# CULTURAL LAG AND SOCIETAL MORAL DECADENCE IN NIGERIA: A RETHINK

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**Abstract**
This study interrogates the interplay between cultural lag and the rising tide of moral decadence in contemporary Nigerian society. Drawing on Ogburn's theory of cultural lag and Durkheim's concept of anomie, the paper examines how rapid material and technological progress have outpaced moral and ethical adaptation, resulting in a weakened moral fabric. Using qualitative research methods, data were gathered through purposive interviews with community leaders, religious clerics, educators, and selected youth groups, complemented by documentary analysis of existing studies on cybercrime, corruption, and cultural transformation in Nigeria. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the findings. The results show that cultural lag manifests in various forms, including cybercrime, political corruption, the weakening of family and religious institutions, and the glamorization of materialism in popular culture. These trends have directly undermined sustainable development by discouraging innovation, weakening civic responsibility, and misdirecting resources. The study concludes that addressing cultural lag is essential for tackling moral decadence and recommends an integrated approach that combines ethical education, institutional reform, and cultural reorientation.

**Keywords**: cultural lag, moral decadence, Nigeria, cybercrime, corruption, anomie

## Introduction

Societies constantly evolve, yet the pace of technological and material advancement often outstrips the adaptation of moral and ethical frameworks. This disjuncture is captured in the concept of cultural lag, popularized by Ogburn (1922). In Nigeria, rapid changes in communication technology, globalization, and urbanization have brought both benefits and challenges. While these developments have created opportunities for social mobility and innovation, they have also produced a fertile ground for moral decadence, evident in increasing cybercrime, political corruption, sexual permissiveness, and the erosion of communal values.

The problem of this study is rooted in the persistent contradiction between Nigeria's material progress and its moral stagnation. Despite being Africa's largest economy, the nation struggles with widespread corruption, rising youth involvement in cybercrime, and a deepening loss of traditional values. Religious and family institutions, once considered strongholds of morality, appear increasingly complicit in the promotion of materialism. The study therefore seeks to examine the nature of this cultural lag, its connection to moral decadence, and its implications for development.

This study fills an important gap by bringing together theoretical, empirical, and practical perspectives on how cultural lag directly fuels moral decline in Nigeria. While existing

studies have explored cybercrime, corruption, and youth culture in isolation, little attention has been paid to their underlying connection through cultural lag. By situating Nigeria's moral challenges within Ogburn's and Durkheim's frameworks, this study contributes to the body of knowledge by offering an integrated lens for understanding the link between rapid modernization and moral breakdown.

**Empirical Review**

The concept of cultural lag refers to the delay between the introduction of new material innovations and the adjustment of social norms to accommodate them. Ogburn (1922) argues that while material culture (technology, inventions, economic structures) evolves quickly, non-material culture (values, laws, morality) lags behind, creating social imbalance. Moral decadence, on the other hand, is the progressive erosion of ethical values and societal norms which is manifested in corruption, sexual immorality, fraud, dishonesty, and the pursuit of material wealth at the expense of integrity. Ogburn (1922) maintains that the failure of non-material culture to keep pace with material innovations leads to social disorganization and moral crises. His framework still resonates today in Nigeria, where the rapid spread of digital technologies and consumerist lifestyles outpaces moral adaptation, producing social ills such as cybercrime, internet fraud, and ritual killings.

Building on Ogburn (1922), Lenski (1966) emphasized how technological changes reconfigure power and social values. According to him, societies that fail to harmonize technological growth with ethical and institutional checks often experience inequality, social tension, and the erosion of moral standards. Lenski examined how technological advancement reshapes social stratification and value systems. He argues that when technological progress is not matched by ethical and institutional development, moral crises emerge. His framework helps explain the Nigerian situation, where the glorification of sudden wealth and technological misuse (such as financial scams) has replaced communal values of honesty, hard work, and integrity. For him, moral decadence arises as a byproduct of unequal adaptation to technological change.

Durkheim (1897) further enriches the discussion with his concept of anomie. He did not use the term 'cultural lag', but his concept of anomie is directly relevant to moral decadence. He described anomie as a breakdown or absence of social norms caused by rapid social or economic change. In such situations, individuals lose moral guidance and pursue desires without restraint. In Nigeria, this explains why the erosion of traditional moral values under modernization has fostered problems like corruption, sexual immorality, and disregard for communal solidarity. Durkheim's work therefore links cultural transformation with moral decline. Typical illustration is the social acceptance of "Yahoo Yahoo" (internet fraud) as a form of success, which demonstrates a state of anomie where moral codes are destabilized.

More recent scholarship brings the cultural lag debate into the digital age. Castells (1996), in *The Rise of the Network Society,* stresses that digital technologies create both opportunities and crises, depending on how societies adapt their cultural and moral frameworks. Applied to Nigeria, Castells' study points out the contradiction between the empowerment offered by ICT and the moral challenges of online scams, cyberbullying, and digital addiction.

In their study on information technology and knowledge economies in Africa, Oyelaran-Oyeyinka & Adeya (2004) argue that while ICT promotes innovation, the lack of corresponding ethical education and governance structures breeds corruption and misuse of digital tools. This position strengthens the argument that cultural lag is not just theoretical but a practical reality in African societies undergoing technological transformation. Similarly, Adegoke (2010) explores globalization and cultural values in Africa and concludes that exposure to global media and consumerist ideals without adequate moral safeguards fuels decadence. His findings reveal that Western media glorification of wealth, luxury, and sexuality has reshaped the aspirations of African youths, leading to the abandonment of communal and ethical values. In their study on the effect of the change inflicted on the Igbo language and culture by Westernisation and Christianity, Uwaezuoke and Obiamalu (2017) lament the moribund state of many rich Igbo cultural practices that had helped in promoting good values and shaping the moral life of the Igbo people. Westernization, to them, could be viewed as "adherence to Western way of life, that is, imbibing the culture of the West, including education, belief system, dressing, technology and language" (Uwaezuoke & Obiamalu 2017:518).

Nnonyelu (2017), in his analysis of corruption and moral decline in Nigeria, asserts that the normalization of unethical behaviour in politics, business, and education illustrates how material desires have overtaken moral imperatives. He argues that while the country has adopted modern technologies and consumer lifestyles, moral systems remain weak, and institutions fail to enforce accountability. His study found that corruption and moral decline have become normalized because Nigerians embrace material progress without corresponding moral progress. Unlike Ogburn's broad theory, Nnonyelu contextualizes cultural lag within Nigeria's social and political realities, showing that moral decadence is both systemic and cultural. He concludes that unless moral reorientation matches technological and economic change, Nigeria risks systemic collapse in values.

Most recently, Ezeani and Okafor (2021) examined cultural lag in the context of Nigeria's digital youth culture. Their study found that social media platforms, while serving as tools for creativity and entrepreneurship, also encourage moral laxity through the glorification of fraud, nudity, and 'get-rich-quick' schemes. They argue that cultural lag explains why technological adoption in Nigeria has not translated into proportional moral or civic development.

Classical theorists like Ogburn, Durkheim, and Lenski provide foundational insights into cultural lag and its moral consequences, while contemporary scholars like Oyelaran-Oyeyinka and Adeya (2004), Adegoke (2010), Nnonyelu (2017), and Ezeani and Okafor (2021) show how these dynamics manifest in the African and Nigerian context today. The gap this study seeks to fill lies in synthesizing these perspectives into a comprehensive analysis of how cultural lag continues to shape societal moral decadence in Nigeria, with a focus on digitalization and youth culture. Its contribution to the body of knowledge is the contextualization of cultural lag theory within Nigeria's unique moral crises, showing how global theories apply to local realities.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on two major sociological theories: Ogburn's theory of cultural lag (1922) and Durkheim's theory of anomie (1897). Both theories provide useful lenses for understanding the mismatch between rapid material and technological change and the slower pace of moral, cultural, and institutional adaptation in Nigerian society.

In his seminal work, *Social Change with Respect to Culture and Original Nature,* Ogburn argues that culture is composed of two dimensions: material culture (technology, inventions, industries, tools, digital media, and scientific advances) and non-material culture (beliefs, laws, customs, morals, and social institutions). He maintains that material culture changes at a much faster rate than non-material culture, creating a period of "lag" where society struggles to adapt ethically, legally, and socially to new realities. This lag, according to Ogburn, generates social problems, disorganization, and moral confusion because institutions, values, and laws do not evolve quickly enough to regulate new technological and material advancements. For instance, the advent of the internet and smartphones in Nigeria brought opportunities for education, business, and communication, but the absence of strong moral safeguards and institutional regulations allowed the rise of cybercrime, online scams, and social vices like sextortion and internet fraud.

In the context of this study, Ogburn's theory provides a framework for explaining how rapid technological growth and globalization in Nigeria outpace ethical development, resulting in moral decadence. Cultural lag thus becomes a critical factor in understanding why societal values, such as honesty, integrity, and communal responsibility, have been undermined in favour of materialistic and individualistic pursuits.

Durkheim (1897) further explains that anomie is most pronounced when traditional values are eroded and new norms have not yet been firmly established. This is evident in modern Nigeria where traditional communal values of honesty, chastity, and hard work are increasingly replaced by a culture that glorifies wealth acquisition, irrespective of the means. The celebration of sudden wealth, electoral corruption, and youth involvement in ritual killings all demonstrate an anomic condition where societal norms are unstable, and individuals act without moral restraint.

Both theories converge in explaining the phenomenon under investigation. Ogburn's cultural lag highlights the structural cause of moral decadence (i.e. technological and material change outpacing moral and institutional adaptation). Durkheim's anomie, on the other hand, explains the psychological and social effects of this imbalance (i.e. normlessness, disorientation, and deviant behaviour). Together, they provide a holistic framework where cultural lag explains why Nigerian society struggles to maintain its moral compass, and anomie explains how individuals respond to the resulting moral vacuum. For instance, the rise of cybercrime in Nigeria can be analysed through Ogburn's lens as a lag between technological adoption and ethical adaptation, and through Durkheim's lens as a manifestation of anomie, where young people, disconnected from traditional norms, embrace deviant practices for wealth and recognition. Likewise, the normalization of corruption in

governance can be viewed as cultural lag when institutions fail to regulate modern systems, and as anomie when citizens accept moral breakdown as normal.

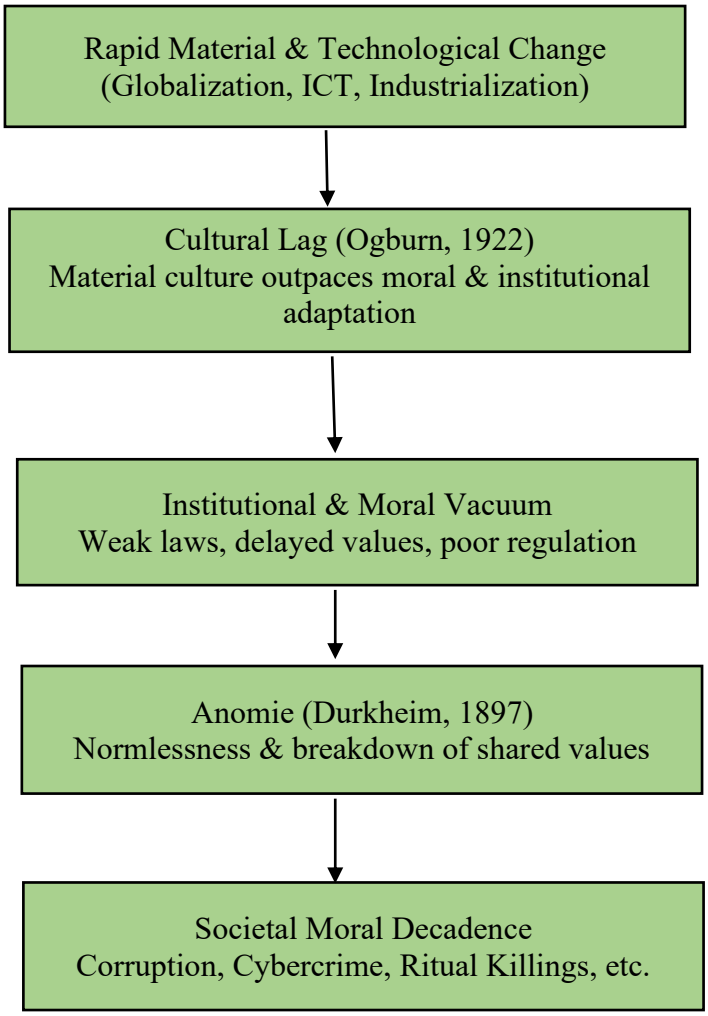


Figure 1: A flowchart demonstrating the progression from material innovation to moral decadence, linking theory to Nigeria's lived realities.

**Methodology**

The study employed a qualitative research design to capture the depth of participants' perspectives on Nigeria's moral challenges. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 30 purposively selected participants, including community leaders, religious clerics, secondary school teachers, and youth representatives from Lagos, Abuja, and Anambra. These participants were chosen because of their active roles in shaping or experiencing Nigeria's moral landscape.

Documentary analysis complemented the interviews through a systematic review of published reports, academic studies, and policy documents on cybercrime, corruption, and cultural change in Nigeria. This provided secondary evidence that enriched and validated the narratives obtained from participants.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, with codes developed around four key categories: corruption, cybercrime, family values, and media influence. Both primary interview

transcripts and secondary documentary sources were coded under these categories. The combination of interviews and documentary analysis ensured triangulation, enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings.

**Discussion**

The findings show that Nigeria is experiencing a sharp cultural lag where material and technological progress outpaces moral adaptation. Thematic analysis of both interview data and documentary sources revealed recurring concerns in four domains: corruption, cybercrime, family values, and media influence.

Cybercrime emerged strongly in both participant accounts and policy reports. Respondents described the prevalence of "Yahoo Yahoo" among youths as a manifestation of moral failure in adapting to new technologies. Documentary evidence from the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC, 2023) confirms rising cases of internet fraud, especially among university undergraduates, validating participants' concerns. This supports Ogburn's cultural lag theory, where ICT innovations like mobile banking and e-commerce are misused in the absence of ethical safeguards.

Corruption was another dominant theme. Participants pointed to widespread vote-buying and embezzlement, while Transparency International's (2023) Corruption Perceptions Index reinforces these claims. For example, during election cycles, reports of vote-buying and misappropriation of public funds dominate headlines. The 2019 and 2023 general elections were marred by allegations of massive financial inducements, yet many of the accused politicians continued to enjoy traditional titles and community honours. Against INEC's promise of free, fair and credible election in 2023 general election leading to the introduction of the BVAS technology to enhance transparency, INEC jettisoned the final function of the BVAS that was to snap the Polling Unit result and to transmit same to INEC Result Verification (IReV) portal real time for ease of verification during collation (Uwaezuoke & Nwobu 2023). The contradiction between democratic ideals and corrupt practices exemplifies Durkheim's anomie, where norms of civic responsibility collapse under material temptations. The culture of confirming the moral status of persons being conferred with traditional/chieftaincy title has given way to conferring morally bankrupt persons with chieftaincy titles on grounds of being wealthy. The persistence of corruption, even in the face of anti-graft policies, reflects the failure of institutions to bridge the gap between material progress and ethical adaptation.

Family and religious values were reported as weakening. Participants emphasized the role of economic hardship in undermining parental supervision, while documentary evidence such as UNICEF's (2022) State of the World's Children Report highlights the strain of poverty on family cohesion. Religious leaders' materialistic displays were also criticized in both interviews and media reports, showing that institutions meant to instil morality sometimes reinforce materialism.

Media and popular culture play a crucial role in shaping youth behaviour. Interviewees lamented the glamorization of wealth and immorality in Nollywood and on TikTok.

Documentary evidence from academic studies (Omokhabi, Adeyemi, & Okolie, 2024) similarly shows how social media challenges often normalize behaviours like transactional sex and conspicuous consumption. This aligns with Durkheim's notion of anomie, where traditional values of modesty and discipline clash with modern trends of display and indulgence.

Together, the thematic categories demonstrate how moral decadence in Nigeria is not merely a private issue but a systemic crisis linked to cultural lag.

**Findings**

The integration of interviews and documentary analysis led to the following findings:

Proliferation of Cybercrime: Digital innovations such as mobile banking and e-commerce, while beneficial, have been heavily misused. Both participants accounts and EFCC (2023) reports confirm the prevalence of *Yahoo Yahoo* among youths, showing material innovation outpacing moral adaptation (Ogburn, 1922).

Persistence of Corruption: Across politics and governance, corruption remains entrenched. Interviews highlighted vote-buying, while Transparency International (2023) confirms Nigeria's low corruption perception ranking. This reflects Durkheim's concept of anomie, as civic norms collapse under modern materialism.

Weakening of Traditional Institutions: Families and religious organizations are less effective in instilling morality. Report on '*State of World's Children'* (UNICEF 2022) supports interview data that economic hardship reduces parental supervision, while media coverage of prosperity preaching confirms the complicity of some religious leaders in materialism.

Influence of Media and Popular Culture: Nollywood movies, TikTok, and Instagram glamorize quick wealth and sexual openness. Academic and policy documents (Omokhabi et al., 2024) confirm these trends, showing how youths internalize conflicting values, deepening moral confusion.

Developmental Consequences: Both data sources highlight the structural impact of moral decadence. Corruption diverts funds from health and education, while cybercrime reduces human capital. Reports on Nigeria's underfunded healthcare system despite oil wealth (UNICEF, 2022; Transparency International, 2023) illustrate how moral decline undermines sustainable development.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study concludes that Nigeria is experiencing an acute cultural lag, where material and technological progress has not been matched by moral and ethical adaptation. Thematic analysis of interviews and documentary sources reveals a society grappling with cybercrime, entrenched corruption, weakened family and religious structures, and the moral distortions of media and popular culture. The result is not only moral decadence but also underdevelopment,

as corruption and fraud erode the foundations of governance, education, health, and economic productivity.

To bridge the widening gap between material and non-material culture, a multi-pronged approach is required. Ethical education should be prioritized across all levels of schooling, with curricula designed to integrate moral instruction into digital literacy and civic studies. Religious institutions must reorient themselves toward their traditional roles of promoting discipline, honesty, and social responsibility rather than reinforcing materialism through prosperity messages. Families should be economically empowered through poverty alleviation and social welfare initiatives so that parents can more effectively supervise and guide their children. At the national level, government must strengthen anti-corruption agencies such as the EFCC and ICPC, ensuring their independence and effectiveness in enforcing accountability within political and economic systems. Equally, youth empowerment through innovation hubs, vocational training, and entrepreneurship programs should be promoted as viable alternatives to fraudulent practices. Finally, the media should be both regulated and incentivized to project positive cultural values, with Nollywood and social media content creators encouraged to produce narratives that celebrate integrity, hard work, and community service. If adopted, these recommendations would not only curb moral decadence but also align Nigeria's material growth with ethical adaptation, thereby fostering sustainable national development.

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