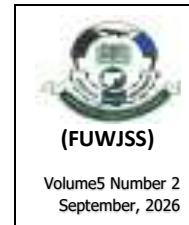


EXISTENTIAL CONTRADICTIONS IN NIGERIA'S CULTURAL-MORAL VALUE SYSTEM

Bahago Abraham Jhein

Department of Religion and Cultural Studies
Plateau State University, Bokkos, Nigeria
Email: abrahamb@plasu.edu.com.ng



Abstract

Nigeria is a country of diverse cultures and traditions with different ethnic groups, which each one has its own value system and is been observed by adherent followers. Nigeria is said to be a moral society, but with the coming of western civilization, the people seem to go for what is best for them, and that has left a huge question of; what now is right and wrong as to moral value? This paper adopts the qualitative research approach which relied on systematic review of secondary textual sources purposely sampled and subject in examining how Western contact reshaped Nigeria's indigenous moral reasoning. This paper concludes that Nigeria's cultural-moral value system has not collapsed but is being actively renegotiated under the combined pressure of colonial legacy, globalization, and modernization, producing a widening gap between urban and rural communities. It is in this light that this paper recommends that families, religious bodies, and cultural institutions must deliberately transmit indigenous values to younger generations through storytelling, festivals, and mother-tongue use. Also, the National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO), which is Nigeria's premier cultural training institute, dedicated to fostering national integration, cultural awareness, and professional development in the culture sector must work towards the integration of culture into everyday life and national policies, ensuring that Nigeria's rich heritage remains a powerful force for development, unity, and global recognition.

Keywords: Culture, morality, diversity, value system, development

Introduction

This paper examines the existential contradictions within Nigeria's cultural-moral value system: the tension between an indigenous, community-centred moral order that predates European contact and the individualist, materialist orientations introduced through colonialism, Christianity, Islam, and, more recently, globalization. The central concern of cultural moral value system is historical. As Onyekachukwu (2019) states globalization and western culture have the potentials of eroding Nigeria's cultural values. This brings Nigerian mind to say, colonial conquest,

Christian evangelization, and Western education did not simply add new values to the Nigerian cultural values system, but they actively devalued it, labelling communal, elder-centred, and spiritually grounded practices as primitive and superstitious while presenting Western individualism, secularism, and material achievement as supreme. Kelani (2013), sees this in a broader perspective in saying, Nigerians tend not to like their own cultural values; but seem to prefer the Western cultures to their own. Kelani's view can result into a cultural-moral order that is neither fully indigenous nor fully Western, but exists in a state of unresolved contradiction, visible today in the widening gap between what communal values prescribe and what globalized, urbanized, migration-driven life increasingly rewards. It is in this regards that this paper traces the historical roots of Nigeria's cultural-moral value system, identifies where Western contact introduced distortion rather than mere change, and examines how these contradictions play out in family life, gender roles, migration, religion, and cultural policy in contemporary Nigeria.

The term '*Culture*' is derived from three elements: values, norms and artifacts. Values are ideas about what is important in life. They guide the result of culture. Norms are expectations of how people will behave in different situations. Each culture has different methods ailed sanctions for enforcing its norms. Sanctions vary with the importance of the norm; norms that a society enforces formally are called laws. Artifacts are materially observable things used by the people. They are derived from people's values and norms (Ogunbameru, 2006). UNESCO sees culture as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs (Jimoh, 2013).

Hornby, A.S. (2010) also sees culture as the customs and beliefs, art, ways of life and social organization of a particular country or group. In simple terms, it is the totality of a people's way of life. Culture includes history, religion, morality, economics, politics, social life (marriage, leisure, rites of passage, behavioral traits and patterns), literature, music, folklore and belief systems (Abara, 2011). Culture covers everything made by man in his environment and embraces the things we believe in, and the things we value and appreciate. It is also a distinctive way of life of a people; their complete design for living. (Onyekachukwu, 2019). All these definitions made one to deduce that before the coming of Christianity and Islam, Nigerian cultures have been guided by moral laws, which safeguard the tradition of the society and communal living which is paramount in the Nigerian cultural society. Culture is known for high values, morals, and

belief to be one with nature and the cosmic world; which helps gives distinction between the sacred and the secular, and the pure and impure.

Morality, originated from the Latin word '*Moralitas*' (which means manner, character, and proper behavior), is the differentiation of intentions, decisions, and actions between those that are distinguished as proper and those that are improper (Long & Sadley, 1987). Gamlund (2012), also buttress that morality is the moral beliefs, views, and attitudes of given individuals, societies, and groups. The word "ethics" is "commonly used interchangeably with 'morality,' and sometimes it is used more narrowly to mean the moral principles of a particular tradition, group, or individual. Ethics is the systematic reflections on moral views and standards (values and norms) and how one should assess actions, institutions, and character traits. Ethics (also known as moral philosophy) is the branch of philosophy which addresses questions of morality. Morality can be a body of standards or principles derived from a code of conduct from a particular philosophy, religion, or culture, or it can derive from a standard that a person believes should be universal (Stanford University, 2011), which could be at least partly a product of culture that emerged to facilitate and structure social cooperation, and a major means of accomplishing this end is through influencing socialization processes and thereby shaping motivations of the individual (Wong 2006).

Nigeria is a country with different diversity in culture, tradition and way of life; this alone shows how the country is rapidly changing. These different ethnicities bring about various cultures, religions, and worldviews, Skidmore (2023) was right in seeing diversity as the ways in which people are different. This helps to ensure that ideas, opinions, suggestions, and governing laws are representative of the people who are differently merged. This diversity is multiculturalism, with a group of diverse individuals from different cultures or societies. It is also sometimes used to mean the variety of human societies or cultures in a specific region, or in the world as a whole. The culturally destructive action of globalization is often said to have a negative effect on the world's cultural diversity (Gbaeren & Dankaro, 2025).

The bedrock on which every society lies on is its value system. These values help to shape the behaviour of the people in the society. These values, because they are good are being transmitted from one generation to another. Jimoh (2013), sees cultural values as those worthwhile and acceptable aspects of non-material of a people which help in moulding the character of the people. The Nigerian value system is rooted in every culture, that affect man's ways of life, behaviour, knowledge, belief, tradition, custom, religion, music, art and craft, dressing, food, and any other capabilities. Any society without a value system cannot endure to the next generation, because what sustains a society is its value system.

Vihara (2007) observes that a debate concerning the nature of moral thinking in traditional societies has long dominated the scholarship of ethical thinkers and social anthropologists alike. According to Mofoluwawo and Ajibade, (2019), they were right in saying the effect of globalization on various aspects of the life of developing nations has always been controversial. Recently emphasis has been on the impact of globalization on African cultural values. There is the fear that ultimately, globalization aims at cultural homogenization and that the culture that will emerge at the end of the day will be predominantly American, thus Americanization. Globalization is a critical tool for cultural homogeneity and end to cultural diversity in the world. The cultural and linguistic differences accompanying ethnic divisions in Africa have been weakened by the forces of globalization.

This shows that in traditional cultures, there are no behavioural patterns of the purely secular kind, which exist in more complex societies, such that relationships between individuals in society only had a religious under stone due to the effect of globalization. The practical aspect of belief in culture is not only worship but also human conduct. Belief in God and in other spiritual beings implies a certain type of conduct, conduct that respects the order established by God and watched over by the divinities and the ancestors. At the centre of cultural morality is human life. Nigerian cultures have a sacred reverence for life, for it is believed to be the greatest of God's gifts to humans. To human beings are inserted within a given community and it is within this community that one works out one's destiny and every aspect of individual life. The promotion of life is therefore the determinant principle of Nigerian morality and this promotion is guaranteed only in the community (Magesa, L. (1997). Living harmoniously within the community is therefore a moral obligation of life. Religion provides the basic infrastructure on which this life-centred, community-oriented morality is based. John Mbiti famous phrase: *"I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am"* captures the ethical principle well (Mbiti, J.S. 1969). The implication is that one has an obligation to maintain harmonious relationships with all the members of the community and to do what is necessary to repair every breach of harmony and to strengthen the community bonds, especially through justice and sharing.

Gyekye (2010) in Standard Encyclopedia of Philosophy views that the ethnics of a society is embedded in the ideas and beliefs about what is right or wrong, good or bad character. It is also embedded in the conception of satisfactory social relations and attitudes indicate that many colonial administrators in their dispatches to their colonial metropolis used to refer Africans as "this incurably religious people". Assertions about the religiosity of the African people have led some scholars to maintain that there is a connection between religion and morality in African ethics. That some

connection may exist between religion and morality is conceivable in an environment that is widely alleged to be pervasively religious. But the nature of the connection needs to be fully clarified.

Mbiti's (1977) obvious Christian orientation is evident in his treatment of the perception of a creator God responsible for the establishment of a religious and moral order. African indigenous religion (if the generalization here may be excused) confirms the existence of a creator God, but it does not appear to be diffusing all aspects of religion is the relatively meagre representation of creation myths. Neither can it be continued that the indigenous African believe in a creator God by observing the Universe, which question whether the belief dominates all other beliefs.

There exists a religious order of the universe and that the creator is considered responsible for this. God gave the moral order to people so that they might live happily and in harmony with one another, (Mbiti, 1977). This means we should view morality as an authoritative code of conduct directly sanctioned by God. The moral code is therefore not autonomous but its autonomy is derived from the creator Himself, God. Any breach of the moral code would accordingly be an offence against God and his instruction. This view does not concur regarding man's position at the centre of the universe, also reflected in creation myths. Mbiti does not relate the keeping if the moral code of any form of a concept regarding divine reward as one would expect from a divinely sanctioned code of conduct. When he elaborates on specific morals, the value is measured in terms of what governs individual and socially acceptable conduct to the benefit of the well-being and to avoid taboos. When he further claims that these morals are embedded in people's practices, customs and rituals and are related to socially inscribed modes of actions derived from experiences of what is in the interest and well-being of the community. The assumption that God gives people their moral conduct and that he is the moral guardian is an unsubstantiated, a prior. It is obvious in this instance that Mbiti is still promoting the idea that faith in a creator God gives sense to morality and not the contrary. This controversy defines the two major critical positions regarding an African conceptualization of morality: one, for example Mbiti claims that religion is the source and foundation of morality, and the other promotes the idea the moral imperative is logically independent from religion.

Origins of Nigeria's Cultural Norms and Moral Value System

Nigeria's cultural value system is best understood as a broad set of pan-Nigerian or "African" values that almost everyone recognizes, sitting on top of enormous ethnic and regional variation, with religion threading through both. This value system is what guides the society in knowing what is right or wrong, good or bad, and pure or impure.

Nigeria has the highest population in Africa of about 242 million people as of 2026 and is home to 250 ethnic groups speaking over 500 languages, with great cultural diversity arising from the variety of customs among them. The Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo together make up more than 60% of the population, with other sizeable groups including the Ijaw, Efik, Ibibio, Annang, Ogoni, Tiv, Urhobo-Isoko, Edo, and Itsekiri. Geographically, the three largest groups dominate distinct regions — Hausa-Fulani in the north, Yoruba in the southwest, Igbo in the southeast — while the Middle Belt states host the country's greatest ethnic mixing. Religiously, the country is close to evenly split: a 2009–2011 Pew estimate put Muslims at just over 50% and Christians at just under 51% of the population, with about 1% practicing other faiths, mainly African Traditional Religion. So, any Nigerian value system has to be read as a shared core expressed through very different regional and religious idioms. (Demographics of Nigeria, 2026).

Traditions and culture are essential pillars in Nigerian communities, shaping identities, values, and social bonds. With over 250 ethnic groups, each region has unique customs that bring people together, preserving heritage and guiding daily life. The National Institute for Cultural Orientation, describes cultural values as shaping behaviour, which in turn forms character, and the collective character of individuals defines a nation's strength. (Segun, 2026). Nigeria being a multi-cultural country is known for its unity in diversity. Despite the diversity, is for known for respect for elders, communal solidarity, religious faith, hospitality, industriousness, cultural pride, and integrity within the community as the seven values that recur most consistently. Other values include the sacredness of life, good human relations, honesty, friendliness, a particular relationship to time, and reliance on proverbs as a shared moral language. (Nwauzor 2014).

Communalism is usually treated as the anchor value everything else hangs off. It is an awareness that identifies a person not as an isolated individual but as someone whose existence and survival depend on union with others in their community — closer to the Southern African idea of Ubuntu than to Western individualism. In practice this shows up as financial interdependence, attending funerals and weddings of distant relations or colleagues, and a general expectation that wellbeing is a shared project, not a private one. (Ogbujah, 2014).

The respect for elders and hierarchy is another strong value being upheld by Nigerians, which is probably the most visible value to an outsider. It is expressed through specific physical gestures like kneeling, prostrating, or bowing depending on the ethnic group, plus honorific titles and an expectation that younger people would not openly contradict their elders. This isn't merely ceremonial - it organizes real authority. Disputes are often resolved by elders and traditional rulers who mediate using proverbs and

allegory rather than formal adjudication, and traditional rulers and religious leaders carry real social weight even without formal political power. This deference facilitates social order but can also encourage uncritical acceptance of authority even when that authority is corrupt or inefficient - a genuine internal debate within Nigerian society about whether the hierarchy is always serving people well (Omenma hotels, 2024).

Religion is not a separate compartment of life but runs through public and private spaces alike - it shapes business hours, what to eat and what not to eat, political positions, and moral reasoning, with people discussing faith openly in professional settings in ways Western cultures tend not to. Friday prayers, Sunday service, and frequent invocations of God in everyday conversation are simply part of how social life is organized, regardless of which faith. That is why hospitality is treated almost as a moral obligation rather than being nice to someone regardless of your religion and tribe. The expectation is that visitors and strangers are taken care of, since one never knows whose household one might depend on in turn - a reciprocity logic rather than pure generosity. (Nwauzor, 2014).

The traditional Nigerian family is extended rather than nuclear, multi-generational, and collective in its decision-making - three or four generations often maintain close daily contact, and major life decisions typically go through family consultation rather than being made unilaterally. Structurally, most families have historically been patriarchal: the father is treated as head of household and primary decision-maker, while women are expected to manage domestic life and childrearing, with grandparents, aunts, and uncles playing an active role in raising children. Training of children is belief not to be an individual affair, but draws on the same communal logic, which emphasizes respect for elders, shared community responsibility for children (the "it takes a village" idea), hard work, and religious devotion, with kids absorbing values as much by watching adults as by direct instruction.

The narrative is shifting, though, and unevenly. Urbanization, globalization, and rising female education have visibly changed family structure, in the aspect of fertility rates, marriage age, marriage type, gender roles, and parenting styles have all moved. Younger, educated Nigerians are often negotiating more egalitarian arrangements privately while maintaining more traditional public presentations, and economic pressure is doing a lot of the actual work of changing gender roles, which families tend to accept women's income-generating work when it's financially necessary, and accept men sharing domestic responsibilities when unemployment limits their ability to provide. There is real strain in this transition: a systematic review of Nigerian family research found a rise in arrangements that didn't fit the

old template at all, in areas like non-marital childbearing, single parenthood, cohabitation, blended families - alongside the traditional patterns.

In the transmission and reinforcement of values, culture is passed down less through formal teaching than through lived practice: storytelling, proverbs, and rites of passage are central, with elders sharing folklore that conveys lessons on resilience, honesty, and respect. Festivals do similar work while marking ethnic distinctiveness; for example, the Yoruba people have the Yoruba praise poetry (Oríkì) which reflects family heritage, while the Igbos celebrate the New Yam Festival in gratitude for harvest, and in the North, the northern Durbar festivals showcase regional identity, all of which simultaneously celebrate difference and reinforce a shared communal ethos across ethnic lines.

Theoretical Framework

This research work provides a general view of Nigerian's moral value system and some of the Western contradictions that has affected this long existence value system. Nigeria's experience of colonialism, Christianization, Islamization, and globalization is read here as a sustained instance of acculturation under unequal power, in which indigenous communal morality has neither been fully retained nor fully replaced, but exists alongside imported individualist and materialist orientations. This paper tries to put together the Afrocentric theory which supplies the standpoint from which Nigeria's indigenous value system is taken seriously as a genuine moral order, and the acculturation theory which supplies the mechanism through which the contradictions between that order and imported Western values are explained, rather than simply described.

Research Methodology

This paper is conceptual and qualitative, generated through a library-based, desk-research design rather than fieldwork. Data, understood here as textual and documentary evidence, were generated systematically in three stages. First, purposive sampling was used to identify peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and reputable institutional and news sources addressing Nigerian and African cultural values, morality, family structure, migration, and religion, prioritising sources published within the last two decades while retaining foundational older texts, such as Mbiti (1969), for their continued theoretical weight. Second, the sampled sources were read closely and organised thematically around the recurring value-domains that the literature itself foregrounds, namely communalism, respect for elders, religion, family structure, and social change, so that the themes presented in this paper emerged from the sources rather than being imposed on them in advance. Third, the thematically organised material was subjected to

qualitative content analysis: passages were compared across sources for agreement and contradiction.

Findings and Discussions

Cultural Tensions and Ongoing Changes in Nigeria

The Nigerian value system is not static, it is how actively they are being negotiated against colonial legacy, globalization, and modernization. The description of communal orientation as increasingly competing with individual orientation, and status increasingly earned through achievement rather than simply ascribed by age or birth, which a real shift from how relationships used to be governed. Nnorugu (2025) argues that core values like communalism, respect for elders, religious pluralism, extended family systems, and traditional rites have endured by adapting rather than disappearing, sustained through oral tradition, festivals, language retention, and indigenous knowledge systems even as younger generations live increasingly globalized lives.

Nigeria's value system is shifting on several fronts at once right now, mostly driven by the same three forces: a very young population, an economic squeeze, and constant exposure to global culture through smartphones. From culture, education, religion and employment, the passage of time, among numerous other factors, has heaped wholesome changes that have left many people wondering whether societal values are merely shifting or experiencing serious decline. These changes can be seen in the following domains:

Respect for customs and language loosening: Beckloff (2008) argues that due to the educative responsibilities of elders, aging means also progress in the social ladder: children learn to respect their elders and the respect is manifested in their greetings, communicative manners and behavioural patterns. But in the real sense, the deep prostration or kneeling greetings traditionally owed to elders, especially in Yoruba culture, are giving way to handshakes, nods, or just standing greetings among younger people, something older Nigerians often describe as a "drastic change" which they're uncomfortable with, recalling how it used to be mandatory for a man to prostrate and a woman to kneel when greeting an adult, a tradition many now consider dead. Younger Nigerians are also increasingly skipping obligatory attendance at every wedding, funeral, or naming ceremony in favor of protecting their time, money, and mental health, sending regrets or digital gifts instead. Mother-tongue fluency is fading too, newer parents in cities are deliberately raising kids to speak English first, a reversal from a generation ago when local languages came naturally and English was the

thing people struggled to pick up. With challenge facing our cultural identity, Szilagyi (2013) believes that respect is equally important in many ethnic groups in Nigeria, but the way they are expressed is different, and culturally diverse interpretations of respect can lead to misunderstandings in communication, opening free way to the construction of stereotypes and prejudices.

Marriage and gender roles are being renegotiated, not abandoned: Gender roles are widely held beliefs and stereotypes about sexual and psychological differences between males and females. Gender roles encompass a range of behaviours that are generally considered acceptable, appropriate, or desirable for people based on their actual or perceived sex. Blackstone (2013) elucidates that gender roles are the product of the interactions between individuals and their environment. Olanrewaju and Awogbayila (2021) argues that gender roles are socially constructed and have played significant part in creating structural barriers that enforce gender stereotype against women in Nigeria. The Nigerian Gen Z (now about a quarter of the population) are not rejecting marriage, rather they are redefining it, they want partnerships built on equality rather than rigid traditional roles, and increasingly normalizing long-term dating, delayed marriage, and even quiet cohabitation despite the cultural stigma. Higher education and exposure to global feminist discourse via social media are pushing young women toward financial independence before marriage, while a genuine economic crunch, youth unemployment near 34%, weddings now averaging millions of naira, is forcing many young people to delay both marriage and children simply because they can't afford the rituals around them. At the same time, traditional gender expectations (men as providers, women as homemakers) remain the cultural baseline, especially outside major cities, and even financially successful women often still defer publicly to husbands as the "head" of the household. So, it is less a value collapse than a widening gap between urban/educated Nigeria and everywhere else.

Mass Migration (Japa): Mass emigration of young, often highly skilled Nigerians has gone from being a desperate escape to something close to an aspirational life goal, success abroad is now romanticized in music, social media, and everyday conversation as proof that one has "made it". Migration exposes one's personality; it expresses one's loyalties and reveals one's values and attachments often previously hidden, as Mbah (2017) phrased "an extremely cultural event". In the Nigerian setting, migration has become a part of the Nigerian culture, which is seen as an achievement. This migration is seriously reshaping family life directly; separating couples for years at a time, with relationships now sustained mostly over the phone or social media

platforms, while one partner navigates immigration backlogs, and it's draining sectors like healthcare badly enough that Nigeria now has only a fraction of the WHO-recommended doctor-to-patient ratio in some regions. The way mass migration (Japa) is equated with success, the cultural premium on how one achieves a goal (historically bounded by respect for elders, hard work, and community honour) has given way to a premium on where one is located. Okunada & Awosusi (2023) opine that this trend has gone worst where that success is now measured by accent, foreign residency, and overseas bank accounts replaces older markers such as integrity, family standing, and contribution to the local community.

Religion: Religion has stayed central, even as other things shift. Unlike the Western separation of faith and public life, Nigerian business hours, marriage choices, and political alignment are still openly shaped by religion, and religious leaders often carry more practical authority in resolving disputes than government institutions do. This hasn't really eroded if anything it persists as one of the more stable anchors while other norms shift around it.

Government Policies or Institutions: The government pushed through Nigeria's first major cultural policy overhaul in nearly four decades in 2025, replacing the outdated 1988 framework with one aimed at funding heritage sites, the creative economy, and digitizing at-risk cultural heritage — though critics note the new policy was drafted with limited input from the young people and women most affected by the cultural changes it is responding to.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Nigeria's cultural moral value system remains a major source of identity, social cohesion, and ethical orientation to every Nigerian, but many have lost it because they do not value what they have and traded it for the Western culture's modernization. When cultural values are eroded from the society man becomes alone with no morality and chaos will be the other of the day. Our value system is our morality, and our morality is our being, which when traded, man becomes nothing less than an animal. In this regards the younger generation must know that times are changing, and its changing with every moral value system that we are used to, which if not guarded jealousy the next generation will have nothing to hold unto regarding cultural conducts. We have seen that the Nigerian values reflect who we are as Nigerians and what we stand for, our aspirations and decisions as to what should be judged as good or bad, right or wrong, which we must not allow modernization, globalization, technological change, materialism, and weakened traditional socialization structures affect our heritage values. Just as Ogbujah (2014)

states that different cultures reflect different values. Our values must reflect who we are, because it pertains to our social ideals, indigenous of the Nigerian people. This calls for a wider awareness, understanding, and being sensitive about our diversity and cultural differences. Above all in our diversity, we must never forget that in having different cultures, respect for each other's differences must be highly upheld.

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