

PROSPECT OF “IGBA OJU” IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY: PATHWAY TO MORAL DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

In the traditional African societies, it is rarely strange to see a child misbehave either in the home or society at large because the honour of such child's family is at stake. Thus, Africans make it an important task to educate and train a child to develop holistically through collective efforts of every member of the society. Many parents of current disposition go to the extent of giving boundaries to how far teachers can correct and influence their children, whereas, in African view, every member of the community stands as parent to every child, and this had served as a mean of check and balance in moral development of children. This study therefore investigates the *Igba-oju* concept in the African Philosophy as a pathway to moral development of young children in Southwestern Nigeria. This study adopted phenomenological approach of Qualitative Research design. One key informant interview guide was used to interview six adults. The data collected were analyzed using thematic. One of the findings showed that *igba-oju* is a child upbringing practice that allow everyone in the child's immediate environment to guide and correct any wrong behavior or character exhibited by the child and likewise reward good behavior in the child. We recommend that Traditional rulers in Yorubaland such as paramount kings, baales (Village head), mogaji (Family head) and chiefs should organize seminars and meetings on the benefits of *igba-oju* to the moral development of children.

Key word: moral; *igba-oju*; children; African Society

Introduction

Child upbringing or training in many Africa traditional settings is tailored towards a communal style where every member of the society is believed, to have a say in how a child should behave, relate, engage and participate in societal activities. This norm and practice empower every member of society to be parents and teachers of every child in such society. This can be seen as the solution to the poser of what birth the African Proverb of Yoruba origin which says —*aju meji l'on bi omo, igba oju loun wol* which can literally be interpreted to mean, two eyes birth a child but two hundred rare the child. This implies that in the African setting, aside from the parents who procreated a particular child, it is the responsibility of every other member of the society, either related by blood or not, to see to the upright upbringing of the child in all ramifications.

In the traditional African setting, child upbringing is a responsibility that is stretched beyond the nuclear family to the extended family and sometimes beyond such setting the immediate society where the child finds himself/herself. In the African traditional child upbringing practice, it is recognized that though a child is birthed and traceable to a family, being head by a father and mother, every child belongs to the community that hosts the family; although the biological parents have the greatest responsibility for

upbringing the child (Iroegbu, 2014). Before the mid 19th century, the care and upbringing of the Nigerian child were done absolutely within the traditional setting of the family and community care and development until the introduction of a formal school system which, according to Ogunyemi (2015), was an admixture of tradition and modernity being the order of the day. Formally, the preschool according to Olalowo, (2020) is placed in the position of one of the institutions with the responsibility of raising a whole-child, which in Yoruba society is referred to as *omo to dape* (Salami, 2018).

However, African traditional child upbringing practices is driven by the notion that since every child is not just a representative of a single institution (family, school, religion, and others), but representing a larger social class such as the society; actualizing the whole-child personality requires that every individual, especially a more knowledgeable person in the society has a role to play in developing the upheld values of the society in such a child. In this process, the kind of education given to the child tends towards developing a totally upright child called *omoluabi* in the Yoruba clime, *onye na -eguzosi ike n'ezu ihe* in Igbo and *da nagari* in Hausa. To the African traditional episteme, unlike the eroding ideology of the modern age of civilization, a child's development is first viewed and nurtured from the lens of social and emotional competencies wherewith interpersonal and intrapersonal moral attitudes are inculcated in the child and not mere progressiveness of intellectualism. In the Yoruba clime, a child can be smart (referred to as *omo to ja fafa*) in his/her daily dealings, which could be hereditary as a family trait, and sometimes develop an obvious result that exposes the child to daily experiences that builds up what it (the society) considers as the right attitude to life as a way of existing and also as a way of relating with others.

The African value system, especially the Yoruba tribe of Southwestern Nigeria, upholds collectivism ahead of individualism, that is, nobody does anything for him or herself, decisions are made to benefit the society, actions are taken for the benefit of the society and every child is seen to belong to everybody, especially when the child is of good conduct. The ecological system theory was adopted for this study as it is in the best position to describe the collectivist value of the Yorubas and the communal responsibility of rearing a child to be morally upright. The ecological system was propounded by Uriel Bronfenbrenner in 1979 to explain how a child is being initiated into society from the smallest unit to the broadest unit. Bronfenbrenner expatiates how different categories of society influence a child and how their participation in the child's development goes in layers. SAGE (2021) further put the propounder's idea to be how a child's natural environment interrelates with the influence of the child's biological characteristics. Based on this, he categorized a child's environment into four: the microsystem, which is the lowest level of the environment, followed by the mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The microsystem is the smallest unit of interaction where a child finds him/herself and examples of this are home and school. In this environment, the child creates an influence and also gets influenced by the event of the immediate environment. In context, this implies that the parents and siblings have an immediate impact on the moral development of a child because they have the first contact with the child and are the closest to the child at every point in time. The other related example of a microsystem is the classroom where the classmates and teachers also spend a long time with the child, therefore, they can influence the child either in a positive or negative way and vice versa. Parents, teachers and caregivers have the responsibility to guide, lead, teach and serve as moral standards for every child around them because the child is a direct influence on his/her peers.

The mesosystem is the second level of the ecological system, and it is the interaction between the components of the microsystem. In the microsystem, the parties of influence can act independently, but when it comes to the mesosystem, the act of a party in the microsystem is corroborated by another party. For example, when there is a connection between a teacher's impact on a child and the parent's influence on the child, it plays a significant role in aiding the child's development, especially to become morally upright.

The next level of the ecological system is the exosystem; although it does not have direct interaction with the child, but it has a great impact on the development of the child. An example of an exosystem is the parent's place of work or a parent's group of friends. Parent's daily experience at work may determine their mood when they get home to meet the family, similarly, parent's work nature will also have an influence on their availability for the children. A situation where parents leave for work early in the morning and comes back home late at night gives the child a very slim opportunity to interact with the parents and makes the child open to influences from forces outside the family. When a parent does not have

time to interact with their children, it creates a lot of gaps in influencing the child's development. The parents will not be able to help the child, even when he/she goes wayward. This shows that the work is affecting the parents directly, and the impact on the parents is being suffered by the children.

The last level of the ecosystem is the macrosystem; this system sums up all other levels of the ecosystem. This system is about the broader view of how society at large influences the behavioural trait of a child which will be a determinant of having a positive or negative moral development experience. The level sums up the cultural context in which the microsystem, mesosystem and exosystem are entrenched. Examples of macrosystems are government policies, social institutions like schools and churches, cultural beliefs and practices, society's code of conduct and so on. These instances of macrosystems create a general guide and principle that can be set as a moral standard for all children through the guidance of parents, teachers, leaders and so on. In the context of this study, the policies created by the government and cultural institutions influence a child's behavior by creating dos and don'ts with liable consequences to checkmate their behavior. Therefore, training the child to meet up with moral standards is influenced by the larger society, using the parents and teachers as a medium to effect the standards.

Many years after Bronfenbrenner came up with the four levels of the ecological system, more experience made him add a fifth of the levels, which is called chronosystem and this talks about integrating all the levels and observing how the interaction among all the levels influences the child's behavior as the child grows older. He noted that society is changing, and so are the principles, therefore, there is a need to observe and understand how these changes influence the developmental outcome in children (Eriksson, Ghazinour, and Hammarström, 2018).

Statement of the Problem

The communal style of child upbringing is a unique practice in African settings. It requires the effort of every individual in a community to inject positivity and progressivism into the society, an act which equally advanced childcare and development. It has been established in historical books and reports from older generations that the moral development of children decades ago is better compared to what is obtainable in the current disposition. This can be linked to the entanglement between civilization and culture. The Africans have their culture which dictates their norms and traditions, but when civilization gets entangled with culture, some of the norms get discarded and replaced with borrowed foreign culture. This act, then is believed to also be linked to the fact that the type of society we operate today does not encourage communal style; which is also an influence of civilization. It is believed in Africa that when people of the same tradition live together to raise a child in the way of the society, they tend to be morally upright and be good representatives of the society that nurtured them. There have been studies on whose responsibility lies the moral education of children, moral problems of girl-child in Nigerian schools and moral education in world society, but this study sees a need to investigate the *Igba-oju* African Philosophy (a communal style of child upbringing) as a means to positive moral development in Children to building a friendly society for all and sundry. This study, therefore, looks at the prospects of *Igba-Oju* African philosophy as a pathway to moral development of young children in Southwestern Nigeria.

Research Questions

1. What are the unique qualities of the *Igba-Oju* (Communal Child Upbringing) African Philosophy?
2. To what extent does the *Igba-Oju* (Communal Child Upbringing) affect the moral development of children between 3-5 decades before now?
3. What is the prospect of *Igba-Oju* (Communal Child Upbringing) African Philosophy in the current disposition?
4. What are the alternatives means to *Igba-Oju* (Communal Child Upbringing) African Philosophy in the current disposition?

Methodology

This study used the phenomenological approach of the qualitative research design. The population of the study includes all elderly people in the Southwestern states of Nigeria (aged 50 and above). 12 participants formed the total sample of the study which were purposively selected from three out of six southwestern states of Nigeria. The criteria for the selection were based on the following: the willingness of the participant, falling within the age bracket and must be an indigene of any southwestern states. One key

informant interview guide was designed and used in this study with six questions to guide the discussion. The researchers seek the consent of the elderly people for permission to conduct the interview on them as well recorded their voices for further analysis. After the permission was granted, the researchers administered the key informant interview guide using the audio-visual material to conduct the interview and the collection lasted for 2 weeks. The information gathered was transcribed and thematically analysed to give the result of this study.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: View on the concept of Igba Oju and your experiences regarding this African method of child upbringing

The respondents were asked about their understanding of the concept and their experience while growing up. Many of the respondents agreed that *igba-oju* connoted child upbringing practices that allow everyone in the child's immediate environment to guide and correct any wrong behavior or character exhibited by the child and likewise reward good behavior in the child. The training goes beyond the child's immediate environment; it includes society at large despite the fact that only two people birthed the child yet the success of the child depends on his/her family and society at large. The excerpts from the interview are presented below under the following sub-themes: view and experience.

Sub-theme 1: views on the concept of Igba-oju

The concept of *igba-oju* has just one definition which is based on the Yoruba proverb though it takes four eyes to birth a child but 200 eyes look after or train the child. This concept implies that every adult in the community has the moral right to correct any wrongdoing or actions against the family or community standard. This means, there is no child in the Yoruba community that lack teachers to direct or guide despite the lack of reading and writing or properly documented curriculum. According to Mr D from Ogun State who submitted that:

When a child goes to school, teachers become loco parentis. I was born and raised in a family house (agboole), where all the family members; that is nuclear and extended family share common purse. In my family house, all the elders in the house are entitled to punish and praise a child in the family.

Mrs A from Ogun State also submitted that:

It means that two people give birth to a child, but a whole lot of people contribute to the upbringing of a child, compared to nowadays, where we have four eyes (father and mother) birthing a child and just the four eyes oversee the child to maturity.

Mr B from Ondo State:

*you asked a good question sir, and I want to appreciate you for coming up with this type of research work, probably parents and appropriate elders will lay hands on this work and learn one or two from it because I believed it would help the current parents to raise morally upright children. Well, let me answer the question you asked, *igba-oju* is a community way of coming together to raise a child to become a meaningful member of the community. So I believed, everyone in the community starting from the immediate family members of the child and other members of the community are teachers and role models to the child and other children in the society.*

Sub-themes 2: experience of *igba-oju* while growing up

The respondents shared their experience with *igba-oju* as a method of child upbringing practices in the Yorubaland, all the respondents agreed that their behaviours were sharpened by the *igba-oju* practices because they know there is no hidden place for them with wrong behaviour in the community as everyone or adults served as police to safeguard the heritage or moral value of their community. Below are the excerpts from the interview on their experience of *igba-oju*: Mr D:

An instance is when an elderly brother beat another of my brother, who is younger to him, as he was trying to escape, he fell and broke his arm. At this point, no serious punishment was given to him because he has the right to punish the younger one who accidentally broke his arm. I lived in

about 2 different family houses and every one of the elders chastises us. Whenever a child also performs well or does something worth praise, they will equally do that because igba oju is not only for punishment and bad character but also for good deeds too. There is no discrimination whether a child belongs to me or another person, all children are treated as “my child”

Mrs F from Oyo State:

I remembered a scenario that happened to me. (silent)... I was around 8 years of age, on that day, my mother sent me on an errand, and while running the errand one of my peers sought my problem and we started fighting (smiles), Unfortunately, one of my mother's friends saw me, she bit me mercilessly that I cannot report to my mother, even before I returned home she had also reported me to my parents, that day was more of hellfire to me than rest of the days till now. See, since that day I never engaged in a street fight no matter the level of the provocation, the best thing I do is to walk away from the person because the beating of that day left a mark on my body till today.

Theme 2: view on moral development

Elders shared their views on moral development and what it meant to them. All of them believed that moral development is paramount to the general well-being of the child and society, because children are the future of society, hence, if society will continue to function well, then attention must be given to the moral development of the children, no wonder Yoruba people do not joke with this aspect of training and development in their children. The excerpts from the interview, as reported by Mrs K (Ondo State):

I believed moral development is the ability for children to behave in a certain acceptable way according to the standard of society. For instance, Yoruba society frowns at stealing, lying, disobedience to parents and elders, and laziness among other social vices whereas celebration is usually thrown to celebrate the right attitude or conduct in the children.

Mrs G:

Moral development in contemporary society is a very bad experience because just the parents taking care of the children without cooperation with people from society, eventually, if the children become wayward, they become a nuisance to society and not to their parents alone. During the period when igba-oju was active, our parents leave us with other people and family in the society to care for us when they travel. Today, children are kept indoors and they have different poor experiences which even lead to depression. Some of the children easily get influenced in a negative way when they have a short opportunity to meet with some other children.

Mr B:

From about age 1, children grow with their own behavior, different children with different characters.

Theme 3: the special qualities of this child upbringing method that differentiate it from current style of child upbringing

The special quality of the igba-oju is that no child is left behind without anyone to correct him or her. That is, it is expedient for every member in the society to play their expected roles toward the children's moral development. For instance, any adult can reward or punish a child without any problem or interference from the child's parents. Just as respondent, Mr H submitted that:

Igba-oju has many qualities but the one I can vividly remember is that of collective action, where everyone took blame or praise in raising children and there was a practice then that if any family refused or discouraged other members to correct their child, such family is isolated by the other families and nobody, I mean nobody will interact with the family, therefore, every family put effort together to raise a well-behaved child.

Mr B:

There are many differences. In contemporary society, there is no compound or extended family, but all man to himself, and this affects the children, especially in development. When Igba oju was really active, a 10 year old child is more intelligent, sharp and wise because of the diverse experience they must have had, living with a large family, tapping lessons from individuals from

the family. Although it has its own negative effect. From personal experience, my father smokes cigars, but he does not want his children to take up the habit, so, being the youngest, whenever I see my brothers taking the wasted sticks of cigarette that my father dropped, I will report them and they would be punished by my father or any other elder in the house. I was very young then, but I already know what to do when I see bad actions. Another instance is that there are some children that some family member love and they do not punish like some other children, and I am an example of that child. Whenever I offend my mother, she will not beat me during the daytime because others will come to my rescue, so she waits till the night, waking me at midnight to satisfy herself with the beating, but she will tell me the reason for the punishment. The case is different today because almost everything has been termed child abuse and a parent can get punished for such.

Note that there are three categories of children – “Omo oju” that is, a child that takes to correction by mere signal (e.g. the look on parents' facial expression); another one is “Omo-enu” that is, a child that only takes to correction after they are being verbally abused or insulted and the last one is “Omo-egba” that is, a child who does not take to correction using the aforementioned style, until they get beaten, therefore, a child is treated according to their type.

Mrs C:

There is room for chastisement and correction during the period for igba-oju, unlike now that people don't correct and chastise. They only try to caution or threaten with punishment, but they will never touch the child. Back then, our parents keep cane and koboko (horsewhip) to beat us. As a result, there is fear that caution child's behaviour, and they grow to become morally upright. The story is totally different today, as it is obvious that moral maladjustment is the order of the day because there is a limit to caution from society.

Theme 4: Practicability of Igba-oju philosophy in this current disposition

The beauty of any culture is an evolvement from one particular phase to another, which can be said of many African philosophies, especially igba-oju concept. In this current disposition, where the common practice is everyman to him/herself and his immediate environment. Igba-oju practice is currently under threat from many factors such as economics, formal education, religion and other institution. As Mrs C rightly said:

I doubt if igba-oju can be practiced in this generation or generations to come because none is showing how to practice it. Take for example, in the olden days, our parents lived together in a compound known as Agboole, which housed factually every member of the family, but today, people live in duplexes or flats even the funniest thing now is that many people do not know their next neighbour talk less of allowing a stranger to correct their children.

Mr B:

This dispensation? I totally doubt it and I have a reason for saying this. This generation lack moral development because they were raised outside the concept of igba-oju like our generation, please don't get me wrong, in our generation despite the igba-oju many children still go astray but the number is fewer than this generation. Also, the concept of I owe none anything is rampant now, based on this, igba-oju cannot be practiced, am sorry. What of the increase in the number of insecurity in the country where nobody can be trusted again with the welfare of children? We need to devise another way or method of raising children that will have moral development.

Mr D:

I doubt if the igba-oju style can still be practiced. I believe that it has been programmed by God for the world to evolve into this and my fear is more for the generation unborn, because those who will train them are the wayward ones today. Therefore, for a child that was not trained through igba-oju, and grew up without good morals, their children have the tendency of being worse than they are.

Mrs E:

From my perspective, they grow to be morally upright after being trained by different family members and also by what they experience in school and we also listen to instructions. Unlike in

contemporary society, where children get so tough, even when parents beat them, they still grow tough because there is a limit to how teachers in school can punish them. Today, only parents discipline their children, they don't even allow teachers to do so. There are experiences where parents visit schools to warn their child's teachers never to touch the child or chastise the child for any reason. In a nutshell, there is nothing like Igba Oju again because what everyone does is what Yoruba call "Konkojabele", that is, all man to himself.

In another way, some also grow tough and even get pregnant from Class 6 because some of them can't endure some tough time experience because there was suffering for many families then, so, the grace of God was also a factor that helped.

Theme 5: other child upbringing methods being practiced and their impact on moral development

The concept of igba-oju is not totally welcomed among the elites in Yorubaland, and even some illiterate parents are beginning to follow suite, nevertheless, the absence of igba-oju as a form of child upbringing does not imply a vacuum of upbringing practice among parents. Today, parents have embraced various upbringing practices like authoritarian, authoritative, permissive and negligent parenting styles while some parents infused both traditional and modern child upbringing practices. The researchers asked the respondents about the current child upbringing practices and it affects children's moral development.

According to Mr B:

Since every home today is fenced up, everyone practices self-training, therefore, parents are the only ones who have the most to do with their children

Mrs C:

The method of upbringing children today is "alakowe" style, that is, training by the elites. It is not "aju meji" that is, father and mother training the child and the result is what we can see in our society today, there is a restriction to punishment and children are growing to act as they find convenient.

Theme 6: suggestion on child upbringing method that can influence moral development in the current disposition

Moral development is paramount especially for the progress of this current disposition because the level of moral decadence among children is on the increase and it must be arrested to avert a dysfunctional society where anarchy and chaos become the order of the day. The respondents are asked to suggest upbringing practices that can foster moral development in children: According to one of the respondents, Mr A:

Bible says train up a child the way he should go and he will not depart from it. The parents have a lot to do by training them in the way of God (religious). Also, parents should live a life of example by not taking alcohol, smoking and other bad habits, even if they will do, it should not be in the presence of the children or to the knowledge of their children. Parents should also avoid using vulgar language. Parents should also train their children with their cultural practices by giving respect to the elders, greeting manners, and when a child has not yet matured (like 18 plus), they should be restricted from some outings and making some personal decisions.

Mrs B:

The only intervention I can think of is to teach them the way of God, pray for them and we as parents should be a moral standard for the children. An ant cannot act like a termite, and lions are born their own likes, therefore, parents should act as the role model to their children. Although, it doesn't work like that sometimes, because we have seen pastors and imam's children going wayward and children of bad parents that eventually grow up to be of good morals. But the bottom line is, every parent should be a role model to their children.

Mrs Y:

the only suggestion I can give is that parents need to trust teachers and other members to play their part in the moral development of their children. I strongly believe that teachers are important in the child's life because they spend quality time with the children and can provide needed information to the parents which can help to foster the moral development of children.

Conclusion

From the findings above, it had been revealed that the impact of igba-oju on the moral development of children in the old Yoruba society cannot be undermined, because moral development is central in the traditional society in Yorubaland. Many measures were put in place to ensure proper moral development and oftentimes, parents and families share blame for any moral delinquency in society, thus, every family makes an effort to develop children's moral development. Though total adoption of igba-oju is no longer possible as society evolves and lace with many challenges that determine communal living, however, igba-oju concept should not be thrown out totally just like a popular axiom that —do not throw the baby with the bathing water. The baby here is the igba-oju which must not be abandoned totally if the moral development of the children will be achieved in southwestern, Nigeria and Africa at large.

Recommendations

- Traditional rulers in the Yorubaland such as paramount kings, baales (Village head), mogaji (Family head) and chiefs should organize seminars and meetings on the benefits of igba-oju to the moral development of children. This recommendation could be achieved through the help of various trade union leaders, religious leaders and scholars in the field related to education to educate parents, teachers and every member of the society regularly.
- Government should ensure adequate and comprehensive security of lives and properties in the country. This recommendation can be achieved by overhauling the security set-up of this country and encouraging regional and communal security networks.
- Parents should create and encourage feedback with their children's teachers, caregivers and other members of the society. To achieve this goal, parents must work hand-in-hand with the children's teachers and other members by giving adequate attention to their report on the children and applying any useful recommendations to foster the moral development of the children
- Lastly, scholars and researchers should produce literature books, especially in the language of the immediate environment to educate parents on the benefits of allowing trusted members of society to join in rewarding good behaviour and punishing bad behaviour in children, once a child knows there is no safe haven for bad behaviour either with the parents or elders in the society, such child tends to behave in the appropriate manner acceptable to the African society.

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