



THE FUNDAMENTALS OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL ETHICS

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Abstract

Scholars of the colonial era have argued that Africans have no ethics, and as such cannot distinguish between good and evil, and that even if they give considerations to issues of this kind, it is always savage in character. This perspective was born from the racist mentality of the time that relegated the African to the background of insignificance. This research, therefore, studies this perspective to understand if there was the possibility of an African ethics in African traditional societies. This research reveals that African traditional societies had their own ethics. It further explored its ontological foundations, the link between the African community and ethics, and the nexus between African ethics and religion.

Keywords: African, Ethics, Traditional, Fundamentals, Ontology, Foundations, Religion.

Introduction

Many ethnologists, sociologists, anthropologists and even missionaries have argued that Africans cannot distinguish between good and evil, and that even if they give considerations to issues of this kind, it is always savage in character: a system that cuts morality to ribbons. Pointing out the colonial mentality or perspective about African sense of morality in his time, Tempels (1959) wrote:

On the subject of theft, it is generally said that the African does not see the least wrong in it, that the only thing that matters is not to get caught. Lies and deceit, it is said, are, in African eyes indications of subtlety of mind, countenanced by all moral assessment. They would

not regard adultery as any infraction of morality and it would suffice if anyone caught in the act should agree to pay an indemnity. (p. 54).

The difficulty of acknowledging that Africans have a morality by Western scholars is based on the differences in the Western and African moral systems. In the Western moral theory, the social order is mere conformity with conventionalized behaviour; however, for the African, morality and moral laws are based on belief and unshakable principles that are tied to ontology and held from conviction. The African like all peoples have a sense of good and evil, which is not left in the air but taken from philosophical concepts and the knowledge of God. Thus Tempels (1959) defended the existence of Bantu-African ethics:

The Bantu likewise reject lies, deceit, theft and adultery, on the same fundamental grounds of the destructiveness inherent in them. They also condemn, as Bantu, various very widespread usages such as polygamy, child marriage and other sexual abuses. In short, they know and accept Natural Law as it is formulated in the Ten Commandments. (p. 56).

In this study of African ethics, the primary preoccupation is to show that traditional African societies had their traditional ethics. This study would therefore, explore its ontological foundations, the link between the African community and ethics, and the nexus between African ethics and religion; however, it is worthwhile to first make an inquiry pertaining to the meaning of ethics.

From Ethics to African Ethics

Ethics generally, is a field of study which deals with the morality of human actions or the norms of human behaviour. Ethics is commonly used interchangeably with morality to mean the subject matter of this study. Omoregbe (1993) defined it as "the systematic study of the fundamental principles of the moral law; or as the normative science of human conduct" (p. 4). According to Thiroux (1998), it deals with the right and wrong of human behaviour and conduct. That is the question of what constitutes the

right or wrong, good or bad in a person's action? What theories are right or wrong in evaluating human action? This establishes the relationship between ethics and epistemology.

Gonsalves (1972) traces the beginnings of ethics to life situations:

Ethics grows out of life situations in which we are confronted with some sort of perplexity or doubt about what is the right thing to do or the best course to follow, situations in which different desires strive for opposed goods or in which incompatible courses of action seem to be justifiable. Such conflict situations call forth personal enquiry into the reasons for deciding where the right really lies. (p. 3).

In describing the purpose or task of ethics, the analytic school of philosophy reduced the task of ethics to analyzing and clarifying moral concepts. Hare (1970) had posited, in the representation of the analytic school of philosophy that ethics is the logical analysis of moral language. Ayer (1971) had also imposed on the entire system of philosophy the task of analysis of concepts. Contrary to their opinions, Lewis (1963) had argued that ethics is much more than the analysis and clarification of language, even though the analysis of language is useful. From the foregoing, African ethics would therefore refer to the salient features or ideas of the African moral life and thought generally as reflected in, or generated by, African moral language and social structure and life.

African Ontology as the Foundation of African Ethics

The African universe is governed by the spirit of harmony, with an influence and a hierarchy of forces that reveals a universe of coordinated forces. There is harmony between the physical and spiritual worlds and the human person who is at the centre of the African universe relates with every dimension of this world. As a result of the harmony in the African universe, what happens at other dimensions of the universe, that is, the world of *Chukwu* and the world of the spirits, also comes knocking at the human world. This harmony of the universe is from God; he summons it into being, strengthens it and preserves it. They are in fact one. The human

person who is at the centre of this universe must tune himself to the different dimensions of his universe for his well being. Madu (2004) wrote:

Health for the Igbo means a harmonious existence between the different spheres of the cosmic order in which man is a member. For man to say that he is healthy or alive therefore means that man should tune himself with the other forces of the cosmic order (p. 25).

The harmony of the universe is an essential condition for the wellbeing of the African. The harmony in the universe gives no place for the bifurcation of reality in the African universe.

In relation to morality, objective moral law for the African is ontologically based; it is based on the things ontologically understood. Thus, when an action is considered ontologically good, it is also considered morally good and juridically just, however, if it is considered ontologically evil, it will be considered morally evil and juridically unjust as well. Actions such as murder would be considered a conspiracy against God and as such an ontological sacrilege. It is reprehensible in the sight of God who is the giver and preserver of all life. This explains why when a person commits an offence he offers sacrifices to the gods or ancestors, this is because an action could touch on the other dimensions of the African universe. Every other law that is worth its name must be based on this philosophy. The differentiation of actions as good or bad is based on the divine will which is expressed in the ontological order. Thus Gyekye (1987) avers that, "Just as the good is that action or pattern of behaviour which conduces to well-being and social harmony, so the evil is that which is considered detrimental to the well-being of humanity and society" (p.133). The social order is founded on the ontological order. To renounce the ontological order is to renounce African ethics and law.

African Community and African Ethics

The African community according to Kanu (2012a&b) and (2014a&b) is made up of seven characteristics: common origin, common world-view, common language, shared culture, shared race, colour and habits, common historical experience and a common destiny. The relationship between the

individual and the community is expressed in African proverbs such as, *Ngwere ghara ukwu osisi, aka akpara ya* (If a lizard stays off from the foot of a tree, it would be caught by man). This expresses the indisputable and inevitable presence of, not just the family, but the community to which the individual belongs. Ezenweke (2014) observes that this interaction dates back to the life of Africans in the pre-civilized world.

As a consequence of the central place the community occupies in African ontology, personhood is strongly linked to it. African philosophy accepts that personhood is something attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through performing the various duties imposed on him or her by living in the community. A person is defined by reference to his kinship, and as such, the reality of communal world takes precedence over the individual. Mbiti (1971) sums up the African view of a person in these words: "I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am" (p. 108). This does not mean that the hold which the community has over the individual African is not so constructive that the expression of individuality is completely frustrated. On the contrary, individuality, instead of being frustrated, is helped and defined by the community. The community in Africa survives on the contributions of individual endowments. Thus, Chidili (1993) avers that the African admits pluralism, but harnesses it and makes proper use of it.

The central place of the community and the relationship between the community and the individual has strong implications for African Ethics. First, there is a strong connection between moral rules and the type of communal kinship relationships that exist among African societies. A crime committed by a person, say stealing, has implications not only for the thief but also for the kinship relationship; for what is stolen is first of all considered to be a thing of the member of the kinship, perhaps of one related to the thief in one way or the other. The offence not only affects the victims of the theft but the whole community, and the shame as well also goes to the whole community. In some quarters, the punishment not only affects the thief but also the close relatives, as in the case where a person is asked to leave the village with his entire family. The community is

involved because it involves the ontological order to which they belong. Thus, Edeh (1985) wrote:

From the Igbo idea of community founded on love and brotherhood, it is easy to discern that for the Igbos any evil, physical or moral, even though personal, has a community dimension. An evil is considered such because it fractures the ultimate whole of life; it causes a break in an existential unity. (p. 106).

The community has a responsibility in rooting out evil, and more so, the responsibility in helping the person concerned. There is an African proverb that says: *A kinsman who strays into evil must first be saved from it by all, then, afterwards be questioned on why and how he dared stray into it to start with.* According to Edeh (1985):

The most important point here is that an evil, be it committed by an individual or group, is the concern of the whole community... the community does not leave the delinquent in isolation. He is always recognized as an indispensable part of the whole. Yet the evil is not condoned, and the culprit is not hidden away or helped to escape. Rather, the whole community comes out to eradicate the evil. (p. 106).

In Western ethics there is an emphasis on the absolute rights and choice of the individual. For instance, as in the case of a mother who decides to abort her child on the basis that it is her child. In African ontology, life is not a personal thing. It is a community affair, involving both the physical and spiritual worlds. This explains why the community prepares for the coming of the child and secures its future within the community. The Igbo would thus say: *Ebulu nwa n'afo, o b'ulu nwa ofu onye; amuo ya, o' b'ulu nwa oha* (When a baby is in the womb, it is the child of one person, when it is born, it becomes the child of the community). Individual choices are not always right; they could be conditioned by personal interests or even psychological deformity.

African Ethics and African Religion

Kanu and Paul (2011) had observed that in Africa, there is widespread belief in a Supreme God, with a profound sense of the sacred and mystery. Thus, it is difficult to separate the life of the African from his personal inclinations to the divine. It is in this regard that he does everything with the consciousness of God. Mbiti (1970) puts this succinctly,

Wherever the African is, there is his religion. He carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting new crop, he takes it with him to a beer parlour or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician, he takes it to the house of parliament. (p. 2)

In the contention of Njoku (2004), this aspect of his daily life is such that,
The African man had many taboos to observe, and many daily rituals to perform, either to appease the community or the divinities. If he was not an indirect or unconscious slave of the dominant conscious, he held perpetual allegiance to one divinity or another. If he was 'free' with men, he was not free with nature or his environment. Suppose community and environment allow him to live his life with fewer burdens, he would still have to pay the debts owed by his past ancestors. (p. 57).

It is on the basis of these perspectives that Opoku (1974) avers that "It may be said without fear of exaggeration that life in the Akan world is religion and religion is life". (p. 286). Opoku (1978) connecting the interpenetration of religion to morality wrote that "Generally, morality originates from religious considerations, and so pervasive is religion in African culture that ethics and religion cannot be separated from each other" (p. 152). Sarpong (1972) stated that "Ethics here emerges with religion and religious practices" (p. 41). Busia (1967) also wrote that "Religion defined moral duties for the members of the group or the tribe" (p. 16). Agreeing with these perspectives, Danguah (1944) avers that "Everything has value only in relation to the idea of the great ancestor" (p. 3).

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Gyekye (1987) rejected the link established by these scholars between religion and morality as mistaken. He observed that these scholars speak of morality only in terms of moral rules or norms, while forgetting that morality involves the conduct of people or the pattern of behaviour. It is therefore not clear if these perspectives are of the view that morality is bound up with religion or if it is that religious beliefs influence human actions, or if both is meant. The reason of Gyekye distancing religion from morality was based on his research among the Akan people of Ghana in which he discovered that the concepts of good and evil are used not because the divine has sanctioned them, but because it helps humanity. He thus, prefers to talk of a humanistic or non-supernaturalistic origin of morality rather than a religious origin of morality which emphasizes the wellbeing or welfare of the community. Wirendu (1983), Summer (1983) and Oluwole (1990), while arguing for the Akan, Ethiopian and Yoruba ethics respectively, had written in the same terms when they argued that African morality is founded on rational reflection, that is, as to what is conducive to human welfare.

While the above perspective is plausible, it needs to be said that when the African scholars say that there is a link between religion and morality, it is not intended to say that God has commanded such a morality but that the failure to fulfill that law would attract punishment from God. Omoregbe (2005) was wrong to have said that it is a perspective held by religious men for that would mean that all those who have held that perspective are religious men. That was a hasty generalization and an easy way out explaining their position. Another question that may arise is: what does Omoregbe mean by religious men? Does he mean those who have a religion or those who are clergy men? The word 'religious men' is ambiguous. To counteract the idea that religion has a link with morality, he spoke of "those who have no religious beliefs at all" (p. 36), but he forgets that the focus of his thought is on *Ethics in Traditional African Society*. To learn of men who had no religious belief at all in traditional African society would be a new and interesting knowledge. More interesting is that fact that Wirendu (1983) and (1995), as cited by Omoregbe said that the people he interviewed among the Akan people all interpreted morality from a purely

non-supernaturalistic perspective. This does not sound real. Reading further, Omoregbe interprets Tempels statement that: "Bantu moral standards depends on things ontologically understood" thus, "By this Tempels wishes to express the truth that the Bantu people see morality not as an arbitrarily creation of the gods or anybody but as something demanded by the very nature of things" (p. 40). Omoregbe may need to read other parts of Tempels work where he wrote that: "Like all primitive people (and semi-primitive) people, the Bantu turn to their philosophical concepts and no less towards their knowledge of God to draw out the principles and the norms of good and evil" (p. 53).

It is true that morality is not religion, but to argue that morality has no relationship with religion sounds plausible but not real. It was not so much about that God has given the moral law, but that these laws when broken offends him and the ancestors who upheld them. God is part of the ontological order, and to do anything that harms the human person is to distort the ontological order and thus would attract divine wrath. In African traditional societies there was the fear of the ancestors and divinities. The idea of the relation of morality to the divine gave morality a strong value in African traditional societies and further affected behaviour, that is, the response of men to that law. Thus, African ethics have both a religious and humanistic basis. It is religious and humanistic at the same time because in African ontology, the human person occupies the central place.

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