
ETHICS, LEADERSHIP QUESTION AND THE CRISIS OF VALUES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This work is centered on ethics, leadership and the crisis of values in Nigeria. The perceived decline in moral values and ethical behavior among leaders and citizens especially in Nigeria is a pressing concern that warrants attention and action. This phenomenon can be attributed to various factors such as lack of poor parenting, accountability, corruption, poor role modelling, and influence of social media. These factors contribute to lack of loss of trust, social cohesion, and economic well-being of the masses. The work used quantitative method of research, a non-numerical method with its descriptive and analytical tools was employed. In doing this, we found out that instilling core values such as integrity, service, and accountability in public servants/politicians is crucial for promoting good governance, enhancing public service and support institutional strength. By addressing the root causes of the decline in moral values and promoting a culture of integrity, Nigeria can work toward creating a more just and equitable nation. Ethical leadership and values are crucial drivers of national growth. We recommend integrity test for potential public officer holders, as well as the training of youths and women in selfless service, as knowledge weighs down the eyes of ignorance.

Keywords: Ethics, Leadership, Values, Morality, Integrity.

Introduction

The problem of Nigeria has been a contested opinion.¹ Lots of folks have been trying to tackle these issue. This is a pointer that Nigeria needs a clear framework for value orientation and responsible leadership. What is surprising is that Nigeria often gloss over the moral values. Nigeria is facing major challenges like insecurity, unemployment, and violence, corruption, but at the root of these issues is a loss of ethical values, faith, self-worth, and community spirit. Good name seems no longer better than riches (Proverbs 22:1). Nigeria's apparent poverty is not

¹. Achebe, Chinua. *The Problem with Nigeria*. (Oxford University Press: 1983).

because it lacks natural resources, instead, it is because people's minds have been impoverished – a mindset battered by years of frustration and traumatized in dealings with a closed-off government system.

“This has created a mindset that is all about getting “settled” and appeased, with a sense of entitlement and dependency, and not enough drive to be creative”.² The policy recommendations aim to spotlight the moral side of Nigeria's problems and lay out a framework for building ethical values and leadership in the country.

Leaders are expected to follow ethical codes set by the government, guided by principles like equity, justice, fairness, and fair play. This means living by certain maxims such as respect, integrity, excellence, accountability, and responsibility, fusion, and transparency. These maxims showcase the need to value others' dignity and worth, regardless of their background, have the courage to do what is right, even if it is tough, strive for top-notch quality in your work, own up to your actions and decisions. It also requires to make decisions openly, so that people can understand the reasoning behind them. These principles help build trust in government, public service and ensure officials act with integrity and professionalism.

The Nigerian government should make ethics and values a core part of higher education, to prepare future leaders especially those joining the public service/politics for responsible roles. To achieve this, government can draw on traditional cultural wisdom and integrate these values into higher education. This matters because the public service is working with people who already have established values. According to Ndukwe and Nwoba, government should “set up strong disciplinary bodies to investigate ethics violations and treat these as serious offenses”.³ This is crucial given the widespread unethical behavior among politicians/public servants.

It is against this backdrop that it becomes quite necessary to interrogate 'ethics, leadership question and the crisis of values in Nigeria'. In lieu of this, this paper examines Nigeria's challenges that underscore the need for ethical leadership, transparency, and accountability, drawing from traditional African values and modern philosophical perspectives to restore integrity and promote societal progress.

² “Ethics, Value Orientation and Leadership Development in the Niger Delta: Recommendations for the way forward”. Federal Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, (June, 2016). <http://www.stakeholderdemocracy.org>. Accessed on 29/7/25.

³ Ndukwe, O. and M. O. E. Nwoba. “Ethics and Values in Nigerian Public Service: An Overview”. *Journal of Public Administration and Governance Research (JPAGR)*, 2(1) (2018), 176-185.

Ethics and Leadership

According to Haaga, what has fundamentally distinguished the successful countries from those that failed is mostly the existence of humane leaders with the capability to anticipate changes and to respond to them positively.

Most political and legal philosophers have interrogated the leadership style which continues to be a major constrain in the quest for integral development, the reason for this interrogation is to emphasize the need for nations all over the world, both the developed and the developing (nations), to engage in various forms of reforms with the intention of ushering in responsible and responsive forms of leadership. Nonetheless, development cannot be achievable within an unstable and dishonest system where there is no clear contrast between the 'office' and the 'office holder' and where leaders are shielded with utmost immunity.⁴

The leadership policies embraced by many African nations appear to have fallen short since their inception. This failure stems not merely from the policies' inherent unsuitability, but arguably more so from pervasive issues like selfishness, greed, and a glaring absence of resolve – a lack of 'will power' – needed to drive genuine implementation and bring about meaningful change.

Before we dwell more on leadership let us understand the meaning of ethics. The noun ethics has different meanings. Mostly, people refer to ethics as a code or set of principles that guide how people live. Consequent upon this, one can talk of 'medical or Christian ethics'. Medical ethics is the code that doctors follow when dealing with each other and their patients. Christian ethics refers to principles that guide the behaviour of Christians, like the rules of conduct found

in the ten Commandments (Ex 20:1-7). Ethics is the philosophical study of moral phenomena. It is all about figuring out what is moral values and principles. Ethics tries to address problems like “How should people live?” and “What is the ultimate value?” It encompasses all sorts of practical moral problems. The terms ethics and morality are closely related, and often used interchangeably.

The origin of ethics goes way back. Humans developed morality first, probably through customs and standards, and then started reflecting on how to live best. “This led to the first moral codes, like the code of Hammurabi or the Ten Commandments. Myths often explained where morality came from, linking it to divine origin”.⁵ Plato questioned this, arguing that if morality comes from

⁴ Paul T. Haaga (2018). “Resolving African Leadership Failure Using the 'Agent Sensitive' Archetypal: A Jurisprudential Approach”, *Nasara Journal of Philosophy*: , (Vol. 3, No. 1, 2018), 83.

⁵ Britannica. “Ethics/Definition, History, Examples, Types, Philosophy, and facts”. <https://www.britannica.com>. Accessed on 29/07/2025.

gods, then what is good or bad would be arbitrary. Morality originally comes from what is useful, but that does not automatically make it moral. The values human beings create through social interactions and turn into moral principles are not like objective facts in the universe. They are more like expressions of what human beings desire and tend towards. Otakpor opines that:

In traditional societies, the main offences they recognized were against the clan, tribe, or local community – basically, public offences. Stuff like incest, witchcraft, theft, and murder were the original offences, and these were pretty universal. These acts were seen as threats to the whole community because they put the very existence of society at risk, according to the people.⁶

People always label actions that affect the social group and its members as 'good' or 'bad'.

Paul Haaga contends that in the early African history, there were two types of leaders: those created and supported by the colonial authorities; and those who emerged amongst the people to lead the struggle against colonial rule and for independence. The latter came to be generally known as “African nationalists” and the former as “colonial collaborators or stooges”. Democracy played no part in the recruitment or creation of either type of leaders. The colonial government identified the collaborators and imposed them on the people. With a few exceptions some African nationalists manipulated their way and imposed themselves on the people. Although both types of leaders claimed to be working in the interest of their people yet each had different interpretations of those interests and the means of achieving and promoting them. Conceding that both types of leaders claimed to be working in the interest of their people yet each had different interpretations of those interests and the means of achieving and promoting them. For many of them, personal greed and the impulse to maintain themselves in power, and not the fulfillment of the electoral promises, influenced their vision of the future.⁷

Leadership is basically about having the right mindsets and behaviors that get people moving in the same direction, working together towards shared goals, and being able to adapt when things change. It can also be seen as a means of influencing others in a group to work towards a shared goal. And honestly, there are like, tons of different ways to define or approach leadership – almost as many as there are actual leaders. Also, leadership is not something you are born with. It is not like a personality trait. Since good leadership is more about what you do rather than who you are, it is actually a skill you can develop. How do you start? Knowing yourself is a major first step. The best leaders are aware of their own thoughts and values, and they show up being real and honest.

Leadership is crucial for any society. It is key to survival and process. The development level of

⁶ Otakpor, N. “The Moral Crisis in Nigeria”. Occasional Lecture Series, 1 (Delta Publications Limited, 2000), 7.

⁷ Paul T. Haaga (2018). “Resolving African Leadership Failure Using the 'Agent Sensitive' Archetypal: A Jurisprudential Approach”, *Nasara Journal of Philosophy*, (Vol. 3, No. 1, 2018), 90.

countries worldwide is tied to their leadership paradigm. According to Asaju, Arome, and Mukail “leadership is about managing resources for the common good, and it applies at all levels, from politics to organizations, institutions, and even families”.⁸ For Nigeria, infusing leadership values at all levels would be a major win. Leading means guiding actions, thoughts, or beliefs by using influence. So, leadership basically keeps a social group or team united, gives them energy, and moves them towards a specific goal. To make this happen, the leadership has to be good. A good leader must possess the following qualities:

1. Integrity: This entails being honest and having strong moral values. People are way more likely to follow a leader if they are sure he has their back and is looking out for their interests. Being a leader means that you are in an important position, and to be trusted with that role, you have got to be honest and have a solid, upright character. This is what integrity is all about. According to Ewelu:

The leader must be one who will not betray the confidence and trust of the unsuspecting followers. So a leader is the type of person that protects the property of the group placed in his charge and is the person whose behavior, both within and outside the group, the subordinates will be proud of. The leader is always a man of prestige and honour. Nobody wants to be led by a dishonest or an infamous person.⁹

2. Transparency and accountability: Transparency is being open and honest in your actions and decisions while accountability refers to taking responsibility for your actions and decisions. When leaders own up to their actions and stay accountable, they build a workplace that is all about trust and reliability. Prioritizing accountability strengthens the team bond and motivates everyone to bring his/her best.

Competence and enthusiasm: A good leader needs competence and enthusiasm. They are like, totally different but very important in their own ways. Competence is still about having the knowledge, skills, and experience to get things done, make solid decisions, and lead the team to hit their goals. Enthusiasm, on the other hand, is about being passionate, energetic, and optimistic. If a leader is competent but does not show enthusiasm, their team might not get inspired or motivated. On the flip side, if a leader is all about enthusiasm but is not competent, they will probably seem ineffective. So, the dream leader is someone who possesses both. They have got the expertise and they know how to pump up and motivate everyone around them.

⁸. Asaju, K., Arome, S. and Mukaila, I. “Leadership Crisis in Nigeria: The Urgent Need for Moral Education and Value Re-Orientation”. *Public Administration Research*, 3(1) (2014), 117-124.

⁹. Ewelu, I. B., “Leadership and African Values”. *West African Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 2 (1999), 40-56.

Ethics and leadership are closely related. Leadership is all about morality on a big scale, which is why ethics is a key to understanding what leadership is. Ethics is how humans interact with each other – what people should do, how people should be, and what is right or wrong. Leadership is a special kind of human interaction that involves power, vision, obligation, and responsibility. By digging into the ethics of leadership, people get a deeper understanding of what leadership is all about, because the core issues in ethics are also the core issues in leadership. Some of those issues are being real, handling self-interest, and doing what is just and right. Ciulla opines that:

Some of the most insightful things on leadership and ethics come from ancient texts that are just waiting to be rediscovered. History is packed with wisdom and case studies on how leaders have handled morality. Ancient thinkers from all over the world give us perspectives that help us understand leadership in new ways. History and philosophy show us patterns in leadership behavior and themes about morality that have been around for ages.¹⁰

They remind us that leadership is deeply tied to what it means to be human.

Ethics is a major key for political leadership. It is all about how a leader conducts himself/herself personally. Ethics is about human behavior, so a leader needs to have solid moral conduct to drive positive change in a democratic community. According to Jeko and Odigie, ethical leadership is “when you are what is best for everyone, not just your own private interests – public interests comes first”.¹¹ This kind of leadership helps build a better society. Unfortunately, Nigerian leaders have been known to make self-destructive choices. Wangari cited in Jeko and Odigie pointed out that “instead of working together for the greater good, they often chase greed and selfishness take over”.¹²

Ethical leadership refers to leaders structuring their organization to perform better when it comes to ethics. To be an ethical leader, you ought to have both knowledge and strong convictions. A strong ethical leader has the right kind of integrity, can make solid decisions, and leads in an ethical way. These leaders make ethics a core part of the culture, always bringing it up and discussing it. In addition, they are consistently ethical overtime, constantly showing that ethics are a major part of who they are as leaders.

Ethics in leadership is important for building trust and integrity. Leaders who make ethics apriority create workplaces where people feel valued, which actually boosts employee

^{10.} Ciulla, B. J. “Ethics and Leadership Effectiveness”. In J. P. Nahavandi (ed). *The Art and Science of Leadership*, (Prentice Hall, 1995), 495-512.

^{11.} Jeko, O. V. and Odigie, J. N. “The Ethics of Governance, Leadership and Developemnt in Nigeria”. *Akwa Ibom State University Journal of Arts*, 5(1) (2024), 19-37.

^{12.} Jeko, O. V. and Odigie, J. N. “The Ethics of Governance, Leadership and Developemnt in Nigeria”. 19-37.

engagement. This drives into how ethics plays a major role in leadership, showing how being ethical builds trust. The goal is to inspire leaders to make ethics a core part of how they decide things. Ethics in leadership is the moral standards that guide what a leader does. It is about being lawful and morally grounded. “Ethical leaders care about their people and the society, making sure their actions match up with shared values. Ethics is basically the foundation of trust and credibility in leadership”.¹³ Leaders who are ethical lead their society better and create a vibe where integrity and respect thrive. When things get tough, ethical leaders use their moral compass to stay true to their societal values. Trust and integrity are like, the core foundation of any society. They are what make relationships work and drive long-term success.

Power is major challenge for ethical leadership. How leaders handle their desire for power has always been fascinating to writers, historians, and philosophers. According to Ciulla and *et al*:

Using power the right way requires self-control, which is a key part of most moral theories. We are starting with The Buddha's “First Sermon” because his thoughts on human nature and desire help understand how tempting power can be. Buddha said desire is what causes human suffering. The only way to end suffering and find happiness, according to Buddha, is to conquer those desires and follow the eight-fold path – which is basically a set of moral guidelines for right behavior.¹⁴

This reminds everyone that leaders are human too, and they need major self-control because their position gives them the means to indulge their desires, which can create an unquenchable thirst for things like power or fame.

Ciulla further contends that leaders who have virtues such as kindness, care, and justice have what is called 'moral capital'. Moral capital is all about “character and excellence in a given context”.¹⁵ Here Aristotle's idea of virtue, which mixes moral and practical knowledge that people apply to everything is used. Virtues are habits for instance, honesty or courage. “One is not really honest or courageous unless the person actually practice those things. Aristotle said that the ultimate goal of life and leadership is eudemonia, or happiness through flourishing”.¹⁶

Virtues are useful for understanding leadership because they are about how people actually do things. Unlike values, which are what one believes in, virtues are what one actually do. So, a leader's virtues are totally observable. Leaders need moral capital, which includes wisdom, virtue

¹³. Ogbonnaya, C. D. “Revisiting Ethics and Values in Nigerian Public Service”. *ASPL International Journal of Management Sciences*, 7(1) (2018), 33-42.

¹⁴.. Ciulla, B. J., Uhl-Bien, M., and Werhane, P.H. (ed.). *Leadership Ethics*, 1 (Sage Publications Ltd, 2013), xxxii.

¹⁵. Ciulla, B. J., Uhl-Bien, M., and Werhane, P.H. (ed.), xxxii.

¹⁶. “Values – Definition, Characteristics, Importance, Types of Values”. <https://www.scribd.com> 30/7/2025.

and goodwill, it influences followers and help them develop virtues too. Morality is actually a source of power for leaders.

The Crisis of Values and the Problem of Leadership in Nigeria

In interrogating the crisis of values in Nigeria, there is need to examine the concept 'value'. Values are the core beliefs that drive what people do and what is important to people. They help people figure out the kind of person people want to be, how people treat themselves and others, and how they relate with the world. "Values give people the playbook for how to act. In a nutshell, values are about what is good, desirable, or worthwhile. They are the reason behind what people do – the end goal, if they will".¹⁷ This indicates that values are the fundamental beliefs that shape what people do and the decisions they make.

They dictate how they act, what is most important to people, and how they relate with others. "They totally influence how people see the world and interact with it, affecting their actions, motivations, and even their personality".¹⁸ Values act as a frame that helps prioritize what is most important, which in turn drives how decisions get made. Values can cover all sorts of concepts, such as loyalty, responsibility, fairness, and respect. These values guide what people do every day, shaping who they are as individuals and as part of a society. Some values, like honesty and kindness, stand the test of time. They are always good behaviors that build trust in relationships. No doubt, there are exceptions but they are rare, for instance, if a criminal is looking to harm your friend and you have to choose whether to lie to protect him/her.

Virtue ethics is a cool approach because it says moral values can become character strengths through practice. People become virtuous by acting virtuous, using practical wisdom to guide decisions. From this perspective, it is key to intrinsic value.

For ages, the search for moral principles has been a key thing that makes social life work and be happy. Every person, no matter their age, colour, sex or social status, has to follow moral principles. Morality plays a huge role in building a fair and righteous society. It is like the foundation. According to Ojoajogwu and Ojone, moral principles are "a big part of every culture, laying out how individuals and societies should behave. The decline in public morality and discipline in Nigeria is really alarming. This problem is everywhere and has dug deep into society".¹⁹ Nigerian leaders must understand the fact that the ethics of modern leadership is not how

¹⁷. Walumba, F. O., Avolio, B. J., Gardner, W. L., Wernsing, T. S., & Peterson, S. J. "Authentic Leadership: Development and Validation of a Theory based Measure". *Journal of Management*, 34 (2008), 89-126.

¹⁸. Ethics Sage. "What are Values". www.stevenmintzethics.com Accessed on 30/07/2025.

¹⁹. Ojoajogwu, O. N. and Ojone, J. E. "African Ethical and Value Reorientation as a Panacea to Holistic Human and Societal Development of Nigeria", (August, 2021). <https://www.researchgate.net>.

much you last but how well you lead. Nigeria is faced and is still facing major moral issues, like fraud, political instability, banditry, corruption, injustice, and unemployment. The level of moral degradation in Nigeria is alarming. Abogunrin pointed this out when he says “humanity has never been as degraded and spiritually blind as it is now in Nigeria”.²⁰

In analyzing Nigeria's economic journey since independence has been tumultuous, marked by decades of volatility culminating in prolonged stagnation following the peak of its petroleum boom. Haaga contends that the country's challenges of sluggish growth, escalating poverty, and deepening inequality stem from multiple factors, including an economic structure prone to vulnerabilities, detrimental policy choices, adverse political climates, and external shocks.

Initially, Nigeria experienced modest growth in the early independence years, buoyed by a pragmatic policy regime centered on an open agricultural economy. However, this progress was severely hindered by the destructive civil war Nevertheless, the failure to diversify beyond oil has contributed to Nigeria's persistent economic decline, leaving the nation grappling with apparent crisis, stagnation, and underdevelopment.²¹

Haaga's further contribution to the discourse on Nigeria's failure underscores the paramount importance of security in modern nation-state. According to him:

In today's world, security has emerged as a critical prerequisite for development, prompting countries to prioritize it above other pursuits. The underlying logic is straightforward: a nation's ability to ensure self-preservation and safeguard its citizens is foundational to progress. Before endeavors like production, research, education, infrastructure development, and socio-economic transformation can thrive, security must be guaranteed.²²

Ultimately, the core objective of every government revolves around preserving lives, protecting properties, fulfilling citizens' basic needs, and fostering societal development. These cannot be possible in the absence of moral values that guarantee societal growth.

Negative values have overridden the positive one's people need to move forward as a society. In discussing the moral decadence in Nigeria, Njoku says:

Corruption has been a major leadership issue in Nigeria, partly because kids are

²⁰. Abogunrin, S. O. “Religion, Crime and National Survival”. Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies, xxvi(1-2) (1994).

²¹. Paul T. Haaga (2022). “Interrogating the Leadership Conundrum in Nigeria and the Question of a Failed State” *Albertine Journal of Philosophy*, Department of Philosophy, St, Albert Institute, Affiliate of University of Jos. (Vol. 6, July, 2022), 15-222. <https://www.acjol.org/index.php/albertine/article/view/2943/2899>

²². Paul T. Haaga (2022). “Interrogating the Leadership Conundrum in Nigeria and the Question of a Failed State”.

not getting the right moral training, which leads to corruption. Past leaders like Buhari with War Against Indiscipline (WAI) and Obasanjo with the Economic and Finance Crime Commission (EFCC) tried to tackle it, but corruption is still around.²³

The problem is at every level – when leaders are corrupt, everyone else follows suit just to survive, ignoring what is right. The economic situation has created a moral vacuum, especially for parents and youths struggling financially. This harsh reality encourages cheating, stealing and bribery. This is why rebooting Nigeria's value system is very necessary. Looking at Nigeria's challenges, it is obvious that there is values crisis because of a general breakdown in Nigerian society. Thus, the need to map out a strategy to tackle this so that Nigeria can hit those sustainable development goals that can elevate poverty and engineer growth.

When people try to solve Nigeria's values crisis, they have to acknowledge that they have a diverse nation, which means they need to manage all that diversity wisely and create a national consensus from their many traditions. Figuring out a set of values they all broadly agree on is a top priority for Nigerian researchers. It is clear that every part of the nation is struggling with a values crisis. Politicians get the most heat because they are much visible and many of them really mess up. Politics and governance in Nigeria are mirroring how the society (Nigeria) is doing morally. “The nation's moral state is basically defined by this crazy culture of wanting everything now, which fuels short-term thinking, making quick cash, and scamming”.²⁴ Many Nigerians prefer taking shortcuts and trying to get huge returns for minimal effort. There is this existence of intense individualism where people prioritize their own gains no matter how shady, over what is good for everyone.

A proper solution to the crisis of values in Nigeria must address the root causes of the crisis. Thus, the need for economic empowerment. Nigerians have suffered enough, such that making lives easier for them economically is a necessity. If Nigeria can tackle poverty and create more opportunities, people would not be forced into shady and immoral acts. There is also a need for education and value-based curriculum. Incorporating value-based education in schools can help shape the next generation's moral compass. Nigeria needs to strengthen family units and encourage parental involvement to help instill positive values in kids from a young age. Finally, regulating media content to ensure that it is appropriate and promote positive cultural values can be a boost in countering the negative influences from foreign media.

²³. Njoku, I. D. “Re-orientation of value System in Nigeria: A Critic”. *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(11) (2015), 25-32.

²⁴. Kayode F. “Crisis of Values Reclaiming Our Society”. *The Cable* (March12, 2016). <https://www.thecable.org>

Conclusion

This paper explores the intertwining issues of ethics, leadership, and the crisis of values in Nigeria, highlighting perceived declines in moral values and ethical behavior among leaders and citizens. The central argument presented revolves around Nigeria's multifaceted challenges, predominantly featuring the erosion of moral values, justice, leadership crisis, ethical decline, and economic volatility. Key factors contributing to this decline include poor parenting, corruption, inadequate accountability, poor role modeling, and social media influences. These elements are seen to undermine trust, social cohesion, and economic well-being. The work emphasizes instilling core values like integrity, service, and accountability in public servants and politicians to foster good governance and institutional strength.

Ethical leadership and values are crucial drivers of national growth. This is why integrity tests for potential public office holders and training youths and women in selfless service to address Nigeria's challenges is necessary. Promoting a culture of integrity, transparency, and accountability is posited as vital for creating a more just and equitable Nigeria. Leveraging traditional cultural wisdom and integrating values into education are seen as pathways to nurturing responsible leadership and countering the prevailing crisis of values. Ultimately, addressing Nigeria's moral and leadership deficits is framed as essential for societal progress and sustainable development. To cap it all, emphasizing traditional African ethical framework alongside modern governance principles could foster integrity and trust. Nigeria's prosperity demands concerted efforts to recalibrate leadership approaches, strengthen institutions, and align policies with the imperatives of equity, security, and broad-based development, thereby steering Nigeria toward stability and progress.

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