

QUESTIONING AFRICAN MORALITY AND ITS RELEVANCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY AFRICA

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Abstract

Morality as man's invention has been with man since the existence of man in the universe. It is as old as man's existence. Although for Onebunne (2019: 231a), in questioning and exposing the African moral order in the contemporary Africa maintains that morality has a broad meaning which covers all the services rendered by man which contribute to the building of a society. Whether this is maintained or not becomes our worry. Morality is a principle that governs every action and conducts of man. Implying critical method, the researcher also questions foundation of morality while exposing that there is no society *cum* institutions that is not morally guided both directly and indirectly though frowned at the moral standard in the 21st century Africa.

Keywords: African morality and its relevance in the 21st century Africa

Introduction

According to Udefi, as the debate concerning whether or not there is African Philosophy began to die down, after everyone accepted there is an African Philosophy, the traditions or trends that emerged from that debate shifted their attention to actually doing African Philosophy. African philosophers began to write on African metaphysics, African ontology, African arts and aesthetics, African epistemology, African ethics and religion, African politics and other issues affecting the Continent. The quest of man to know the underlying principle of all things, brought man to the ideas that there is a force that is behind the coming of things into existence and the disappearing of things from existence. How to reach this supernatural force that govern and control all things came about the ideas of acting in a pacific way and not acting in pacific way. Thus, when a person adheres to this moral faculty called the conscience, he or she is said to be morally guided or disciplined, simply because he has paid a kind of allegiance to this moral principles and moral faculty. On the other hand, not paying allegiance to this moral faculty and principles brings about the lots of irregularities and confusion seen in our society. This implies that, there is no human action or conduct that is not influenced by morality or that is not morally built. In fact, every human act is guided by morals; thus, morality is embedded in every being. It is the conscience that adjudicates whether or not an individual should dance *in tandem* with this morality (moral principles). Away from this, Westerners, Africans and a quite ratio of this contemporary occupants have questioned whether or not Africa and Africans have morality or put in simpler term, whether they have moral values and if so, any of its relevance especially in the 21st century Africa. The major aim for examining the role of morality is to achieving the desirable level of social order in Africa. The reason why this is important is derived from the fact that major challenges in contemporary African society is the problem of social order. Social order is used in the normative sense to depict normal functioning of society in such a way that individuals and institutions within the society experience development. It is the case however that it cannot be said that we have the desired level of social order in many African states. The reasons for this are legion. Some of them are bad leadership, ethnic chauvinism, bad followership, political crisis, religion crisis and corruption. It is also the case that development, sustainable one indeed, will continue to elude Africa without the desirable level of social order. You will get better handle on all these shortly.

The Notion of Moral Values

In every human society, social interaction would not only be difficult but impossible if the people do not have a sense of right and wrong. This sense of right and wrong is important if the individual is to have the good life. In striving towards his own welfare or self-interest, the individual is also aware that the welfare of others is as important as his and therefore must act in such a way that will ensure not only his own well-being but the well-being of the society in which he finds himself either by accident or deliberate act. Moral values encompass those ingredients that would make a moral situation achievable. They include

honesty, avoidance of greed; avoidance of lie; trust; keeping of promises when we are not presented with a dilemma; altruism, that is, placing others first, love and obedience. Although the list is inexhaustible and may vary from culture to culture, the nexus of all these values lies in the fact that they help in ensuring human well-being. Although moral values may vary from culture to culture, there is a sense in which we can talk about universality of morality. The primary consideration for this is the rationality of man. In this regard, when we say that man is a rational being, we are implying, according to Sogolo, that there are certain things shared in common by mankind and if these traits such as love, self-reflection, honesty, sympathy and so forth, are absent in any human group, there will be doubt as to whether that group is human at all. (Sogolo, 1993: XV).

Moral Values and Contemporary African Society

Let us note also that social, communal and ethical values are intertwined in such a way that one cannot talk about one without the other. This simply underscores the fact that moral values have social origins. Bewaji poignantly describes social basis of morality thus:

“It is the social milieu in which competition for the scarce resources of the environment takes place. But it is not only the resources of the environmental that are scarce. The human resources of love, patronage, recognition, compassion, companionship, etc are also scarce and require deliberate efforts in both their generation and equitable distribution. Here lies the crux of the moral responsibility of society to its members and to itself. And this fact is represented in numerous ideas in African thought” (Bewaji, 2004:397).

The extensive passage from Bewaji has a lot of implication for contemporary Africa in the sense that we in Africa are not only experiencing the dearth of material resources needed for development, we also lack the moral resources to manage the little resources we have due to what Olusegun Oladipo has described as —moral dislocation (Oladipo, 1998). The present situation is sharply in contrast to what prevailed in traditional African societies in which brotherly concepts such as *Ubuntu* flourished. It is true that social order exists to provide the multifarious needs of man which are necessary for a fulfilled happy life conducive for development. It is also true that social order is a condition in which society is organized to effectively provide for the needs of man. Granted that this is the case, how do we in Africa ensure the desired social order? This is where morality comes in. Interestingly morality leads to the sustenance of social order and social order can enhance not only the internalization of morality, it can also enhance its application. The Africans strongly believed that some of the departed and the Spirit keep watch over the people to make sure that they observe the moral laws are punished when they break them deliberately or consciously. These additional beliefs strengthen the authority of the morals. We have made it clearly from the beginning that morals deal with human conduct.

However, there is personal conduct, which has to do precisely with the life of an individual. For example, a person could ask himself whether it is right or wrong for him to study, to fight in the field, to consult the doctor or Medicine Man when he is sick and so on. Thus, the greater number of morals has to do with social conduct, that is, the life of society at large, the conduct of the individual within the group or community or nation. Morality in the African context deal much with moral conduct and great emphasis in social conduct, in relation to the basic conception of Africans that the individual exists only because others exist. Because of the great emphasis lay on one’s relationship with other people, morality has been evolved in order to keep society not only alive but also in harmony. Without morality in the society they would be chaotic, conflict, confusion, and tyranny in the society. Morality helps people in doing what is right and good for their own sake and that of the community. It also helps people to develop the sense of responsibility towards oneself and the other in the society, thereby bring to their consciousness the duties they are to perform for the society in order to enjoy certain rights from the society. Morality in the African context deal much with moral conduct and great emphasis in social conduct, in relation to the basic conception of Africans that the individual exists only because others exist. Because of the great emphasis lay on one’s relationship with other people, morality has been evolved in order to keep society

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Moral Values as the Basis for Social Order

We cannot forget Socrates so soon, for according to him, —the unexamined life is not worth living. Granted this, we must re-examine our moral pedigrees from the individual and state perspectives if we are to ensure the desired level of social order that will promote development in Africa. Morality presupposes human well-being both at the societal and individual levels. If this is the case, moral values are not ends in themselves as such but tools which should be tailored towards arriving at our goals. Let us make a disclaimer at this juncture. It is not that Africans do not understand what it means to be moral and what moral values are all about. This means that in spite of Africans' knowledge of morality, state of things are not as desirable as they ought to be. The problem then is that the non-application and non-internalization of these moral values have been due largely to the inaction of the states in Africa that have foisted undue political and economic pressures on the individuals, who then have no choice but to resort to unethical means of attaining livelihood and survival. Furthermore, we cannot overlook the role of the government and state in promoting social order which will make the proper application of moral values possible. For instance, when government derives its legitimacy through the people and not just through the military coups, kangaroo elections and one party dictatorship that have become the trade mark of most African states. This is buttressed by the fact that leadership successions through democratic process have become so difficult that most African leaders are replaced in office through coup d'états or sudden deaths.

In similar vein, government economic policies should be such that allows the unfettered development of the weakest individual in society. This seems to be the major pre-occupation of Rawls in his *A Theory of Justice*, (Rawls, 1971) where he argued that the state has the obligation to protect the interest and welfare of the less well-off in society. The essence of the foregoing is that since we cannot reverse the movement of capitalism in most African states, with some of its perceived threat to economic dependent ones, government can continue to foster such measures that will make it possible for the ordinary citizens to enjoy the benefit of living. Finally, the solution to our moral problem and social order would then require re-adjustments in our attitude towards wealth, democratic values such as justice and freedom, and governance and the necessary educational orientation, which is not predicated on the fetish of material development which governments in Africa tend to encourage. Rather, it should be based more fundamentally on educational orientation, both at formal and informal levels, that develops human mind to strive for excellence, integrity, justice and happy life based on reciprocal obligation (Oyeshile, 2006).

African Morality: Founded on Religion or Humanism?

Perhaps, the most hotly contested issue in African ethics or morality is whether it is based on religion or humanism. Several African scholars have participated in this debate. Those who claim that somehow African morality has its roots in religion include Jude Ifeanyi Onebunne, Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu (OSA), J.S. Mbiti, E. Bolaji Idowu, and Moses Makinde among others. On the other hand, Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Gyekye and Segun Gbadegesin argue strongly that African morality has its roots in African humanism. To properly understand what the controversy is all about, we may need to define and outline the points put forward by each group.

African Morality is founded on Religion According to Philip Edema (2018)

Basically, this group maintained that morality is rooted in Religion. Not only is it rooted on religion, they have argued that the foundation of morality should only be traced to religion. Religion for them is not

only the bearers but heirs and founders of morality; as such, seen as human construct to dictate and direct man's actions. Other main claims of this group include that:

1. Africans live in a religious universe (the views of Mbiti, Idowu, Awolalu, etc).
2. Religion plays a great role in the lives of African people.
3. All their activities (including cultural practices) must be influenced by one religion or the other.
4. Therefore, an African system of morality (or ethics), based on African cultural beliefs, must have religious foundation (Makinde, cited by Gbadegesin, 1991:71).

Religious Relevance of Morality According to Gbadegesin (1991)

Gbadegesin reconstructs Makinde's view in what could be seen as an alternative version of the above claims to support the great roles that morality has played and its continued relevance in the 21st century Africa.

- a. Moral principles only make sense when we can distinguish between moral and immoral acts, between good and evil.
- b. The concept of good and evil... are necessary for our understanding of moral concepts and moral principles.
- c. God's will is the essence and source of good and evil in man's behavior without which we would never have had the concept of morality.
- d. Therefore, God must be the source of our concepts of morality.
- e. Therefore, Africans believe that God is the source of our moral ideas (Ibid, 75-76).

African Morality is founded on Humanism (Wiredu and Gyekye)

The second group of African scholars, led by Wiredu and Gyekye, totally reject the above points, whether as stated in the first instance or in the second. They argue on the contrary that:

- a. Traditional African religion is not a revealed religion.
- b. How, then, could they have had access to the commandments of God (or gods) to use as the basis of their moral system?
- c. As a matter of fact, African traditional religion is "naturalistic" – i.e. arising out of human existence in the natural world.
- d. African morality, just like our religion, is meant to guide and regulate human conduct in society.
- e. Clearly, therefore, African moral values (morality) must necessarily have arisen from human experience in the natural world.

Core African Moral Values versus 21st Century Africans

It is by questioning whether Africans have moral values that we would realize that right from antiquity, undeniable African moral values are richly embedded in her rich traditional practices. This poses a great question on the level of morality (moral decadence) found in Africa especially in the 21st century Africa. Thus, this is another simpler way of understanding the position of the second group that states the above points in a slightly different way.

African humanism is the practice in Africa whereby one has to show mutual respect to one's kinsman, and protect one another's interest because everything belongs to everyone. The crisis that divides the Africans and put their moral level into shambles include possession of wealth and ownership of land, trade conflicts and agriculture etc. Onebunne rightly pointed out that possession of wealth was not at the service of the individual, but rather at the service of the community. No doubt therefore that it is never in the nature of a traditional African to acquire wealth for private use which will be at the detriment of others (2019: 234). The reverse of this not only bring about individualism but also reduces the *modus operandi* of the formation of the African community, thereby rewards such community with poor social order or makes individuals to act in their personal preferred way.

African humanism is about securing the well-being of every human being (Wiredu, 1995:37). Onebunne, in trying to juxtapose this essence of Africans living as brothers, cited Mogobe B. and Ramose that “The essence of being is that no one can live in Isolation of others, you cannot be human all by yourself” (Onebunne, 2019). This implies that it is only when we recognize that the African morality is built on that interconnectedness existing amongst members, moral values become evident. The undeniable relationship that must exist among Africans as it has been in the era and practice of communalism, remains when morality should be seen to be more relevant. Good moral behavior ensures that the land continues to hold human beings, animals, plants and crops generally. This equally implies that the reverse will be the case when bad actions are perpetrated. Therefore, to avoid any danger to the community, individuals must be willing to exhibit actions which will serve as a model of proper and human behavior which brings fulfillment of human aspirations and stability to the community (Onebunne, 2019: 232). The summit of these remain that there is no much argument to the fact that African morality is evidently in their community. In fact, seeing African society is seeing where moral values is the order of the day. Because it is in her community that love or care for one another, respect, diligence, hard work et cetera all trail. Regrettably, the reverse is the case in our 21st century Africa. Hard work seems to remain an old fashioned story. Love has become a story for the uneducated and uncivilized as those who parade themselves as being highly civilized have jettisoned and neglected these moral virtues and principles. Discussing the health benefits of the youths on thesis as this has erroneously been conceived to being a business for the jobless and ill fashioned as her youths have taken joy in taking those harmful but toxic drugs (as *Indian hemp*, *mkpuru mmiri*) affecting their health both psychologically, morally, physically and otherwise. Let’s discuss about hard work. Yahoo and Yahoo plus (Ritualistic Yahooism) and other get-rich-quick Ponzi schemes and other fraudulent initiatives including varied deviant behaviors amongst the African youths have been given major priority. African society known for those core African moral values have become a land where using human beings for rituals, robbery and pull-him-down syndrome is never a news. These and many more raises such question as to where lie our African moral values or African core moral principles.

African Morality is about ensuring that the interest and well-being of all are preserved and protected. Today, moral awareness is gradually being acutely perceived (Onebunne 2019: 232c). Therefore, African morality is not derived or based on the wishes of any god or religion, but is based on human interest and well-being (humanism). No wonder, Onebunne, dedicated chapter 7 of his *Being as Belongingness*, basically discussing on moral order in contemporary Africa, correctly noted that though the humanism being discussed does not only end here but that “the moral order ensures that human actions are not only pleasant or good to the individual alone but to the entire community”. Buttressing further he maintains that...“human actions were not given selfish interpretations but rather they were good or bad based on the way it affects the community” (Onebunne 2019:231). It suffices to say that African moral values and morality is embedded in her rich communitarian lifestyle and this include services obtained in her style of education, politics, religion, economy and other aspects of African community culture. What is good to oneself would not be bad to another and vice versa. It is this pattern of living that justifies the claim that there is moral order in traditional African society.

Conclusion and Evaluation

Nevertheless, whether African morality is founded on religion or humanism we must not fail to still assert that there are certain moral values that characterize most African societies. African morality or that moral probity pursues human well-being and social welfare. Morality helps to cement harmonious social relationships and solidarity. Ethical egoism or doing things only to protect one’s interest is disapproved. Thus, moral values emphasize social and community interest ahead of the individual Morality which imposes social responsibility on all. That is, one is expected to show concern and care for the interest of other persons and the community at large. Good personal character is a major goal of the African moral system. As a result, the cultivation of excellent moral virtues, such as probity, patience kindness, fairness, humility, gratitude, moderation, temperance, generosity, contentment, hospitality, perseverance,

trustworthiness, truthfulness, respect for older people, chastity before marriage, and faithfulness in marriage, are widely encouraged in African societies (Gyekye, 1996: 55-71). The opposite of the above moral virtues, such as greed, adultery, sexual promiscuity, disobedience and disrespect for elders, laziness, lying and stealing are all greatly frowned at in African societies. However, let us note that some of these moral virtues or vices are emphasized, or disapproved to a higher or lesser degree in different African societies.

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