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THE NATURE OF AFRICAN ETHICS

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ABSTRACT

African culture seems to be most dynamic, as its constitutive cultural settings are being controlled and influenced by ethical systems. It is on this ground that this work observes that morality permeates every African philosophical reflection. It is the opinion of this work that ethical reflections or moral conceptions do not have independent existence but depend on other African philosophical world-views to exist so as to moderate the social order.

INTRODUCTION

Most times people question why ethics is seen as a science. The simple answer is that, we cannot study ethics as a whole. It is that systematic approach to its study that makes it scientific. So African ethics is a science concerned with the question of right and wrong in human behaviour with the African mind-set. It deals with how men ought to behave, and why it is wrong to behave in certain ways, and right to behave in certain other ways. It is thus, a science that studies the reasons why certain kinds of actions are morally wrong and why other kinds of actions are morally right and commendable (Omoregbe, 1993). Based on this we will try to look

at the sources of African ethics, the nature of African ethics, the essence of African ethics, enforcement of moral order in African society and conclusion.

THE SOURCES OF AFRICAN ETHICS

There are two major positions concerning the source of African ethics. The popular view is that of religion being the major source of African ethics. It forms the keynote of African ways of life hence African ethics is basically seen as a religious ethics, (dependent on religion). This makes it almost impossible to separate or explain African world views outside their religious lives. On this note, African religion has its moral codes which make an African “to be highly religious in the sense that everything he does is guided by the hopes and fears of not only the living but the departed, the gods or divinities and the Omnipotent Being”(Ozumba, 1995). As the result, their ideas about what is right and wrong are detected by the gods and the Supreme Being, God. This informs why in different African cultural settings they have their different ‘dos and don’ts’. For instance, it is unethical to throw something at night among the Efiks. This is to avoid hitting an ancestral spirit or children from the spirit world who are expected to be born into the earthly families (Asukwo and Etta, 2011). Though this view may be regarded as superstitious, yet it helped them to fight against child abuse and other social ills. It is strongly believed also that African traditional ethics is based on natural right of reason with conscience playing a central role. African moral standards, they argue are derived from the very nature of things which implies that ethics is founded on consideration from human welfare. Ayantayo (Online) however argues that in all, scholars of both camps (the two sources of African ethics) “agree that African traditional ethics is essentially interpersonal and social with religious belief and practice, having impact in its articulation and inculcation”. This form of ethics in other words, takes man’s existential needs as a paramount object of interests. A simple explanation of this type of ethics is summed-up in the words of Ozumba (1995). He opines that “the African ethics is premised on an impressive pillar of humanism”, meaning that, the welfare of man and community are the main thrust of African ethics.

THE NATURE OF AFRICAN ETHICS

Going by the agreement, as expressed by Ayantayo, and further corroborated by Ozumba, the humanistic nature of African ethics in a more comprehensive sense implies that it is a man centred ethics, egalitarian, not individualistic, but a communal ethics. This is related to the concept of wholeness in Africa. It is believed in Africa that the sacred is manifested not so much by separation but as by unity. Man in Africa within the context of this ethics, finds fulfilment not as a separate individual but as a participant in a family and a community (Booth, 1977). So, the well-being of each individual in Africa depends on the preservation or restoration of one’s relationship with his other family members or community. According to Appiah (Online)“ethical thought in sub-Saharan African grows largely out of traditions that are communalistic, not based in individual consent”. At the same time individuals do develop their ethics (this is what stands out a family from other families) which must not contradict the societal norms. If it does, that individual will be regarded as a deviant and would be called to order. This informs why the Efiks hold the view that *eto idaha ikpõn ke ikõt iforo akai* (“a tree cannot make a forest”). This implies that no one man can make himself or constitute a society,

and as such others need to prone him, correct him , build his life until he becomes something and knows the dos and don'ts of life. African ethics therefore, is so integrated and holistic in such a way that it approves a right action that affects members of a given society positively.

African ethics is a practical experience, hence discussing African ethics within the context of African religion is not a digression but complementary. In his opinion, Ozumba (1995) posits that, the belief in tradition is necessary in the understanding of African ethics. For him, a discussion on African ethics cannot be done in a manner that excludes its cultural setting. In Prozesky's (Online) view, "the moral culture of traditional African societies" and their "religious beliefs were fused with moral values to form a single whole". This view point to the fact that what is called African ethics is a product of African religious belief, and cannot be divorced from its religious culture.

An African is noted mostly for his religiosity. Everything he does is guided by the expectations and fears based on imparted moral codes. Hence, his everyday life is pervaded by thoughts that are directed by taboos and the sacred. This according to Ozumba (1995) is the reason why African ethics is founded on ontology which connotes inter-relationships arising from the fact that all things are related to each other. All human beings, spirits, and the entire cosmos are seen as being interwoven. Any alternation of the position of one entity instantly upsets the positioning of other entities.

ESSENCE OF AFRICAN ETHICS

It is believed in African traditional setting that, the community to which the individual belongs consists of both the living and the invisible worlds. This of course, has ethical implication, which forms the concern for maintaining sound societal relationships, and based on the necessity to safeguard such crucial link between the two components of society (the visible and invisible worlds). Here, the ancestors are the vital links of communication between these two worlds. According to Kigongo(online), "a fundamental unity between the different human beings in the community, i.e. a unity of human relationship, underlies traditional African ethics. African ethics places considerable value on conformity of the individual to the social group in order to preserve the unity of human relationship". In order words, moral or ethical codes in African society promote social unity as well as mutual co-existence among the component units of a given culture. In some African societies like the Efiks, it is a taboo to hurt a stranger, hence the saying that *Efik edi mme asua eyen-isõñ mma oduduñ* ("Efiks are those that hate the indigenes and love strangers"). Kigongo(online) further adds that "human behaviour is expected to conform to this value to ensure social harmony... (as) vital elements in the African sense of moral aesthetics". Which means the knowledge of these moral codes fosters good conduct and promotes individual responsibility towards the maintenance of rules and regulations in the society (Mbiti, 1970).

To sustain the corporate existence within African society, Kigongo (online) identifies two things expected from individuals:(i) "others had to look after the well-being of the individual i.e. the responsibility of many for one; (ii) the individual had to look after the well-being of others". These responsibilities necessitated the existence of many laws, customs, set forms of behaviour, rules and regulations, observances and taboos that constitute the moral codes and ethics of a

given community or society. Any breach of this code of behaviour is considered evil, wrong or bad, and is seen as injurious to the accepted social order. Thus, moral goodness within African ethics implies that man's action must be in accordance with the standards of the laws of nature as enshrined by God into human system.

In African ethics, moral goodness warrants that an acts, attitudes and behaviour be suitable for the achievement of cordial communal coexistence. And that is the very essence of forming a society so that negative attitudes may not disrupt the unity of purpose that regulates the social existence of men in the society. Every African society has good acts approved by the elders of the people. For this reason, a belief widely admitted by the Africans is that wisdom goes with age because the longer one lives the more he experiences things.

ENFORCEMENT OF MORAL ORDER IN AFRICAN SOCIETY

In most African society like the Efiks there are many agencies through which law and order are maintained. For instance, in Efik traditional judiciary system, there are judiciary hierarchies that tried offenders who steal (eyip inö), commit adultery (esin efibe), murder(owot owo), assault(omiom, ye enwan), trespassing(ebe adaña), etc. The units through which conflicts are mitigated and resolved are (i) family setting, whose head looks into cases within his immediate family setting; (ii) village setting - whose head looks into cases among the constituted families that make up that village; (iii) the clanal setting whose head is also known as the Etubom –he looks into unresolved matters from the villages. (iv) Obong's Council – is headed by the Edidem of the Efiks. Obong's-in-council looks into cases as a final court of the land (*efe anana ntöñ* – meaning 'a court without roof', i.e you cannot appeal further). Immediately a case leaves the family setting, the Efiks have a saying that *emen nkanya nwörö obio oyom obio etiene enye ekim* ("he who takes his roofing mat outside for sewing will not sew it alone"). That means unsettled case within the family can take wider dimension if it goes public. When judgment is passed different agencies are there to enforce its implementation. Among the Efiks they have ekpe society, swearing of oath, invoking of ancestral spirits against the person, the youths, womenfolk and some other secret societies. Before action is taken they will issue threats to guilty ones who either refuse to pay fine or reject the final judgment. The society may (i) inflict physical injuries on them; (ii) banish them out of the society; (iii) ban them from farming in the village land; (iv) if he swells and dies, he will not be given dissent burial; (v) others will be warned from associating with such who do not live in accordance with the norms of the community. And because of the way these agencies operate, living a moral life within the African setting becomes a compulsory issue rather than voluntary.

In modern days some of these actions may condemned as irrational and uncivilized, but one needs to understand the foundational logic of how African rationalized their moral beliefs. Ozumba (1995) avers that "African ethics is not merely experiential but mystical". Since the ancestors are believed to be living among their people the society has to be rid off of the evil doers who refused to work according to acceptable moral orders. Failure to punish the offenders may incur the wrath of the ancestors/gods who may inflict the society with famine, deaths, sicknesses/diseases, barrenness, etc. In other words, in all the reasons Africans advance in supporting their moral beliefs, what lies at the base are experiential and mystical order.

Whereas, the experiential order is based on community response or obedience to directives given by the elders through oracle; the mystical order arises from the expression of surprise by the people over the intellectual abilities of oracle as a tool for solving existential problems. This portrays the oracle as transcending human intelligence. It suffices therefore as a considered fact to say that the transcendent intelligence exhibited by oracle within the African ethical setting, is perhaps in line with their belief in the divine. Others refer to them as departed elders (ancestors). In Africa, ancestors are not ordinary humans, they are those who lived a good moral and honourable life and who were regarded as custodians of knowledge and wisdom within their families and communities. It not every aged person who dies that becomes an ancestor. For the Efiks, those who died as deviants to societal norms, who died immoral deaths, those who committed suicides, those who died by charms or curses and are either buried with face down rather than face up cannot enter ancestral cults and become ancestral spirits. When libations are poured for the ancestors, right hands are used, but for those that died in wickedness left hands are used because they are *mfum-mfum ekpo* or *nkök-nsañã ekpo* (“wicked spirits that have no dwelling place”). Much importance is attached to ancestors among the Efiks and other African societies since they are seen as the guardians of traditional ethics and morality. When people have the idea of functioning to the benefit of their families after death they will endeavour to live a good life here on earth to qualify them to become ancestors. This is one of the ways Africans believe that the Supreme Being rewards those who are highly moral even at death. The implication here is that the ancestors continue to be pre-occupied with regulating the affairs of their communities even in their temporary absence. In a sense, they are still concerned about the moral integrity of their communities, specifically for the fear that, disregard of what constitutes moral virtue renders the community vulnerable to harmful spirits and subsequent destruction.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, what we can be deduced from the above views about African ethics is that the central concern of African ethics is the management of life and maintenance of well-being within society. Individual ethical choices are made within the context of the community. Here, individual actions are evaluated and judged based on the effect those actions have on the life of the community. So the aim African ethical values boarder on the extent to which an individual’s action or conduct can advance human decency and the common good or viability of the community. We have been to establish that African ethics is founded on the collective wisdom of the ancestors and elders that become the basis or point of reference for moral decisions or choices that the individual or community makes. It is a morality which is the creation of the community and emerges from the social institutions; it is lived within the community. For this reason, what an individual does directly or indirectly affects the whole society. This ethical practice demands that those who have done shameful or immoral acts must be cleansed before they are accepted back into the community. This is possible after a communal ritual of purification (uyet *esurisu*). Another essential character of African ethics is that, the community’s history and life experience turn out to be the resource of African ethics. These resources may vary from social customs, religious beliefs, regulations, social taboos, proverbs and certain symbols and possibly language.

Today, it appears that the real value and purpose of African ethics to African people are eluding our society because of infiltration of some foreign moral codes that have no respect for the sacredness of human lives. Antinomianism has taken over our society just because our traditional moral laws have been undermined, hence civil laws cannot therefore be obeyed. It is the recommendation of this work that we retrace our steps as Africans by bringing back those ethical values that once made our society preferred and esteemed. This can be done through formal education by introducing good and sound African ethical principles to our school curriculum to be taught in schools. While this is important, we should lose sight of imparting good lives into our children but rather continue to emphasize and get those values imprinted in their hearts because the Holy Scripture tells us “train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it”(Proverbs 22:6 KJV). This training is very necessary as its impact can help our children to grow to respect constituted authorities and civil laws.

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