

Globethics Repository

The logo for Globethics, featuring the word "Globethics" in white, sans-serif font centered within a solid blue rectangular background.

The Integral Nature of African Cultural & Religious Values as Ethical Values

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	2026-07-10 05:34:59
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/166328

Chapter Six

The Integral Nature of African Cultural & Religious Values as Ethical Values

Abstract

The fundamental thrust of this paper is the ambitious claim which postulates that there is an African Business Ethics, the challenge of which is to rediscover Traditional African Values and apply them to modern Africa, thus, building a sound foundation for doing 'Business' in an 'Ethical' manner and making them known to the rest of the business community. The paper takes as its evaluative focus African Business Values and Ethics. These are pre-eminent virtues still known and operative in various communities all over the continent. Some of the points that will be touched upon are the question of African identity; its past and future, as well as aspects of African philosophy relating to religion, culture and ethics. The paper tries to show how such issues fit into and/or relate to many modern categories of Western philosophical paradigms.

KEY WORDS; African Identity, African Culture, African Values, Time, Tradition, Modernity, Oral Tradition, African Philosophy.

1. Introduction: Basic Questions

"When God created the world, he gave the Europeans the CLOCK (Watch) and gave Africans TIME."

Amazing or perhaps, as simple as this assertion may sound, there is something which attracts a deeper inquiry from the traveller, the researcher and scientist, the drivers of business and captains of industry, academics, tourists and historians and many others who travel through the continent as they observe, in contra-distinction to the experiences made in other continents, Africa's quite distinctive attitudinal belief in and practice of a *take-it-easy lifestyle*. Such a belief and practice are often expressed in such statements as *God is in control* and *tomorrow is another day*.

This paper is not about generalizations. It is about identifying specifics of the African world-view. It raises questions about the inherent rationality in the

cosmology and interpretation of the universe by African traditions and religions, often expressed in holistic and interconnected terms. This is different from a 'Cosmo-vision' generally found in Western philosophies, namely, one which identifies reality in clearly spelt out, separated and isolated beings, each seen in linear and particularistic terms and analogically separated from each other.

The point being made here is that Culture matters precisely because Culture and its ingredients provide the key to a proper understanding of reality. It is also helpful in solving problems that emerge from this basic reality. What comes to my mind is the oral interview I once conducted with Ozor Neife Ozoike, a wise old centenarian from Umana Ndiagu in the Ezeagu land of Eastern Nigeria. During the interview Ozoike said in part:

"People who do not look back to their ancestry cannot look forward to posterity."

Without taking into account this reality of African culture, how would one explain a certain ease in the African mind and its elastic attitude to 'Time', *vis-a-vis* the mentality of a clear mechanical dependence on the electronic clock or watch found particularly amongst peoples of the Western hemisphere? Thus, the term *African Time* has emerged and has become both entrenched and readily accepted as a *modus operandi* in African lingual expressions. One encounters it wherever one may travel within the continent. Lateness is excused on the grounds of African Time! If one may be allowed to generalize on this topic, it seems that there is more to this phenomenon which makes an African live life *leisurely*. In comparison with people from other continents, Africans relax more; they laugh a lot and tell many stories. This mentality certainly affects Business and Ethics in the African context. In Africa, it has a universal application.

The question is: "how and why is it so?" This question also offers a valid reason for the exercise, attempted in these pages, to understand and study the *Integral Nature of African and Cultural Values considered as Ethical Values*. All over the African continent, there is an amazing identity as to how people regard both business and Ethics and as to how they understand the concept of 'Time', not just as an exact moment but as something around or 'surrounding' an event. To repeat: "Why is this so?"

To avoid biases or prejudices, it is critically necessary to be allowed to present an African perspective without the use of interpreters in a search for *knowledge and its transfer across cultures*. As has become clear in inter-cultural

exchanges, cultural divergence amongst the peoples of the world has led to much misunderstanding, prejudices, injustices, exploitation, xenophobia and even wars. These consequent, negative tendencies are unhealthy for the peace of nations and for the sustainable balance needed for individuals and communities worldwide, that is, if they may be happy and fulfilled in their essence. *The challenge is to launch a new inter-cultural and inter-communicative dialogue that presents itself as a fundamental human right as "we emerge in the new millennium and in the 21st Century".*

2. Background and Justification

The background for this reflection and its attempt to justify a notion of *Understanding Africa from an African Perspective* is a reminder that much of what is 'known' or written about Africa stems from non-African 'experts': intellectuals, traders, anthropologists, travellers and missionaries. In their writings, most of these observers tend to look *down on* Africa and its peoples who are considered as primitive, barbaric, uncivilized. Africans are deemed as lacking in any ability for rigorous philosophical, ethical or even scientific development, comparable to the external paradigms offered by the Westerners, by Islam or by writers from various Eastern traditions.

The postulation being made here about Africa and Africans (not in mere general terms) derives from available facts and from 'on-the-ground' realities. They are based on credible works of research done by many African writers, especially since the past 100 years. It contends that *the African world-view, its cosmology and philosophical foundations, its religions and ethical foundations have an inherent rationality and ability that interpret the universe in holistic and inter-connected terms and not in isolated, linear and particularistic terms, separated from each other.*

Numerous questions can be asked when dealing with this topic, questions meant to give some sense of direction for the thoughts expressed here. Such questions include: What are the ideas and the underlying philosophy in African societies which have given rise to such concepts and practices as the understanding of the 'Earth', the attitude and use of 'Land', property and ownership, family values, respect for the elders; reverence of the ancestors; the role of gender: men, women and youth? What is the African attitude to life, to the divine milieu, to God, religion, the spirits and the spiritual realm? How is consensus built in communities? What does community mean to the African and how is the spirit and practice of community life conducted? Are there governance and needed structures in village social affairs? (One would wish to include here reflections on aspects of medicine and health, work and

its relations to the past, present and the future.) What is the concept and the purpose of law? What of the adjudication of cases where legal cases arise? What of the concepts of 'morality', 'democracy', 'management', 'profit' and 'price allocation', 'transparency', 'environment' and 'ecology'?

The rediscovery of cultural and religious values translated into ethical values would also focus on other areas of production and work such as industry and enterprise, manufacture and commerce, trade and agriculture, hunting and game, taxation issues, contracts and labour relations, money and capital, (including the factors of production), markets and competition, and supply and demand factors in the economy. One overriding question still remains to be reflected upon, namely, how community harmony takes precedence over individual rights? Is there an Ethics in Business in the *African World-view*? Can there be an African Business Ethics?

The fundamental thrust of this paper is to give a background for the ambitious claim that there is in fact an African Business Ethics; the challenge is to rediscover the 'Traditional African Values' and to apply them in modern Africa. In this way, an attempt can be made in building up a sound foundation for doing Business in an Ethical manner and for making them known to the rest of the business community. The paper takes as its evaluative criteria, African Business Values and Ethics. Such values and such an ethics are pre-eminent virtues; many of these are still known and operative in various communities all over the continent. The point is to reiterate them in order to bring out their impact for our study.

Some of these values include respect for the divine and the sacred; respect for elders; keeping one's promises and standing by one's word; being honest at all times; to act with justice and fairness in dealing with others; to exercise legal consciousness and to observe the rules; the interest of the community having priority over private and individual interests; avoiding conflicts of interests; practicing transparency, disclosure and accountability in every situation; preserving the 'common good'; respecting and protecting life and the environment (humanity and nature); being prudent in speech and not harming others; being content and eschewing greed.

Such espoused traditional values should be regulated and applied to modern issues of sustainability, the Corporate Governance Function and applied in the service of the Common Good. Our search, therefore, is not to invent new codes of conduct, but rather to *rediscover* these inherent traditional values and principles of sustainability, subsidiary and solidarity. The next step

would be to apply them to the modern models of a global culture that speak of Corporate Governance, Corporate Social Responsibility, Business Ethics so as to contextually maintain the best practices within an African milieu. In doing so, we should be able to establish the integral nature of African cultural and religious values considered as ethical values.

3. African Identity as the Unity of the Past, Present and Future

African cultures and philosophies as found from the Horn of Africa to the Southern Cape, from the Western Atlantic shores of Senegal through the massive forests of Central Africa to the Indian Ocean washing the shores of Kenya, express three levels of existence that incorporate the Past (ancestors from whom traditions, ethics and cultures derive their origins); the Present (the community to whom the individual belongs); and the Future (as yet-unborn generations; one has to ensure continuity and sustainable management for those who will come after us). These three levels are cardinal points in understanding the African view of the relationship between culture and religion, tradition and ethics, private and public interests, the human community and the world of nature in general including animals and trees, and animate and inanimate beings. Although customs varied from community to community in matters such as marriage, burial rites, title taking, there still prevailed a central link for various African communities on the "ultimate questions of life concerning the origin of human existence, the purpose of life, death, the why and how of things, moral laws, land and markets, to mention but a few".

4. African Philosophy

African philosophy is one of Community, expressed in the phrase; "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am". In the original African society, the areas of culture, religion, law, economy, politics, history, morality and trade are not easily separated. This is a tradition that identifies the peoples at their deepest levels of consciousness and accompanies their every activity. Any external evaluation needs to take into consideration the factors of the interplay between the sacred and the secular in African societies: "the connection of the seen and the unseen, the union of the dead with the living, the spirit with the ordinary human and the dependence of the earthly human who is seen on the spiritual which is unseen" (Uzukwu). One way of dealing with the wide spectrum of The African might be in terms of at least the following ten categories.

- **Culture** (*Omenala*), understood as the entire way of life of the people

(including the past, the present and the future), is the traditional law in African societies, a central thread guaranteeing the protection of life and property, the harmony of the members of society not only among themselves but also with nature, and their linkage to the divine through the ancestors and the deities. It is said that every people has a culture; a way of life that links their past to the present and points to the future. Even though culture is not static but steadily dynamic, some of the elements that provided the rationale for cultural practices in the past may have disappeared in the face of modern realities of migrations, new technologies, scientific discoveries, wars, to mention just a few ingredients. Nonetheless, there is an urgent need to enhance the linkage and sustainability of cultural developments and its interpretation at least on the levels of principles that identify these societies, even in the face of the modern age. In the African milieu, whether amongst an agricultural people or nomadic tribes. Culture (*Omenala*) provided a proper foundation for a sustainable economy, where the preservation of the environment, the enhancement of principles of equity and fair play and the promotion of an economy that recognizes both individual interests and communal protection existed side by side without any contradictions.

- **Inter-generational Context:** The above mentioned aspects of African culture (*Omenala*), is transferred from one generation to the next by oral tradition through symbols and rituals, in fables and dances and in the moral formation and religious traditions of the peoples of Africa: "as soon as a child is born into the community of 'Umunna' (brethren), life is affected by the intricate network of restrictions and all that they represent. Immediately a child is able to speak and understand issues, ... it is exposed daily to the do's and don'ts of the society and parents drum it into its ears, through fables told in the night around the fireside and exposure to the various forms of rituals and other observances, the gravity of committing abominable acts" (Olisa).
- **Property Rights:** Private Property, understood as a 'Social Mortgage', emphasized the right of access of all persons who belong to the community, to the gifts of nature, including the various factors of production such as land and labour. Even though the community respected the right of individual ownership of property, this did not imply the amassing of wealth by a few to the detriment of the majority. In other words, ownership of property was subjected to its universal destination and use by all the members of that community. The idea of a philosophy

founded on the principles of "it belongs to me but I belong to the community" (*Umunna; Ubuntu*) ensured that property rights were guaranteed, but not in an absolute system as found in capitalist societies. A property right was limited by overall social (stakeholders) interests.

- **Religion:** which relates man to the unseen universe of the deities and the gods in a sense, conveying humanity's dependence on the world and spirits beyond man, emerged in African Cosmology as a natural phenomenon. This interconnectedness between the spiritual and secular signifies an interrelatedness of the past, the present and the future generations. These factors are to be considered in decision-making processes. Thus, the taboos of many African societies, even in unwritten and pre-literary symbols and traditions, protected the overall environment, including land, animals, water, forests and nature *via* religious codes. *Respect/or nature is noticeable in the many traditional societies on the continent, since humanity attained both continuity and history through the elements; a truly organic understanding of ecological sustainability and a philosophy still practicable and noticeable in many business practices in contemporary times.* The point being made here is that there is no African without a sense of religion, a practice of religion and a link to some form of religious adherence. *Many, therefore, say that atheism is un-African.* Authors in their research works prove the point which is corroborated by the various experiences of daily life in the reality of traditional religions existent on the continent and "in the many African cultures and societies all of which show that **to be African is to be religious**". About the African it is said that "they eat, drink and live religiously. There is no unreligious African" (Mbiti). African religion is not an isolated abstract, but is again embedded in culture and is considered as part of culture, which is a way of life of the people. The Igbo cosmology of Nigeria 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" (Odoemena, A).
- **Linkage between Culture, Society, Economy and Religion:** There emerges an 'inter-wovenness' between religious beliefs and cultural practices. Attempts to delink this 'inter-wovenness' during the Islamic and Christian religious missions proved impossible; these mistakes are currently being corrected under a so-called agenda of enculturation. Win-

Win scenarios emerged from this world-view and practice, thus, making it possible to evolve from the *Omenala* (culture, tradition) unique principles that can give an integral understanding to economy, society, culture and environment. It is in this way that traditional African religious values, philosophies and cultural practices are now being unearthed and re-branded into the new and emerging religious space on the continent.

- **Values guide Life:** The point being made here is that African traditional religion is essentially a philosophy and a spiritual way of life, which permeates, pervades and animates the traditional social institutions, norms and celebrations. Every Igbo ritual act of the peoples of south-eastern Nigeria, including sacrifice, dance and festival, had a philosophy or idea behind it. In other words, action was motivated by and grounded on values which involved a basic belief, a philosophy, an underlying principle or an idea. These values, thus, generated actions and behaviour, which in turn influenced individuals and groups.
- **Business Ethics is always Social Responsibility:** Even though the study of Ethics is classically made distinct from morality and emerges on the philosophical and scientific scene, especially in modern times, as the rational basis for the *ought-ness* or wrongness of actions by humans (in relation to what is right and wrong). Ethics here does not refer simply to cultural beliefs, traditions or religions, but to the rational basis of establishing the fact that it is rationally fair or unfair to treat people outside the ambience of justice. This Western model of Ethics which continues to gain ground in the many humanistic and speculative sciences and other areas of human endeavour, elicits its scope and array in such disciplines as business ethics, media ethics, bio-ethics, social ethics, political ethics, economic ethics, environmental ethics, legal ethics, gender equity ..., and the list continues to grow. In an African ambience, doing business is always an ethical matter. In this context, therefore, *Business Ethics must entail social responsibility, where the community is an extension of the business and business an extension of the community.*
- **Ethics is Culture:** A discussion of ethics within the African ambience must necessarily involve a discussion of both the African philosophies and cultures, and their moral and overall ethical practices. The point of linkage between religion, morality, law, social and economic realities is the domain where the African locates tradition, the *Omenala* (culture), which is the foundation for Ethics, and therefore, the rational background

for living together. In summary, this contribution from the African point of view achieves the ***promotion of stakeholder participation*** which enhances communal living and values based on principles of *onye anwuna ma ibe ya efula*, which is "live and let live", implying the age-old Social Ethical Principles of justice, fairness, solidarity and subsidiarity.

- **Life is the highest Moral and Ethical Value:** The integral nature of African Cultural and Religious Values as Ethical Values begins with an understanding of life which is considered Sacred and which has to be preserved, protected, promoted and generated. In this sense, homicide, murder, suicide and other unnatural forms of death inflicted on another were considered crimes against the 'Earth' and a breach of the bond between human beings, the deities and the earth itself. Such breaches were a destruction of the communal foundations upon which society existed and had to be pacified by all means by the entire community even where the culprit and his family had to undergo expulsion from that environment. In serving life, the *Omenala* (culture) in its ethical dimension sought to serve communal harmony, to respect the past heritage of ancestors and the laws of the land founded also on religious beliefs, and to help in the progress of the economy by protecting the earth and making laws to discipline erring persons who thwart the laws of the land.
- **Modernity still contains Tradition:** It may amaze some, but the reality 'on ground' shows that the traditional *Omenala* is still the link between the ethical, religious and secular realities, as well as the basis for the legal system and morality in general. It still exists as strongly today as it did yesterday. Africa's beliefs in traditional religious practices, cultural practices and even the lifestyles of the present are still found in the many big cities of the Continent. Many modern cities carry the cultures of their peoples and we find them in Lagos, Abuja, Accra, Cape Town, Johannesburg, Enugu, Cairo, Tunis, Nairobi, Lusaka and Harare, to mention but a few.

5. Conclusion and Practical Applications

The main issues from an African perspective on this integral linkage between Religion, Culture and Ethics which unfortunately do not fit into the modern categories of many Western philosophical paradigms, actions or thought patterns are as follows:

- **A broad understanding of culture** which encompasses the entire way of life of a people. Thus, culture (*Omenala*) has the potential to assist and

guide modernization processes in a sustainable manner as founded on cultural rationality (derived from the past) and as projecting into the future. In the face of radical and rapid changes worldwide, so also in Africa, globalization, migrations, technological advances, the danger of losing original sources (including cultural integrity) all remain threats. There is an urgent need to look again into the primary sources of traditional cultural rationality in order to enable a significant yet sustainable development. One may do this by promoting inter-cultural dialogues that look into Africa's past history so as to retain or reclaim elements with relevance and applicability to modern economies.

- **Religion as an integral reality**, a non-dualistic relationship between the sacred and the secular in promoting an integral understanding of creation is what is called for. Here, the presently living, the yet unborn and the living dead, all share in a cyclical bond which determines the being and consciousness of all Africans. This kind of religion determines the relationship between humanity and divinity; it has formed the basis for the reverence of creation governed by God and a respect for the earth (*Ala*) which had its own ethical implications. One of these ethical implications is a deeply rooted respect for nature as an organic understanding of ecological sustainability.
- **Law as a service to harmony**, which regulates issues of justice and community by prescribing the rules which governed society, is indispensable. It was unique in building consensus, social harmony, reconciliation and equitable relationships. The essence of the law and of justice in traditional society was not to blame this or that person, but to settle the matter for the social harmony of the entire community and its continued existence.
- **Economy, where business is not separated from ethics** and where nature is preserved (ecology), needs intensive implementation. Land is thus, understood not as a *good* for *absolute ownership*, but one for being *used* and respected as such. In many cases, land in traditional society was not sold but allowed only for use, since the 'Earth' was recognized as what provides sustenance to the agrarian economy of traditional society upon which everything depended, to cover the needs of the past, the present and the future. Besides, an absolute sale of land was conditioned and practiced only as *leased* on a temporary basis, to enable the transmission of this scarce good for future generations. This traditional

cultural value translated today as a Business Ethical model can serve as a deterrent to a greed whereby those who wish to do so can buy off all that is available because of their capital base. Wealth has significance when it is used responsibly to further community interests and not hoarded just for individual aggrandizement. In Africa, one acquires reputation by adding value through one's wealth which is to be shared with the village community.

- **Win-Win Scenarios in Business:** The principles that find relevant application in this context include; Recognition and Promotion of Win-Win scenarios in the economy; Social Responsibility of Business; a "We-and-Them" consciousness in social relations; Property as a Social Mortgage and a Natural Right; Inter-connectedness between Spiritual Realities and the Material World.

