

NEXUS BETWEEN MORAL VALUES AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL SOCIETIES

Nenman Danjuma Wapwera

Abstract

There seem to be a strong connection between moral values and economic development in traditional African societies. This connection to a large extent seems to be overlooked and that has attributed to the dwindling economic development being witnessed today in most of the societies. This study aims at re-echoing the nexus between moral values and economic development, specifically in African societies. The study adopts a descriptive analysis of the African moral value system and how it facilitates economic growth within the African region. Findings from this study reveals that despite calls from some quota that economic development has no link with moral values, there is a strong connection between the two so far as African society is concerned. Attempt to separate the two which results to corruption and other immoral actions are part of the causes of the dwindling economy in Africa.

Keywords: Moral values, Economic development, and Traditional African Societies.

Introduction

Moral decadence and the slow pace of economic growth are two issues that the world is still addressing in the wake of the 21st century. In certain cases, the slow pace of economic growth causes an economic meltdown and recession in certain countries (OECD 2019). There are many factors contributing to economic stagnation, particularly in Africa, but one major conundrum is the region's weak financial institutions, as noted by Haber (2008). The disregard for fundamental principles is the only cause of these issues (Apenda 2015). Kose, Sugwara, and Terrones (2020) noted that there have been four worldwide recessions in the past few decades: in 1975, 1982, 1999, and 2009. According to their reports, each of the episodes revealed a contraction in annual real per capita global GDP and broad-based weakness in other key indicators of global economic activity. Trust seems to have no place in institutions and societies that once practiced social cohesion.

Moral problems that plague most societies, such as corruption, nepotism, indiscipline, greed for wealth, banditry, kidnapping, and armed robbery, call for the need to reemphasize moral values (Uzochukwu 2007). Moral values are “those things in human character which we judge as good or bad, right or wrong, progress or reaction, noble or ignoble” (Nwala 1980:295, cited in Uzochukwu 2007:132). The judgement of the people in this context determines the rightness or wrongness of actions. As humans, we are surrounded by norms that we are expected to hold fast to. The ability to abide by such norms defines one’s uprightness in society.

Africans, as observed by Idang (2015) and Udokang (2014), have a system of various beliefs and customs that every individual ought to keep in order to live long and to avoid bringing curses on them and others. This observation is in line with the first view brought forward by Idowu when he mentions that morality derives its source from society. It was mentioned above that there is no single society without dos and don’ts; in that regard, the traditional ethical principles are followed to maintain the social order of African societies. Udokang (2014) maintains that at the heart of African traditional ethics and morality is the African’s concern for the well-being of his brother and neighbour. That core value is held in high esteem by Africans but seems to be lacking in present-day African societies.

Economic activities are highly valued in African societies. The activities cannot be separated from the lifestyle of Africans. High moral values have a way of leading to economic growth in any society. Morality in African society has played and is still playing a key role in ensuring the development of the societal economy. This virtue seems to be fading, and as such, we hear today complaints of moral decadence and the degeneration of the economy in African society that are not known to exist. There is a high need for re-echoing sound moral and economic values for this generation and generations to come.

The relationship between moral principles and economic growth has been studied by academics. Some contend that moral motivation is necessary for economic growth and that growth has morally beneficial effects as well (Friedman 2006). According to Taylor (2014), there are three primary categories into which criticisms of the connection between economics and moral virtue can be divided: How much does virtue exist in everyday economic life? Is economic analysis going too far in areas of conduct that belong outside the purview of economics? Does studying economics in and of itself deter moral behaviour? Taylor (2014)

claims that while economists would rather avoid discussing moral issues, moral judgements are unwilling to ignore economics. As demonstrated by others, morality and character are crucial components of economic growth because they are closely linked to greatness (Elakhe 2014).

This study seeks to point out the connection between moral values and economic growth in African traditional societies. The study aims at investigating the relationship between moral values and economic development using the example from Ngas traditional society as a case study.

Conceptualizing Morality

The concept 'of morality' has been viewed differently from different perspectives and from different disciplines and societies. One can easily equate the complexity of the term with that of religion. There is no definite term for what constitutes morality owing to the diverse nature of people's culture, values, traditions, and even ideologies (Ibekwe 2018). The concept connotes different things to different people, but the underlying principle is that the concept deals primarily with the question of what is right and good and what is wrong and evil in human conduct (Mbiti 1991). Morality spells out the boundary between what is right or good and what is bad or evil.

Etymologically, the term 'morality' is derived from the Latin word "mores," "mor, 'moralis," which means "manner" (Ushe, 2011; Anderdon, 2013; Onwochei, 2007). The term was introduced by Cicero as an equivalent to the Greek '*ethos*', thereby making the terms synonymous with each other (Gammel 2009; Konai and Mukherjee 2018). Anderson (2013) explains that the term morality can be used either descriptively or normatively. The descriptive sense of morality, according to Gert (2012), refers to a code of conduct put forward by any actual group, including a society, whether it is distinguished from etiquette, law, or religion. The descriptive sense can also be seen when morality is used to refer to the important attitudes of individuals. The normative sense of morality as maintained by Gert (2012) refers to the universal guide to behaviour that, under implausible specified conditions, all rational persons would put forward for governing the behaviour of all moral agents. Morality as a term or concept can be applied to many aspects of life, such as religious morality, nature morality, and social morality.

Africans understood morality to simply refer to the combination of social values, norms, and mores and their legitimacy in the community from which they

arise. This is why Wiredu (1998) opines that African ethics is the observance of rules for the harmonious adjustment of the interests of individuals to those of others in society. According to Wiredu (1998), ethics encompasses the full spectrum of human activity that has developed in our interactions with one another, ourselves, and other worlds, in addition to Africa. African morality is viewed by Gyekye (1996) in two ways: first, it is the set of social norms, values, and rules that direct people's behaviour within a society; second, it is the attitude and responses to these norms and rules as ingrained in the entire society with the intention of directing the way of life as good or bad in order to live a communal and harmonious life. African traditional society bases its understanding of ethics on the idea that man is never alone (Husein and Kebede 2017).

African Economy

The pre-colonial Africa, as explained by Ayandele (1996:17), is characterised by a “simple peasant economy, organised in a communal manner with certain levels of technology, which include smiting, pottery, weaving, and clothing industries, bridge construction, building, and general construction” (cited in Uzochukwu 2007:132). The African economy was able to sustain and keep the Africans.

This economy was well sustained before the colonial era. The chief marker of African economic values is cooperation. Two major economic activities in society include farming and fishing. Idang (2015:105–106) argues that farming and fishing in most African societies are cooperative engagements. He notes that friends and relatives would come to assist in doing farm work, not because they will be paid but so that if it happens that they need such assistance in the near future, they will be sure to find it. This idea of communal engagement also encourages men to take pride in having many children, as the children are seen to be the main labour force of the family and society. The collective effort of individuals in society is seen as the most important thing when it comes to economic growth in Africa. This is always stimulated by the spirit of ‘we are better together’.

Adamu and Victor (2013:95) suggest that religion has played an important role in the process of economic development in the very early years of the world's history. Citing the work of Basher and Khan, Adamu and Victor insist that religion affects productivity through certain personal traits such as work ethics, thrift, honesty, and openness to people. These traits may in turn make people

more or less economically productive (Basher and Khan, 2008; cited in Adamu and Victor, 2013). It is indeed true that bad work ethics, dishonesty, and a lack of openness to ideas that will be beneficial to all serve as threats to the economic development of any living human society.

Africans are very interested in creating wealth, as those who strive hard and earn such wealth are respected and considered responsible members of society. Such a wealth must be gathered through legitimate means. Awoniyi (2015:9) opines that Africans seek and place high values on wealth, both private and family (clan). He maintains that the right to and importance of private properties are recognised in the African economic system, where private ownership exists side by side with public ownership. The scholar reiterates that in African societies, families operate independently of the chiefs, who do not control all the dynamics of the traditional economy. The resources of the community can be accessible to any member of the community. With that, the growth of the community's economy lies on everyone's shoulders; the people cooperate to ensure the sustainability of the economy. Alolo (2017:41) also corroborates this claim when he mentions that in most African communities, properties were and are still owned by the community. Alolo did not discard the fact that there are traces of private ownership of properties; he still maintains that "communal property ownership is based on a principle of inclusion." People are carried along in the management of the properties, which in recent times has been hard to come by in our contemporary societies.

Agriculture accounts for around 25 percent of Africa's gross domestic product (GDP). This sector remains a major contributor to the African economy (Ayomide, 2022). Even with this, productivity (most especially that of sub-Saharan Africa) is always rated the lowest across the globe. The reason for the low productivity cannot be far from the fact that most of the workforce has limited access to the tools and support that would enable an increase in productivity (African Development Bank, 2015). But Africans survived before their contact with the Westerners, and as a continent blessed with both human resources, they had been exporting agricultural products to Europe and the West. One now wonders what has gone wrong and why Africa is now rated low in agricultural productivity.

Agbiji and Swart (2015) studied the economy of Africa and concluded that the economic performance of African countries in recent times has clearly not done enough to promote economic diversification, job growth, and social

development. They maintained that while poverty still persists on the continent, corruption is still on the rise. This clearly predicts lost hope for the African economy, but should this be taken as sacrosanct? This is my belief because there are quite a number of indicators that the economy can improve upon.

Mensah and Ozer (2016) describe the African economy as the fastest-growing in the world. Agriculture, according to their submission, was considered to be the frontrunner spearheading economic growth in Africa in the past. The scholars, however, noted that, though the sector is still the largest employer, other sectors like the service sector and the mining and oil sector are noted to be pushing the growth of Africa. The leading economies that are reshaping the economy of Africa are Nigeria, South Africa, and Egypt, with increased growth performance in the service sector, industry, and agricultural sectors. Mensah and Ozer (2016) describe the African economy as the fastest-growing in the world. Agriculture, according to their submission, was considered to be the frontrunner spearheading economic growth in Africa in the past. The scholars, however, noted that, though the sector is still the largest employer, other sectors like the service sector and the mining and oil sector are noted to be pushing the growth of Africa. The leading economies that are reshaping the economy of Africa are Nigeria, South Africa, and Egypt, with increased growth performance in the service sector, industry, and agricultural sectors.

The Nexus between Moral Values and Economic Growth in African Societies

There seems to be some kind of relationship between economics and ethics, or morality. The synergy between moral values and the economy cannot be overemphasised. Uzochukwu (2007) opines that moral values change with changes in the economic structure and religious structure of society. He also submits that moral values are determined by economic and religious forces.

In relating economic development and morality, Elakhe (2014:75) notes that whatever is not generally acceptable as right or good in a particular society or nation cannot contribute to the development of that nation. He further clarifies that if morality has to do with issues of right and wrong, good and evil, and acceptable and unacceptable, it therefore implies that individual values and convictions are involved. These values and convictions play a critical role in determining human behaviour and, thus, economic performance. This is, in a way, trying to establish that there is indeed a connection between morality and economic development. The implication, therefore, is that economic development

strives better in situations where individual and collective values are involved. Elakhe (2014) further observed that most of the underdeveloped and developing countries do not achieve the supreme objective of moral actions, which is “the greatest number’ due to a lack of “good governance, corruption among the leaders, wide spread of moral hazards in public and private institutions, institutional failures, inadequate law enforcement agencies, etc. The scholar opines that adherence to moral values is a key indicator of achieving development in a nation. He then advocates for the promotion of moral values, noting that it will enhance the performance of the economy since the economy cannot be separated from the people. Elakhe concludes that the foundation of economic development in any nation begins with an effective and efficient moral and value system.

Friedman (2005) argues that economic growth has moral benefits. He observed that societies develop moral norms—against violence, favouring family bonds, against theft, in favour of truthfulness—with the aim of getting people to behave in ways that may be of little or no direct benefit to themselves but nonetheless make everyone better off. Such norms, according to his submissions, are no less important in the economic sphere. Friedman further notes that hard work, diligence, patience, discipline, and a sense of obligation to fulfil our commitments clearly make us more productive economically. The scholar reiterates that certain characteristics of personal behaviour are important for economic growth, and when these characteristics acquire moral status, the resulting ethic encourages people to behave accordingly. He insists that moral values nurture the behaviour that spurs economic growth. This submission also emphasises the relationship between morality and economic growth. They go hand in hand.

Morito (2017) contends that ethics and economics are internally related. According to his argument, the simplest way to explain the two is to use the explanatory framework of inter-dependent emergence. This framework holds that trades in the moral economy—which frequently entail commodities and services—are a part of continuing relationships based on reciprocity and trust. As a result, a community of interlocutors is created that is capable of identifying one another's capacities for estimation, intention-making, decision-making, accusation, judgement, and expectation-forming. Morito opines that in maintaining a community's economy, reliability and stability are crucial factors. This, according to the submission, implies that the value and the principles

guiding the relationship become the concerns that each member can be trusted to protect. Trust, which is an ingredient of communal values, is held to sustain a system. Morito notes that “the violation of the moral economy, the violation of trust relations, can create anger, resentment, mistrust, and desire for revenge, resulting in a dysfunctional trade community, as indicated by the near total collapse of the world economy.” He later concludes that treating ethics and economics as if they are externally related is committing conceptual error. In principle, Morito’s position is that morality and economy are inseparable entities if, truly, the economy of society is to be developed without hitches.

African culture and values can be used as a prism through which to examine the relationship between moral principles and economic growth in traditional African countries. With a system of diverse beliefs and rituals that every person should uphold in order to live a long life and prevent cursing themselves and others, African culture is deeply ingrained with moral considerations.

Idang (2015) suggests that the economic values of traditional African society are marked by cooperation. When any of them was in difficulty, all members rallied around and helped him or her. Hence, we can state without fear of contradiction that the economic values of traditional African societies such as the Ibibio were founded on hard work and cooperation (Idang 2015). It takes morally upright individuals to uphold that standard, because a person with a dubious lifestyle will not be trusted in times of cooperation.

Good moral standing is a demand in African society for one to be accepted as living a worthy life. Ancestors demand good moral virtues in order to ensure the prosperity and good health of individuals and the entire community. A person who lacks moral virtues would not be welcomed in the land of the ancestors (Danfulani 2006). Morals keep society from disintegrating. According to Uzochukwu (2007:135), “moral values have the potent powers of helping and creating an enabling environment for societal development.” He went further to mention that any infringement of the values comes with punishment for the culprit. He then summed up that sanctions for moral value breakers serve as deterrents for those who want to engage in immoral acts.

Van der Walt (2003) observes that in traditional African society, a shared morality was the cement of society. In his observation, Van der Walt reiterates that traditional morality in Africa is not about obeying the will of a god or pleasing him but about obeying the will of the community and seeking the

wellbeing of human beings. He went further to mention some of the characteristics of traditional African morality, including “communalistic, anthropocentric, pragmatic and utilitarian, tribalistic, shame-oriented, and this-worldly.” These moral traditions were integral parts of communal life in Africa. The submission therein implies that morality is a strong pillar on which African society leans. Societies across the globe are governed by norms that guide the conduct and activities of their members. African societies also have such norms. Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) avow that in African societies, there are set patterns or codes of behaviour for both individuals and the community as a whole. These codes are to be observed by all. The scholars opined that if such norms are faithfully adhered to, it will be to the good of the individual and society at large, and at the same time, if such norms are not faithfully observed, it will bring disaster not only to the individual but also to the community. These norms, codes, or patterns are what Awolalu and Dopamu referred to as the ‘moral value’. They then see moral values as the fruits of religion, not just human inventions.

Many Africans have a strong belief that each individual has a moral conscience. This moral consciousness is built in the individual by the creator himself (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987). The moral conscience, as maintained by Ikenga-Metuh (1987), pronounces judgements on the goodness or badness of any actions and sometimes reproaches him/her when s/he does wrong. Ikenga-Metuh further reiterates that morality governs man’s understanding of himself and his relationship with beings other than himself. He then postulates that morality in an African context involves a three-dimensional relationship: God, man, and the ontological order. “Morally good behaviour, in Metuh’s view, reaffirms the right relationship between God, man, and the ontological order. Morally bad acts on the other hand negates and disrupts this relationship (233). This position by Ikenga-Metuh clearly depicts that morality is a product of religion since the creator is involved. Well, this position may be right with the Africans in terms of their understanding and value attached to morality.

Religion permeates every aspect of African life. Africans, as noted by Mbiti (1969), are ‘notoriously religious’. The concept of morality in Africa emerges from human relationships with the Supreme Being and the ontological order. The scholar claims that “God gave the moral code of order to the people so that they might live happily in harmony with one another.” He views morality as authoritatively sanctioned by God (cited in Ibekwe 2018). Morality in African traditional religion, according to Mbiti (1991), deals with conceptions of what is

right and wrong, good or evil, and is based on the belief in many African societies that morals are given by God. Mbiti (1991) identifies two kinds of morals, both of which deal with human conduct: personal conduct and social conduct. Personal conduct deals directly with an individual's personal life, while social conduct largely deals with an individual's conduct within their social group or community. Mbiti opines that African morals place more emphasis on social conduct since a rudimentary African view is that the individual exists only because others exist. Mbiti also opines that communalism also plays a vital role in sourcing values in Africa. He maintained that an individual owes his existence to other people. He is simply part of the whole. He insists that whatever happens to an individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to an individual. An individual can only say: "I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am. This idea is supported by several African scholars like, Awolalu, Kwasi Wiredu, and Ikenga-Metuh, Segun Gbadegesin (Adakanya 2020:11).

In traditional Ngas society, for instance, it takes moral uprightness to grow the economy. Aside from the normal communal activities that Africans are known for, sometimes people keep their properties (like animals, farmlands, and even businesses) in someone's care, and only the morally upright keep good care and also give reports on the true picture of their stewardship. For instance, the *Cir* is a practice where someone keeps his sheep or goats in someone's care. The person who takes care of the animals always has a share in the animals in cases of new births. The onus on telling the truth about the care of the animals remains in the hands of the shepherd. If he is morally upright, he tells the owner the truth about the condition of the land. Some people also release their lands for people to farm on, and in return, they give them some percentage of the farm products. It takes honest people to utilise the land well and play their parts in the agreement.

Immoral individuals, such as thieves, adulterers, witches, and evildoers, are viewed as calamities in Ngas traditional society. These individuals are not permitted to attend the community assembly. They are prohibited from participating in group activities, which lowers the number of people who could improve the local economy. They are rejected not only by people in this world but also by those in the afterlife. They are not worthy of adoration as ancestors.

Conclusion

Economic development and morality are inextricably linked. To this end, it is highly recommended that moral values be re-echoed and upheld to bring about the needed changes in the economy. The lack of morals and human greed are, in my opinion, the main reasons of the current global economic crisis, notwithstanding the opinions of certain academics to the contrary. In terms of economic development, moral principles are essential, particularly in Africa. It serves as the cornerstone for many African communities, enabling them to maintain peaceful cohabitation and expand their economies. When both individual and group values are involved, economic development aims to be better. Certain personal behavioural traits are critical for economic development, and when these traits gain moral standing, an ethic is created that motivates people to act in certain ways. The behaviour that promotes economic growth is fostered by moral principles.

The researcher therefore recommends that conscious efforts be made to emphasise the need for maintaining a high moral standard in society. This will in turn aid in helping people approach economic activities with fairness, thereby boosting them.

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