

**DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDE AND MORALITY: QUEST FOR
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

By

ORPELOYE, H. O.

Department of Philosophy & Religious Studies
Joseph Ayo Babalola University, Ikeji-Arakeji, Osun State.

Abstract

This paper argues for a necessary connection between strong moral values, democratic practices, and achieving sustainable development in Nigeria. It contends that without a return to ethical principles and virtues, attempts at democracy will remain theoretical, and sustainable development will be an illusion. Nigeria, like many African nations, is undergoing a complex transition from traditional to modern society. This process demands not only physical change but also a shift in the mindsets of its leaders and citizens. The paper identifies bad leadership, poor followership, and corruption as key impediments to progress. While existing efforts at promoting sustainable development are acknowledged, the paper critiques their limitations, particularly the misconception of what true sustainable development entails and the rejection of moral values integral to its success. Through a critical analysis of existing literature, the paper aims to address the gap in understanding the crucial role of morality in achieving sustainable development within a democratic framework specifically in the Nigerian context. It argues for the development of a values-driven approach that goes beyond existing blueprints and offers concrete recommendations for fostering ethical leadership, promoting civic engagement, and addressing corruption in Nigeria. By focusing on the Nigerian case, the paper ultimately contributes to a broader discussion on the importance of moral foundations for sustainable development across Africa

Key Words: Morality, Democratic Attitude, Sustainable Development

Introduction

Nigeria, the vibrant heart of Africa, pulsates with the hopes and dreams of its youthful population. Yet, the path towards a truly democratic and sustainable future remains precarious. While democratic structures exist – constitutions, elections, and multi-party systems – their effectiveness hinges on a cornerstone often neglected: morality. This paper argues that a robust moral foundation, woven from shared values and unwavering virtues, is the essential thread that binds a functional democracy to the pursuit of sustainable development. Despite the outward trappings of democracy, Nigeria grapples with a multitude of pressing issues that threaten the very legitimacy of its democratic practices. These issues are not isolated but rather a tangled web that weakens the entire system. The specter of electoral fraud looms large. Accusations of vote-buying, ballot stuffing, and voter intimidation continue to cast a dark shadow over elections. This not only disenfranchises citizens but also erodes public trust, the lifeblood of any functioning democracy. A sense of helplessness and cynicism sets in, leading to a vicious cycle of low voter turnout and further manipulation.

Endemic corruption, a hydra with countless heads, siphons the lifeblood out of the nation. Public funds meant for vital development projects, from education to infrastructure, are diverted to enrich a select few. This not only hinders progress but breeds a deep-seated resentment within the populace. The very notion of democratic representation becomes a cruel joke when leaders prioritize personal gain over the collective good. Political parties, often lacking internal democracy, prioritize patronage networks over well-defined policy platforms. This fosters a culture of self-interest and undermines accountability. Leaders become beholden to powerful figures that bankrolled their campaigns, not the electorate they are meant to serve. Disillusionment with the political system leads to a disheartening apathy among the citizenry. Low voter turnout becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. When citizens feel their voices are unheard and their votes don't matter, they disengage from the very process that is supposed to represent them. This lack of participation strengthens the stranglehold of those already in power, further entrenching the status quo.

These interconnected issues highlight the urgent need for a moral awakening in Nigeria. A citizenry, grounded in ethical principles such as honesty, integrity, and a commitment to the common good will demand better from their leaders. They will hold them accountable for their actions and resist the allure of quick, ill-gotten gains. This moral foundation is the fertile ground from which a more just and equitable society can take root. This paper delves deeper into this intricate relationship between morality, democratic practice, and sustainable development in Nigeria. It

explores how a strong moral foundation can address the pressing issues plaguing Nigerian democracy, ultimately paving the way for a future where both democracy and sustainable development can flourish.

Morality and Public Life

In any discussion on morality and public life, Man plays a critical and pivotal role on issues bordering around morality and public life. Apart from being an individual, man is also a social being. As an individual each man is complete, independent and distinct from other men. Also, as a social being, man cannot fully live as man or develop, and actualize his potentials outside of fellowship with other men. It is in view of this inability of man to meet his existential needs and develop his potentials all alone that led to the emergence of society and the sense of morality. Morality therefore, from this perspective is a creation of the society. Morality is derived from the Latin word "mores" which means custom" (Ekanola, 2008). Morality is sometimes used interchangeably with ethics which is the branch of philosophy which deals with tightness and wrongness of human conduct. There are certain actions which all of us would condemn as morally wrong and ought not to be done. For instance, armed robbery, embezzlement of public funds, bribery and corruption and other related vices are regarded as morally wrong. There are certain other actions which all of us would consider as morally right, like kindness, honesty, hospitality and respect for human life. It is in connection with these moral rights and vices that the importance of morality in public life assumes a prestigious pedigree. Men as social beings have both material and spiritual needs. For society to achieve its aim of empowering man for good and transforming society, it must be holistic. That is, it must cater for man's temporal needs and his eternal goals. It must address the needs of his socio-economic, cultural and political as well as moral life. Moral development is a process of developing acceptable behaviour or patterns of interaction with other people. It is through social development that individuals develop appropriate social skills, values and morals for the sustenance of the society (Ekanola, 2008).

Moral principles guide individuals in society to leverage their reasoning and education for positive personal growth and a fulfilling life. An educated man without morals is like a suicide bomber with grenades strapped to his waist. Learning without character or education without morality turns a ruler of a people into the chief looter of the people's wealth. It is morality that checks and moderates the excesses of man and channels his resources away from destructive uses towards the development of the society. The point we are trying to make here is that without thinking and acting morality, it may be practically impossible to pursue development in any sphere of

human experience as people would be egoistic in the pursuit of material development without its complements in morals.

The Concept of Democracy

Democracy, a seemingly straightforward concept, proves surprisingly challenging to define universally. Its widespread adoption across diverse societies reflects a core appeal, yet scholars grapple with the nuances that constitute a true democracy. While some argue for a clear-cut definition, others emphasize the complexities inherent in its real-world application. One popular view positions democracy as a system where power resides with the people, exercised either directly or through elected representatives. This translates to a set of fundamental rights for citizens: the right to vote, express their opinions, participate in decision-making, and hold their leaders accountable. However, scholars like Schumpeter (1942) argue for a more minimalist definition. They propose that elections are the core element of democracy, functioning as a mechanism for peaceful power transfer through competition for votes. This perspective suggests that democracy isn't necessarily about direct "rule by the people," but rather the ability to choose leaders and replace them if necessary (Przeworski, 1998). Additionally, Riker (1982) and Hardin (1999) emphasize the importance of ensuring free and fair elections to maintain this power transfer mechanism.

However, Wiredu (2001) has a contrary view about defining democracy. According to Wiredu a notorious thing about democracy is that it is easy to define but difficult to interpret (2001:227). Owolabi, (1999:4) identified two reasons for lack of consensus among scholars on what democracy is. The first is that democracy has become, in current usage, another word for political decency and civilization. As an idea, democracy today has become an honorific title and passed into the catalogue of universal virtues. Democracy, in a way, has become a moral concept with regimes laying claim to it just for the sake of survival without any commitment to its ideals (Owolabi:2004:4). In view of this assertion, it becomes very-difficult for an agreement to be reached because of the diverse political regimes and systems that lay claim to democracy without being authentically democratic.

Another reason given by Owolabi on why democracy is difficult to define is on account ideological connotation. On this view, the ideological struggle between the socialists and the capitalists has generated a situation where regimes are conferred with a democratic title, not because of its participatory tendency, but mainly because of its ideological persuasion. Explaining this problem further, (Gitonga 1988:6) made the following observation about this problem. There is no doubt however that

the substance or content of what is desirable as democratic is a function of the ideological bent of the term. As the ideological bents or political families are many and diverse, so too are the meanings attached to the term. The deduction from the above assertion is that the meaning an individual scholar gives to democracy is a product of his ideological leaning/ orientation. What then is democracy? Etymologically, the term 'democracy' comes from two Greek words "demos" which means "people" and "kratei" which means "rule" (Irele, 1988:6). Central to the notion of democracy is the idea of the sovereignty of the people. Democracy as the rule of the people gives not only an express right of participation to the people in the process of governance but accords the will of the people supremacy over any other interest or groups. Democracy is also defined as a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by *citizens, acting indirectly through* the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives. For Noam Chomsky, (1992) "a society is democratic in so far as the public can play a meaningful role in managing their own affairs". In spite of the differences in the conceptualization, all versions of democracy share one fundamental objective, that is, how to govern the society in a way that power actually belongs to the people.

Sustainable Development

The idea of sustainable development was formulated in the 1970's by the World Commission for Environment and Development usually called the Brundtland Commission. It was this commission that popularized the concept and ever since it has become an indispensable notion in any discussion about national development.

Sustainable development is defined as an enduring, remarkable, non-terminal improvement in the quality of life, standard of living and life chances of the people. It is viewed as a development that must be capable of surviving generations over a long period of time. The World Commission for Environment defines sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. (NCED,1987).

Kelley-Laine (1997) views *sustainable development from two* perspectives. First, is from the perspective human situation and second, from the environmental perspectives. For him, the environment plays a fundamental role in development sustainability. Social well-being can be measured in terms of the extent to which the environmental functions and assets are left intact. Babawale (2008) has a similar view with Kelly-laine on the issue of how development is to be understood. In his view, development has to do with improving and refining that which is already in existence and adapting it to contemporary requirements. The second process

involves finding solutions to new problems or new forms of solutions to old problems. Both imply creative responses to social, political and economic affairs. Sustainable development can therefore be defined as a conscious, deliberate and systematic policy of ensuring the survival of a state in such conditions that the social, economic and political necessities that are imperative for the enjoyment of the good life in the utilitarian sense are immediately available. That is, ensuring the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

Morality, Democratic Attitude, Sustainable Development and Utilitarianism

In most African societies preoccupation with development has had only marginal success. Many scholars have suggested causes these problems to include corruption, misconception of development, insufficient technical assistance, incompetent management, inappropriate policies, among others. Claude Ake, (2001, vii) wittingly asserts that political conditions are the greatest obstacle to development. From his assertion therefore, some measure of correction is desirable in the political terrain of our national life if, indeed, we desire sustainable development. The panacea for this problem lies in moral values and Virtues which morality enhances. Virtue is any human excellence of character. This includes any quality of human character that is admired and valued. From the utilitarian perspectives of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1833) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1872) the foundation of morals is utility or the greatest happiness principle. Utilitarianism is an ethical theory based on the principle of utility, the principle of the greatest good or the principle of the greatest happiness of the greatest number, Mill (1949:35) emphasized the altruistic aspect of utilitarianism which is concerned, not necessarily with the happiness of the doer of an action, but the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people. Utilitarianism is therefore not individualism or egoism but, on the contrary, a theory that is concerned about the happiness of people in general. In other words, the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent's own happiness but that of all concerned. Between his own happiness and that of the others, utilitarianism requires him to be strictly impartial as disinterested and benevolent spectators.

A combination of utilitarian ideals, moral virtues of temperance or self-control, justice and accountability which is one of the cardinal ideals of democracy, are the essential and necessary values which our politicians need to imbibe and apply in the discharge of their duties to the common people since it has been observed that the major obstacle to development domiciles the political terrain. (Ake, 2001).

The virtue of temperance which is the steadfastness in choosing higher personal values rather than lower bodily values should be imbibed. It is our view that lack of temperance of will in choosing higher public or societal values rather than personal values in line with the utilitarian ideals could be the lacuna in fostering democratic attitude among our people.

The Harmful Grip of Political Corruption in Nigeria and the Way Forward

Corruption, a pernicious cancer, eats away at the fabric of every society it infects. In Nigeria, this malignancy thrives particularly well within the political arena, posing a major threat to the nation's progress and prosperity. On this note, this session explores the multifaceted nature of political corruption in Nigeria, its devastating consequences, and the urgent need for a new generation of leaders to steer the country towards a brighter future.

While the outright theft and misappropriation of public funds are undeniable hallmarks of political corruption, its tentacles reach far deeper. It manifests in insidious practices like nepotism, where public positions are awarded based on personal connections rather than merit. This undermines the potential for a competent and qualified leadership to emerge. Furthermore, well-intentioned policies are often deliberately misapplied to benefit a select few, often those in power. Instead of serving the collective good, these policies exacerbate existing inequalities and marginalize the needs of the most vulnerable (Falana, 2012).

Perhaps the most destructive form of political corruption is the rigging of elections. This foundational attack on democracy undermines the legitimacy of the entire system. Through vote-buying, intimidation, and manipulation, the very concept of free and fair elections is eroded, leading to a government that lacks true democratic representation (Folarin, 2014).

The consequences of political corruption in Nigeria are far-reaching and deeply damaging. Erosion of public trust is a major outcome. When citizens witness the blatant misuse of power and public resources for personal gain, their faith in the government evaporates. This apathy and cynicism cripple civic engagement, hindering progress and fostering a sense of helplessness.

Furthermore, political corruption stifles economic development. Resources that should be invested in vital sectors like education, infrastructure, and healthcare are diverted to enrich a select few. This lack of investment weakens the overall economy, perpetuates poverty, and hinders the nation's ability to compete on a global scale. The ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor is another consequence of

political corruption. Corrupt practices often disproportionately benefit a select elite, further marginalizing the majority. This economic inequality breeds social unrest, instability, and a sense of injustice (Folarin, 2014).

Finally, political corruption undermines the very foundations of democracy. When elections are rigged and the rule of law is disregarded, democratic institutions weaken, and citizen participation suffers. A culture of impunity emerges, emboldening others to engage in corrupt activities, perpetuating the cycle and reinforcing the stranglehold of corruption on the nation. The path forward for Nigeria is clear: a new generation of leaders is desperately needed. These leaders must be imbued with a fervent patriotism, driven by a genuine love for their country and its people. Accountability is paramount; these leaders must be transparent and responsible in their actions. Furthermore, they must possess unwavering moral principles and a commitment to the rule of law. Ultimately, they must be dedicated servants of the people, prioritizing the collective good and the aspirations of the citizenry. Only by nurturing such leaders and dismantling the web of political corruption can Nigeria break free from its grip. A future of sustainable development, economic prosperity, and a vibrant democracy awaits the nation on the other side of this struggle. The fight against corruption is a fight for the soul of Nigeria, and its success will determine the nation's destiny.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the relationship between democratic attitudes and sustainable development cannot be denied. A democratic society that values participation and transparency is more likely to prioritize sustainable attitudes that will benefit both current and future generations and in doing this, corruption should be jettisoned at all phases of the society structure. Hence, this paper has argued that a strong connection between democratic practices, ethical principles, and moral values is essential for achieving sustainable development in Nigeria. Without a firm foundation in morality, attempts at democracy will remain hollow, and sustainable development will be an elusive dream. It also identified key challenges to progress, including bad leadership, poor followership, and the pervasive issue of corruption. It has also acknowledged the limitations of existing approaches to sustainable development, particularly those that neglect the crucial role of morality. Moving forward, a values-driven approach is necessary. This approach should go beyond mere blueprints and focus on fostering ethical leadership, promoting active and informed civic engagement, and tackling corruption at its roots. By nurturing a citizenry that prioritizes ethical behavior and actively participates in the democratic process, Nigeria can create a fertile ground for sustainable development.

The Nigerian case highlights a broader issue – the critical role of moral foundations for sustainable development across Africa. By addressing the challenges identified in this paper and implementing the proposed recommendations, Nigeria can not only secure its own future but also serve as a model for other African nations striving for a more just, prosperous, and sustainable future.

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