

Indigenous languages and Recovery of Human Values

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Abstract

Values appear to exist only in the realm of the human species. The realm of values and ethics lifts man from barbarism and savagery. Human values are virtues that guide us to take into account the human element when one interacts with other human beings. They are the many positive dispositions that create bonds of humanity between people and thus have value for all of us as human beings. Human values are the foundation for any viable life within the society. No peaceful human society is possible without values. Shared values and ethics are vital for the proper functioning of the economic, political and social network and also, for the well-being and development of the potential of every world citizen. As it stands, in the race of materialisation, we are losing our moral and human values and turning towards savagery hence the urgent need for the recovery of human values. Today, nations both developed and developing, face erosion of humanistic, ethical and moral values. In the normal course of events these values are absorbed along with one's mother tongue in the first years of life. For that reason, cultural value and mother tongue are so intertwined in public consciousness that they are often, but mistakenly, seen as inseparable. Language is the carrier of the cultural heritage of societies thus the death of a language constitutes the annihilation of norms, values, attributes and beliefs of a people. It does not require any intellectual analysis to realise that indigenous languages stock people's cultural heritage. Indigenous languages contain complex understanding of a person's culture and their connection with their land. Thus human values are passed by parents to their offspring soon after childbirth are instilled throughout the children's upbringing. These values are passed from generation to generation. As they grow, children learn more values from their peers, religious leaders, teachers, friends and society at large. Indigenous language is fully laden with peoples' cherished cultural and traditional values which a second language can never unveil. The paper argues that indigenous language is a veritable instrument for a proper recovery of human values. The work is divided into sections: definition of concepts, effect of human value erosion, the need for recovery of human values, indigenous languages and human values and finally, the task ahead.

Key words: values, indigenous, language, culture, society, development

Introduction

Values are rooted in the very conditions of human existence, hence our knowledge of these conditions, that is of the human situation, leads us to establishing values which have objective validity; this validity exists only with regard to the existence of man; outside of him, there are no values. Human values are the foundation for any viable life within the society; they build a space for a drive, a movement towards one another which leads to

peace. Human values are closely integrated with human life. They are intertwined with our day to day chores.

Generally, human values are highly encouraged in society, while negative attributes are discouraged and condemned. People with excellent human values are usually held in high esteem, admired and rewarded. All cultures and societies encourage teachers, doctors, lawyers, politicians, business people and more professionals to have strong human values. Although these values generally operate on a subliminal level, they are nonetheless, a major force in the shaping of each persons' self-awareness, identity and inter personal relationships. These values are psychological imperatives that help generate and maintain an individual self-assurance and consequently, success in life. Putting into practice our human values help us have a contributing attitude towards peace. Human values are thus an inspiration for peace; by integrating them into our way of managing human relations, they predispose us to us a tool for peace. Knowledge and understanding of the very most basic human values is of basic importance to any human in the world, to make truly responsible decisions, and to give a responsible direction to one's life; and also to give a truly responsible direction to the developments of one's children. Any development not based on the most basic human values can be futile or can even be harmful or destructive to human development and to future humanity. The most basic standards are those which are most needed to avoid a mentality or behaviour against our highest human values.

The Concepts: Values, Language, Culture, Society, development

When we talk about values, we refer to interest, pleasure, likes, preferences, duties, moral obligations, desires, want, needs aversion and attraction and many other modalities of selective orientation (William, 1968:283). Values cover the whole ramifications of the society and these values apparently play regulating role in human relationship and also stabilizing factors of the society. Values are the internal precepts by which we make our decisions. When we are confronted by choices, options or moral dilemmas, the decision we make will indicate what values we hold. Values are set of beliefs, ideas and morals. They help a person to determine what is right from what is wrong and so build a person's character and personality.

Human values give worthiness and respect to life. The foundation of human values are based on dignity of human life; respect and consideration for the "other" and the importance of integrity and service. They are vital for the proper function of the economic, political and social network and therefore, for the well-being and development of the potential of every world citizen.

Culture is popularly seen as the ways and life of a particular people or society. It involves their value system. Culture has been defined as "the shared values, traditions, norms, customs, arts, history, folklore and institutions of a group of people". Culture shapes how people see their world and how they function within that world. It also shapes personal and group values and attitudes, including perceptions about what works and what does not work,

what is helpful and what is not, what makes sense and what does not. Cultural influences shape how individuals and groups create identifiable values, norms, symbols and ways of living that are transferred from one generation to another. Culture shapes how people experience their world.

Language is the carrier of the cultural heritage of societies thus the death of a language constitutes the annihilation of norms, attributes, values and belief of a people. People express their thought in speech and both are determined, to a great extent by their culture. Each language carries with it an unspoken network of cultural values. A language plays a central role in the identity of community and language is one of the key channels through which a community's culture, tradition, and values are maintained. Language is not only a medium of communication, but also part of the culture of a people. It is in a way the totality of culture since culture cannot be expressed in any way except through language. The cultural background of a people is so intertwined with language that one cannot fully understand and appreciate one without the knowledge of the other.

An indigenous language is a language that is native to a region and spoken by indigenous people often reduced to the status of minority language. Indigenous language is fully laden with people's cherished cultural and traditional values which a second language can never unveil. Indigenous languages keep people connected to culture and strengthen feeling of pride and self worth.

Society refers to an organization of persons associated together for religions, benevolent, cultural, scientific, political, patriotic or other purposes. Language is the indissolubly linked with the members of the society in which it is spoken and social factors are inevitably reflected in their speech. Culture includes a society's art, beliefs, customs, institutions, inventions, languages, technology and values. Language does not exist in a vacuum. It is always contextualised. That is, it is situated within a socio-cultural setting or community. There is a necessary connection between language and society. It is a means of expressing a society's tradition and culture; so language exists as an aspect of a culture.

The relationship between language and culture cannot be ignored in the history of any society. Development entails the process of economic and social transformation that is based on cultural and environmental factors and their interaction.

Basic Human Values

The issue of human values recovery is relevant especially now, when life in Western culture is almost universally experienced as a rapid flux of hanging identities, upgrading technologies and personal challenges to reinvent oneself in response to the needs of the market.

Values are the principles or standards of behaviour that are formed by life experiences and codes of conduct, implicitly and explicitly, from our family, cultures, organizations, institutions, religions, nations etc. Milton Rokeach, who has also written widely on the

subject, defines values as "an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end of existence" (Rokeach, 1973). Values are the link that tie together personal perceptions and judgements, motives and actions. Human genuine values are life-embedded ideas and precepts, along with their various justifications because, they are human, values are not divinely ordained rules of behaviour- not commandments set in stone. They are related to differing culture; unique persons and situations and are developed and expressed in human terms for the human aims they collectively represent. They are the principles, standards, convictions and beliefs that people adopt as their guidelines in daily activities. Principal human values are the foundation on which professional ethics are built. They are a set of consistent measures and behaviours that individuals choose to practice in the pursuit of doing what is right or what is expected of them by the society. Most laws and legislations are shaped by human values.

Generally, we have two forms of values, personal and core. Personal values are lessons learned from life's trials and tribulations. Core values are embedded during our initial upbringing and creates the way a person orients to the world, or if you prefer the filter from which you not only make meaning but from which you decide how you will act and react to life's daily challenges. Core values emanate from the centre of who we are and what is most important to us as a human being.

Human values are universal: they are shared by all human beings, whatever their religion, their nationality, their culture, their personal history. By nature they induce consideration for others. Human values are for example: Civility, respect, consideration, honesty, fairness, loyalty, sharing, solidarity, openness, listening, welcoming, acceptance, recognition, appreciation, brotherhood, friendship, empathy compassion love etc.

Respect is one of the most important human values for establishing relations of peace and yet it remains elusive. Its understanding varies according to age (child, teen, adult) to one's education and surrounding culture. It is better understood when combined with other values: a disposition that is deeper than civility, very close to consideration, an approaching appreciation. Indeed, to respect someone, one must be able to appreciate some of his/her human qualities, even if one does not appreciate his/her opinions or past behaviour.

The most basic principle of any social community is feelings of connectedness which come out of our perception, empathy and awareness that the other human is basically as we are ourselves. This creates trust and a friendly attitude towards the other. Out of this empathy and the awareness that the other is basically as we are ourselves and the resulting feelings of connectedness we feel a natural and spontaneous respect for the other.

Justice is one of our highest social human values. In general justice is needed to realise and maintain our highest human values of freedom, peace, life, love and happiness and injustice can prevent or inhibit these highest human rules of freedom, peace, life, love and happiness.

In the words of economist J.C. Kumarappa "Our life is something higher than material possessions and our life is also to be looked at from the possibility of the development of

personality. A condition for life itself as the very highest human value are the values of love and happiness; which hence also can be seen as the very highest human values on their own.

Life itself has to be seen as the fundamental human value to any human being, for without life itself not any other human value can be realised. Life itself is a basic condition for the experience of any other human value. However, at the same time the value of life itself is totally dependent on the two other most basic human values of love and happiness.

Life without love and happiness is basically of no value. Hence, the suicidal tendencies of lifelong prisoners, or single old people who lost their only child or terminal patients in a hopeless suffering etc. Life, love and happiness can be seen as a basic group of our very highest and most essential human values or most basic and universal core values.

Our physical and mental health can also be seen as part of our highest human values for just as life itself, our physical or mental health can easily become a condition for our very highest human values of love and happiness. For some people, love is the most important of the human values. It is the values that sets the foundation for all the other values. Our entire purpose is to love and to be loved. Love as a value is the cornerstone, the seed, the beginning, the gateway to all the other values. If you lived completely in love you'd never hold a grudge, feel pain or confusion. You wouldn't be able to because true love is pure. It is God. Love cannot be judged or measured, it is only felt. Thoughts of love must be followed by words of kindness and acts of selflessness or else love becomes meaningless (Dewan, 2003).

The values of freedom is also needed for our human creativity. Human creativity asks for an inner mental freedom and hence in general also for an outer-freedom. And just as for our happiness, basically a freedom from dominance, repression, burden, obligations and duties etc. However also, freedom from material or financial problems allows people to be unburdened and more focused on the creation of a more prosperous or better world.

Erosion of Human Values

The 20th century has been described as the bloodies century of this age and the first decade of the first century has been a continuation of the same. We are witnessing a violent world, a grim reminder of the ancient past, where human life had no value. "The problem generated by the neglect of human values and personal integrity surface under many guises. Sociologists, such as Richard Sennet in his "The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism (1999:27), speak of the reification that happens to people in an economy which destroys everything that gives meaning to human life and ruins those qualities of character which binds human beings to one another and furnish each with a sense of sustainable self". Psychoanalysts and therapists, such as Brain Thorne in *Infinitely Beloved* (2003:37-38), describe the Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubezak and Marek Oziwicz appalling psychological consequences of "the perverse value system to which as a culture we have all but succumbed"; a system which churns out people who are "violent, self-denigrating, enraged, starved of validation, deprived of a sense of their own identity" (38) and

ultimately burn-out. Anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz in *His Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (2001:220), admit that late twentieth century developments, with their spin-offs including ethnic wars, linguistic separatism, the "multiculturization" of international capital, "have produced a sense of dispersion, of particularity, of complexity and of uncenteredness (to the extent that) we (.....) are left with the pieces".

The erosion of values is causing havoc in our society. Cases of murder, kidnapping, forgery, suicide etc. are on the increase. The world today has changed drastically; human values are no longer cared for. Today, greatness, goodness and success is measured by the wealth one has. The main aim of life is to earn more and by any means. Simple life is no longer a motto of life. To achieve the luxurious in life, people are greedy, selfish, dishonest and adopt foul means to collect money. High ideals of patriotism, self less devotion to society, sacrifice and service are hollow words for them. Today, corruption has become a way of life and has been spreading into the society. Anything can be bought or sold (human beings, human parts, question papers and answers, results and certificates, voters card etc.) currently in our society.

Both developed and developing nations face erosion of human values. Dignity of labour is a thing of the past/or meant for the dejected and less privileged. Nobody is ready to do any meaningful work to earn a living. This accounts for the increase in armed robbery and kidnapping. In the earlier times, people used to do everything on their own. This disciplined their minds, but now, we have machines that do virtually all that humans used to do for themselves. As Prathapan (2009) puts it, "now of course we have machines, if one gadget stops working, you can always buy another, thus hard work, patience, discipline, persistence etc, are forgotten values. And people want to increase their bank balance so that they can keep buying machines".

Language Extinction and Erosion of Human Values

Of the estimated 6,700 languages currently spoken throughout the world, a little over 2,500 have been classified as endangered and half are predicted to become extinct by the end of the century. As UNESCO eloquently expressed;

"languages are humankind's principle tool for interacting and for expressing ideas, emotions, knowledge, memories and values. Languages are also primary vehicles of cultural expressions and intangible cultural heritage, essential to the identity of individuals and groups. Safeguarding endangered language is thus a crucial task in maintaining cultural diversity worldwide.

An endangered language is one that is likely to become extinct in the near future. Many languages are falling out of use and being replaced by others that are more widely used in the regions or nation, such as English in the U.S or Spanish in Mexico. Unless current trends are reversed, these endangered languages will become extinct within the next century. Many

other languages are no longer being learned by new generations of children or by new adult speakers; these languages will become extinct when their last speakers dies. In fact, dozens of languages today have only one native speaker still living, and that person's death will mean the extinction of the language: it will no longer be spoken or known by anyone.

Languages are the pillars of cultures and vehicles of oral traditions. Each language is a unique way of thinking and structuring the view of the world. Language is not only a medium of communication but also part of the culture of a people. It is in a way the totality of culture since culture cannot be expressed in any way except through language. The cultural background of a people is so intertwined with language that one cannot fully understand and appreciate without the knowledge of the other (Omego 2005:202).

An endangered language is one that is likely to become extinct in the near future. When languages are no longer being learned by new generations of children or by new adult speakers; the language will become extinct when their last speaker dies. Many indigenous languages in Nigeria are endangered and on the way to extinction.

Outright genocide is one cause of language extinction. For example when European invaders exterminated the Tasmanians in the early 19th century, an unknown number of languages died as well. Far more often, however language becomes extinct when a community finds itself under pressure to integrate with a larger or more powerful group. Sometimes, the people learn the outsiders' language in addition to their own; this has happened in Greenland, a territory of Denmark, where Kalaaallisut is learned alongside Danish. But often, the community is pressured to give up its language and even its ethnic and cultural identity.

When, a community loses its language, it often loses a great deal of its cultural identity at the same time. Although language loss maybe voluntary or involuntary, it always involves pressure of some kind, and it is often felt as a loss of social identity or as a symbol of defeat (Woodbury 2012).

As Woodbury emphasizes,

Much of the cultural, spiritual and intellectual life of a people is experienced through language. This ranges from prayers, myths, ceremonies, poetry, oratory and technical vocabulary to everyday greetings, leave-takings, conversational styles, humour, ways of speaking to children and terms of habits, behaviours and emotions. When a language is lost, all of these must be fashioned in the new language- with different words, sounds, and grammar- if it is to be kept at all. Frequently, traditions are abruptly lost in the process and replaced by the cultural habits of the more powerful group.

From the foregoing, it is clear that values are embedded in culture and language is the only vehicle through which culture can be transmitted from one generation to another. Hence, when a language goes into extinction, the culture and values are also lost with the language.

Indigenous Languages and Recovery of Human Values

To recover the almost eroded human values in a country like Nigeria, the historic warning given by Phelps-Stroke commission comes to play. The Commission warns as early as 1920-21 that the

Native tongue is immensely more vital in that it is one of the chief means of preserving whatever is good in nature, customs, ideas and ideals..... All people have an inherent right to their own language. It is the means of giving expression to their own personality..... No greater injustice can be committed against a people than to deprive them of their own language (quoted in Omolewa, 1975 :107).

As Uzozie (2011) points out, similar opinion and feeling were expressed by a few other well meaning Europeans and Nigerians alike, in the 1930's the majority of Nigerians that had been so won, heart and soul, that they hardly paid attention, and made hardly any efforts to love their languages and thereby change the course of cultural-neglect and decay which now degenerates into loss of human values.

The mother tongue is the most useful language to a bilingual child in the formative state of his life. According to Fafunwa (1982), it is natural to him like mother's milk. It is also the means by which his attitudes and appetitudes are best developed. The child should thus be encouraged to in his first twelve years in life to master his mother tongue for the positive development of his physical, mental and intellectual potentials. We should care about preventing the extinction of language because of the human costs to those most directly affected.

Along with the accompanying loss of culture, language loss can destroy a sense of self worth, thereby limiting human potential which in turn hinders the development of the society. An indigenous language is a language that is native to region and spoken by indigenous people often reduced to the status of minority language. In line with the above, the Australian Society for Indigenous Languages (AUSIL) comments:

Decades of research and experiences show that meaningful recognition of indigenous languages, along with their deliberate and systematic incorporation into programs in the education, health, justice, and job training sectors, along with reasonable cross-cultural training and orientation of service providers are critical to closing the gap. The evidence consistently indicates that doing so gives significantly better outcome in:

Literacy, standard English proficiency, school retention rates, learning in all subjects, reduction in anti-social behaviour, and

as well as progress towards achieving the Millennium development goals.

Health advantages including mental and physical health have been linked to learning and retaining ones' own language.

The Task Ahead

According to UNESCO, appropriately 600 languages have disappeared in the last century and they continue to disappear at a rate of one language every two weeks. Up to 90 percent of the world's languages are likely to disappear before the end of this century if current events are allowed to continue.

As a result of linguistic erosion, much of the encyclopaedia of traditional indigenous knowledge that is usually passed down orally from generation to generation is in danger of being lost forever. This loss is irreplaceable and irreparable. Customary laws of indigenous communities are often set out in their language and if the language is lost the community may not fully understand its laws and system of governance that foster its future survival.

Values of any kind in actual life depend for their meaning and the forms they are expressed on the kind of social culture, language and human environment where they apply, it is obvious that no rigid system or hierarchy of values can be said to apply everywhere and equally. In many respects, the culture itself is the determining factor in what are regarded as values and what as anti-values. Values are mostly related as much to the history and traditions from which they arose as to the demands of the current environment, which now must be said more and more to be a global one. As societies become more closely inter-related and common positions and practices emerge as a result, the question of values must be reconsidered and reinvigorated as part of aiding that process.

From the foregoing, it is clear that human values give worthiness and respect to life and no human society is possible without values, it follows that urgent steps should be taken to recover the values embedded in our culture. Hence indigenous languages are the most suitable means for recovering human values. The paper recommends that appropriate aspects of our diverse indigenous cultures should be incorporated into the school curriculum

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