



## CHILD MORAL DEVELOPMENT: A PARADIGM FOUNDATION FOR VALUES AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN ANCIENT GREEK AND TRADITIONAL YORUBA SOCIETIES

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### Abstract

*Good moral development is desirable in every society for social, economic, and political development. Child's moral competence and the effect on the society in ancient Greek and traditional Yoruba societies is the focus of this paper. For centuries, ancient Greece has captured the interest of scholars in humanities, especially, those in the field of Classical Studies. While different aspects of Greek's life such as politics, economics and gender issues have been over flogged, the topic relating to ancient Greek children and their upbringing has received little or no attention until recently. This is due to the fact that children are underrepresented in written and archaeological record. In other words, children were rarely written about in literature or depicted in art. This paper will analyse comparatively the various means moral values were instilled in children in ancient Greek and the traditional Yoruba societies. Moral values can be regarded as guiding principles of life which are responsible for the overall development of an individual. Moral values reflect ones personality, attitude, behaviour and even vision. Values are backbone of any society or nation for moral values bring in peace of mind, joyful environment, better quality of life, sustainability, and harmony in the global society. Athens and Sparta were the two most prominent city-states during the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. Thus, this study focuses on these two Greek city-states and the Yoruba people of different areas since all the Yoruba people have the same moral philosophy in helping their children to form good character. Content analytical method is employed in this work using the works of ancient writers and research of contemporary scholars.*

**Keyword:** Greeks, Yoruba, Moral Values, Children, Character

### Introduction

Throughout human history, every society formulates codes of conduct expected to guide the moral behaviour of all the members of the society. While these codes of conduct defer from one society to another, there are some distinctive universal morals that exist in every culture and society such as respect for elders and importance of hard work, these qualities are known as morality. The word 'morality' has been described in various ways depending on the perspectives of those defining it. For instance, Smeltzer and Bare (2014) define morality as the system used by people to decide what is right and what is wrong, and how conscience affects choices. Smetana (2018) describes morality as a system of rules that regulate the social interactions and social relationships of individuals within a societies based on concepts of welfare, trust, justice and rights. Dahl et al (2021) define morality as obligatory concerns with others' welfare, rights, fairness, and justice, as well as the reasoning, judgments, emotions, and actions that spring from these concerns. To Özlem



(2004: 7), morality is the group or network of beliefs, values, norms, orders, prohibitions, and designs which are involved in the life of a person, group, people, social class, nation, or cultural environment in a certain historical period and which guide their actions. Gleaning from the various definitions and descriptions, morality refers to developing good etiquettes and ethics which assist a person to become discipline and responsible individual in the society. In other words, moral development refers to the process through which a person acquires sensibilities, attitude, beliefs, skills and dispositions that make him/her a morally mature and adequate human being in the society.

Morality is neither evident at birth, children gradually acquire views about right and wrong with passage of time. According to Aristotle, the mind of a person at the start was a *tabula rasa*, which means blank slate, which implies that the mind starts blank, but acquires knowledge as the outside world is impressed upon it (*De Anima*, 430a1). The Stoics, like Aristotle, hold the view that man is born a *tabula rasa* and his interactions with the world give him his concepts and indeed his rationality (Ätius, *Placita* 4.11; Mansfeld & Runia 2020: 1591). With this, it is obvious that no child is born disciplined but gain good morals through upbringing which inculcates such in him/her. Charity, they say, begins at home, hence, in every society, home is the first educational institution for children, where the parents play the major role of developing their morals and educate them about etiquettes that develop their character, help them to understand, recognise and perform their civic duties in the best possible ways. Parents have the obligation of instilling moral values in their wards.

Moral values refer to personality traits that guides humans to make judgements and decisions based on what is culturally perceived as right or wrong. Moral values vary from culture to culture, thus, a person's values serve as a reflection of the environment or culture he/she grew up in. Moral values are vital in every stage of life. The values reflected as adults were instilled in persons during childhood years. Tani and Brentford (2020: 11) assert that "future behavioural outcomes of early adolescents could be influenced by events experienced in childhood." Hence, it is imperative for children to be imparted the expected adult values. This paper examines the child moral upbringing as a paradigm foundation for values and social development in ancient Greek and traditional Yoruba societies, bringing out the similarities and divergences in the way children were brought up and the effect on society at large.

### **Child Moral Upbringing in Ancient Greece**

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle views children as potencies while he considers the parents as actualities which means that children that are potencies should be brought up by the parents and other moral educators that are actualities. He also argues that children are not capable of moral action unless they are guided because their actions lack genuine decision procedure. Hence, the need for them to be brought up morally. In *The Republic*, Plato expounds that character is formed during childhood. He explains "you know also that the beginning is the most important part of any work, especially in the case of a young and tender thing; for that is the time at which the character is being formed and the desired expression is more readily taken" (*The Republic*, II, 377). Parents and adult relatives and nurses played important roles in moral upbringing of children in ancient



Greece. From the works of ancient Greek writers, especially the philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, parents employed various methods to inculcate moral values in their children. This moral education started as soon as the child is able to understand what is being said to him. Concerning this Plato states:

Education and admonition commence in the first years of childhood, and last to the very end of life. Mother and nurse and father and tutor are vying with one another about the improvement of the child as soon as ever he is able to understand what is being said to him: he cannot say or do anything without their setting forth to him that this is just and that is unjust; this is honourable, that is dishonourable; this is holy, that is unholy; do this and abstain from that. And if he obeys, well and good; if not, he is straightened by threats and blows, like a piece of bent or warped wood (Plato, *Protagoras*, 325C-D).

Explaining Plato's idea of straighten the child by threats and blows, Barrow (2001: 34) claims that punishment in ancient Greece did not always warrant violence rather stubborn children were simply threatened with frightened tales of creatures who carried away bad children. In relation to frightening tales, both Plato and Aristotle are of the mind that stories told to children as tales of the bogeyman which aimed at scaring children into good behaviour are to be scrutinized. In Plato's opinion, the most esteemed of the poets, Homer and Hesiod ought to be censored for children because they portrayed the gods as absurd and even immoral (*The Republic*, II, 377-378).

The first six years of a child's life in both Athens and Sparta were meant for physical, mental and social development of the child. These years would be a time of enculturation and socialisation within the *oikos* (household) and its environs. Children were expected to learn their role in the family by watching and imitating the adults with whom they came in contact as well as by playing together with siblings and peers. By the end of this six year period, children were considered to be ready for the next step of the journey into adulthood which meant greater involvement in the wider community.

However, the path to adulthood in Athens and Sparta differ as well as the attention given to the male and female children. For instance, in Sparta, once a boy, reached the age of seven, he was expected to leave the family home for the first time in order for him to start his demanding journey through the compulsory state educational system and would not return home until after the age of thirty. In a similar way, the Athenian boys were expected to start their formal academic education which depended on what their fathers could afford. Unlike the Spartan boys, however, the Athenian boys continued to live at home until their marriage, usually in their mid-thirties (Shapiro, 2003:107). The Athenian girls, on the other hand, were not given formal education like the boys, rather, they were expected to be educated purely in domestic matters, such as weaving and spinning, supervision of slaves and other basic household management. Beaumont (2015: 104) argues that it was unlikely that many girls were schooled outside the home since all these skills could be imparted by their mothers or other female members of the household. Beaumont suggests that female education was a random and individual affair and took place largely at home under the instruction of a closely watched private tutor or from a more formally educated sibling, or the



household *paidagogos* who may have developed at least basic literacy skills from attending the boys' lesson (Beaumont, 2015: 104).

At this juncture, it is important to note that the Spartan girls received similar education like that of the boys though selective and less arduous. This is in contrast to girls in Athens who were more sedentary (Sommerville, 1982: 26). However, while Spartan boys left home at the age of seven to learn the survival techniques and skills they would need as hoplites, the girls remained at home to continue their education.

Plato reiterates the need for parents to discipline their children from their early age, and maintains that children form their character between the age of three and six. He further explains that parents must maintain a balance between over pampering and over protective of their children. Plato claims that luxury makes a child bad tempered, irritable and apt to react violently to trivial things. At the same time, he opines that "unduly savage repression can turn children into cringing slaves and puts them at odds with the world that they became unfit to be members of the community" (*Laws* 7.791-3E).

For children to form their character, Neils and Oakley (2003:199) opine that play was considered as an aspect of socialisation process which was important phase of childhood. This notion was evident in Plato and Aristotle's works where they express the opinion that between the second and seventh year of a child's life, he forms his character while he played. Both Plato and Aristotle were keenly aware of the vital role play had in shaping the character, morals and physical abilities of children. For instance, in Plato's opinion, children love to play and invent games whenever they came together. This period, according to Plato was to be characterised by games with other children with the administration of mild discipline (*The Laws*, 7.794b). Aristotle believes that from age two to five, the child should continue to exercise through play but the form of play and stories told to children must be supervised by officials and the enthusiasm for the play should be diverted into productive channels, according to him, play should help in identifying aptitudes, and toys should prepare the child for his/her role in life and skills should be acquired with the aid of games (Aristotle. *Pol.* 7. 17.1336a). Plato further links children's play with legislation when he states:

If you could control the way children play, and the same children always play the same games under the same rules and in the same conditions and get pleasure from the same toys, you'll find that the conventions of adult life too are left in peace without alteration (Plat. *Laws* 7.797b).

Another important avenue for children to be introduced to the life of the polis is through religious activities. According to Golden (1993:31, 41, 49), both in Athens and Sparta, members of the family worshiped in order to have the gods on their side as well as gaining them as witnesses to their family unity. Worshiping together also served as a way of laying the foundation for the essential qualities of piety and morality, which both the Athenians and Spartans believed to enhance the child's progress on the journey to adulthood, the crucial required attributes of the ideal citizens of both Greek states.



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### **Child Moral Upbringing among the Yoruba**

Many contemporary societies are afflicted with improper moral development leading to lots of ills in the society such as corruption, bribery, nepotism, embezzlement, extortion and parochialism, just to mention a few. Contemporary Nigerian society is not an exception. The political office holders deplete the resources meant for national development by embarking on medical treatments abroad rather than develop the health sector at home, they also embezzle huge amount of money that many generations of their grandchildren may not be able to exhaust in many years. The greatest impediment confronting development of morality in children is hypocrisy on the part of those expected to model morality for children. Parents, especially, are not living up to expectation. Actions, they say, speak louder than words. Generally, parents caution their wards on fighting and cheating but some parents throw caution to the winds, quarrel and fight in the presence of their children. Some even perpetrate other vices such as stealing, lying and cheating. While some parents help their children engage in examination malpractices, registering their wards in the so called ‘special centres’. Others pay a huge amount of money to acquire fake results for their children. How do such parents instil morality in their children?

The society at large has been infiltrated with immorality of all sorts through different forms of entertainments, and video games. Actors and actresses of the “woods”- Nollywood, Hollywood, Ghollywood and the rest – push immoral concepts through movies. Indecent dressing next to nudity has become the order of the day for fashion industries and magazines have taken up the baton of offering clothing to suit all forms of indecent roles. Radio and television stations have also contributed to the moral decadence in the society with music and advertisements that glorify immorality. Immoral acts such as crime, cultism, rape, killing, kidnapping, and corruption in its different forms are exploding around us because children are not receiving moral education needed, neither at home nor in the society, and so can no longer distinguish between right and wrong. In the face of this moral decadence, it becomes imperative to go back to our root. Yoruba people are one of the three major tribes in Nigeria. The questions at this point are: what is Yoruba concept of morality? How was moral education transmitted to children in Yoruba traditional society?

Morality, from the Yoruba point of view, is a state of uprightness and integrity of an individual based on the accepted social order, norms and values. Thus, a child refers to as *omolúàbí* in Yoruba is regarded as one possessing great moral value. Children are highly valued by the Yoruba and are considered as wonderful blessing from *Oloḍumarè*. The Yoruba strongly believe that the way a child is brought up influences the child’s development in every aspect of life socially, mentally, emotionally, physically and more importantly, morally. Hence, the saying “*omọ tí á kò kọ ló ò gbé ilé tí á kọ tà*”, which literally means the child not trained will sell off the built house. In other words, the Yoruba believe that a child not properly brought up will certainly become a social destitute in his/her later years when such a child is supposed to be productive. It is generally believed that a successful upbringing of a child depend largely on the parents and for the parents to take full responsibility for their children, they must be physically and morally viable. The absence of this can have adverse effect on the future of the child. In order to forestall a child becoming a social



destitute in the future, the traditional Yoruba parents make the moral upbringing of their children a priority.

According to Yoruba tradition, children are considered as wonderful gifts and blessings from Oloḍumarè. It is generally accepted that parents are the first teachers of their children, they have the responsibility of instructing them in the proper way of relating to their elders and people of their age group. As opined by Babatunde (1992: 8-10), “in the communal atmosphere of the traditional family, parents of children who behave in approved ways are approved as successful; parents whose children misbehave are shamed and advised to put their houses in order.” While it is the responsibility of parents to guide and give formative instructions to their children, but the moral upbringing of a child is not viewed as solely resting on them. Like much of African society, a great number of Yoruba people live in extended families, thus, it is also considered the responsibility of the extended family and the society as a whole to help with the moral upbringing of a child. All involved is expected to play their role perfectly well. Hence, the saying, “*oju’kan ló ñ bí mọ, igba ojú ló ñ wòó*”, which means that only two people give birth to a child, but, the entire society guides and forms the child into the acceptable standard of their society. Adewale (1986) also stresses that in traditional Yoruba religion, it is the duty of parents to bring up their children ethically and in the knowledge of God. According to him (Adewale, 1986), children are made to believe in “reward and punishment” and “in the potency of blessings and the efficacy of curses of spiritual beings”. The role of parents in training their children is emphasised in the following verse from the Ifa divinatory corpus (Odu):

If one trains one's children,  
They will be perfectly wise  
As Ire, the daughter of Olokun.  
If one does not train one's children,  
They will be stupid and foolish  
Like Ibawini, the son of Otu Ife (Adewale, 1986).

The instruction and moral education as well as acculturation of a child, to the Yoruba, begin with the child’s formative years, when the child is still in the womb. It is believed that though the child is yet to be born, it can understand the instruction been passed across. This can be seen when a pregnant woman taps on her stomach whenever she feels discomfort with the posture of the foetus, with the tapping and mild scolding from the mother, the child repositions itself to the comfort of the mother. From the first day the child is born, the Yoruba take delight in welcoming the child with poetry and songs believed to be of moral value to the child upbringing. Grandmothers and older women played important role of intimating the child with family oríkí and lullabies. As the child grows, different techniques were employed to inculcate moral values in their children. The various mode of giving moral instructions, according to Faleti (2009), is called moral or value systems *ìwà ọmọlúàbí* in Yoruba language. The term “*ọmọlúàbí*” is described by Ayanleke (2013) as the “embodiment of the best character traits.”



The Yoruba believe that moral values such as kindness, courage and humility build a child's character. Moral values form the very essence of their being and become a foundation of their moral beliefs. Moral values do not only help children distinguish between rights and wrongs but also help shape their perception of the world. The Yoruba believe that a child's with a strong moral compass can determine the good from the bad and take action to correct any ill in the society in whatever way they can. It can be said that moral values inculcated in a child determine how he/she behaves as an adult. A famous Bible verse states "train up a child in the way he should go, and when he grows old, he will not depart from it" (Proverbs, 22:26).

Conventionally, the moral training of a child begins with the mode of greetings. The Yoruba people have distinctive ways of greeting on different occasions and people of different categories. From infancy, children are taught to respect not only their parents and elderly ones, but also to show courtesy to those in position of authority. For instance, while greeting, in Yoruba land, it is expected that a male child prostrates while a female child kneels down. The younger ones take the cue from the older ones in the family in showing honour and respect to those in position of authority no matter their age like kings, high chiefs and religious leaders. It must be noted at this point that in Yoruba traditional culture, unlike in western culture, but like in every African culture, it is the elder who show the desire to engage in hand shake with the younger person and not the other way round.

Both parents- father and mother- play different important roles in inculcating moral values in their children. In every society, especially at the early stage of the child's life, mothers have great influence on their children. This is due to the fact that child is closer to the mother than the father. Also, the mother more than any other members of the family, cares for the needs of the child. In the traditional society, mother and child are always together, the baby sleeps besides the mother, the child is fed by the mother with her arm round the baby, and she even carries the baby on her back when she is going about. With this closeness between mother and child, the mother is expected to instil moral values in him/her. With time, the child starts to do things in imitation of the mother, hence, the saying *òwú iyá gbòn lẹ'mọ ó ran* meaning like mother like daughter. The mother can pass message to the child without uttering a word. For instance, the mother can ask the child to do or not to do certain things by her facial expression. She can make some signs to the child without talking and the child will get the message. In other words, when the mother smiles or frowns her face, the child knows what it means and such a child is considered cultured and well trained. On the other hand, a child that is not able to read the mothers gestures, mood or expression at any time is not considered to be properly trained. In some cases, verbal corrections are required by the mother who may openly correct the misbehaviour of a child.

The father also play important roles in training their children and imparting moral values in them. Unlike in ancient Greek society where children, especially the male children were enrolled to receive formal education, children in traditional Yoruba society were tutored by their parents and relatives in different expected gender roles. Like in Athens, however, female children were trained in caring for household chores as well as learning certain trades. Motivating the children to be industrious, from the age of six up to marriage, a son is expected to assist his father in productive



operations on the farm, if the father is a farmer; girls on the other hand assist their mothers at whatever occupation they do (Fadipe, 1970). At a stage, the father allots a small part of the family land to a son while he is still young to work on during his spare time. It is after the son gets married that his father allots him sufficient land for the need of his own Family.

Fafunwa (1974) opines that, Yoruba parents often apprenticed their children to the relatives, friends or competent craftsman or mistress. There are psychological reasons for sending children to be trained by others such as to avoid sentiment of over pampering in the training of the children and to employ stricter measures to make the children more serious on their job. This sentiment is in accordance with Plato's idea of parents maintaining a balance between over pampering and over protective of their children. It has been observed that children trained by other people, different from their parents did better and it was therefore regarded as the most successful form of education.

The traditional Yoruba employ different techniques to inculcate moral values in their children. Like in ancient Greece, play or story telling is one of the methods used. As mentioned earlier, the responsibility of training the children is considered not just the responsibility of parents but also that of the extended family and the community at large. Folktales and myths are often used by the elderly to engage the children. The elderly gather the children, who may be joined by children from the neighbourhood, to relate to them stories or events, usually folktales or myths, believed to have taken place in the remote past. These stories are not to serve as mere amusement to the young ones, but according to Fasoro (2005: 6-7), these stories are "deliberately and consciously told to the young ones in order to impart moral values on them." For instance, at the end of any related story, the story teller asks questions like "*èyin ọmọdẹ, kí ni àtàn yìi kọ wa?*" (children, what moral lessons does this story teach us?), "*ọgbọn wo ni a rí kọ nínú àtàn yìi?*" (what wisdom can we derive from this story?). Most stories related always focus on the reasons why certain vices like lying, stealing, and greediness among inter alia, should be avoided.

Proverbs, poetry and songs are other means of imparting moral values in young one. Proverb is a powerful tool employed to instil moral in young ones. Among the Yoruba, proverb is interwoven with everyday life activities; especially their speech that can be heard at any time and on different occasion. According to Fasiku (2006: 51), proverbs "serve as a means of achieving clarity and conciseness in discourse." Proverbs are used by the Yoruba to drive home important message, hence, the saying *òwe lẹ'şin ọrọ, ọrọ lẹ'şin òwe, bí ọrọ bá sọnú òwe ni a fí n wa*, that is, proverb is the horse of word, word is the horse of proverb, if word goes astray, proverb is used to track it. The effect of proverb in the society has been described in various ways by scholars, for instance, Adewoye (1987:1) describes proverbs as reflecting "diverse aspects of a people's culture, beliefs, traditional, social and political institutions, ethics, commerce, health." Taylor (1931: 70-71) refers to proverbs as "the simple truths of life and contain the ethical or moral values of a society." The aesthetics quality of the Yoruba language is the proverb. Thus, for the Yoruba, proverb "constitutes a powerful rhetorical device for shaping of moral consciousness, opinions, and beliefs (Akporobaro et al, 1994: 169).



The kind of proverb used by the Yoruba is dictated by the situation or context of discussion, but generally, proverbs are used to help young ones develop sense of responsibility. The following table show some of the proverbs used to instil moral values in children:

Yoruba Proverb	English Translation	The Moral Lesson
Bí ó tí wù kí ojú kan tóbì tó, ojú méjì sà n ju ojú kan lọ.	No matter how big an eye is, two eyes are better than one.	This proverb teaches that team effort is superior. In other words, two heads are better than one.
Lẹhìn òkùnkùn biribiri, ìmọlẹ́ á tàn.	After a pitch-black night, the dawn always comes.	The moral lesson here is that darkness does not last forever, we should look forward to the coming dawn. (tough times do not last forever).
Bí a bá s'òkò s'òjà, ará ilé ẹni níba.	If we throw stone in the market, it will hit our relative.	This proverb emphasizes that we should be careful of how we treat others because our action may hurt us or those close to us.
Bí ẹṣin bá dá'ni, a máa n tun gùn ni.	If one is thrown by a horse, one ought to remount it.	We should not give up after a failure.
Tí òjò bá dá tán, tí abẹ́ igi kii dá bọrọ́.	When the rain subsides, the one dripping from the trees seldom promptly cease.	This proverb infers that consequences of actions outlive them, therefore, one should be mindful of potential consequences.
Ẹni bá fì ịṣu tí kò jinná gún'yán, ó di dandan kó jẹ'yán tó lẹ'mọ.	Whoever prepare pounded yam with half cooked yam will certainly eat lumpy pounded yam.	This proverb teaches the value of patience that good things take time.
Wúra tó máa dán, á la iná kojá	A piece of gold that will shine must pass through fire.	This teaches that nothing good come easy (no pain no gain).
Bíbí ire kò se f'owó rà.	Good pedigree cannot be bought with money.	This teaches that money is not everything.

These are but few of the proverbs used for moral training of a child. Songs and poetry are also used to inculcate values in children. Some are used to show the importance of hard-work, patience and why it is important for one to enhance his character among others. Parents trained their children to report any kind gesture of others and to show them any received gift. As suggested by Plato, the traditional Yoruba parents discipline their children not only by scolding them but also by flogging them. According to Babatunde (1992:91), when children behaved madly they are flogged. The aim of flogging is considered an act of kindness which aimed at preventing the children from becoming wayward as well as protecting them from danger that can destroy their future. This is in contrary to the modern ideology where flogging of children is considered child abuse.



The traditional Yoruba categorised children who misbehave in the society into two distinctive parts, the child is regarded either ‘à bî ko’ (an untrained child) or ‘à kọ̀p gbà’ (a child who refuses to accept training), hence, when a child is referred to as lacking home training, they are invariably insulting the parents of the child, thereby passing a condemnatory message to the parents. Thus, the effect of having well-behaved children in the society cannot be overemphasized.

### Conclusion

The concept of inculcating moral values with sound character in children is to help develop resilient children for the development of the nation. In the modern society, teenage pregnancy, suicide, drug abuse, rape and fraud of all kinds are on the increase, hence, the need for children of great moral values. To achieve this, it would be of interest to return back to the good old ways of teaching values through traditional moral values. Traditional Yoruba people taught their children to be morally upright by devising effective and pragmatic ways of impacting certain ideals and virtues in them. As discussed the family plays an enormously role in child moral upbringing. Both ancient Greeks and traditional Yoruba considered family to be the primary source of moral values. However, modern families, including Yoruba people, are undergoing transformations as they adapt to an ever-changing world, which brings changes in the family functions, forms and structures as well as the family education model. The amount of time parents spend with their children has dropped radically. As a result, education responsibility has been taken over by institution and other people, which is leading to the deterioration of child upbringing values of children (early adolescents) in the family milieu. This paper therefore, encourages, not only parents, but also extended family and society at large to embrace the traditional way of inculcating moral values in children which would rid our society of its moral decadence after all, charity, they say, begins at home- *ilé la ti ñ kó ẹ̀şọ̀ ròde*.

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