

## **RETHINKING TRADITIONAL AFRICAN ETHICAL IDEALS FOR CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper rethinks traditional African ethical ideals for contemporary society. Traditional African societies evolved ethical ideals that were useful in preserving and maintaining peace and order in their social settings. Over many centuries, these ethical ideals ensured peaceful and harmonious co-existence among the African societies. They, however, began to wane as a result of westernization and modernity. This paper therefore reemphasizes these ethical ideals as most valuable for contemporary society. The paper adopts the qualitative research design and relied solely on secondary sources. It was found in the study that, African ethical ideals have immense benefits to the society. Ethical ideals like kindness, truthfulness, justice, fairness, generosity, hospitality, respect for human life, honesty and accountability among others were the elements that kept African society in harmony and in order. The benefits of these ethical ideals can be seen their role in ensuring good character formation, the common good, social justice, maintaining peace and harmony as well as a sense of sacredness of human life among other things. The paper therefore recommends the reviving of these traditional African ethical ideals for moral consciousness of the contemporary society. The study surmises that unless conscious efforts are made towards revitalising the fading traditional African ethical ideals, and the reintegration of the younger generations of Africans into these values, there could never resurge the high moral consciousness that characterised traditional African societies.

### **Introduction**

Like other societies of the world, traditional African societies have undoubtedly evolved ethical systems, values and principles to guide social and moral behaviour. Traditional African ethical ideals always played an intricate role in maintaining peace and harmony in African societies. This explains why in traditional African societies, even though there were no conventional courts of law, there was positive disposition towards ensuring justice, law and order. Notably, there were fewer incidences of crimes, violent conflicts and social injustice as it is witnessed in contemporary society. Basically, the ethics of traditional African society were embedded in the ideas and beliefs about what is right or wrong. They

were conceptualised in good or bad character as well as the conceptions of satisfactory social relations and attitudes held by the members of the society. There were forms or patterns of behaviour that were considered by the members of the society to bring about social harmony and cooperative living, justice, and fairness. The ideas and beliefs about moral conduct were articulated, analysed, and interpreted by the moral custodians among the society. Traditional African ethical ideals were beneficial both to the individual well-being and the society. This underpins why this paper calls for a rethinking of traditional African ethical ideals for the morality of contemporary society.

### **Conceptualizing Traditional African Ethics**

The term ‘ethics’ is technically used by philosophers to mean a philosophical study of morality – where morality is understood as a set of social rules, principles, norms that guide or are intended to guide the conduct of people in a society, and as beliefs about right and wrong conduct as well as good or bad character (Gbadegesin, 1991). Even though morality is the subject matter of ethics, it is most often used interchangeably with ‘ethics’. In this entry, ‘African Ethics’ refers 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” (Gbadegesin, 1991:27). Many writers have made the observation that despite the indisputable cultural diversity that arises from Africa's ethnic pluralism, there are underlying affinities in many areas of the African life. There are some features of the moral life and thought of various African societies that, according to the cited sources, are common or shared features.

Gyekye (1985) avers that African ethics is used to refer both to the moral beliefs and presuppositions of the sub-Saharan African people and the philosophical clarification and interpretation of those beliefs and presupposition. This understanding of the phrase “African ethics” defines it in terms of two facets. Firstly, it defines it by invoking commonly shared moral beliefs and presuppositions by people below the Sahara. Secondly, it refers to the intellectual reflections and deliberations on these moral intuitions. In essence, this definition does not presuppose that there is absolute agreement about African moral thought, but to mean that there are sufficient commonalities among the peoples down the Sahara that warrant and justify the use of this phrase to capture a body of work attempting to critically reflect on these (commonly) held moral beliefs (Molefe, 2016).

African ethical principles revolve around virtuous acts. Virtues like honesty, kindness, hospitality, generosity, truthfulness, probity, fairness, passion and compassion, altruism, transparency, accountability, courage, patience and so many others were cherished in traditional African society. There were conscious efforts to inculcate them in children because

they are desirable and acceptable. These ethical ideals have a lot of benefit to the contemporary society.

### **Traditional African Ethical Ideals**

There are various traditional African ethical values which are of immense relevance to contemporary African society. Some of them are presented below.

#### ***Centrality of Good Character***

Good character forms the foundation of traditional African ethics. A person would be judged as having a bad character if he/she is considered dishonest, wicked, or cruel. In most moral evaluations reference is made to the character of a person. Thus, character is a basic and crucial element in African ethics generally. *Iwa* (character) is, for the Yoruba, “perhaps the most important moral concept. In fact, a person is morally evaluated according to his/her *iwa* whether good or bad” (Gbadegesin, 1991: 79). African ethics is, thus, a character-based ethics that maintains that the quality of the individual's character is most fundamental in our moral life because they help in promoting a healthy society where the common good is pursued.

Good character is the essence of the African moral system, the key player of the moral wheel. The justification for a character-based ethics is not farfetched. For, all that a society can do, regarding moral conduct, is to impart moral knowledge to its members, making them aware of the moral values and principles of that society. In general, society satisfactorily fulfils this duty of imparting moral knowledge to its members through moral education of various forms, including, as in traditional African societies, telling morally-freighted proverbs and folktales to its younger members. But, having moral knowledge, being made aware of the moral principles and rules of the society is one thing; being able to lead a life in tandem with the moral principles is quite another. An individual may know and may even accept a moral rule, such as, say, it is wrong to cheat the customs. But he may fail to apply this rule to a particular situation; he is, thus, not able to effect the transition from knowledge to action, to carry out the implications of his moral belief (Idowu, 1973).

In other words, the ability to act in accord with the moral principles and rules of the society requires the possession of a good character. Thus, in the context of the activities of the moral life in our decisions to obey moral rules; in the struggle to do the right thing and to avoid the wrong conduct; in one's intention to carry out a moral duty, the quality of a person's character is of ultimate consequence. It is from a person's character that all his or her actions good or bad radiate: the performance of good or bad acts depends on the state of one's character. Wrong-doing is put down to a person's bad character. Thus, the Yoruba maxim ‘Good character is a person's guard’ (Gehman, 1989).

African traditional maxims are explicit about the formation of character: character is both formed and acquired. A person is therefore responsible as much as the society for the state of his or her character, for character results from the habitual actions of a person. The logic of the acquisition of our character or habits is that the original nature of the human being was morally neutral, neither good nor bad. A person's original moral neutrality will in the course of his life come to be affected, in one direction (the good) or the other direction (the bad) by his actions and responses to moral instruction, advice and persuasion. The original moral neutrality of a human being constitutes the foundation of our conception of the moral person, for it makes for allows room for choice, that is, moral choice. Consequently, what a person does or does not do is most crucial to the formation and development of his or her character, and, thus, to becoming moral or immoral (Gyekye, 1983).

### ***Interest for the Common Good***

Interest and pursuit of the common good is characteristic of traditional African ethics. In traditional African moral thought, the notion is expressed most vividly in various proverbs and tales. The common good is not a substitute for the sum of the various individual goods. It does not consist of, or derive from, the goods and preferences of particular individuals. It is that which is essentially good for human beings as such, embracing the needs that are basic to the enjoyment and fulfilment of the life of each individual. If the common good were the aggregate of individual goods, it would only be contingently, not essentially, common and, on that score, it would not be achieved in a way that will benefit all the individuals in a society. If the common good is achieved, then the individual good is also achieved. Thus, there should be no conceptual tension or opposition between the common good and the good of the individual member of the community, for the common good embraces the goods the basic goods of all the members of the community. If the common good were understood as the basic good as human good as such, there would be no need to think of it as a threat to individual liberty as touted by Western liberal (individualist) thinkers, for, after all, individual liberty is held as one of the basic goods of the members of the society (Anakan, 2009).

Notably, there is no human being or society that does not desire peace, security, freedom, dignity, respect, justice, equality, and satisfaction. It is a moral notion that embraces fundamental goods which are intrinsic to human fulfilment. The unrelenting support by people in a community for such moral values as social justice and equality on the one hand, and the spontaneous, universal denunciation of acts such as murder and cruelty on the other hand, are certainly inspired by beliefs in the common good. The common good is thus a notion that is conceptually affiliated to the notion of community and, thus, to the notion of human society as such. The common good is an essential feature of the ethics espoused by the

communitarian African society. The pursuit of the good of all is the goal of the communitarian society, which the African society is. A sense of the common good which is a core of shared values is the underlying presupposition of African social morality. All African ethical ideals are oriented towards the attainment of the common good (Eluke, 2000). Traditional African social ethics is expressed in many maxims (proverbs) that emphasize the importance of the values of mutual helpfulness, collective responsibility, cooperation, interdependence, and reciprocal obligations (Wiredu, 1995).

### ***Community Spirit***

The authentic African is known and identified in, by and through his community. The community is the custodian of the individual; hence he must go where the community goes. In the material term of reference, the individual must go the “community centre” or village square which is a social, political, judicial and religious centre. This is corroborated by a popular African proverb: “Go the way that many people go; if you go alone, you will have reason to lament” (Eluke, 2000: 31). The African idea of safety and its value depends on personal identification with and within the community. Communalism in Africa is a system that is both supra-sensible and material in its terms of reference. Both are found in a society that is believed by the Africans to be originally "god-made" because it transcends the people who live in it now, and it is "Man-made" because it cannot be culturally understood independent of those who live in it now (Eluke, 2000). Therefore, the authentic African is known and identified in, by and through his community.

The community is the custodian of the individual; hence he must go where the community goes. In this sense the community is "man-made". Again, the important events in and around the community are well known to its members. And because at the community centre, their tutelary deity often has a shrine, the centres therefore become also the centre of communal religious worship, sacrifices and festivities. In this sense the community there gathered becomes "god-made".

The philosophy behind the traditional African communalism, therefore guaranteed individual responsibility within the communal ownership and relationship. The prosperity of a single person, says an African adage, does not make a town rich. But the prosperity of the town makes persons rich. Put in another way, a person can only be truly safe in a safe community. Seen on the economic level Wilson (1960” 43) observed that in an African community:

Poverty was a foreign concept. This could only be really brought about to the entire community by an adverse climate during a particular season. It never was considered repugnant to ask one's neighbours for help if one was struggling. In almost all

instances there was help between individuals, tribe, chief and chief, etc. even in spite of war.

This explains why a traditional community may have poor people but it may not have beggars.

In a similar vein, the traditional African community attitude to work was another factor which made it impossible for us to have beggars within the 'clan vital'. It is true that when a job had to be done, the whole community turned out with supplies and music and proceeded to sing and dance its way through to the successful conclusion of each particular chore. In this way work was converted into a pleasurable productive pastime (Ikenga-Metuh, 1990). Generally speaking, the goodwill and brotherly atmosphere, normally inspired and sustained during the work period, by music, justifies its usage. But what is more important is the solidarity it fosters. Thus Opoku (1978) wrote, "Whether the musical situation is meant to provide entertainment or is created for ritual and religious purpose, the ultimate effect seems to be the same: to bring the community together" (Opoku, 1978: 58).

### ***Peace and Harmony***

Gyekye (1983) maintains that African traditional ethics has dual connotation. On the onehand, it refers to set of social rules, values, and norms that that guide the conduct of the people in a society. On the other hand, it refers to the attitude and responses to such norms and rules...embedded in the whole society and aiming at directing the way of life as bad or good in order to live the communal and harmonious life. The rationale for moral rules then is to ensure the harmonious co-existence of members of the society through the systematic adjustment of their discordant interest. Ethical ideals like justice, truthfulness, fairness, equity and so many others provided a fertile environment for peaceful co-existence, order and harmony.

The concept of ethics in the traditional African society is based on the notion that man is never alone. Thus, society according to Opoku (1978) is a series of interrelationships in which each one contributes to the welfare and the stability of the community, and avoids that which is disruptive or harmful to the community's life African ethics is based on communal living in the sense that it fuses the society into one big whole. Mbiti (1969: 69) observes that "In Traditional African Society, there is no 'me' but 'us'; not 'my' but ours." It is within this perspective and context of no 'me' but 'us' no 'my' but 'ours' in a given traditional African society that traditional African ethics has been formulated.

### ***Respect for Good Human Relations***

Bewaji (2004: 2) sees human relations in traditional Africa as a concept which is described as "...a way of life emphatically centred upon human interests and values; a mode

of living evidently characterized by empathy, and by consideration and compassion for human beings". Hence, in an African community, everyone is accommodated. This African sense of accommodation accounts for why, "In traditional African culture, the weak and the aged; the incurable, the helpless, the sick were affectionately taken care of in the comforting family atmosphere" (Eze, 1997: 23). Life in the African community is based on the philosophy of live-and-let-live. This principle is based on the concept of the 'Clan vital' and applies to a concrete community. According to Wilson (1960: 19),

Inter-community relationship realised in the interaction between individuals of different communities is different from the intra-community relationship based on interpersonal relationship realised in a definite community, among its members, to express the practical traditional African concept of humane living.

Relationship between individuals recognises their worth as human beings and not only what they possess or what they can do for each other. However, these can come as secondary considerations, in terms of reciprocity and in terms of inter-personal relationship. People help one another without demanding immediate or an exact equivalent remuneration. Everyone is mindful that each person has something to contribute to his welfare, some time and somehow.

In the same light, the art of dialogue and conversation is a cherished value in African human relations. People freely discuss their problems and look for suggestions and solutions together. The unwillingness to talk to people about either private or public affairs can be interpreted as bad manners or sign of enmity. Above all the African believes that he who discusses his affairs with others hardly runs into difficulties or makes mistakes in the execution of his plans. A good human relationship based on inter-personal communication has always been emphasized in the African Community. Anakan (2009: 61) observed:

Ours has always been a man-centred society. Westerners have in many occasions been surprised at the capacity we have for talking to each other not for the sake of arriving at a particular conclusion but merely to enjoy the communication for its own sake. Intimacy is a term not exclusive for particular friends but applying to a whole group of people who find themselves together whether through work or residential requirements.

But the discussions must respect individuals' sentiments; hence conversations that may cause misgivings are avoided. People generally learnt to speak and act in ways that respected other people.

***Sacredness of Human Life***

The traditional African does not like violence per se. This is because shedding of blood is abhorred. People who were killed were those whose continued existence was a threat to the life of others and to the peace of the community. In such cases, the principle that it is better for one man to die than for all the community to perish, applied. War was only taken to as a last resort, that is, when all formal and normal courses of action to search for peace had failed.

Within this ambience, murder was not encouraged, especially within the clan. If a man conscientiously killed another man within the community, he was killed himself. But if he killed a kinsman inadvertently, he was exiled for some long period. However, murder is officially committed during war or in self defense. In this case, the murderer is not expected to eat until he has ritually washed the blood of the slain man off his hands. This ritual helps to free the murderer from the anger of the God's. This is why "In many (African) tribes the killing of a kinsman, the antithesis of caring for him, was not only a crime but also an abomination. After the murderer had been executed, his family would have to perform sacrifices and rites to remove the stain of evil and ward off the anger of the gods. In this light, unborn children are protected and, abortion is tabooed. Sources of life are sacred. Ethical ideals like respect for human life, dignity and sacredness help in ensuring a sense of sacredness of the human life (Eze, 1997).

### ***Sense of Hospitality***

The traditional African sense of hospitality is one of the values that characterised the African society. The Africans easily incorporate strangers and give them lands to settle hoping that they would go one day, and the land would revert to the owner. For the Africans, one cannot opt out of his original community completely. Hospitality, kindness and generosity are important elements in building a hospitable society. Africans have symbolic ways of expressing welcome. These are in forms of presentation of kola nuts, traditional gin, coconuts, etc; in various communities. These are given to a visitor to show that he is welcome and safe. Among the Igbo, the basis of hospitality is the generally accepted principle that a guest should not harm his host and that when he departs, he should not develop a hunch back on the way home. Eze (1997: 83) summarised the African attitude to strangers in the following words:

In traditional African culture, whenever there is food to be taken, everyone present is invited to participate even if the food was prepared for far less number of people without anticipating the arrival of visitors. It would be a height of incredible bad manners for one to eat anything however small, without sharing it with anyone else present, or at least expressing the intention to do so.

This is an expression of kindness and generosity which are core ethical ideals in traditional Africa.

### ***Sense of Respect for Authority and Elders***

Ethical ideals in African are essential in promoting respect for those in authority and the elders. In the words of Best (1995: 21), “African traditional culture generally have deep and ingrained respect for old age, and even when we can find nothing to admire in an old man, we will not easily forget that his grey hairs have earned him right to courtesy and politeness”. Though it is natural for the African to respect an elder, this respect in some cases, can be relative to what we can find and admire in an elder. It is true that respect for elders starts within one's immediate family. This is why the Yoruba say “*Obileye*”, which means, parents have dignity and respect (Gbadegesin, 1991). The elders in Africa are respected for many reasons. For example they are believed to be the teachers and directors of the young. Among the Efik, it is said: "The words of one's elders are greater than amulets", it means that they give more protection than the amulet does. In the same way, the Igbo say: He who listens to an elder is like one who consults an oracle (Eze, 1997). The oracles are believed to give the infallible truths, thus the elders are also believed to say the truth and their words and instructions are heeded to for the promotion of good behaviour among the young.

Furthermore, the elders are taken to be the repository of communal wisdom and therefore they are conceded leadership in the affairs of the people. One of the reasons for this is the nearness of the elders to the ancestors. And as Gyekye (1983) avers, in the African concept, legitimate power lay in the office sanctioned by ancestral norms, not in the person; and the person lost his right to exact obedience once he abused that office. But the elders themselves respect authority and hardly abuse it, and often are committed to the demands of their office.

The respect given to the elders has its practical effect in the maintenance of custom and tradition. The young are always looking forward to being elders and they are often told that if a child respects an elder, he would be respected by the young when he becomes an elder. The care of the aged, as an African institution, is situated within the family. It is so cherished and so organised that there is no need, in the African setting, for nursing homes for the aged as exist today in Europe and America. The idea of old people's home and its introduction into Africa would lead to the abuse of the African sense of and respect for old age (Menkiti, 1984). Menkiti (1984) further states that “... respect for elders also has a corresponding responsibility on the part of the elders attached to it, and the reception of this

respect is dependent on the execution of that responsibility; it is based on the reciprocal exercise of duties/rights, based on the old/young relationship”.

Respect for elders in Africa is akin to African humanitarian ethics which seek to collapse moral duty and moral ideals, the latter being the basis of the so-called supererogatory duty into one capacious moral universe inhabited both by the morality of duty ‘proper’, obligation, and justice and the morality of love, virtue, compassion, benevolence, and other “moral ideals”. Such a capacious morality would make no distinction between a morally obligatory act and a morally optional act. It would insist that no act that is morally good in itself or that will conduce to the well-being of some individual or group of individuals should be considered morally optional, to be morally shrugged off or unconscionably set aside, if we understand morality to be something that serves (or, should) serve human needs.

### **Evaluation**

Traditional African ethics has the welfare or wellbeing of the human person as its key attribute. The human person is seen as the center of the universe and the entire creation is seen as being there to serve human purpose. This idea of the human person as the center-piece of creation is buttressed by Mbiti (1969: 38) when he observed that, “it is as if the whole world exists for the sake of mankind”. This shows thereby that African people look for the usefulness or otherwise of the universe in relation to humanity. It has to do with both what the world can do for the human person and how he/she can use the world for his/her own good.

The western individualistic manner of living is quite reprehensible to the typical African person. African style of life is rather collective and universalistic in character. This way of life is traceable to the forebears of the people and is powered by collective authority or consensus of the elders. As Ikenga-Metuh (1990:106) rightly articulates, “the community makes the individual. An African’s worth and identity among the people depends on where the community places him/her”. In this experience “the other is another self. The I is lost in the You; the You and the I is lost in the We”. In this atmosphere, they are constrained by genuine love; solidarity and common good and are further motivated by the resulting sense of true identity, duty and right or justice. Under African ethical code, people do not think of themselves as discrete individuals, but rather understand themselves as part of a “community”. The “We” relationship takes pre-eminence. Mbiti supports this view with his popular inversion, “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am”. The individual owes his/her existence to other people. He is simply part of the whole... whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens

to the individual. The individual can only say: “I am because we are; and since we are there I am (1969: 108).

### **Conclusion**

Traditional Africans have a humanistic ethical and social worldview of life generally. The foregoing discourse makes this very clear. Qualities such as good character, patience, love, kindness, respect for elders, sense of respect for the sanctity of human life, etc are all pointers to the humanistic nature of Africans. These qualities make for the smooth running of the society and cordial relationship between human and human on the one hand, and human and God on the other. The traditional African worldview is centered on the human person. African ethical ideals are aimed at ensuring the welfare and interests of each member of society can hardly be accomplished outside the communitarian society. Social or community life is, thus, not optional to the human being. Social life, which follows upon our natural sociality, implicates the individual in a web of moral obligations, commitments, and duties to be fulfilled in pursuit of the common good or the general welfare. Thus, African humanitarian ethics defines social morality, the morality of the common good, and the morality of duty that is so comprehensive as to bring within its compass what are referred to as moral ideals.

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