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THE HIDDEN DIMENSION OF SOCIAL NORMS IN IBIBIO: TRI-TANGENTIAL TRAJECTORY OF IBIBIO INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE ON MORALITY

abstract

This study examined the hidden ethical elements of norms in Ibibio culture and its day-to-day manifestations within the periscope of ethical prerequisite. This study presents a socio-cultural description of Ibibio norms which are an integral part of the culture, social custom, rituals and beliefs governing social coexistence. It argues that though norm is a cultural production with emphasis on prohibitions, Ibibio norms dictates behavioral and/or conversational re-orientation.

keywords

Norms, Ibibio normative world, prohibition, morality

Introduction

Despite the importance of social norms in contemporary societies and their impact on human behaviour, little research has been conducted on the diversity and power of social norms on the ethical orientation of individuals and the well-being of communities in many African societies especially the Ibibio of southern Nigeria. Most accounts describe this phenomenon simply as a mere cultural product prescribing behavioural and conversational prohibitions without a perusal of the sacred or magical nature of norms (Ouidade, 2010). As a result, they have some difficulty explaining both the moral aspect of the occurrence as well as the tremendous expansion of its ideology. This study therefore aims at filling this gap by analyzing to what extent the concept of norms helps understand, clarify and solve plethora of moral issues ravaging our society.

In Ibibio societies, like many other societies of the world, several activities are characterized by externally sanctioned prohibitions, and human behavior is not governed solitary through rational decision making. Somewhat, societies often have shared values and standards of acceptable behavior that members of the society are encouraged to follow. Specifically though, a cultural norm or a societal value guides and regulates the behavioral pattern and thoughts of their members by agreed upon expectations and rules. These rules constitute the list of behavioural guidelines which is typically referred to as societal norms, customs and norms (Esema, 2002). These include not only illegal or criminal behaviors sanctioned by law, but also norms of conduct enforced through social sanctions. However, the customs and norms governing interactions between people and their environment in Ibibio society are complex and dynamic. They translate to what can appropriately be described as indigenous knowledge (IK), otherwise known as traditional knowledge (TK), or local knowledge.

Although conventional wisdom shows that an important part of the characterization of every society hinges on the different social norms and values that govern their members' behavior. Ibibio norms go further to provide the moral sanctions against transgressions which are associated with individuals' emotional ambivalence and likely to provoke the wrath of the spirit/gods. This is however due to the contagious nature of the norms, in determining (desirable values) in the human community (Ouidade, 2010). It is through the process of inculcation and articulation of these values that

proper behavior is ensconced among the youths and adult Ibibio society. The specific objectives of the study are to critically review the phenomenon of norms as it affects what governs individual and social acceptable conduct to the benefit of the well-being of the community, identify its causes and areas of manifestation, highlight its current trend, propose a sustainable and pragmatic solution toward averting the negative expression of the phenomenon. This study adopted a conceptual and theoretical perspective governing the application of norms regarding the state of affairs in Ibibio. The study is of the opinion that norms whether viewed as laws, custom, or personal beliefs of a people specify situations in which behaviors or actions should not be performed. In that regard, it communicates moral messages for the benefit of all. The fundamental hypothesis of this study, therefore, is to demonstrate that norms have the capacity to perform critical responsibility in the ethical life of the Ibibio people. In the perspective of this research, this constitutes the hidden dimension of the phenomenon.

Theoretical Framework

This scholarly discourse is founded on Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) and Planned Behaviour (TPB) which posits that “a person’s behavior is determined by his/her intention to perform the behavior and that this intention is, in turn, a function of his/her attitude toward the behavior and his/her subjective norm” (Ajzen, 1991: 179). According to this theory, the best predictor of behavior is intention. Intention is the cognitive representation of a person’s readiness to perform a given behavior, and it is considered to be the immediate antecedent of behavior. This intention is determined by three things: their attitude toward the specific behavior, their subjective norms and their perceived behavioral control. The theory of planned behavior holds that only specific attitudes toward the behavior in question can be expected to predict that behavior (Ajzen, 1991: 180). In addition to measuring attitudes toward the behavior, we also need to measure people’s subjective norms – their beliefs about how people they care about will view the behavior in question. This study also finds premise on Vygotskian’s socio-cultural model which cogitates that superior order functions and develops out of every social interaction. According to this theory, “every function in an individual’s cultural development becomes visible in life in twofold” (Adamson and Chance (1998). Firstly, it appears on the social level between people, and secondly, it emerges later on in an individual level from inside the person involved. This implies that the individual in the society must first relates with people which includes the parents, siblings, elders and peers in order to develop culturally before the norms and values are molded and deposited

in such an individual. The most important goal worthy of note here is the act of learning through socialization. It follows that, cultural growth of an individual depends to a large extent on the social interactions with the societal norms, values and the wisdom of the elders as articulating agents.

Social Norms and Human Behaviour

Human behavior everywhere is not governed only by rational decision making. A culture or a society guides the behavior and the thoughts of their members by agreed upon expectations and rules. Norm is a proscription of behaviour that affects everyday life. Communal norms for instance exist in invariably all cultures throughout the world, and represent a class of informal institutions, where traditional, social and religiously governed norms define the human behaviour. These norms remain the prime factor guiding their conduct and behaviour towards fellow man and society (Allan & Kate, 2006: 40). Scholars are of the opinion that norms symbolizes the prohibition of an action based on the belief that such behaviour is either too sacred and consecrated or too dangerous and accursed for ordinary individuals to undertake hence caution is required. Under this interpretation, a norm is a form of “thought police” that governs not just human behavior, but also the human thoughts. For example, merely thinking or considering incest, necrophilia, or cannibalism is a violation of the relevant norms. Norms can be repugnant and appalling actions or behavior which includes the display of some bodily functions (Masaka, & Chemhuru, 2011: 132).

From anthropological perspective, norm-related prohibitions are largely behavioral in nature (Van Gennep, 1904: 48). The norms’ role in any society it exists is to prevent certain behaviors from happening, such as the killing of totemic animals, desecrating sacred places and engaging in certain activities against societal norms (Frazer, 1994: 99). However, prohibitions in every norm can also be conversational in nature. It is in this light that conversational nature of norms encompasses the restriction of people’s freedom to talk about certain topics due to social, moral or religious conventions (Frazer, 1994:97). A good example of this kind of norm is exemplified in death-related norms. This is why many researchers see death as the paragon of a conversational norm (Masaka & Chemhuru, 2011: 58), because it is a painful subject that people find difficult discussing. Yet, death-related norms are founded on a general prohibition of killing. For instance, murdering someone or oneself (through suicide or assisted suicide) is a behavioral norm in many modern societies (Martindale, 2005: 22).

**Configuring
 Social Norms
 in Ibibio
 Worldview**

Norms exist in every society and governs how members of such society behave, think, make judgments and perceive their world. The hidden dimension of Ibibio social norms institution revolves around the moral sanctions that help in shaping an Ibibio person's (eti-uwem) virtue in the human community. Ibibio people have an obsession with the desire to inculcate right ethos in an individual. Social norms are among a number of methods through which the character of an individual is shaped in Ibibio cosmology. Norms in Ibibio is teleological in character in that they involve sanctions that are meant to inculcate the most appropriate traits in a person that would make him a worthy member of the community (Esema, 2002: 98). In Ibibio worldview, the concept of norms is predicated on the premise of the "trinity". The trinity principle in regards to social norms presupposes that there are three most important norms in Ibibio. These most important social norms give birth to other societal norms. They are: (a) Norms connected with (ukot) inlaw otherwise known as "abasi ukot". (b) Norms connected with (ayeyen) grandchild or else "abasi ayeyen". (c) Norms connected with (esenowo inuaesit) visitor otherwise called "abasi esenowo inuaesit" (Esema, 2002: 102). Similarly, according to Chigidi (2009), "The avoidance rules in these norms are restrictive and not directive in the sense that they only tell the individual what not to do and not what to do" and by implication one is made to pick up desirable behavioral traits otherwise acting contrary to the dictates of this norms invites undesirable consequences. A good character is a solid weapon against various anti-social behaviors. The outcome of good character is good reputation whereby a person becomes the envy of many because of his commendable dispositions (Masaka, & Chemhuru, 2011: 133).

Though the inculcation of commendable character traits in individuals is a lifelong process, it is believed, among the Ibibios, that such moral education makes an indelible impression in one's formative years. In this light, children are taught the difference between good and bad behavior and they also learn to avoid a number of norms. Strong and severe warnings for those who violate Ibibio moral code are quite visible in the taboos. The veracity of punishment and a host of other unwanted consequences if one dares to violate the moral code help to instill commendable moral behavior in Ibibio society (Udo, 1984: 22). It is in light of this fact that Gelfand (1979: 33) contends that "the purpose of these norms is to instill a sense of discipline into the children as well as one of fear." The aspect of fear that is normally associated with Ibibio norms is a way of dissuading people from performing immoral acts. Hence, it has an instrumental value in that it discourages people from engaging in certain behaviors that run contrary

to the ethos of Ibibio society. Although Ibibio taboos are fear inducing, this fear has no intrinsic worth, but is a means to an end, that is, promotion of good behavior. Though this means of achieving a virtuous life is morally questionable, the philosophy in Ibibio norms is that the end justifies the means. Fear may not be the best and ethically appropriate tool to achieve the end of a virtuous life in Ibibio society, but it is believed that the goodness of the end trivializes the badness of the means (Esema, 1984:25).

It is important to note that the individual within Ibibio society, just as in other African societies, does not live in a moral island. A human being can only be fully comprehended as an inseparable part of the whole (Menkiti, 2006: 98). This communitarian view of the individual emanates from the realization that the moral life in every human being is shaped not only by the community of physical beings alone but also by spiritual forces. In this regard, Gelfand (1979: 35) makes an important observation that though “the origin of Ibibio norms is unknown, they bring home to the young the realization that other forces exist besides the physical ones” in the moral education of members of Ibibio society. Since enforcement of Ibibio moral code has a spiritual dimension, the learners of Ibibio morality come to know of “the existence of spiritual powers, so important in the Ibibio religious belief” (Gelfand, 1979: 35; see also Bourdillon, 1987: 88) such as the ancestral spirits as well as Ibibio deity who provide the living with, among others, direction and appropriate moral guidance (Asante, 2000: 44). Ibibio people believe that spiritual forces are custodians of their moral code. Ancestral spirits play a crucial role in making sure that one picks up desirable character traits and avoid vices. The Ibibio believe that ancestral spirits help in ensuring that one’s character is good provided that that person does not offend them through, among others, failure to perform periodic rituals in their honor as well as a host of other social misdemeanors such as incest (Udo, 1984: 26). Therefore, the violation of norms can be seen as a direct provocation of ancestral spirits who are the custodian of the moral code. Tatira (2000: 61) concurs with Gelfand (1979: 37) when he notes that “an act that breaches a taboo triggers a reaction supposedly at the supernatural level.

Without this fear of the unknown, young people are generally adventurous, full of doubts and questions, and like experimenting with things.” It is pertinent to note that taboos are effective moral tools because their violation invites the ire of ancestral spirits who are one of the key pillars of traditional religion. It is worthy of note that Ibibio norms do not reveal the correct consequences for performing certain actions but give a consequence that a human being naturally loathes and fears. Therefore, for one to comprehend the complexity of Ibibio norms, one has to look at their common and hidden meaning.

The Cultural Context of Ibibio Social Norms

Social norms are generally considered as a socio-cultural phenomenon affiliated with beliefs, values, custom, and hierarchical power. Every culture has its own norms. As a cultural construct, every human society prohibits or restricts certain kinds of behavior, although those prohibited in one society are not necessarily the same as in another. In Ibibio society, the shared norms are what defined the culture or subculture of Ibibio people. In this regard, prohibitions concerning issues like stealing, adultery, killing, illegal possession of farmland and other properties, and violating the norms regulating relationships with inlaws, visitors, and grandchildren attracts societal disapproval and punishment which serves as a deterrent to others and thus engender positive values through abstention. Norm is a foremost element of Ibibio culture (Esema, 2002: 101). It is one way in which Ibibio society expresses its disapproval of certain kinds of behaviour believed to be harmful to its members, either for supernatural reasons or because such behaviour violates a moral code. A culture or a society guides the behavior and the thoughts of their members by agreed upon expectations and rules. In line with this understanding, Osei (2006: 20) posits that “norms represent the main source of guiding principles regulating and directing the behaviour of individuals and the community towards the Supreme Being and especially the gods and the ancestors in African traditional societies”. This is why Freud (1912: 73) showed that norms are productions of culture insofar as they are established by a group’s recognized authorities to regulate the group. It is the prohibition against touching, saying, or doing something for fear of immediate harm from a supernatural force. Akindele and Adegbite (1999: 592) further explain that normative words and expressions reflect social customs and views of the people’s culture. It can be characterized as being concerned with behaviour which is believed to be supernaturally forbidden or regarded as immoral and improper. Every society has a culture and norms hold the society together. Although some norms can be traced to apparent danger in health and safety, no common explanation has been given for most others; most authorities agree that they tend to relate to objects and actions that are significant for the maintenance of social order. In Ibibio society, a norm is a powerful social interdiction system relating to any area of human activity or social custom that is venerated and or forbidden based on moral judgment, religious beliefs and or scientific consensus. They are recognized to avoid disrespect to any given authority, be it legal, moral and/or religious (Udo, 1984: 37).

The Responsibilities of Norms in Ibibio Society

Norms in every society are fundamental to understanding social order as well as variation in human behavior in such society (Campbell, 1964: 12; Durkheim, 1951: 84). In Ibibio society, norms provide expectations

shared by the members of a group about appropriate ways to behave in given situations. This provision of expected ideas of how to behave is what makes up the culture of Ibibio people. It is a common feature to find that in Ibibio, norms constitute the potential “pressure” in situations that: help to define the nature of social reality; form the foundation upon which people base their interaction; and provide a common medium for members’ self-evaluation. By means of these mechanisms, norms increase feelings of personal and group identity in the entire Ibibio-land (Ekong, 1983: 132). It is worthy of note that in Ibibio like its counterpart in other part of the world, norms shape behavior of people by providing limits within which people receive social approval for their behavior or actions. These guidelines establish an informal basis for estimating how far one may go before experiencing the normative power of ridicule, rejection, and loss of status among group members, friends, acquaintances, and co-workers. That is why group norms reflected in the dominant or most typical attitudes, expectations and behaviors not only characterize these groups but also regulate group members’ actions to perpetuate the collective norm. Indeed, norms can be powerful agents of control as “choices” of behavior are framed by these norms and as the course of behavior most commonly taken is typically in accordance with normative directives of “reference groups” that are most important to the individual (Esema, 2002:108).

Although group norms that are backed by powerful punishments for violations in Ibibio society can restrict behavioral freedom such as debarring the community members from entering the violator’s premises, buying any goods from him/her, and selling any product to him/her, they tend to promote excessive uniformity, even though it serves the critical responsibility of understanding and predicting actions and behaviours of people in the society. Ibibio norms contain the collective power to create and regulate social reality (Ekong, 1983: 131). This is done through the process where norms serve as a mechanism to create order and predictability in social relationship and the understanding of each other’s action. It is apparent that the awareness of the norms operating in a particular community or group situation enables each member to anticipate how others will enter or attend to a particular situation, for example, what kind of cloth will they wear? And what are they likely to say and do, as well as what behavior on one’s own part will be expected and approved (Esema, 2002:109). Norms in Ibibio society also help to interlock the roles that the people or members of the society perform in social situations. Sometimes in a group setting, a new norm usually will emerge that was not operating before or that challenges the prior standard operating procedure. In this

case, the norms that have been already internalized and integral to the society are called into question. These roles and duties of Ibibio norms in this thesis constitute the capacity to which critical responsibilities of Ibibio norms are executed (Udo, 1983:97).

The Significance of Ibibio Norms in the society

Social norms are rules of behavior that society uses to assess the population. How people respond to a violation of social norms depends on a number of different factors. Norms are an expression of interconnectedness of two inseparable dimensions in the African worldview: the visible world and the invisible one. That interconnectedness can also be seen as interdependence whereby the quality of life of the ancestors and of people depended on each other's actions (Menkiti, 2006: 48). Norms are an expression and a means of perpetuating what was considered as the most important features in African culture: preservation of life and well being of people. Life and its quality were seen as crucial and the society applied a variety of methods to preserve it and transmit it, including norms. Norms in Ibibio showed the communal dimensions of one's actions. In the culture where one was defined by belonging to a community and where the community was far more important than its individual members, one's actions affected that community. Norms therefore were helping the people to recognize their own importance. In this setting, if one could affect his or her community negatively, then such a fellow was not unimportant. To a certain extent, norms could be viewed as 'self-esteem-enhancing beliefs' (Mbiti, 1969: 83). Norms in Ibibio helped the people to realize that an improper behaviour would always have consequences for them, the community and the nature. Norms were an expression of a quite sophisticated moral system ruling the lives of the people in the community and the life of an individual. Even though formulated as 'negative' principles stressing (Ku) 'do not...' and teaching people about what was not acceptable in the community, by implication, they were also pointing out to the actions that were supposed to be done. By preventing people from doing wrong things, they were helping them to focus on what was encouraged in the community. Norms in Ibibio are an expression of the 'natural law', a general set of rules commonly understood by all human beings (Esema, 2002: 102). Similarities among various tribes, norms concerning prohibitions against such acts as incest, murder, stealing etc. show the common ground of various norms. Often formulated in a way that implied more than their original wording, they were helping people to exercise their common sense and moral responsibility in interpreting them as well as applying them to various situations.

In a society where there was no police or access to police is remote, norms served as a guardian of moral values. To a certain extent, they were better than modern law enforcement agencies, because, in most cases, breaking of a norm was associated with an automatic punishment – one did not have to be caught to be punished. Through norms one was made aware that an improper action as defined by the society one was a member of, and how such action would result in negatively implications affecting the harmony of the person concerned, the family and the society at large. Transgressing it would also result in punishment (Parrinder, 1969: 20). It was a way of teaching people that each action entails consequences. Such consequences/ punishment was usually automatic, personal (creating feelings of fear and guilt), affecting, in one way or another family and the community. That punishment could also be administered by the community (Miller, 1983: 21).

Conclusion

The article mirrored expressly on the moral dimensions of Ibibio social norms. It noted that Ibibio norms are meant to instill correct dispositions in people through fear-inducing moral sanctions. Norms, understood as unwritten laws restraining people from breaking communal custom, is used in Ibibio societies to preserve harmony in the different communities as well as a good relationship with spiritual beings. The “ku” or “kunam” principle in Ibibio culture serves as vital regulator in inculcating commendable moral traits in individuals (Esema, 2002, 103). The paper also noted that even though Ibibio norms have limitations in that they do not disclose the true consequences of certain human character defects, the most important aspect of these norms is to inculcate commendable character traits in their apprentices that would make them worthy members of society that would not only behave in a desirable way towards fellow human beings, but also relate to the environment in a manner that embodies respect for biodiversity as well as sustainable exploitation of nature’s resources (Masaka & Chemhuru, 2011: 133).

Ibibio norms provide prohibitions that forbid people from behaving in such manners that are a threat to the welfare and wellbeing of fellow human beings as well as the environment. Even though norms foster commendable character traits among people through threat of severe reprisals for the ones who violate them, they have desirable utility because they help to keep the wicked in check. In this regard, though the means of enforcing desirable behavior among people are morally questionable, norms constitute one among a number of sanctions employed to ensure proper behavior in the society, the end has justified the means. Nonetheless, norms are formulated in forms of (ku’s) or (kunam’s) ‘don’ts’ and sometimes being

ambiguous, they on the other hand enabled people to maintain the moral order and hierarchy in the society (Udo, 1984:40). In this regard, though the contemporary society is quite different from the traditional one, there is a need to enforce norms or to come up with an alternative way that will promote traditional values.

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