

Globethics Repository



Ethics and Democracy

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Ike, Obiora F.
Publisher	Printed and bounded by BEW IT LTD
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-09-23 02:57:01
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/166324

Chapter Two

Ethics and Democracy

Introduction

With a variety of cultures, people, languages, systems and historical conditions in the study of the religions, society, life-styles and values in Africa, one is confronted by a bewildering number of various traditions and ethnic groups that the student is either tempted to concentrate on only one ethnic group in what we call particularistic, holistic study, or to generalize the African condition in a universalistic invention from elements in different systems, thus, creating a cosmology which presumes to belong to all Africans but actually belongs to none. This is the predicament which both the holistic, particularistic and general universalistic have for both of them. The consequence could lead to a false picture of Africa. The temptation remains a dilemma. A realistic approach is to see the ethnic group “as a category of interaction, and by using limited comparative analysis based on geographical contiguity and the evidence of oral history of the moment of ideas, peoples, institutions and the influence of personalities, to establish models, which are applicable to given cases.”¹ This is the option we shall attempt here focusing on various linguistic and tribal groups found in Africa.

The religious and moral systems of Africa constitute, each, their own organic universe, their own integrated *microcosm*. Each developed its own imagery, its own system of classifications and complementary oppositions. Although at a popular level, religion always provides an element of explanation, prediction and control, it would be quite wrong to see these religions as explanatory systems, let alone systems of comprehensive explanations. They offered their adherents a further and unifying dimension to life itself. There was scepticism as well as faith, but insofar as religious faith triumphed, the African believer discovered a meaning in his existence and was able to hold a balance between hope and despair², and we may add mystery and meaning, life and tragedy, joys and sorrows and achievements.

¹ Aylward Shorter, *Theology in Context/The language of an African Theology* in *Ordensnachrichten* 19. Jhg., 1980 / Heft 6, pp. 466 ff.

² Shorter, A. *ibid*.

Truth is Life

The Africa world-view generally and the Igbo culture of Nigeria in particular believe that *truth exists*. This truth is explained as life '*ezi okwu bu ndu*'. Life in its various dimensions and experiences. This simple definition of '*truth as life*' that is, of human conscious living and existence within a particular geographical reality, historical necessity and physical environment explains why the Igbo chose not to define '*truth*' in an abstract category but to explain truth as an experience of life. To be true is to be alive within the community of the living and the greatest value was the protection of this life. Inasmuch as life, which begins at birth, was experienced, the African described the experience of this life and its extremes as corresponding to truth, which alone was shared by the concrete human community.

The challenge of such a thought pattern to the various Western philosophical schools of idealism, rationalism, empiricism etc. is to position the life experience of Africans considered as truth *vis-a-vis* '*the abstract theoretical and logically conceivable*' notions of the definitions of ethics in the Western cultures by individual philosophers. Here lies a difference in the search for the foundation for ethics in universal categories *vis-a-vis* the concrete historical experience of life. Whereas truth and life were identical in the African world-view, the western thinker realized this thought in the famous Cartesian '*Cogito ergo sum*'.

In reality, African cosmology accepts that '*truth imposes itself*' without much logic, speculation and rationalization. It is not an abstract doctrinal formulation, which induces conviction, or truth but a confrontation with perceived reality. The African point of view is that imagination, experience and reason are far from being opposed to one another. In the words of Pope Paul VI, "*The idea is perceived rather than analysed, believed rather than reflected on and is expressed in very different ways in African culture.*"³

This provides us with a convergence of probabilities that creates for us the certitude, which is our guide to life. African world-view centres around the human being, his life, his welfare, the welfare of his descendants, living, dead or unborn, communion with the ancestors who play a vital role in the life of the historically present community. Although today, many Africans are increasingly getting urbanized and Westernized, Christianized or Islamized, ancient traditions and customs still abound and have their influence and validity in people's way of life, language, clothing, food, birth and initiations

³ Paul VI, Africa Terrarum, art. 8, ASS 59, 1967, p. 1079.

rituals, marriage, music, trade, agriculture, family communion sharing and solidarity patterns, relationships, death, burial, religious beliefs, political structures, among many others.

Tradition

Culture has been regarded as a *people's way of life*. It is neither static nor permanent. Culture goes through the entire philosophy and outlook of a people. Certainly in many African societies, culture, law, religion and morality are not easily separated. Religion is a regular accompaniment; it is an extension of culture. A common culture binds people together and, therefore, characterizes them. This is the moment of tradition, for tradition is responsible for the continuity which one finds in any society. It also identifies the people of that society at their deepest levels.

Etymologically, the word tradition comes from two Latin words *trans* (across) and *dare* (to give). The two combine to give, '*tradere*' meaning to 'give up', 'hand over', 'decline', 'transit', 'surrender', 'concede'.⁴ The part of culture, which unites people and gives them a sense of continuity and identity is their tradition. It has endured the test of time and is passed down from one generation to another.

It is the traditional values and conventions which help to establish people's cultural identity as Austrians, Americans, Swiss, Germans, Nigerians and, thus, effectively unites these societies.

*Tradition fashions the bond between successive generations in a society. We received from the past our language, laws, symbols and all those ideas and feelings which we generally accepted unquestionably and provide our society with its characteristic cultural values. Even if members of a given society rarely stop to formulate and reflect to what they have taken over, they remain radically indebted to the past for the inherited values and expectations which give life its meaning and provide ideals to be striven for. Thus, one generation passes on to another norms, attitudes and behaviour patterns by which society has hitherto functioned and now seeks to perpetuate itself.*⁵

⁴ Lewis, C.T., A Latin Dictionary, London, 1969, pp 1883 – 4.

⁵ Collins, G.S. J., Fundamental Theology, Paulist Press, New York/Ramsey, 1981, p.193.

Actually, African cosmology did not distinguish between religion and the secular society but created room for an interdependent world where;

*“The secular is so interwoven with the sacred that one does not exclude the other, nor could one be conceived without the other thereby giving religion an anthropocentric outlook.”*⁶

In the words of Harvey Cox *“To live here and now is the most important concern of African religious activities and beliefs. There is little, if any, concern with the distinctly spiritual welfare of men apart from his physical life. Even life hereafter is conceived in materialistic and physical terms. There is neither paradise to be hoped for nor hell to be feared hereafter ... there is no messianic hope or apocalyptic vision of God stepping in at some future moment to bring about a radical reversal of man’s normal life.”*⁷

Eugene Uzukwu, commenting on this interplay between the sacred and the secular in African cultures notes that there is;

*“The connection of the seen to the unseen, the union of the dead with the living, the spirit with ordinary man, and the dependence of the earthly man who is seen on the spiritual which is unseen.”*⁸

We might summarize by saying that African religion did not seek to make its members holy, to purify them nor to encourage its members to seek a transcendental union with the Supreme Being or with any other deity. The religion does not seek the welfare of God or that of any spirit nor does it seek to love them, but rather to obey the laws they are believed to have laid down to serve human interest. Therefore, this world-view seeks to communicate with and influence this world of the supernatural practices which included rituals and rites, sacrifices, consultation of the oracles, and respect of the ‘*Omenala*’ (the laws of the land).

⁶ Odoemena, A., African Traditional Religions Claim to Absolute Truth vis-a-vis its Tolerance Capability. A lecture delivered at ninth symposium of Theologie Interkulturel of the Johanne Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt/M, from 21 – 23/11/1996.

⁷ Cox, H., African Religions and Philosophy, London, 1969, p.4 in Afolabi Ojo, Yoruba Culture, Ibadan, 1971, p.184.

⁸ Uzukwu, E., Igbo Spirituality through Igbo Prayers; in Bulletin of African Theology, Zaire, 1984, p.211.

Family, the first School of Ethics and Morality in Africa

In most African societies, every individual born is considered a member of a family and of a clan. Until this day, the family is accepted as the most basic social structure and the first home of morality and ethics. The family, whether monogamous or polygamous is united by a bond of togetherness and feeling of closeness. Outside the family, the individual member is lost. A member is only free within the family community and his ability to contribute to its vitality. According to Max Gluckmann,

*“The ethical effect of such situation is that every action of a member of the family which departs from the norm influences many activities adversely. Each breach of the norms has a wide moral disturbance because many relationships are affected.”*⁹

*The family, therefore, is considered as the training ground and the first authority that sees to it that the traditions of the tribe are kept. It is the pride of the elders if their children know and respect the traditions of the tribe, which affect life. Thus, any achievement of the child is attributed to good upbringing of the family.*¹⁰

Community, Solidarity and Life as Basis for Ethics

Because man lives and partially defines himself in terms of community, he is responsible to the community, which as well acknowledges the individual members. The sense of community and solidarity is so strong that a person regards oneself as truly human when he/she is in communion with others. According to J.S. Mbiti;

“A typical African believes and holds tenaciously to the principle that he/she, as an individual is, because they are, and since they are, therefore he/she is.” Continuing this thought he asserts, *“Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his/her own being, his/her own duties, his/her privileges and responsibilities towards himself/herself and towards other people. The individual can only say I am because we are and since we are therefore I am.”*¹¹ This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.

This sense of community finds expression in the daily life style of people where loyalties of kinship, clanship, language, culture, politics, religion etc. converge. One might describe this sense of togetherness as; *community*

⁹ Gluckmann, M., *Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Societies*, London, 1965, p. 244.

¹⁰ Niba, M.S., *The Bafut Concept of Traditions ... A philosophical Reflection*, Bambui, 1984, p.30 (unpublished).

¹¹ Mbiti, J.S., *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann, London, 1975, pp 108 – 109.

sentiment not just neighbourhood as community. This principle of sense of togetherness extends to include both the temporal and spiritual sphere,

“Not only the living but also the living dead - the ancestors, the Supreme Being and the entire spirit world. There is no room for rugged individualism, as every person is related to the other making possible a deep common solidarity and loyalty. Even natural objects are seen as inter-related, as symbols of each other.”¹²

Any young man who cuts off himself from the community in the African sense and becomes a person in what is more or less the Western sense, cuts off from life. He is no longer a person in the African sense. If he is to survive to some degree, he must quit the village and begin existence somewhere else, however, no matter how prosperous he becomes he is presumed to miss something in his personality. It is only by re-establishing the link with his kit and kin, which is actually part of him, that he can once more be a person, his full self.

A Shift from Religion to Ethics

The absence of the clear division between the sacred and the secular, the profane and the spiritual, the theoretical and the practical, all these expressed the African difference to Western categories of thought which had clear lines distinguishing the temporal and the eternal, idealism and empiricism, rationalism and pragmatism. The Igbo and in fact various African societies viewed the historical human person as the being;

‘whose life in community expressed the truth and which truth was the basis for a good life.’

There hardly existed religious wars, ideological doctrines, formal prayers or missionary enterprise in African societies. It was on the level of ethics, therefore, of life lived and shared in community, that problems existed. One would summarize this view thus;

“Do not show me your religion show me your good deeds.”

The shift, thus, moved from philosophical speculation to experienced life; *“That which promotes life is good and acceptable. That which destroys life is bad*

¹² Gaba Publications, Human Response to the Call of God, in Spearhead, 1979, no 58, p. 27.

no matter for what reason except where such life so destroyed was for the survival of the community and often not a member of the community”.

This was acceptable in cases of inter-tribal wars. Culture rich in values is regarded higher than a society rich in material wealth. If human beings are victimized by an oppressive society, which leads to their death or dehumanization, there was every reason to question the validity of the act from the perspective of the victim. Values of ethics in Africa stressed, therefore, the protection of life, the enhancement of life, the survival of community, the protection of the family, respect for village authority, need for openness, loyalty and humanness in personal relationships. The visible world of human society is supported by the world of the ancestors, the living dead, who are the custodians of ethics and morality.

The specific African contribution, therefore, in the debate is to establish that ethics had its validity and foundation on the arena not of religion but rather the relationship between members of the community (the present, the dead and the unborn). This is the essence of corporate personality and, thus, the foundation for the respect for traditions, for justice and the laws of the land where ethics has its foundations.

