they only tell the individual what not to do and what to do" and by implication one is made to pick up desirable behavior traits, otherwise acting contrary to the dictates of this norms invited undesirable consequences. A good character is a solid weapon against various bad behaviors in Ibibio land. According to Osei (2009:20), posits that "norms represent the main source of guiding principles regulating and directing the behavior of individuals and the community towards the Supreme Being and especially the gods and the ancestors in African traditional societies". This is why Freud (1912:73) showed that norms are productions of culture in so far as they are established by the group's recognized authorities to regulate the group. It is the prohibition against touching, saying, or doing something for fear of immediate harm from a supernatural force. Udo (1984:37) observes that in Ibibio society, a norm is a powerful social interdiction system relating to any area of human activity or social custom that is venerated and or forbidden based on moral judgment, religious beliefs and or scientific consensus.

The Significance of Ibibio Norms in the Society

Social norms are rules of behavior that the society used to assess the population. Norms are an expression of interconnectedness of two inseparable dimensions in the African worldview the visible world and the invisible one (Menkiti 2006:48). Norms in Ibibio showed the communal dimensions of one's action. Norms helps the people to recognize

their own importance. Norms in Ibibio helped the people to realize that an improper behavior would always have consequences for them, the community and the nature. Norms were an expression of a quite sophisticated moral system ruling the lives of the people in the community and the life of an individual. By preventing people from doing wrong things, they were helping them to focus on what was encouraged in the community. According to Esema (2002:102), norms in Ibibio are an expression of the natural law; a general set of rules commonly understood by all human beings. In a society where there was no police or access to police is remote, norm served as a guardian of moral values. To a certain extent, they were better than modern law enforcement agencies, because, in most cases, breaking of a norm was associated with an automatic punishment-one did not have to be caught to be punished.

Conclusion

The article mirrored expressly on the morality and values in Ibibio traditional society. It noted that Ibibio moral values and norms are meant to instill correct disposition in people through fear-inducing moral sanctions. These moral values and norms are unwritten laws restraining people from breaking communal custom and laws of the society. Ibibio traditional society is built on integrity, honesty, hard work, service to others, respect to elders and justice. To provide an adequate justification of morality is not an easy task to involve in it is very interesting to see that at in the quest of the justification, what is morally right and wrong are both presented before us. It is pertinent therefore, to choose what term to be morally right is to bring peace and harmony to the society. For man's action to be term good, it must consistently possess some characters that are beneficial to man. Those term bad are characterized by negative influences. Goodness in Ibibio culture cannot be overlooked because it is those acts, behaviors and attitude that are crucial for peace and harmony to reign in a society. To have a good character calls for conscious cultivation of positive moral values like respect, solidarity, generosity and hospitality.

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