

## Traditional Ethics and Social Order: A Study in African Philosophy

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### Abstract

Traditional ethics in this paper refers to the norms, precepts, principles and moral codes, which regulate the conduct and actions of individuals in African societies. The paper provides a clear understanding of African ethics and morality. It shows how traditional ethical principles helped to maintain and ensure social order and stability in traditional African societies. It x-rays the effects of Western civilization and culture on the smooth functioning of traditional ethics. It recommends the utilization of traditional ethical principles in the development of the abundant human and material resources in modern Africa, especially in this age of globalization. The paper finally advocates a harmonization of the positive elements of traditional ethics with Western culture for a better moral society in contemporary Africa.

**Key words:** Traditional Ethics; Social order; African philosophy

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### INTRODUCTION

Early European writers on Africa had dismissed as non-existent, the notion of ethics and morality among Africans. Writing about the Igbo of Nigeria, Basden (1966, p.34) says that, “the word morality has no significance in Ibo vocabulary ... where the natives have remained

untouched by outside influence. There is nothing exactly corresponding to the social evil of European life.” This assertion, as it is, is a clear manifestation of Western prejudices, ignorance and lack of understanding of the African culture. It is worthy to note that Basden contradicted himself in the same book when he says that

in the majority of Ibo towns, a very clearly defined code of morals exists theoretically. Infringement of these laws may lead to severe penalties being inflicted, and cases are known where infidelity on the part of a wife has been punished by torture and death of both offenders. (1966, p.34).

Basden in the first statement opines that the word morality has no significance in Igbo of Nigeria vocabulary, yet in the second statement he agrees that, a very clearly defined code of morals exist theoretically. His acceptance that sanctions were applied when offences were committed is a prove of the practicality of the Igbo (African) code of morals. Consequently, African ethics and morality are not a mere figment of the mind of Basden but also practical.

Before the time of Basden, Nadel also echoed the non-existence of ethical and moral principles in Africa when he says of the Nupe:

As for the realm of ethics, Nupe religion is altogether silent. It upholds no ideal man or condemns his antithesis. There is no eschatology, no mythology, exemplifying rights and wrongs, crimes and retribution, and no promise of reward to the law. Nor is there formulated doctrine concerned with norms of actions of more common currency, the simple rights and wrongs or everyday morality (Nadel, 1954, p.265).

Most of these wrong early European observations about the traditional religion, ethics and morality of the Africans, were used to justify especially their strong judgment about the African’s mental and moral characters. This is clearly portrayed in Richard Burton’s opinion that:

The Negro is still at that crude dawn of faith-fetishism and has barely advanced the ideas of personal deity, a duty in life, a moral code, or a shame of lying. He rarely believes in a future

state of rewards and punishments which whether true or not are infallible indices of human progress (1946, p.199).

Burton fell into the same pitfall as Basden. He contradicted himself about the Negroes of Africa in the study which he carried out on the Fon People of Dahomey. After the study, he observed that, the Fon people had “a sense of (the) numinous with a philosophical concept of the Supreme Being comparable to that of any thinkers in modern or ancient Europe.” (1946, p.291) He further recognizes the fundamentally religious and philosophical basis for human sacrifice practiced by the kings of Dahomey but attributed it to “innate human cruelty.” (1946, p.292) These unpopular, derogatory and unscholarly observations, (unscholarly because they were not based on an honest research, recognition and consideration of the culture of the people being studied), portray the bias and wrong notions which early Europeans and Christian missionaries had about African peoples, their religion, morality and culture.

This paper, therefore, is set against this background with the aim of correcting the wrong notions about African culture and ethics. It also shows how African ethics and morality serve as a vehicle for social order and stability in African communities.

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## 1. AFRICAN ETHICS AND SOCIAL ORDER AND STABILITY

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Against the wrong views expressed by some European scholars as showed above, some African scholars who understood their culture and language, have shown in their studies that a well ordered and clearly defined system of ethics and morality exists in Africa. African ethical principles and moral codes regulated the lives of individuals in the community before the advent of colonialism and missionary activities in Africa. Law and order, stability and social harmony were maintained and preserved through a strict adherence to and observance of the normative ethical principles.

In his pioneer work on African Religions and Philosophy, Mbiti (1969, p.205), observes that:

There exist many laws, customs, set forms of behavior, regulations, rules, observances and taboos constituting the moral code and ethics of a given community or society. Any breach of this code of behavior is considered evil, wrong or bad, for it is an injury or destruction to the accepted social order and peace. As in all societies of the world, social order and peace are recognized by African people as essential and sacred, where the sense of life is so deep, it is inevitable that the solidarity (and stability) of the community must be maintained otherwise there is disintegration and destruction.

Elsewhere, Mbiti (1969, p.175) also states that “African peoples have a deep sense of right and wrong ... this moral sense has produced customs, rules, laws, traditions and taboos which can be observed in each society”. This implies that African traditional ethics predates the coming

of Europeans to Africa. Ethics and the sense or ideas of morality in Africa were not the creations of the Europeans and Christian missionaries as Basden and others would want their readers to believe.

Every community, towns and villages in Africa had a system of morals which are preserved in their customs and tradition. “There is no society (in Africa) that has no set of dos and don’ts. A society that has no norms or ethically intelligible way of ascertaining and enforcing good conduct is bound to disappear in the short or long run” (Ozumba, 1995, p.55). This explains why Opoku (1978, p.166) rightly observes that “the solidarity of the community is maintained by laws, customs, taboos and set forms of behavior which constitutes the moral code”. Ozumba and Opoku’s viewpoints stress the inalienable importance of ethics and moral codes in the maintenance of social order and stability in African societies. In other words, African societies were maintained in terms of social order, through the observance of traditional ethical principles and customs. Any violation or disregard of these principles resulted to disorder and social dislocation. In this regard, Tempels (1959, p.45) rightly observes that:

Africans have traditionally been very conscious of the social dimension of morality. Morality is always seen in the social context. Hence any serious violation of the moral order has a social aspect which involves serious social consequences. The whole society is affected, for every evil act is an anti-social act which has adverse effects on the whole community.

Nwosu and Kalu (1982, p.5) agree with Tempels’ view when they observed that “a given cultural group enjoys a high degree of stability to the extent that the members of the group allow their actions to be governed by the dominant values and norms”. Substantiating our view that African ethics and morality is the bedrock of social stability, Asouzu (1998, p.3) states that “African traditional society recognizes and holds firmly to certain values ... identified as necessary for correct functioning of the society and the welfare of the individuals”. To violate or go against the order as religiously legitimated “is always to risk plunging into anomaly .... In such case the cosmic order has been wronged and must be righted by appropriate ritual and moral acts” (Berger 1967, p.48). There is no doubt that Traditional African societies depended largely on the strict application of the moral codes of ethics for the smooth running of the society. By observing the customs, prohibitions or taboos and other normative values, social order and stability were ensured. Commenting on Igbo ethics, Ilogu (1975, p.23) says that:

*Omenala* (customs) is the means by which the traditional Ibo society enforces conformity. Culturally speaking, *omenala* is the means by which the social ethos is measured, the values of the society are continued from one generation to another and the process of socialization through the education of the young ones are facilitated. Harmony and equilibrium are in this way

maintained as every member of the society knows what to expect from his neighbor and what to give to them, simply by observing the well known customary law of behavior and moral code, that is *omenala*.

Tradition and custom in African society, defined the various aspect of human behavior and social activities that were approved and those aspects that were prohibited and forbidden. All the moral codes of morality were nearly in the form of prohibitions which were sanctioned by the deities and ancestral spirits. This account for why many scholars hold the view that African ethics and morality is derived from traditional religion. Ilogu (1975, p.23) further observes that:

*Omenala* (custom) is derived from the goddess *Ala* (earth divinity) and sanctioned by the ancestors; it is religious in nature, although it fulfils social, moral and cultural functions. It holds on the community derived from the power of the goddess and the ancestors. Hence the unquestioned obedience which the community gives to it.

Ilogu's opinion about the source of Igbo ethics and morality is also true for other African communities. For Esomonu (1985, p.183), "the belief in divine moral code and the ability of the gods to punish any deviation from or violations of the divine law was ... the most powerful mechanism of societal control". Shorter (1973, p.62) agrees with this view when he observes that:

In African Traditional Society, morality is seen to be in an intimate relationship with the ontological order of the universe. This order is "given" if not explicitly "God given", and it is expressed in the system of symbolic classification current in society. Any infraction of this order is a contraction in life and brings about a physical disorder which reveals the fault.

Traditional African society made no clear distinction between religious law and moral law. "It is what religion forbids that the society also forbids and the society approves what religion approves. Religious values are the same as moral values" (Divine, 1986, p.37). Among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, "Morality is certainly the fruit of religion. They do not attempt to separate the two and it is impossible for them to do so without disastrous consequences" (Idowu 1962, p.146). The religious basis of African ethics also attracted the comment of Bertrand Russell. According to him, "many traditional ethical beliefs are hard to justify, except on the assumption that here is a God or a World Spirit or at least an immanent cosmic purpose ... without a theological basis, they lose persuasive force and the power of psychological compulsion." (Russell, 1992, p.27) It is an incontrovertible fact that for the African, ethics is tied up with the religious worldview. This agrees with Abogunrin's view that, "the ethico-religious conception of the universe prevails in traditional societies ... and morality rests upon the commandment of the Deity" (1982, p.4). This implies that African Traditional religion is the bedrock of traditional ethics. The Supreme Being,

the divinities and ancestral spirits were the main sources of African morality and ethics. This is why moral laws were inviolate and immutable and no offender was left unpunished.

Some dissenting views however exist. In some African societies, God was not the source of morality nor was morality dependent on divine revelation and directive. In his writing about the people of Ghana, Wiredu (1983, p.7) states that:

Among the Akan people of Ghana, morality is not founded on religion but on rational reflection as to what is conducive to human welfare .... The Akan had no belief in a revealed religion hence doing good is not dependent on God's directive. The Akans never had a body of moral doctrines believed to have been sent to mankind by God. Hence there is no such thing as revealed morality or religious morality among the Akan people. They define morality not on the basis of the will of God or the command of God, but in terms of the conditions of human welfare.

The implication of Wiredu's observation is that African ethics is humanized. It is essentially interpersonal and social, with a basis in human welfare and well-being. This is why the African man is essentially his brother's keeper and is ultimately concerned about his welfare. Community of life or communalism ranked over and above individualism; hence the stress on communal solidarity. The African man's concern for the well-being of his brother and neighbor is at the heart of traditional ethics and morality.

## 2. TRADITIONAL ETHICS AFTER COLONIZATION: EXISTENCE OR NON-EXISTENCE?

The civilizing mission of the Christian church had the greatest impact on traditional morality and ethics. Many scholars have undoubtedly identified Christianity as responsible for the social and ethical dislocation of African traditional society. According to Ekechi (1989, 65), "as the ranks of Christians swelled, so also did violations of societal codes of conduct rise". Converts were made to believe that traditional customs which are the very foundation of ethics and morality were paganistic and heathenish. Consequently, converts were encouraged to disregard, abuse and jettison their traditional customs which held the society together.

The implication of this was soon to be felt: Great changes were to take place in the moral life of Africans due to the forced acculturation of the Western world. Ekwuru (1999, p.9) captures vividly the modern situation when he wrote about the Owerri (Igbo) of Nigeria that "the entire world of human life, the meaning of life itself, has broken into pieces". Selfishness and avarice have become wide spread because Africans drunk in Western cultural habits no longer respect or obey traditional ethical norms

and values. Communal solidarity of the pristine times has given way to individual solidarity and mindedness. The Spirit of community is strength has been replaced with wealth is strong. Individuals commit the heinous crime of using their brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, kinsmen and even their children for rituals, instead of protecting them from harm.

Social order which ensured honest humane living and security of lives and property has given way to a state of anarchy and disorder characterized by distrust and suspicion. Accordingly, Ekwuru (1999, p.8) observed that, "daily, the proliferation of social crimes and the unbearable conditions of human life cloud the future with a notable gloom and bleak". The litany of social ills in contemporary African societies is endless. Moral bankruptcy has given rise to numerous cases of ritual killing, incest, child abuse, marital infidelity and divorce, disorder and arm robbery, kidnapping, dishonest living and the famous 419 or OBT (obtaining by tricks), etc.. In all these, the colonial conquest of Africa, Christian values and education and culture have been identified as being responsible for the dislocation, denigration and decline in traditional ethical values.

Western Education and culture have planted in the minds of the modern African a state of confusion and conflict. Thus, he finds himself in the vortex of schizoid religio-cultural mentality, a confused mind caught in the web of two conflicting cultures.

In order to restore social order and stability in African communities, there is an urgent need to revive our cultural values, traditional ethical principles and institutions. There is the need to re-establish them as the guiding principles of our daily life and living. As Iwe (1991, p.185) observes "there is an urgent need to revive and revitalize the dropping spirit and basic institutions of our culture, if we have to avoid the incidence of selling our souls to foreign cultures and turning our people into the cultural clowns of other nations, and into citizens no longer at home but ill-at-ease in their native land and culture".

To this one may add the fact that a conscious return to and observance of traditional ethical principles remains the only viable and valid option if social order, harmony and stability would be restored in our contemporary African societies.

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## CONCLUSION

We have articulated in this paper that Africans had a clear sense of morals and ethics before the advent of colonialism and Christianity. The paper also has shown that traditional ethical principles drew its strength and force from traditional religion of Africa. That social stability and order in traditional African societies were anchored on the respect for customs and traditions of the society. It argues that colonialism, Christianity and

Western education and value system, have dealt a severe blow on the traditional ethical principles, which ensured peace, harmony and social stability. The paper finally advocates a conscious return and revival of traditional ethical principles of the pristine time, if modern Africa is to enjoy the social order and stability in her communities.

Since a complete and total reversal of the impacts of Western culture on traditional ethics is impossible, it is our opinion that a healthy integration of the positive elements of the Western and traditional values is imperative. The challenges and opportunities presented by globalization and international interdependence should be explored in charting a new culture and cultural policies for modern Africa. Consequently there is the need for proper utilization of traditional ethical norms and principles in the development of the abundant human and material resources of modern Africa. The reality of modern changes and the role which traditional ethical principle can play cannot be ignored in our march to global peace, security and progress. Traditional ethics and morality has an important role to play in the molding of good citizens and a humane society, where peace, solidarity and brotherhood will thrive: A society where all men will live and interact happily without fear of being stabbed in the back.

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