

CONSCIENCE AND SOCIAL ACCEPTABILITY AMONG THE IBANI IN NIGER DELTA, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Makalah ini membahas posisi nurani dalam kehidupan moral masyarakat Ibani. Ditengarai bahwa bagi suku tersebut pengembangan dan perubahan kehidupan moral tidaklah cukup dipercayakan hanya pada pendidikan tradisional, keluarga dan komunitas. Dibutuhkan kesanggupan menerima, dan pemahaman diri tentang, kebesaran sang Pencipta, kekuatan dasyat yang mampu mengubah individu sebagai percik ilahi dan memampukan nuraninya memilah putusan-putusan moral.

Key Words:

•*Conscience Culture* •*Religion* •*Ibani* •*Material Development* •*Moral Authority* •*Institutions* •*Social Grouping* •*Tradition* •*Divine Energy*

Mie nye (character) among the Ibani is the essence of a person's being. The Ibani are the group of immigrants from the central Delta who today are found in the present Bonny and Opobo Kingdoms close to the Atlantic. The Kingdoms thrived on the Palm Oil trade in the sixteenth and Nineteenth centuries, where they were affected by Ibo cultural influences. The Ibani is one of the culture groups inhabiting the Niger Delta, of Nigeria. This is an area that is a bedrock of crisis on account of the under development, environmental degradation, oil pollution and total neglect by oil prospecting companies. Recently, the Niger Delta has become the Centre of hostage taking and kidnapping for ransom. Among the Ibani a person with *mie nye* (character) is one with qualities and behaviour that conform with accepted practices as distinct from those that are bad. *ibi miénye* is good character such as hospitality, respect, generosity, protection of women, opposition to violence, opposition to selfishness, opposition to vandalization, regard for hard work and honour, chastity before marriage and condemnation of homosexuals, etc.

When one is said to have *ibi mieye* it means the individual displays qualities or have some attributes which conform with his/her being adjudged to be good as distinct from those that are bad. Indeed *mie nye* is the very essence that makes life joyful. It give acceptability, good wishes and prayers, to those who possess it. It is what differentiates a human being from an animal. But what determines *mie nye*? Is it possible for *mie nye* to act independently? *mie nye* is determined by conscience – a thought process, which provides a moral guide for our conduct. Conscience, therefore, guides man to make informed independent moral decision. Conscience is a mode of consciousness or thoughts about ones own value or dis-value. Conscience is the Centre of self-assessment, self-criticism and self-appraisal. Among the Ibani, conscience possesses a distinctive critical/evaluative character often employed in assessment and critical value judgement. Conscience guides one in deliberations of what is good or bad actions and beliefs.

Consciences promote good relations among people. For instance, when one maltreats another, he is asked how it would be like if he/she was at the receiving end. This is an expression of the saying “do unto others as you would wish them to do unto you – the golden rule.” This is a clear expression of the role of conscience in promoting good neighbourliness, good relations and happiness among people.

Among the Ibani, culture and tradition also account for the cultivation of conscience. Culture refers to the whole social practice giving meaning that accompanies all social actions and makes it socially meaningful and not mere biologically based reflex or personal habit⁵. The meaning, dimension is a matter of everyday practices and comes up more explicitly when one is faced with difficult situations like injustice, suffering, dilemma or anomaly. The cultural dimension of social practice is often so undefined that it leaves room for quite a number of possible interpretations. Patterns of action are susceptible to change in the course of further actions, they are not fixed. For example bribery or graft may change along with the changes of its forms in practice and its growing complexity thereby changing its meaning. New Practice brings with it additional alterations and unexpected twists to pre-established meanings. It is therefore difficult to control the meaning of a particular belief or value.

On the other hand, tradition implies specific way of coping with the diversities that have emerged in the course of history. It is something invented, not stumbled upon or received. It is a product of human decision in a significant sense. The material that were handed down⁸ and over to one time and place from some other time and place are always much more numerous than those labelled “tradition”. Tradition is often a selection from the wide array of material; often a matter of human attribution. Such selection must be informed by need and must fit in without requiring a total change of already existing way of life. According to Curtin,

If new political features are copied, we can expect to find a local development that needed the support of symbols, roles or structural elements to bolster its own authority. But the basis for that authority must have been there all along, and it must have roots in the local society – its economy, its social structure, its religion its value system.

Even on going customary forms of action and belief do not constitute tradition until they are marked as such and assigned a normative status. What materials is designated “tradition” is a matter of human judgment, which is based on a contestable claim for their centrality or importance in the life of a group. It is important to note that traditional education inculcates values of society into children born into the society and is

believed to be an important agent of moral upbringing. It is however necessary to point out that it is not all the norms inculcated into a people are used in the guidance of their conduct. Whereas some are imbibed, others may change with time and circumstances or may not even be used at all. This is so in view of the evolutionary nature of our moral ideas. For instance, a person's moral principle today may be a completely different thing the next day. An indication that the values from the socializing agents such as tradition, can change in view of the dynamic nature of morality.

The family is another factor that instills the development of conscience among the Ibani. The Ibani family is composed of not only the nucleus or immediate family, but also the extended family. This close family unit because of the structure of life in the community brings them together more often. The family becomes an important agent of socialization. In these formative years of the child, the family plays a crucial role in the development of moral consciousness. Through social interaction, habits, norms, customs prevailing in the society are imbibed and the moral attitude of society begins to develop.

Despite the fact that moral values are rooted in society, not all value systems become imbibed by individuals. This is known as selective acquisition of values. Values change according to circumstance, age or evolutionary trends. This re-enforces the dynamic nature of morality. An individual that develops conscience is said to have *kukubie*, which gives social acceptability in society. A person with good character is said to be well trained or from a good home - *furo tuo*. The concept *ibi mienye* (good character) refers to one who aspires to enable others achieve their life aspirations, but knows the social requirement of society at any given circumstance. This is one whose moral or ethical sense is not only high it has not been changed by the dynamic nature of society.

However, the *furo tuo* (well bred or son of the soil) concept is receiving serious knocks from the twin actions of modernity and westernization. The quest for socio-economic achievement and individualism has gradually eroded the *furo tuo* concept. Although the conscience still remains an important factor in moulding the individual into a true *furo tuo*. As the conscience is developed the social institution gradually takes shape, since the family also constituted part of society's social institutions which formulates moral beliefs that guide the conduct of every body in the society.

Individual and Morality

Individuals must be guided by the interest of others in any social relations. Among the Ibani, individuals made efforts to cultivate good relations. People willingly sacrifice their freedom for the common good. They must ensure that their beliefs, actions and judgement are such that could be seen and adjudged good or bad. Moral judgement is important for the individual despite the fact that society play important role in its existence. It would be erroneous to view morality as entirely social in foundation. No doubt society enthrones the apparatus for its existence, and systematically implants in everyone in the society its moral codes.

Having said that, the thorny question now is what is the source/origin of morality? The notion of morality having a societal source lacked the explanation of what makes morality reasonable, what gives it its notion of value, or what gives it its quality of goodness. The point being made is that the origin of morality may be independent of the reason that morality has some value – short of questioning its source, it is reasonable to conclude that society's sense of solidarity and preservation is based on some social factors adequately harnessed by the collective conscience of the people.

Social Grouping and Conscience

Social grouping and cultural boundaries give qualitative demarcation or identity. Members do virtually every thing everyone in other societies do, whether in education economic, familial or political functions. Social groups function as an association rather than as a separate entity. And they mostly incorporate many elements borrowed from others in the “wider” society and mould them to their own needs. Moreover, social groups are usually not separated by a natural break in social interaction simply because they have to interact with one another. In this connection conscience is but a matter of allegiance to certain standards or moral orientations and not isolation.

Besides no social group has a monopoly of what is right and proper or the various elements that make up its way of life; these elements cross social boundaries and are applied by particular groups in one way or another. For any social group, therefore, the standards of judgement for determining the meaning and plausibility of moral attitude are those internal to the practices themselves. More over, becoming or cultivating conscience is something

akin to primary socialization. Learning to listen to your conscience is like learning a second language. One learns a second language in the same way one learns the first, by an intensive association with a close-knit group of people who already speak it, and conscience like languages can be understood only in its terms. To know the meaning of conscience among a group for example, would be meaningless outside; rather to look at the use of the term within a social group would be more meaningful. The way the term features in stories, beliefs and behaviour of a group is all that matters.

Conscience is not an individual affair, it is cultivated in everybody through certain social institutions. Through these institutions, moral norms, rules of conduct, standards of evaluation and the mechanism for the control of human behaviour are implanted in everybody. Through this process, everyone becomes aware of what conscience is in Ibani society. Indeed during the process of development and regulation of human behaviour, there is the evolution of a sense of shared moral beliefs. Conscience regulates the behaviour of members of the society without recourse to coercion. In other words, creating an enabling environment where individuals can effectively develop their conscience becomes the social responsibility of all²¹. Good conscience leads to the practice of virtue, the right conduct in life and manners, the science of improving the temper and making the heart better. But good character can only strive in an atmosphere devoid of negative social relations.

Religion and Conscience

In present day Ibani and indeed the world over, there exist a growing revival of religion. This is a blessing, as it tends to bring about harmony in the attitude of man to his fellow man. The acceptance of Jesus Christ is an attempt to re-align the heart of people to God. The Bible becomes their guide in their daily activities. This change which some see as a painful spiritual process, is one of the forces that had helped shape and evolve the Ibani culture. Believing in God and His essence is a Universal concept. God is Divine, and the truth is that once this Divine Energy (DE) of Divine Christ (DC) an all embracing power comes into the human body the earnestness and passion to live and be in the spirit of the Divine Energy is the first sign of transformation and acceptance of His will. Once that spirit of Christ that raises the consciousness or awareness to a higher level, - that

is the level of the spirit is attained, one saw things differently. It is only when one lives in the spirit, that the spirit – the spark of God (SG) takes control of the conscience – the inner voice (IV), defeating and reducing the material development (MD) or ego, leading to a moral and acceptable life in society.

The conscience comes alive once the truth is revealed. Rosmini – Serbati has it that truth is reduced to system by organizing single truths among themselves, showing the intimate links that unite one to the other. Truth St. Augustine says must be avidly accepted wherever it may be found. God is truth. He is the Divine Energy whose manifestation is the infinite universe and whose super consciousness permeates all there is with ever increasing clarity of the mystery of Christ, which affects the whole course of human history. God is a universal value. Perhaps, a more effective way of driving home the point being made here, is to state that this enormous consciousness (conscience) is the only way to make man live a moral life, since in Genesis (6:5-6) “God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually”. In order words, the conscience is to guide man to live ethical life, to what is good or bad. It is innate, the inner attribute of God to direct man to himself because God is good. Any man who behaves wickedly and shamelessly is said to have no conscience. Therefore, conscience is the ultimate moral authority.

Conclusion

Conscience is precisely what constitutes this task. Traditional education, family, communities are not the ultimate source of morality but rather God working through the conscience. Religion has its role to play. It made man discover himself, develop his conscience, making him a better citizen of the society and the world. The knowledge of God has transformed the people to a higher level of super consciousness of the Divine spirit (DS), where the conscience directs, dampens and controls our ego so that the higher self (HS) will prevail subjugating the material development (MD) at all times. The Spirit guides one constantly in the determination of the rightness and appropriateness of our decisions and actions. Living in the spirit is tantamount to being a co-creator in active form. This is because being in the spirit makes one operate in the level of God and see things from God's perspective.

End Notes:

1. The *Ibani* are located in two large city-states in the Niger Delta, close to the Atlantic. The Kingdoms thrived on the Palm Oil trade in the 16th and 19th centuries. See also Jones M. Jaja and Kingdom Orji (2006) Impact of Colonial Rule on the Pre-colonial Ndoki Economy 1840 – 1960 in *Journal of Nigerian Languages and Culture – Jonlac* No. 10. Vol. 1
2. It is estimated that in 2006 alone more than 150 expatriates had been kidnapped and released after payment of unspecified amount, running into millions of Naira.
3. Locke, J. (1979) *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, the Clarendon press, Oxford.
4. Childless, J.F. (1979) *Appeal to conscience*. Ethics.
5. Gudsdorf G.P. (1980) *Anthropology*. The New Encyclopaedia Britannica vol. 1. Chicago: Cambridge University Press.
6. McCall, D.F. (1969) *Africa in Time Perspective*. New York, Oxford University Press.
7. See Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger (ed.) (1983) *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press.
8. See Carr, E.H. (1968). Argues that history begins with the handing down of tradition, and tradition means the carrying of the habits and lessons of the past into the future. This means, the records of the past are kept for the benefits of future generations.
9. Most scholars now agree that each culture represents an original development, conditioned by its social and geographical environment. Each culture is also conditioned by the manner in which it uses and enriches the materials that comes to it from outside (through diffusion).
10. Curtin, P. et al (1978) *African History*, London, Longman.
11. The extended family system has collapsed as far back as the 1970. Western education, Christianity and the need for paid employment have totally disrupted the family system.
12. See Ade – Ajayi, J.F. (1965) *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841 – 1891*. Longman. See also Ayandele, E.A. (1966) *The missionary impact on Modern Nigeria 1842 – 1914*, London; Anene, J.C. (1966) *Southern Nigeria in Transition, 1885 – 1906*, Cambridge.
13. Among the Yoruba ancestors exist as Guardian of Domestic Morality and Preserver of Sound Family Tradition. See Idowu, B.E. (1962)

- Olodumare God in Yoruba belief*. Longman Group Ltd.
14. Abimbola, W (ed.) 1975 *Yoruba Oral Traditions Ife*: Department of African Languages and Literature.
 15. See Jaja, J.M. (1995) *Opobo: A Cultural History 1870 – 1980* unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.
 16. Barth, F. (1969) *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries Boston*; Little Brown.
 17. Wiredu, K. (1992) “The Moral Foundation of an African Culture in Wiredu and Gyekwe (ed.).
 18. McIntyre, A (1988) “A Second first language in *whose justice*”? *Which Rationality?* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
 19. Jaja, J.M.(1996) The Cultural Historian and the role of inculcation of Nigerian Culture in School Children in *JOTASE – Journal of Technical and Science Education*. Vol. 1 and 2.
 20. Akin Wowo, A.A (1990) “Contributions to the Sociology of Knowledge from an African Oral Poetry. See also Afolabi Ojo (1966) *Yoruba Culture*. University of Ife and University of London Press Ltd.
 21. Nwigwe, B.E. (1994), *Ideological links Between Christianity and Greek Philosophy*. Port Harcourt. Hercon Press Ltd. See also Eboh, M.P. (1993) *Introduction to Philosophy and Philosophizing*. Claretian Institute of Philosophy, Maryland, Nekede, Owerri.
 22. Rosmini – Serbati (1977) *Dizionario Filosofico*, a cura D, Giulio Banafede, Fiamma Serafica di Palermo.
 23. St. Augustine, *The Confessions* Book 1, 1
 24. Flannery A (ed.) (1977) *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Costello Publishing Company New York.
 25. *Bible*, The.

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6. Carr, E. H. (1968) *What is History*. Middle Zex Penguin.
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21. St. Angustine, the *Confessions* Book 1.
22. *The Bible*.