

The value of life in African ontology and global bio-ethical discourse

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Introduction

A cursory glance at the historical evolution of western philosophical tradition, from the ancient era, through the medieval, modern and contemporary epochs, reveals that the interrogative on what consists life and the human person has always occurred to the human mind, however, a definitive and unequivocal response has still not been reached. Scholars of almost every age have been divided into two groups: the vitalists and the mechanists.¹ The general tendency of vitalists is to consider life as a singular original phenomenon, irreducible to matter. The representatives of this school are of the Judeo-Christian tradition.² For in the living organism are found phenomenon of self-construction, conservation, regulation and repair, which are not found in machines³. However, with the triumph of mathematics and science, philosopher-scientists began to give a mechanistic interpretation to life. They observed that the human body is a well contrived machine, with its levers (bones), its pumps (heart), its bellows (lungs), etc. Descartes and Leibniz proposed the analogy of living organisms and machines, in particular the clock. From this perspective, life is a singular organization of matter. What distinguishes living substances from non-living substances is that the living substances have a much

¹ Battista Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*. Bangalore: Theological Publications India, 1998, p.26.

² John Ebeh, *African concept of life, person and community: contribution to global bio-ethical discourse*. In person and personhood: A philosophical Study. Enugu: Snaap Press, 2010, p.73.

³ G. Canguilhem, *The Knowledge of Life*. Paris: Vrin, 1969, p.116.

more complex way of molecular structuralization.⁴ With the dawn of modernism, animated by the Cartesian anthropological philosophy, which overthrew the theocentricism of the medieval world, practical philosophies began to feature prominently on the landscape of philosophy, giving greater impetus to science and technology: 'the conquest of nature.'⁵ This has further promoted the mechanistic concept of human life, while giving less value to the vitalist or Judeo-Christian perspective.

While this can be said about the concept of life and person in the west, what can be said of the concept of life and person in African ontology? What has the African to say about the nature of life and the human person? The assessment of this interrogation is a primary step in the preoccupation of this piece. Having understood the idea of life and human person in African ontology, this piece further explores the implications of the concept of life and person in Africa for global bio-ethical discourse.

The concept of life in African ontology

The concept of life has been analysed by scholars of various academic disciplines and at different periods. However, the researcher is primarily concerned with the concept of life *ndu* in Igbo anthropology. Igbo traditional thought, like those of other African groups, has perhaps been rightly dubbed heavily anthropocentric and their concept of life derives from this perspective.⁶

Life as the highest good

The desire for *ndu* and its preservation in Igbo ontology is the *summum bonum* (the supreme good), and every other thing is

⁴ Battista Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*. Bangalore: Theological Publications India, 1998, p.33.

⁵ Kanu Ikechukwu A., *Man Science and Technology: The contradictions of our Contemporary World*. In the ViewPoint Magazine. Vol.3, No. 4, 2004, p. 3.

⁶ T. U. Nwala, *Igbo Philosophy*. Lagos: Literained Publications, 1998, p.144.

expected to serve its realization.⁷ The prominent appearance of *ndu* in Igbo proverbs, parables and personal names projects the height of the value the Igbo race places on life. For instance, the Igbo would say,

Ndubisi: life is the first. From this perspective, life for the Igbo, is the prime necessity. Life should be pursued before and above every other thing or value.

Ndukaku: life is greater than wealth. This is a little bit related to the first. If life is greater than wealth, then, wealth must not be pursuit at the expense of life.

Ndubuizu: life is ethos of consensus. That people are able to come together and discuss and even agree on something is because they have life.

Ndulue: If life stretches out. The plans about the future in the present can only be actualized if life extends into the future.

Ndukwe: If life agrees. This is related to the preceding. The actualization of future plans depends on if life agrees that we be in that future.

Nduka: Life is greater.

Nduamaka: Life is good.

Because of the prime place that life occupies in Igbo philosophy, everything that the Igbo does is geared towards the preservation of life. Eating, drinking, sacrifices, rituals and rites, kinship, taboos and other moral provisions, worship and even the existence of sacred specialists is for the preservation of life. Nothing is done without a bearing to life.⁸

⁷ T. U. Nwala, *Igbo Philosophy*. Lagos: Literained Publications, p.144.

⁸ Obioma Obi, *Igbo Concept of 'ndu' life: Values and Challenges*. In Amamihe: *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol.7, June, 2009, p.8.

Life as active and dynamic

Life for the Igbo is not just to exist and be counted as existing at census. It is an active and dynamic existence in which other things follow. Life is the principle of activity, growth and fulfilment. As such, the more elevated the life, the more effective and efficient will the functions of acting, growth, reproduction. This implies that the value of life is linked with the quality of life. The higher the quality the better the performance; it is a vital force that keeps a person not only in motion, but also in constructive actions that help a person and others live on and better.⁹ From the above perspective, to say to a man who lives *iwuola* (you are dead), means that the person in question has become inactive or incapacitated in respect to certain functions expected of him as a human being.¹⁰ For instance, the inability of a man to climb a palm tree or to pregnant his wife, these may earn a man the expression *iwuola* or *odi ndu onye wuru awu ka mma* (a living that is worse than the dead). If one however is able to execute any of the above roles, it earns him or her the expression *idi ndu*.

Life as given and sustained by God

A very significant concept of *ndu* among the Igbos is the idea that *ndu* is from God. This makes the human person a theomorphic being. This explains why the Igbos say, *ndu sin a Chi* (life is from God). When a child is born it is taken to be a gift from God. The life of children is not attributed to mere biological fact of conception because every child has existed in an antecedent world of a divine master. It is thus not surprising that the Igbo would name their child,

Chi-nyere ndu: God gave life

Nke-chi-yere: the one God has given

⁹ Obioma Obi, *Igbo Concept of 'ndu' life: Values and Challenges*, p.8.

¹⁰ T. U. Nwala, *Igbo Philosophy*, p.27.

Chi-n'eye ndu: God gives life

Chi-di-ogo: God is generous

Chi-nwe- ndu: God owns life

Chi-ekwe: God has agreed

Chi-ji-ndu: God owns life

However, God does not only give a child, he also guides and protects the child all through its existence; this is why the Igbo would say *ndu di n'aka Chi* (life is in the hand of God).¹¹ Even though life is in the hand of God, it is still for the Igbo a paradox: meaning that it is unpredictable. It is often interrupted by death. One wonders indefinitely at such enigma, inconsistency, mystery and puzzles of premature death, the absurdity and ambiguity of life and death. It is in this regard that Onunwa echoes that, "Among the unfriendly agents that threaten life here on earth (for the Igbo) is illness. The other enemy which the Igbo hates is death"¹².

Although death is conceived as a transition to the world of the ancestors, it still does not change the fact that it is an enigma. It is thus not surprising that the Igbo would name their child: *onwu di njo* (death is bad). *Onwubuche* (death is my worry). *Onwubiko* (death I implore you). *Onwu kam ike* (death is more powerful than I am). *Onwuasoanya* (death is no respecter of persons). *Onwuamaeze* (death does not recognize a king or a great man). In spite of the human person's wisdom and technological know-how, death still defies prediction.

Life as belongingness

The Igbo world into which a child is born crying *abatala m ya* (I have come into it) is made up of seven characteristics: common origin, common world-view, common language, shared culture, shared race, colour and habits, common historical

¹¹ Obioma Obi, *Igbo Concept of 'ndu' life: Values and Challenges*, p.12.

¹² U. Onunwa, *Studies in Igbo Traditional Religion*. Obosi: Pacific Publishers, 1990, p.81.

experience and a common destiny.¹³ This communal dimension of the African life is expressed in the Igbo proverb, *Ngwere ghara ukwu osisi, aka akpara ya* (If a lizard stays off from the foot of a tree, it would be caught by man). It expresses the indisputable and inevitable presence of, not just the family, but the community to which the individual belongs.¹⁴ The Igbo's believe that "when a man descends from heaven, he descends into a community." The community rejoices and welcomes his arrival, finds out whose reincarnation he is, gives the person a name and interprets that arrival within the circumstance of the birth. As the child grows, he becomes aware of his dependence on his kin group and community. He also realizes the necessity of making his own contribution to the group.¹⁵ According to Mulago,

The community is the necessary and sufficient condition for the life of the individual person. The individual person is immersed into the natural world and nevertheless emerges from it as an individual and a person within his conscience and freedom given him by the mediation of the community in which he senses a certain presence of the divine.¹⁶

During one of the feasts organized by Okonkwo in the work *The Things Fall Apart*, his uncle Uchendu expressed the Igbo philosophy of belongingness:

¹³ Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*. Owerri: IUP, 1995, p.344

¹⁴ Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*, p.345

¹⁵ Uchendu V. C, *The Igbos of South East Nigeria*. London: Rinehart and Winston, 1965, p.34.

¹⁶ Mulago Victor, *African heritage and Contemporary Christianity*. Nairobi: Oxford University, 1989, p.115.

We do not ask for wealth because he that has health and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him.¹⁷

After the feast, when one of the eldest men of the *umunna* rose to thank Okonkwo, the reason for the Igbo philosophy of belongingness is revealed with a different shade of insight,

A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Everyman can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so.¹⁸

Mbiti has classically proverbialized the community determining role of the individual life, "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am."¹⁹ The community, according to Pantaleon, gives the individual his existence. That existence is not only meaningful, but also possible only in a community.²⁰ To be is to belong and to belong is to be.²¹ To be alive is to belong.

¹⁷ Chinua Achebe, *The Things Fall Apart*. England: Heinemann, 2008, p.132,

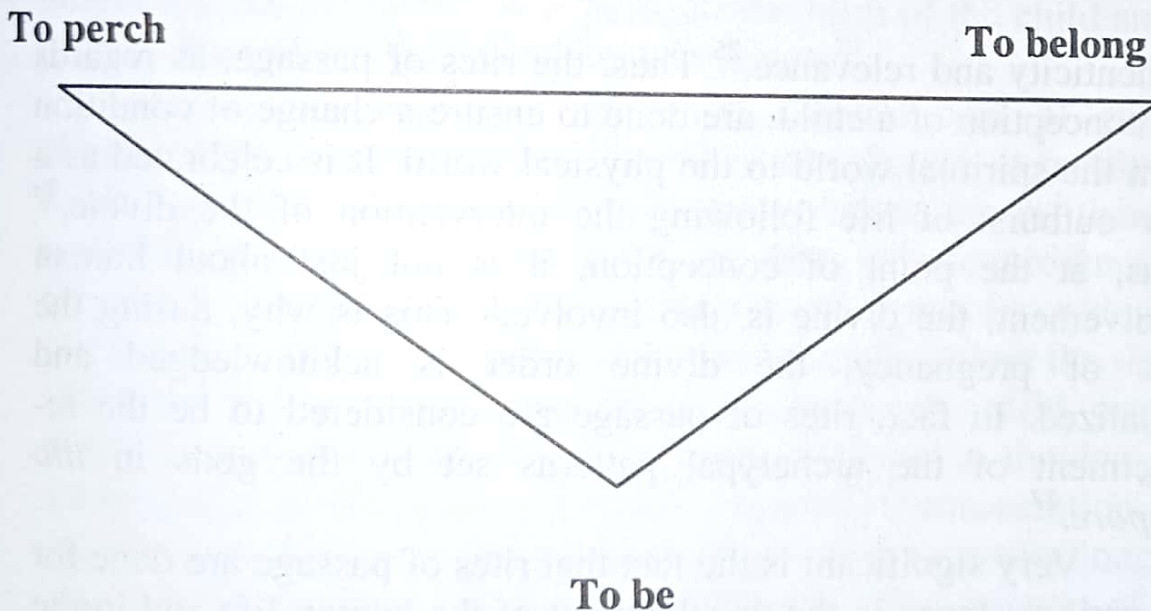
¹⁸ Chinua Achebe, *The Things Fall Apart*, p.133,

¹⁹ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: East African Educational publishers, 1970, p.108

²⁰ Kanu Ikechukwu A., *The Functionality of Being in Pantaleon's Operative Metaphysics Vis-a-Vis the Niger Delta Conflict*. In *African Research Review: An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal*. Vol. 6. No. 1, January, 2012, p. 215.

²¹ Andre Anah, "Belongingness: A Redefinition of Being", p.241

The Igbo principle of *Egbe bere Ugo bere* (let the kite perch, let the eagle perch) re-enacts the contents and significance of belongingness as the essence and hermeneatic core of Igbo reality.²² Pantaleon believes that what a being is, is its activity of perching (belonging). To perch is to be. To be is to perch. To be is to belong and to belong is to be. Pantaleon expressed this in a diagram expressing the relationship between perching, belonging and being.²³ And this diagram reveals that when one perches, one belongs and when one belongs one becomes.



When *Egbe* perches and *Ugo* perches, they be with each other. They are present to each other. They relate to each other deeply and directly as well as have relationships with other inhabitants of *Uwa* (world). To relate is to share something: to give

²² Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*, pp.378-9

²³ Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy*, p.379

and take. Together they struggle to overcome their difficulties and share their joy.²⁴

The provenance of human life in African ontology

In African ontology, life begins from the conception of the child in the woman. And right from the time the child is conceived, respect is accorded to the child through the rites of passage. In these rites and rituals, the hands of the gods are recognized in the socio-religious community and implored to further effect their

authenticity and relevance.²⁵ Thus, the rites of passage, as regards the conception of a child, are done to ensure a change of condition from the spiritual world to the physical world. It is celebrated as a new outburst of life following the intervention of the divine.²⁶ Thus, at the point of conception, it is not just about human involvement, the divine is also involved. This is why, during the rites of pregnancy, the divine order is acknowledged and actualized. In fact, rites of passage are considered to be the re-enactment of the archetypal patterns set by the gods in *illo tempore*.²⁷

Very significant is the fact that rites of passage are done for the various stages in the development of the human life and in the life of the traditional people. And every stage is connected to the other and is as significant as the other, for without the early stage, there wouldn't be a later stage.

²⁴ Kanu Ikechukwu A., *The Functionality of Being in Pantaleon's Operative Metaphysics Vis-a-Vis the Niger Delta Conflict*, p.216.

²⁵ Jude Emeka Madu, *Rites of Passage in Traditional and Modern Igbo Society*. Unpublished lecture Note. 2011. Nanmdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State. Nigeria, p.3.

²⁶ Ikenga Metuh, *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes: The Problem of Interpretation*. Jos: Imico Press, 1991, p. 124.

²⁷ Ikenga Metuh, *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes: The Problem of Interpretation*, p.124.

In the contention of Metuh, "Pregnancy (for the African), is a transitional period between conception and childbirth. And so the ceremonies of pregnancy and childbirth together, generally constitute one whole."²⁸ According to Parrinder, "Like some of the seven sacraments, these mark the turning points in life; birth, puberty, marriage and death. They are accompanied with various religious and magical acts."²⁹

Pregnancy in African life, is not just about the woman and her choices, it is a community affair. The community bears both the gains and the loses. The *dramatis personae* include: the wife, the husband, neighbours, spirit forces and the unborn baby. The whole pregnancy rite is fashioned to facilitate the birth of the child and to protect the mother and child from evil forces.³⁰

Among the Igbos of the North Central area of eastern Nigeria, their pregnancy ritual is called *Ima Ogodo*. It involves a series of rites. As soon as conception takes place, there is consultation with the divine about the best way to preserve the pregnancy. The materials used in the rite are symbolic: a dog for sacrifice, a white chalk, ogirishi tree and gravels. When the dog is sacrificed, it is usually a dynamic ceremony for the child, praying that he may be dynamic, visionary, smart and loyal as the dog. The white chalk signifies purity. It is also a symbol of consecration. The ogirishi tree survives under hard conditions, and have very long life span. It symbolizes longevity and health. The prayer of the community that brings the ogirishi tree is that their child may flourish like it. The gravels symbolize permanence, signifying that the child has come to stay. This is the prayer that the priest says during the sacrifice,

²⁸ Ikenga Metuh, *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes: The Problem of Interpretation*, p.124.

²⁹ E. G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*. London: Sheldon Press, 1976, p. 90.

³⁰ Jude Emeka Madu, *Rites of Passage in Traditional and Modern Igbo Society* p.5.

We have planted the ogorishi tree in order that the child born to this woman may flourish like the ogorishi tree. We have set gravels from the riverbed besides the tree in order that as gravels remain when the river dries up, so may this woman's child remain alive after the waters of childbirth have broken.³¹

In all these, efforts are directed towards protecting the child and securing his future if he is eventually born.³² This is based on the African philosophy that life begins even before conception.

The concept of person in African ontology

The analysis of the concept of what consists of a person in African understanding would be based on the Yoruba idea of a person *eniyan*. Yoruba scholars agree that the human person is made up of three basic elements: *Ara* (body), *Emi* (breath) and *Ori* (soul).³³ Bolaji Idowu describes the body as the concrete, tangible thing of flesh and bones which can be known through the senses. As regards the *Emi*, he describes it as spirit, and this is invisible. It is that which gives life to the whole body and thus could be described through its causal functions: Its presence in the body of a person determines if the person still lives or is dead.³⁴ According to

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- ³¹ Ikenga Metuh, *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes: The Problem of Interpretation*, p.125.
- ³² Jude Emeka Madu, *Rites of Passage in Traditional and Modern Igbo Society*, pp.6-8.
- ³³ Egunoluwa Oduwale, *Personhood and abortion: An Africa perspective*. In *Personhood and Personal Identity: A Philosophical Study*. Enugu: Snaap Press, 2010, p.99.
- ³⁴ Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. London: Longman, 1962, p.30.

Ebunoluwa, the body is the creation of *Orisha nla* (Arch-divinity). He was assigned by *Olodumare* (the Supreme Being) to mould the body of human beings. It is only the Supreme Being that puts the spirit into the body so as to give it life. Yoruba reflections on the human person does not end with the body and spirit, there is third element called the soul. The soul suggests that the human person already has an individuality in the spiritual world before birth. From this understanding, life does not begin with birth, it rather begins as soon as one acquires the soul which defies a person's individuality.³⁵ The soul of the human person begins to live even before there is a body for its abode.

Global bio-ethical discourse on abortion

Abortion is the premature termination of pregnancy, prior to birth. Ebunoluwa defined abortion as "the deliberate removal of or deliberate action to cause the expulsion of a foetus from the womb of the human female or mother so as to result in the death of the foetus."³⁶ Henry Peschke provides further insight when he defined abortion as "the removal of the non-viable human being from the mother's womb by human intervention, whether by killing the child before removal from the womb, or whether exposing the child to a certain death outside the womb."³⁷ The Catholic Women Organization of Nigeria defines abortion as "the forceful removal of pregnancy, through the use of drugs, instruments and herbs to prevent a soul from being born to life."³⁸ By defining the foetus as

³⁵ Ebunoluwa Oduwole, *Personhood and abortion: An Africa perspective*, p.99.

³⁶ Ebunoluwa Oduwole, *Personhood and abortion: An Africa perspective*, p.97.

³⁷ Henry Peschke, *Christian Ethics: A Presentation of Special Moral Theology in the Light of Vatican II*. Dublin: G. Geodiffe Neale, 1997, p. 345.

³⁸ John Animhawo, *The Abortion Controversy*. In Kpim of Morality Ethics: General, Special and Professional. Pantaleon I and Anthony E. (Ed.s). Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 2005, p.114

a soul, these women are introducing a theological dimension into the debate: that the human person is not just physical but spiritual.

There are two types of abortion: spontaneous and induced abortion. While spontaneous abortion is the same thing with miscarriage, induced abortion is caused by the woman herself or usually by a medical doctor.³⁹ In addressing the issue of abortion two basic principles come into conflict: the value of life and individual freedom. Deriving from these two basic principles, issues like when human life begins and perhaps at what point it is to be valued and protected to the same extent as human beings who

already have been born. And more so, the issue of absolute right: who has absolute right over the issue at stake, the child or the mother?⁴⁰

The debate on abortion

In the debate on abortion, three views emerge: the pro-choice perspective, which essentially states that a woman ought to be allowed to have an abortion, regardless of the reason, if she requests it;⁴¹ the opinion of the pro-life, is that a woman ought not to have an abortion; and the moderate perspective, which is a position in-between the pro-choice and pro-life.

Pro-choice perspective on abortion

The pro-choice school have come up with a couple of arguments, and they could be enumerated as follows:

1. Women should have absolute rights over their bodies like men, including procreative rights. They argue that in the past, women, because of an 'accident of nature', have not shared in these equal rights, but now that birth control, which includes abortion, is possible they can and should. They argue that the conceptus is just

³⁹ Jacques Thiroux, *Ethics, Theory and Practice*. United States of America: Prentice Hall International. 1998, p.264.

⁴⁰ Jacques Thiroux, *Ethics, Theory and Practice*, p.265.

⁴¹ Jacques Thiroux, *Ethics, Theory and Practice*, p.274

like any other part of the woman's body, and thus she has an absolute say over if it should continue to live in her body or not. They believe that male domination is responsible for strict abortion laws.⁴²

2. They argue that until a child is born, human life does not exist; as such, the conceptus at any stage of development cannot be considered to be full human being. The conceptus does not have rights as the unborn child has, and while in the womb of the mother, it is subject to her decisions.⁴³ This argument is from the potentiality school of thought.⁴⁴ They opine that early development of human life cannot be accepted as a complete human being and human person but as a potential human being, since they are in the process of becoming that which they are in the process of becoming.⁴⁵

3. Since the arrival of significant birth control methods, it has been possible to ensure that every child born into the world is wanted. Given the present day conditions of overpopulation, economic difficulties etc, they argue that only children who are planned for and really wanted should be brought into the world, and abortion makes this possible.⁴⁶

4. They argue that abortion these days have become safe, and you would have problems only with abortions that are self-induced or performed by unqualified persons. As long as abortion is performed by qualified medical personnel in qualified medical setting, the risk for all procedures is minimum, and thus should be allowed.⁴⁷

5. Rape and incest are two of the most serious crimes committed against women by men, and abortion creates a path out

⁴² Jacques Thiroux, *Ethics, Theory and Practice*, p.274

⁴³ Jacques Thiroux, *Ethics, Theory and Practice*, p.275

⁴⁴ John Ebeh, *African concept of life, person and community: contribution to global bio-ethical discourse*, p.73.

⁴⁵ Marchal John, *Scientists and the Embryo*. The Tablet, August, 1984, p.787.

⁴⁶ Jacques Thiroux, *Ethics, Theory and Practice*, p.275

⁴⁷ Jacques Thiroux, *Ethics, Theory and Practice*, p.276

of this menace. They maintain that under no circumstance should a woman be forced to endure an unwanted pregnancy resulting from any of these actions.⁴⁸

6. They argue that women should be allowed to take responsibility for their sexual activities, and this responsibility definitely includes the right to terminate pregnancy.⁴⁹

Pro-life perspective on abortion

The arguments against abortion from the pro-choice perspective are as follows:

1. Their first argument is from the genetic view of the beginning of human life. According to this view, human life starts at conception because a person's genetic make-up is established at conception and programmed towards the creation of a unique human being,⁵⁰ that is, as soon as the chromosomes from the sperm of the father and the ovum of the mother are united, then a human being exists, and must be valued and respected.⁵¹
2. They state that every innocent and unborn child, must be regarded as a person with all the rights of a person from conception onward. The words *innocent* and *person* are key words here.⁵²
3. Pro-lifers believe that abortion is more likely to set in motion the disregard for human life in all its aspects. They argue that individual killings, mass tortures, genocide committed by the Nazis under Adolf Hitler began with the legalization of abortion.⁵³
4. Pro-lifers also argue that abortion procedures are dangerous to the well-being of the mother. These dangers could be medical or psychological.

⁴⁸ Jacques Thiroux, *Ethics, Theory and Practice*, p.278.

⁴⁹ Jacques Thiroux, *Ethics, Theory and Practice*, p.278

⁵⁰ Theresa Iglasias, *Invitro Fertilization: The Major Issues*. Journal of Medical ethics. Vol 1. 1984, p.43.

⁵¹ Jacques Thiroux, *Ethics, Theory and Practice*, p.271

⁵² Jacques Thiroux, *Ethics, Theory and Practice*, p.271

⁵³ Jacques Thiroux, *Ethics, Theory and Practice*, p.271

5. If a child is unwanted by the parents, abortion is not the only alternative; babies could be put out for adoption. And in fact with the legalization of abortion in many countries, it has been observed that available babies for adoption has dropped drastically. As regards economic considerations, where an innocent, unborn child is involved, economic considerations should not come first before the life of a person.⁵⁴

6. In cases of rape and incest, which are always rare, if reported on time, contraceptive procedures can be used on time.⁵⁵ Rape and incest is never enough justification for abortion.

7. If men and women have sex together, whether contraceptives are used or not, they should be able to know that pregnancy may ensue. Thus, they should take responsibility for their actions.⁵⁶ Their mistake should not become the child's problem.

Moderate perspective on abortion

The moderate school on abortion would agree that a strong pro-life position and a strong pro-choice position are extreme approaches to the issue of abortion. The moderate position is along the spectrum between these two extremes. They argue that neither of the extreme positions is workable. They are based on unresolvable and conflicting absolutes that are based on questionable premises.

1. The first argument of the moderate position on abortion is that there is no absolute right to life. It is true that the value of life is important, but again it is not the most important value. There are other values like overpopulation, burden of taking care of children born with deformities, the risk of families passing genetic deficiencies that may cause a burden upon society as a whole. The

⁵⁴ Jacques Thiroux, *Ethics, Theory and Practice*, p. 273.

⁵⁵ Jacques Thiroux, *Ethics, Theory and Practice*, p. 274

⁵⁶ Jacques Thiroux, *Ethics, Theory and Practice*, p. 273.

value of life principle, thus involves a great deal more than just the right of the unborn baby or mother.⁵⁷ This explains why the moderate perspective would argue that no one has an absolute right.

2. Their second argument is that no one has an absolute right over one's body. We do not allow people ridden with plague or other contagious diseases to refuse treatment or quarantine, because if we do so, they could constitute harm to us. The argument of women's absolute rights over their bodies does not hold, this is because, what now affects the woman's body and life will also affect the body and life of another baby.⁵⁸

The contribution of Africa to global bio-ethics

With the development of science and technology, and the interrogations emerging from the field of bio-ethics, the question is, what can Africa, with her own value system contribute to this discourse?

1. Very valuable and unique is the ethical teaching of *Odu Ifa*, the sacred text of the Yoruba ancestors, that we and all human beings have been divinely chosen to bring good into the world and that this is the fundamental meaning and mission of human existence. In African ontology, human life has a purpose which is linked to the divine purpose. Life is not just a machine that integrates and disintegrates. And in fact, in Yoruba ontology, the human person is seen as an emanate of the divine entity from whom all beings emanate.⁵⁹

2. One of the contributions of African traditional ethics to global ethics is that life is the highest good. It is a value that should be considered first before any other value. The securing of wealth as is the case for many doctors who perform abortion, and the

⁵⁷ Jacques Thiroux, *Ethics, Theory and Practice*, p. 281

⁵⁸ Jacques Thiroux, *Ethics, Theory and Practice*, p. 281

⁵⁹ Akinwowo, A., *Oral traditional as a Source of Psychological Knowledge*. In *Psychology and Society: Selected Readings*. Ed. Wilson E. B. Ille Ife, 1987, p.61.

pursuit of personal interests like career and avoidance of being a disgrace, these should not come first before life. Everything we do should be directed towards preserving life.

3. In western ethics there is an emphasis on the absolute rights and choice of the mother. In African ontology, life is not a personal thing. It is community affair, involving both the physical and spiritual worlds. The community prepares for the coming of the child and secures its future within the community. Individual choices are not always right; they could be conditioned by personal interests or even psychological deformity. The fact that one has life confers on the person the responsibility of preserving life and thus contributing to the welfare of the lives of others. Life is thus the other oriented and has its duties and responsibilities. It is received and cannot be taken by the one who received it. Life has a duty to it, and it is that of preserving that life until its natural end. The foetus among the Yorubas is called *atinuke* which means one who is shown affection from the womb. The deliberate termination of pregnancy is for the Yoruba an irresponsible act which should not be encouraged.⁶⁰

4. The mechanistic concept of the human person that has dominated western thought in modern time has affected their concept of life. The African sees life as a sacred thing. Life for the African, is not merely biological but meta-empirical; it is not just a fruit of physical conception but a sacred gift and a most precious good... Life of the person is inserted by the divine, protected by the ancestors and related to the community life.⁶¹

5. Western thought sees life as consisting of stages that may be considered unrelated. African concept of life does not follow a straight line as a series of moments, which follow one another; it presents itself more of a circumference in which the various

⁶⁰ Ebunoluwa Oduwole, *Personhood and abortion: An Africa perspective*, p.101.

⁶¹ John Ebeh, *African concept of life, person and community: contribution to global bio-ethical discourse*, p.75.

moments are in continuity, inseparable and interdependent.⁶² Life has to begin from somewhere and we don't begin from nothing to something. At conception life begins and the human person is biologically under construction. We don't kill a child because it is still at the earliest level of development.

6. The life of the human person from the African perspective is composed of the body, the spirit and the soul. And the idea of the soul as already seen in Yoruba ontology defines a being's individuality, even before conception. The foetus thus has a right to live. It is a complete human person different from the mother that carries it. Its survival does not depend on the mother's choices, it naturally has a right to live.

7. The African attitude towards the pregnant and the various stages of pregnancy, child bearing, marriage, care and love for children and their belief that children are a survival of the race and the family can add value to global bio-ethics. In African traditional societies there is nothing like an unwanted child or an unplanned baby.⁶³ Even when a child is gotten out of wedlock, the coming of the child is still a welcome event.⁶⁴ The Yorubas believe that a child does not have an enemy and that a baby is a sign of a good thing in the family. The death of the child in the womb of the mother is understood as a bad omen.

Conclusion

In many parts of the world, abortion has been legalized, and even tax payers fund used to finance it. The legalization and use of public fund suggests a collective conspiracy to kill the younger and defenceless generation in the womb of the mother. 17 out of 1,000 of child bearing age in the UK had an abortion in 2008. Nearly one

⁶² John Ebeh, *African concept of life, person and community: contribution to global bio-ethical discourse*, p.74.

⁶³ B. O. Sannoh, *Traditional Yoruba Child Psychology*. In *Biomedical Ethics*. Eds. T. A. Mappos and D. DeGrazia. New York: McGraw Hill, 1996, p.98.

⁶⁴ Ebunoluwa Oduwole, *Personhood and abortion: An Africa perspective*, p.101.

in three of pregnancies in Europe are terminated.⁶⁵ In 2008, approximately 1.21 million abortions took place in the U.S., down from an estimated 1.29 million in 2002, 1.31 million in 2000 and 1.36 million in 1996. From 1973 through 2008, nearly 50 million legal abortions have occurred in the U.S. A. With all these occurrences, children and the unborn are likely to feel unloved and unwelcomed.⁶⁶ At a time like this, when Europe and America are

plunged into a silent crisis of the value of life, as a result of her concept of human life and personhood, empty of humane feelings towards the fragile members of the human community such as the early development of human life: embryos, foetuses, infants and palliative cases the West has so much to learn from Africa. If the West can take from Africa her concept of life and person, it would help her build a more humane society. And since the opinion of the West counts most in global issues, it would help create a global ethics that would enhance the value of human life.

⁶⁵ Claire Rates, *Nearly a Third of Pregnancies in Europe End in Abortion*. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-2088840/Abortion-statistics-Nearly-pregnancies-Europe-end-termination.html>. 19th January, 2012.

⁶⁶ US Abortion Statistics. http://www.abort73.com/abortion_facts/us_abortion_statistics. May 24th 2012.

