

African Indigenous Religious Ethics: A Tale of Culture Contacts and Contests

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Abstract

Peoples' moral values and beliefs are often open to attacks from the influences of modernization. Discussions on interaction between modernization and religion have not paid much attention to the impact of the former on the moral values and beliefs of African Indigenous Religion. This paper therefore critically observes that, in reality, African Indigenous Religion has witnessed its own fair and unfair dosage of flowing changes. It closely examines the concept of ethics of sex, administration of justice and environment in the indigenous religion of African people and how modernization has affected it. The study employs oral interviews and bibliographic sources. The author concludes by recommending ways of rediscovering and sustaining the ethics of African Indigenous Religion even in the face of modernization.

Key Words: Indigenous Religions, Ethics, Culture, Contests

Introduction

There is no doubt that the question of what is right and what is wrong, what to do and what not to do as embedded in the religion cum culture of the African people, has agitated minds everywhere for long. Values are deep rooted, entrenched belief systems, which influence African morality profoundly. These are core moral truths which are wedded in oral traditions, liturgies, stories and proverbs. However, today, African Indigenous Religion (AIR) has become, to borrow from the most ecological terminology, an endangered species. Excuse my intellectual haste to assert at this early stage of this paper that, in reality, African Indigenous Religion has witnessed its own fair and unfair dosage of flowing changes, with each era of development representing a transient mobility in the historical and moral continuum. In order to put the issues in clear perspective, we have to establish here that the originating basis for this work is to locate, expatiate and theorize upon the concept of ethics embedded in the indigenous religion of the African people and how modernization has affected it.

Conceptual clarifications

Ethics: The concept of ethics ultimately rests on the analysis of what is good and what is bad. Different people have defined ethics in various ways. Among the plethora of suppositions, the following may suffice for the purpose of this work. Ethics is a systematic reflection upon human behaviour with expectation of how they ought to behave and what they ought to do. Human conduct which ethics studies, embodies both the inward and outward activities such as intention, motives, desires, speech, movement, and physical action. The conduct of man could affect the actor and those towards whom such a conduct is directed. This raises the social background of ethics (Ayantayo:2000:124-125). In other words, ethics examines how men ought to behave, and why it is wrong to behave in certain ways and right to behave in certain other

ways (Omoregbe:1993: ix). It therefore follows that the notions of ‘good and bad’ are constant and human ethical language is founded upon them (Dzurgba: 2003:22).

African Indigenous Religion, Culture and Ethics:

AIR and culture are intrinsically interwoven. In fact, the world is barren of any group of people without culture and any religion that is not dressed in the culture of its people (Adetunji: 2004:72). According to Amanze, religion and culture are intertwined. Religion controls the community. It is the religion that sets the rules – dos and don’ts. Religion sets the limits and the culture goes along with it. For example, new yam festival is a cultural practice, but before the celebration, sacrifice is made to the god (*Aha njoku*) who is the power that makes the yam to grow or germinate (Amanze: 2007: interview).

On the other hand, in African belief, ethics is a product of religion. There exists a strong interplay between God, spirits, ancestors, and the living. Foundational ethical principles lie in the understanding of the God the people worship – God is everything good. Because God is good, He also demands His created beings to be good in their relationship with one another. Mbiti has earlier observed that: *It is believed in many African societies that their morals were given to them by God from the very beginning. This provides an unchallenged authority for the morals. It is also believed that departed/ancestors and the spirits keep constant watch over people to make sure they observe the moral laws and are punished when they break them deliberately or knowingly. This additional belief strengthens the authority of the morals* (Idowu:1996:148-149). Unlike in Western societies, in Africa, religion stands as the foundation and the all-governing principle of life, as there was no African atheist in the traditional African society.

Modernization: For the purpose of this paper, modernization refers to aspects of culture contacts between Africa and the rest of the world. It is instructive if not unfortunate to note that, culture contact between Africa and the West has brought about varying consequences. In some aspects the nature of the change is simple and cumulative modification of existing indigenous values. In others, it has been a radical modification of the existing traditions (Sofola:1973:11).

African Indigenous Religious Ethics and the Age of Modernization

In this section of the paper, attempts are made to discuss the ethics of sex, environment, administration of justice, as well as other aspects of social ethics like sense of community and fellow-feeling

Sex Ethics

In Africa, sex is revered and restricted. To protect the young and unmarried from sex and preserve societal morality, the relationship between unmarried male and female was characterized by chastity. The traditional African way of life forbids an unmarried young man from holding the hand of a lady who is not his wife while walking with her especially in public. This was seen as ‘*Aru*’ (taboo) among the Etche speaking people of Rivers State. But this and some other interpersonal interactions that were hitherto forbidden by the indigenous codes of conduct are now liberalized by the Western social traditions. Presently, under the influence of Western culture, kissing, necking, and holding hands in public are socially acceptable as well as permissible (Akpa:2001:6). Virginity was highly cherished in African traditional society. *Vigro indicta* (not virgin before marriage) was forbidden. To prove a wife’s virginity, white cloth was laid during the first night after marriage. Marriages were terminated the following day if *vigro*

indicta was discovered. It brought a stigma to the woman's family. But if the woman was a virgin, the family and entire community was congratulated and respected (Amanze:2007:interview). Idowu also affirms that *Chastity before marriage on the part of the woman is essential. A woman who is not virtuous at marriage is a disgrace both to herself and to her family. Chastity in married life is a woman's bounden duty* (Idowu:1996:157).

Kunhiyop adds that upon discovery on the wedding night that a woman has lost her virginity, a song was composed and the name of the lady and her family was sung to the hearing of the public. But if proven to be virgin, then there was praise and dancing for her self-control and the family was proud (Kunhiyop: 2004:10). Sadly, Amanze observes that the practice of honeymoon in addition to contemporary dating and courtship has eroded the check on virginity (Amanze2007: interview). A man in the morally unpolluted Africa particularly in Etcheland of Rivers State would first take his new wife to his parents' home before he took her to his own home if at all he had to live on his own. Ideally, the new wife was expected to live together, cook and share the same pot and kitchen with the mother-in-law for sometime before living independently. But today, even before the wedding, some intending couples start co-habiting. And after wedding, honeymoon follows then a nuclear family is established even before childbirth.

Traditionally, in Etcheland of Rivers State, the child of a single mother who was never married belonged to the woman's native (paternal) family. The child is called *nwa okpu* and can never be claimed by the man who impregnated the woman. Even when a married woman had a child out of wedlock, (matrimony), the child still belonged to the legitimate husband. Therefore the people have a saying: *iko asaje 'ku nwa* meaning a *male friend* does not claim ownership of a child. There was no DNA, no medical tests, no court summons to prove paternity of or claim a child. It was a cherished culture. But today, a man who is not legally married to a lady but impregnates her will add salt to injury by laying claim to the child from such immoral and culturally forbidden relationship (Nweke: 2007: interview).

Justice and Crime Control

The administration of justice has been affected too by modern influence. In traditional Etcheland, a thief was exposed, judged and when convicted, the stolen item(s) was/were hung on his/her neck or waist. He/she was then moved round the whole community naked and flogged. In addition, he was made to pay fine or excommunicated from his *umunna* (kinsmen). Some other offenses like poisoning a kinsman resulted in banishing the perpetrator of such crime from the village. Or he/she was ex-communicated from the rest of the villagers. If he/she died before making peace with the community, the body was thrown into the evil forest. In essence, the aggregate life was fully shaped according to the cherished traditions, hallowed secrets and revered institutions that usually ensured that any member who contravened any of them was severely punished. The yam thief is a thief, the status of his kith and kin notwithstanding, he must be punished. The murderer too, having murdered life must, as determined by the degree of crime, face death or be exiled. Stigmatization of crime or any other deviant behaviour served as a potent social control system and appropriate security measure to 'protect precious tenets of the social environment from erosion or degradation.' For such deviant behaviours as infidelity of the wife, abortion and adultery, it is usually made public by specialist minstrels who mock by mimicking such obscene conduct in socially reprehensible ways. In Igbo land, the potency of social stigma is such that families and kindred can pledge away any item, including precious land, to save off the stigma, if possible (Nnamani:2003:30-31).

The justice system in most primordial African societies was indeed a leveler. Where there was any semblance of central authority, such personages belonging to such elevated social ranks in the land were also subjected to the same beam of the searchlight of probity and brought through the same trial if found wanting. This impartial system is nurtured by the belief that laws are derived from God (divine) and all men are equal before God. Indeed, this belief in divine origin of the laws of the land and its supremacy over man-made laws actually sustained long adherence to what is adjudged right for the benefit of long-held traditions. It was the basis for consolidation of the widely spread system, which prevented the structuring of the society for the benefit of some privileged individuals. It consolidated security of the society (Nnamani: 2003:31-33). On the contrary today, the administration of justice as Monday observes, is characterized by bribery and corruption. The justice system is loose (Monday: 2007: interview). In some regrettable instances, a thief is charged to court and dependent on how much he is willing and able to pay, he offers bribe and is acquitted thus, corruption becomes systemic and endemic. Making allusion to the present situation of the security and justice system in Nigeria, Nnamani (2003: 34-36) observes that:

What obtains at the moment is at best an admixture of the old values and new ways, most of which confuse the modern man and induce excuses for violation of the laws. Colonialism and indeed, post colonial African polities, appeared confused about what should constitute their social evolution and political order as in rising to the challenges of complex security questions negating modern mechanisms for restraining of the unbridled quest. In the case of modern societies, the negation of the age-long social order, which effectively informed character and decency, [has] seriously altered community prestige and stabilizing institutions. Whereas it was true that the... old order sustained the socio-political order of that era, particularly with due respect to the belief system ordaining ceaseless morality and rectitude, the current regime of social order faces credibility question on account of rejection of such elements of the social environment....

Other Aspects of African Social Ethics

The Sense of Community: The traditional Africa also laid heavy emphasis on community as against individualism. The concept of community dominated African thinking. At the family level, African family includes parents, grandparents, sometimes great grandparents, uncles, aunties, siblings, nephews, nieces, and cousins. In most African settings, there is no actual word for cousin, nephew, niece, uncle or aunt. These are western inventions/classifications. To the African, cousins are brothers and sisters, uncles and aunties are fathers and mothers. One's cousin would feel offended when called a cousin. This is because it connotes remoteness if not denial. Another point worth noting is that the family (extended) has a lot of control over individual members. For example, a man may marry not because he feels he wants to marry, but because his parents want him to marry so that they can have and carry grandchildren. The Africans believe that when a person is born, he/she is born into a family, clan and tribe and this

makes African Ethics a social ethics as against personal ethics which is characteristic of Western Ethics. Individualism is discouraged since the whole community suffers as a result of evil committed by an individual member of same community. The individual is to behave in a fashion that conforms to the ethos of the community. In other words, communal morality regulates and controls the individual's conduct. The idea of the 'we' and 'us' is deeply embedded in Africans beginning from childhood. What the community says or believes is binding on the individual. The rights of individuals are elements of corporate rights and duties so that the solidarity of the community is given premium above the individual's private concerns. For example, on the question of levirate marriage, the elders decide who is to inherit the wife of a late relation (Kunhiyop: 2004:21-22).

The African sense of community is further demonstrated in community fellow-feeling as reflected in the communal land tenure and ownership. Africa's peasant economy was rooted in the idea of live-and-let-live which made it possible for every individual member of the society to be his brother's keeper; each person had access to means of production which of course is not alienated from the group corporate. The land is held in corporate for the good of community with allotment to every able-bodied member who needs it at a given time. It was captured in the philosophy of what we have we hold and share (Sofola:1973:81,86,88). It could be argued from a moral point of view that the opportunity which individuals had in using land reveals unequivocally, the existence of tolerance among members of the society. It also showed the spirit of collectivism, communalism and co-operation (camaraderie, partnership, and mutual relation). This fostered fraternity, solidarity, fellow-feeling, volunteerism, coalitions, etc (Ayantayo: 2000:130). The Live-and-let-live lifestyle among the Etche speaking people of Rivers State is captured in the proverb: *Egbe b're, Ugo b're, keshi ibe ya eb'le, nku kwa ya* – meaning: let the kite perch, let the eagle perch; that which refuses the other to perch may its wings break.

However today, individualism – a hallmark of Western Culture, has modified this aspect of African ethics. Nuclear family is almost replacing the extended family system. Before one can visit an extended family member today, he/she is expected to inform such relation in advance to obtain permission. Visitation without prior notice is now considered as intrusion into one's privacy. This is the absurdity and cruelty of individualism which is at the core of western culture and which most Africans especially the educated elite have imported into Africa. The Communal land tenure and ownership – a characteristic of the altruistic African peasant economy has been bastardized by the rampant sale of land these days. The notion of selling land was a strange idea. Even strangers (like the white missionaries) were allotted land free of charge. The live-and-let-live traditional philosophy which placed high premium on the dignity of human person and life has been grossly affected. Today, intolerance of ideologies, greed and acquisitiveness, immoral colonialism and neo-colonialism reign supreme. Fears of annihilation characterize today's living. Weapons of mass destruction and wars of conquest are launched. The Western idea of the 'I' which was hitherto detested in traditional Africa, has today, almost upset the idea of the 'we'. Materialism and economic determinism, self-centered values have replaced mutual assistance in today's Africa. The economic obligation of the Western man does not extend beyond himself, one wife and very few children. Even his own parents are no more his business. This could be seen as well in most modern African societies.

In traditional African society, the economy was guided by the ethical principles of honesty, respect and sympathy. Labourers were adequately remunerated. The employer was conscious of the moral duty to pay for the services rendered him while the labourer/employee knew he was morally duty bound to render services in corresponding proportion to the wage

negotiated. The Yoruba usually say: a labourer's sweat should not dry before he is remunerated (Ayantayo:2000:30). This may have accounted for the absence of industrial strike. As Ogbueri (2007: personal interview) noted there was no love for money, love for life was supreme. People were concerned with maintaining a good name than acquiring riches. But today, the reverse is the case. People work and are underpaid. Some whose salaries are commensurate with their labour are either not paid or their salaries delayed. This has led to frequent and avoidable organized labour strikes.

In some African societies there is also rampant disrespect for elders these days. In the uncontaminated Africa, there was high degree of respect for elders for moral reason. The Etche people of Rivers State has a proverb that: '*Okomanu bu ji unwu*' – meaning: elders are yam in time of famine. That is, when there are puzzling difficulties, the elders supply the needed wisdom to move forward. The Africans' respect for the aged extends beyond the basic fact of their vast wealth of knowledge and life experiences. It is primarily premised on the simple morality that they are the forebears of the society and the usherers of as well as sponsors of the young to the world. Therefore, native morality demands that they be accorded their due respect, recognition and appreciation of their role. Therefore Africans especially the Yoruba has a proverb that 'he who aspires to be old should not take the old man's walking stick from him'. The walking stick is the old man's support and personal adjustment; even to the blind among them, it is the eye (Sofola:1973:76-78). But today, respect for elders has almost been deposited in the dustbin of history. As Monday (2007:personal interview) observes, with modern (formal) education, youths now feel knowledgeable enough, and therefore, disrespect has set in. The young have shown a lot of disregard to the elderly whom they feel are illiterate and out of grip with modern realities. Nweke (2007:personal interview) also alleges that 'formal education has made youths to slight illiterate elders'. He also indicted foreign movies for encouraging the youth to preach modernity and making them averse to discipline. Today, many young people cannot even greet their elders nor stand up for them to sit down especially in public.

Ethics of the Environment

In primordial Africa, nature was highly cherished and preserved. Land could remain uncultivated for a long time. The land was considered sacred and belonging to the living, the unborn and the dead. Sacrifices were often offered and the land received fertility. Forests were kept to preserve wildlife. It was considered morally wrong to cut trees in certain places especially places treated as sacred. Firewood and building materials were fetched from places not considered to be sacred. Most trees and plants bring life-they are used for healing and warding off evil spirits. There were a lot of prohibitions against hunting of certain animals and the pollution of certain water bodies. This promoted the preservation of some animals and plant life (Nweke: 2007: personal interview). But today, all sorts of abuse and exploitation are meted on nature. Environmental ethics today reflects a distant departure from what was before the coming of the white man. Woods are rampantly cut down. In sum, uncontrolled resource extraction and unsustainable development is degrading most of Africa's natural ecosystems which were hitherto a source of strength and pride. Some unethical use of the environment has led to loss of human lives thus in essence, it has reduced the value and dignity of the human person.

Positive Effects of Modernization on AIR

Modernization has increased the number of non-blacks and non-Africans to become adherents of AIR. Through the help of the internet particularly the World Wide Web (www), the

meaning and practices of AIR could be accessed globally. The television and radio has helped in the publicity of AIR in contemporary time. Also, the movie industry has helped to act and dramatize the various aspects of AIR and culture. The abolition of the killing of twins is another positive effect of modernization in Africa.

Conclusion

Our 21st century world is in quandary due largely to its dominance by the occidental gospel with extreme emphasis on the supremacy of the material and economy to the utter exclusion of the morals which *ab initio* normally ought to guide the production and distribution of these materials. With reflection, we need to conclude that the West has failed to achieve a total progress in which moral and spiritual considerations are at play. Africa has willy-nilly adopted most if not all the moral perversions of the Western civilization, which in the words of Sofola (1973:20) crystallizes in:

The overemphasis on economic success which gives the erroneous impression that man is essentially a glutton and that he lives solely by bread alone[sic] from which standpoint everything and progress is judged; the lack of appreciation of the worth of man and his wholesome relation with others; the determination of a man's worth solely in terms of his economic productivity – a factor which makes the elderly lose their respect and reverence which simple morality must have made the young... to give them; the prevalence of the Machiavellian philosophy of the end justifying the means; the lack of belief in the Supreme force called God,...and His power and glory.

When one makes a realistic and objective evaluation of the contemporary society and embarks on retrospective journey into the virgin Africa, one cannot but agree with Jean-Jacques Rousseau that learning and civilization brought moral degeneration and their advancement only succeeds in making things worse. Studies have replaced virtues, learned men have replaced virtuous men, and academic ability has replaced morality. Since learned men began to appear among us, good men have disappeared. Even the few good men among us are looked down upon; it is learned men that count, not virtuous men (Omeregbe: 1993:214).

Recommendations

AIR especially the ethical element should be part of secondary school curriculum. The practitioners of AIR and custodians of African traditional institutions should no longer treat it as illiterates' business. They should acquire formal education and employ the use of modern technology to make it more attractive and respected especially among the youths. There should be more scholarships/grants for scholars/students of AIR. Religious studies departments in institutions of higher learning should have broad based specializations in ethics which should include AIR ethics. The media should step up its current role in propagating AIR by emphasizing more on the positive and ethical elements. Christians and Muslims in their missionary bid should drastically reduce their condemnatory utterances against AIR. The current efforts in promoting Christian-Muslim dialogue should extend to include AIR. This has become necessary in view of the fact that despite intimidating posture of Islam and Christianity, the influence of AIR has refused to die as attested to by the patronage of the latter by SOME 'Christians' and 'Muslims'.

Parents should spend more time with their children and teach them morals through traditional story telling rather than buying them (the children) films especially foreign ones.

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