

TRADITIONAL ETHICS AND THE MAINTENANCE OF SOCIAL ORDER IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

The concern of this paper is that traditional ethics is the ethics that can lead to peace and unity in Nigeria. The paper argues that this ethics is born out of African ontology which is community-oriented and looks beyond the individual to the community. It posits that this ethics is not distinct from morality and religion: it is an ethics that is lived as well as professed. This ethics holds that immorality brings immediate punishment meted not only on the individual but the entire community. Hence, it is an ethics of fear-fear of the anger of the spiritual world and beings. It also holds that immorality brings shame to the individual as well as those that he/she is connected to. Therefore, the paper asserts that if this ethics is revitalized in the Nigerian society, it will be a morally upright society as well as a socially ordered society with peace and tranquility.

Keywords: Social order in Nigeria; Traditional ethics; Traditional Religion

Introduction

The traditional ethics that this work is concerned with is African traditional ethics, of which its existence has been called to question by Western missionaries, anthropologists and colonial masters. For instance, S. F. Nadel asserts that

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

This implies that the Nupe that is a typical African people or ethnic group has a religious system that lacks any concept of ethics. This is also the comment made about the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria by G. T. Basden. Basden notes that “the word ‘morality’ has no significance in Ibo vocabulary, and that where the natives have remained untouched by outside influence, there is nothing exactly corresponding to the ‘social evil’ of European life” (34). The Westerners usually link this belief that the Africans lack ethics to the thought that the Africans originally had no idea of the Supreme Being and morality. Udobata R. Onunwa captures this thus:

First there was that overt cynicism as to whether Africans ever had a religion. Secondly Emil Ludwig and those who shared his own view points projected the hypothesis that Africans had no knowledge of God on the grounds that Africans were intellectually inferior and could hardly conceptualize God. Africans were unable to make cognitive effort. Thirdly, many of them concluded that since Africans had neither religion nor knowledge of God, their moral world was without basis and any foundation whatever. (*Contemporary Themes* 12)

What Onunwa is saying in summary is that for the Westerners there was nothing like moral value or ethics in traditional African society.

Contrary to the above views many scholars, some of African stock have argued for the presence of morality in traditional African society. A good example of an African scholar that has argued for the presence of ethics in traditional African society is John S. Mbiti, who notes that

There exists many laws, customs, set forms of behaviour, regulations, rules, observances and taboos constituting the moral code and ethics of a given community or society... Any breach of this code of behaviour 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. (205)

This is to say that traditional African society has ethics. Even Basden who notes that there was nothing like morality in Africa gave a contrary opinion of his view as he later asserts that

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

This shows that Africans do not only have an idea of morality or ethics but practice morality.

One can also go ahead to show that there is ethics in traditional African society by alluding to, the meaning of the word ‘ethics’. Ethics is derived from the Greek word εθος (ethos) meaning norms, conduct or code of conduct, manner or way and custom of doing things. Simply put it is the science of morality. And morality or “moral principles spell out what constitute right conduct and what constitute wrong conduct and the penalties for violating the codes” (Ekeopara, *African Traditional Religion* 72). In more simple terms, morality is the rightness and wrongness of human actions. From this understanding of ethics which is strongly linked with morality, one will conclude that traditional African society has ethics and it regulates the social order in such a society. This is because traditional African society has sets of rules and customs that guide their relationship with each other and other beings in the cosmos. These codes of conduct define what is right or wrong in a community. It is this type of ethics that can bring about social order in Nigeria, as proposed by this paper.

What is African Traditional Ethics?

Ethics, according to Joseph I. Omoregbe, is “the branch of philosophy which deals with the morality of human actions; or is the branch of philosophy which studies the norms of human behaviour” (3-4). These human actions and behaviour are governed by a set of norms or code of conduct within any given society. Hence, ethics is “a normative science of human conduct” (Oke and Esikot 1). It is the science that is concerned with the rightness or wrongness of human action or conduct in the society. African traditional ethics is concerned with the morality of human action in an African society. It is concerned with the dos and don’ts of the society. It focuses on what the society ought to be like, which is based on human actions and relationship. This is to say that traditional ethics is geared towards an ideal society where there is peace and tranquility. Chike A. Ekeopara writes about African traditional ethics by noting that it is:

The notions of excellence and goals that bring greater harmony in one’s self and other individuals in the society, it is then understandable that they are the natural part of the ethical thinking that is common to all cultures of the world. Those actions, which benefit people and are accepted by the society could be called ‘good’ and those that bring harm to the people and society could be called ‘bad’. (*African Traditional Ethics* 68-69)

This implies that

African traditional ethics places emphasis on goodness of character. A good man is a man of good character who refrains from vices, such as killing, stealing, adultery, disrespect for elders, telling lies, ridiculing deformed or unfortunate people, incest, cruelty or doing harm in any way to other people. Goodness of character does not, of course, consist in avoiding vices alone; it also (and more importantly) involves the cultivation of virtues, such as kindness, generosity, hospitality, justice, respect for elders, obedience to legitimate authority, humility and (for the female) virginity before marriage. (Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* 214)

By this, African ethics approves doing good as virtuous and doing bad or evil as vice that must be avoided. It is the science of rightness and wrongness of an action within a community or society that affects others. It is the morality of human action in a given society.

The above remark points to the fact that African traditional ethics and morality are closely related. This is simply because the subject of ethics is morality. And it is impossible to talk of ethics without morality and vice versa. Hence, when one talks of traditional ethics one is talking about African morality and when one is talking about African morality one is talking about traditional ethics. Ekeopara makes this relationship between ethics and morality clearer as he notes that

Morality refers to the established and recognized social customs and tradition in their many and diverse ramifications, the omenala which regulates the behaviour and conduct of individuals in the society. Morality here will mean those customs and tradition, which were used to determine the rightness and wrongness of human action in the society. These customs and tradition were used to exercise strict control over the moral life of individuals in the society. (*African Traditional Religion* 72)

This connotes that African morality like traditional ethics “provides the rule for right conduct and prohibitions against wrong acts, rules, regulations, prohibitions, nso-ala, which are valid for all members of the society or community” (*African Traditional Religion* 72). In this way, African traditional ethics and African morality can be used interchangeably. And this is how they are used in this research.

It is pertinent to state here that African traditional ethics or morality is closely tied to, or inseparable from, African Traditional Religion. This is glaring in the definition of morality by Onunwa, which reads thus:

Morality is basically the sum total of the outlook and way of life of a given religious community, their concept of what may be

done or avoided with the effort to attain the goal of union with the Supreme Deity. (*Contemporary Theme 14*)

This assertion points to the fact that African morality or ethics has a religious undertone. This is because it is in reference to God that African ethics is based. The statement has two implications. First, it posits that African traditional ethics is not possible without the idea of God (the Supreme Deity). It is in this light that Onunwa writes that “morality in its religious significance is always with reference to God implying that it is concerned with how humans should behave so as to be upright and pure before God” (*Contemporary Themes 14*).

The second implication is that African traditional religion is anthropocentric. It is anthropocentric because it is humans who strive to live morally sound or upright lives in order to attract blessings or favour from God. This is also the goal of African traditional ethics. It therefore goes as far as affirming that African traditional ethics and African traditional religion are intertwined and cannot be divorced from each other.

Furthermore, “African traditional ethical consciousness cannot but be a religious one” (Magesa 59). African religion is a religion that is lived than professed. It is one that is practiced in their ethics. “African religion forms the African people’s ethical consciousness as a whole united system wherein each factor influences the other” (Magesa 60). By implication, being religious is practicing the ethics of the religion. Hence, being is doing and vice versa. Thus, “not until one has understood that for the African, ‘ontologically good is the ethically good’ can one appreciate and understand the moral sense of the African and the direction of ethical pursuit” (Adegbola 118), which is rooted in African religious beliefs and practices.

African traditional ethics is based on African ontology. African ontology holds that beings exist in community. Each of these beings exists and exerts their vital forces on each other. According to Placide Tempels, “one force will reinforce or weaken another” (59) in this community of beings. And in this community of being there is hierarchy of beings. This hierarchical order of beings in African ontology is given graphically by Francis Njoku thus:

God
Spirit of ancestors
Humans
Animals
Plants, and
Inanimate objects (18).

Those beings that are higher in the hierarchy of beings exert more force on those below them. Thus they can bring calamity and disaster on

those beings below them who defile the moral law or principles. It is this consciousness that causes the Africans to live in fear of the spiritual beings that are above them in the hierarchy of beings. That is to say that African ontology gives birth to an African traditional ethics that is based on fear- fear of superior beings such as the Supreme Being, the divinities and the ancestors that can make their lives miserable if they fail to live the right kind of life on earth. Hence, the agents of moral action in African traditional ethics are the vital forces of the entire created universe, of both the visible and invisible worlds.

Onunwa raises another view that African ethics is an ethics of “shame”. This, he believes is the position of some scholars who according to him hold that “in African ethical systems, the greatest deterrent from doing evil is the shame and loss of esteem, which follows the exposure of a person’s misconduct” (*Contemporary Themes* 13). This is to say that in a typical African society, one does not live a morally sound life because of his/her relationship with the Supreme Being or to avert the calamities that may accompany his/her evil action, but because of the shame that comes with his/her evil act being exposed to other members of the society. This type of ethics also takes into consideration the fact that everyone’s view of each other is important and should be taken into consideration as humans co-exist.

It is germane to state that African ethics goes beyond fear and shame factors but includes guilt factor. This is seen when one’s conscience pricks him or her when the person realizes that he/she has gone against the set of moral codes, rules or regulations guiding his/her community. According to Onunwa, “this implies remorse, a case of being remorseful and repentant” (*Contemporary Themes* 13). This debunks “the age-long notion that the traditional African has no sense of sin (but at best belong to a ‘*shame culture*’ rather than a ‘*guilt culture*’)” (*Contemporary Themes* 13). There is in Africa the idea of sin and guilt which is the product of sin against the Supreme Being, divinities, and ancestors, fellow humans and the moral customs or laws guiding the society.

Furthermore, African traditional ethics is communal in nature and not individualistic. It is an ethics which causes one to take into consideration the existence of others. It is an ethics that sees to it that an individual does not exist alone but in a community of other individuals. Hence, an individual in such a community does not live to satisfy his/her interest alone but he/she lives to satisfy his/her interest alongside the interest of others. Ekeopara in this vein notes that

Communalism is a common feature in the African society and ethics. The African traditional society is based on communalism. Communalism is the basis of African man’s

concern about the well-being of his neighbour which is at the heart of traditional ethics. (*African Traditional Religion* 69-70).

He goes on to note that “individualism and selfishness is a vice, hence it is condemned” (Ekeopara, *African Traditional Religion* 70). Here, solidarity is a major virtue of traditional African society. Traditional ethics is an ethics that holds that all human beings exist together and are in mutual complementary service to each other (Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda* 350). They act in such a way that their actions will not be detrimental to others. This African traditional ethics is called humanism-African humanism. This is simply because it is human-oriented. This is because it “organizes reality in order to minister to the existential needs of man and his well-being” (Iwe iv).

What is Social Order?

Before we go into considering: traditional ethics as an agent of social order, it will be necessary to consider what social order is. Social order is a state of well-being in the society wherein the individuals within the society are at peace with one another and have their lives and properties well secured. It is an “internal organization” (Onunwa, *Studies in Igbo* 17) of a community or society. It is “the survival and welfare of the community (which presupposes the survival of the individual)” (87). It can also be seen as “a condition in which the situation of life and everything in the society is controlled, as it should be, where individuals perform their correct functions in the society” (Ekeopara, *Ethical Order* 28). Ekeopara further notes that

Social order is a tranquility and freedom from either inward disturbance or worry. Social order ... implies harmonious living and orderliness in society and moderate peace free from civil disorder and instability. It is the peaceful regularity of life in the society in relation to the traditional norms, values, customs, traditions and structures, which constitute the society. (*Ethical Order* 28)

Social order leads to social stability and maintenance of good interpersonal relationship as well as human relation with their environs. This agrees with the view of Tempels that “created beings preserve a being one with another, an intimate ontological relationship” (58). This social order also gives rise to all round progress in the society. This is possible through African traditional ethics. Here, “they may also establish rules of order and rituals for themselves which they perform” (Onunwa, *Studies in Igbo* 17) for peaceful co-existence.

Traditional Ethics: An Agent of Maintaining Social Order in Nigeria

It is a truism that African traditional ethics is one of the factors that brings about moral as well as social order. It is generally believed in

traditional society that God is involved in the maintenance of the peace and tranquility of the society. This is depicted in the writings of Laurenti Magesa which reads thus:

An important feature of African Religion's moral vision with reference to God is its refusal to speculate on the reasons why the divinity does what it does. God is God. For African Religion, it is enough to know and trust that God is "wings of the people". God is always there for humanity to search people out of danger when need be, to place them out of reach of any agent bent on destroying the fullness of life. When God refuses to do these things, it is always temporary and indicates that it is time for humanity to examine itself to see what it has done wrong and when to correct its behaviour and repair the danger. (49)

This statement has two implications. First, it implies that the human social order depends on God. This is to say that God is in charge of maintaining peace and tranquility in the society; God is responsible for protecting and preserving the life that God has created. In this way, God ward-off evil forces/spirits that tend to militate against the human life. This is to say that God ensures that no spiritual force or power interferes in the affairs of humankind to distort life and social order in the universe.

The second implication is that human beings are also involved in the maintenance of social order. This can be explained from two perspectives. One, human beings can distort or maintain the social order through their relationship with the Divine (God- the Supreme Being). If human beings live uprightly before God the creator and sustainer of the universe, God will continue to sustain social order. But if human beings offend God by living a life that is contrary to the will of the Divine, God withdraws from the affairs of humankind and all that follows is chaos, confusion, calamities and social disorder or catastrophe. Whereas, if human beings live uprightly before God and please God in all respect, humans will live well with the blessings of God and in peace with the created order. It is in this vein that Magesa notes that "because God is solicious of humanity, every individual and every community should observe proprieties of behaviour" (49).

Two, human beings ought to live a life of moral soundness and uprightness toward each other. They need to live a morally upright live that takes into consideration the interest of their fellow human beings as well their own well being. It is in this sense that Magesa asserts that

One ought not to behave improperly before one's elders,... This is particularly true in matters that touch the Great Elder, God. In behaving disrespectfully before one's elders, one risks incurring "shame" an individual or group who behaves disrespectfully in

serious matters that touch on tradition risks even greater shame and mortal danger for the individual and the entire community. (49-50)

It has been stated that humans occupy a central place in African ontology and this type of ontology promote an ethics that is interested in the well-being of humans. Hence, human's realizing of his/her central place in the universe makes him/her move towards achieving order in the society and peaceful co-existence with others.

Thus maintenance of order, control of various forms of *forces-spiritual and physical*-and the quest for survival are possible if man understands his central position in the universe as well as the things that makes the universe tick. (Onunwa, *Contemporary Themes* 17)

With humans realizing their central place in the universe, they try to live in such a way that they can co-exist peacefully with one another, other beings and the entire universe. It is based on this quest of preservation of the human race that the African promulgate laws and moral principles or ethics to guard human behaviours and conduct. It is through this traditional ethics that the Africans maintain social order in their respective communities.

This ethics guides their relationship with the spiritual as well as the physical world. Africans try to appease the spiritual world and beings by trying to act according to their dictates. In this, they make all the necessary sacrifices and offerings as prescribed by the diviner or traditional priest. In this way, they ward-off evil forces and bring the favour of benevolence forces as well as the favour of the spiritual world that aid peace in the physical world. This is born out of purity of life that is, character. According to Onunwa:

Character is the essence of beauty, character is the index of beauty, success and virtue. Character, not reputation, is the central virtue in human life on earth... Character implies moral uprightness, peace with the gods, natural forces and peace with men and other peers. Purity of life is therefore essential in the blocking of the anger of the evil spirits and ancestors. (*Contemporary Themes* 19)

With the above awareness in the African worldview, Africans strive to live morally sound not only toward or before the spiritual beings, but with their fellow human beings. This is because failure to do so will entail disaster in the community that will affect the individual as well as the other individuals in the community. It is in this light that Onunwa notes that

Any immoral act could incur the wrath of the spiritual beings, which could withhold rains, sunshine and eventually affect the fertility of humans and the land. Unnatural deeds breed

unnatural troubles. Human misdemeanour upset the natural rhythm of the cosmos to the detriment of humans and other living creatures on earth. For the Africans, therefore, laws and moral constructs are made in order to enhance the position of humans on earth and to foster their stable and continued existence in the universe. Moral laws are not set up to bring blessings or glory to the gods. (19)

But these laws are made to bring peace, security and stability in the human society. This is achievable through good behaviour and character which traditional ethics seeks to instill in the life of individuals and the community. It also strives to keep away bad character from the society. This is because bad character is a threat to life on earth, hinders development and improvement of social conditions as well as security. This therefore constitutes threat to the human life which traditional ethics seeks to protect.

Thus, bad character obstructs the continuation of life on earth, which is in the form of reincarnation. Traditional ethics has the intention that desires to defeat death and instill the perpetuation of the human life through reincarnation. This idea of reincarnation is possible only for those who lived a morally sound life in their first or previous life.

It is the position of man in the created universe that has made him to construct the theory of reincarnation which gives him hope to return after physical death, to continue with another cycle of life here on earth- away to defeat death which threatens human life. One of the conditions for reincarnation is pure ethical and clean life led here on earth time and space. Reincarnation is therefore not for until a few conditions are met. These include transparent honest life on earth, death at a ripe old age, a viable kin and descent group, good death not by any despicable disease like dropsy, leprosy and insanity. (Onunwa, *Contemporary Themes* 20)

This strives of human beings to continue to be reincarnated leads humans to live a morally sound life. Humans at this point become less materialistic. It is at this point that people begin to think of not harming others or depriving them of their rights. That is to say that in traditional ethics, there is no room for exploitation of humans by humans. All live in solidarity to each other. Hence, “today, any African leaders who cheat their people are committing abomination” (*Contemporary Themes* 23).

In this light, traditional Africans do not get involved in incest, murder, stealing/theft, suicide and adultery/fornication. These are vices in the traditional society that attract sanctions and punishments such as banishment, being stripped naked and paraded round the community in shame. Ekeopara explains some of these vices and their accompanying sanctions thus: for

incest, he notes that “the offenders were stripped naked and paraded round the town and market square (a public disgrace). This was then followed by a cleansing and reintegrative ritual” (*Ethical Order* 110). He also notes that

If one commits murder intentionally he was killed if the victim was his kinsman or was banished from the community for life, depending on the circumstance. But if the act was not committed intentionally, the culprit was banished for a period of time after which he rejoins the community after performance of the prescribed rituals and sacrifices to appease the gods of the land and the relations of the victim. If the act on the other hand was against a foreign community, the offender was required by tradition to replace the victim with another person from his family, clan or community. If he failed to do this it could result into war if the aggrieved community so desired. Many inter-tribal wars in traditional society were as a result of this kind of offense apart from those that were induced by land disagreements. (110-111)

These cases go as far as affirming that traditional ethics is an ethics of fear and shame. This is due to the shame that comes with one being caught in a particular act and the accompanying disgrace that follows such as moving the culprit round the community and the kind of songs that will be sung in the culprit’s name for several weeks. This makes people to avoid committing offences such as stealing.

In the aspect of fear governing the ethics of traditional Africa, one can allude to the Ihechiowa ethics of sex. In Ihechiowa community of Arochukwu Local Government Area in Abia State, Nigeria, it is believed that any woman involved in marital unfaithfulness or adultery is not given any sanction directly by the community but is punished directly by the ancestors (ndi-ichie). The kind of punishment she receives is that any member of her family that she loves most will be visited with the anger of the ancestors. In this way, they infect the person with an incurable disease that may lead to death if the woman does not confess and the necessary prescribed rituals or sacrifices performed on time. The fear of bringing the wrath of the ancestors on any member of a woman’s family keeps most of the Ihechiowa women faithful in the marital homes. In this case, fear of the wrath of the ancestor governs the ethics of the Ihechiowa people.

Traditional ethics is indeed an ethics that can lead to social order in the Nigerian society. This is owing to the fact that it is an ethics that sees being as existing in community. This ideology will make a Nigerian live with the consciousness that he/she needs others to survive just as Mbiti asserts that “I am because we are, and since we are therefore, I am” (108-109). This we-consciousness will cause the Nigerian to live in such a way

that will promote the well-being of not only himself/herself but also the well-being of others in the community. It is an ethics that will restrain Nigerians from stealing from the nation's purse, at the detriment of the masses. As an ethics of brotherhood and oneness, it will help prevent this senseless ethno-religious killing in the country. This is because naturally one will not kill his/her brother/sister for any reason since this act will lead to calamities and disasters in the land, owing to the fact that the ancestors will be displeased. It is this mentality that will cause members of different religious group to see their fellow Nigerian as one by natural birth and sharing a common ancestor that is ready to avert danger and promote the well-being of the people. This will be possible if Nigerians see themselves as brothers and sisters that need to stay together.

Thus, there will be a reduction in crime rate in the country since no one will want to steal from his/her brother or sister. It will prevent marital unfaithfulness among Nigerians, if the sex ethics in Ihechiowa is thought used a model for all Nigerians. It will not only lead to marital fidelity on the part of the females but also on the part of the males, who will not want to be unfaithful to their wives, which might lure them into having extra-marital relationships that in turn brings calamities upon the family. Similarly, no Nigerian will like to live a life that will bring shame to himself/herself, his/her family, kin, clan, community or ethnic group. Every Nigerian will like to live in such a way that will bring pride and honour to his/her family, kin, clan, community and ethnic group. With this, honesty, love and peaceful co-existence will be the order of the day in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The people in traditional African society always try to live in such a way that they will neither offend the Supreme Being, the divinities and ancestors; to avoid their wrath and anger that bring calamities on the individuals and the entire community. The typical African therefore carries out all of the instruction of the Supreme Being, divinities and ancestors in order to preserve his/her life and those of others around him/her.

He offers gifts to both good and bad spirits. The essence is to secure the good of man, the happiness of the central figure in the cosmos. He is not particularly interested in seeking the good or glory of the deity per se but his own security and blessing.
(Onunwa, *Contemporary Themes* 18)

In this way they ward-off the anger of the spiritual world as well as spiritual forces and bring in their favour and protection. Apart from the above moral relationship that exists between the humans and the spiritual world that is being promoted by African traditional ethics, the African tries

to live a morally upright life with the other members of the society bearing in mind that others are needed for his/her existence and survival.

Thus, a typical African goes and lives with the consciousness that he/she is being with others and the kind of life he/she lives affects the moral and social order. This consciousness therefore motivates him/her to live a morally upright life that leads to the perpetuation of life on earth. Hence, traditional ethical laws, customs and code of conduct were promulgated to meet this goal. This, therefore, makes traditional ethics which is rooted in African traditional religion and ontology, life-affirming and a humanism since it is after the life and well-being of humans. This indeed is the ethics that can reposition Nigeria for social peace and unity, social order and progress.

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