MORAL CONCEPT OF COMMON GOOD IN AFRICAN HUMANISTIC HERITAGE

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Abstract

African moral humanism advances a morality of human integration that is determined towards the full realization and development of the African human personality for the purpose of achieving common good of individuals in a given African society. Many African communities today have drifted from the moral norms that have kept them together for a long period of time. This has brought untold hardships on the different African societies resulting to wars, killings, cheatings, corruption and malicious injustices of various kinds. These all stem on the level of moral decay in our society today, thereby, eroding the long held view of common good among the African peoples. The paper aims at bringing to bare the doctrine of African morality as founded on humanism; the doctrine that considers human interests and welfare as basic to the thought and action of African people. In so doing, the researchers adopted the critical analytical method of research It submits that understanding this doctrine in African moral thought gave rise to the cherished communitarian ethos of the African society. Therefore, since social life, which follows upon our natural sociality, implicates the

individual in a web of moral obligations, commitments and duties to fulfill in pursuit of the common good and the general welfare, the paper recommends, that morality and common good should remain our humanistic heritage as African people.

Introduction

African moral humanism advances a morality of human integration that is determined by the full realization and development of the African personality. Therefore, African morality is human centered; the doctrine that considers human interests and welfare as basic to the thought and action of the people. It is the understanding of this doctrine in African moral thought that has given rise to the communitarian ethos of the African society. The welfare and interests of each member of the society can hardly be accomplished outside the communitarian society as the communitarian ethos is borne out of the beliefs in natural sociality of the human being. Social or community life is, thus, not optional to the human being in his given society. Social life, which follows upon our natural sociality, implicates the individual in a web of moral obligations, commitments and duties to fulfill in pursuit of the common good and the general welfare. Thus, African humanitarian ethics spawns social morality, the morality of the common good, and the morality of duty that is so comprehensive as to bring within its compass what are referred to as moral ideals such as love, virtue, compassion, which are considered supererogatory in Western ethics. Central to the African morality is character, for the success of the moral life is held to be a function of the quality of an individual's personal life. A moral conception of personhood is held in African ethics, the conception that there are certain basic moral norms and ideals to which the conduct of the individual human being ought to conform. It is in this regard that the paper rests its concern on the recognition of the

fact that, the African ethical traditions appreciate all human beings as brothers by reason of our common humanity which is indeed a lofty moral ideal that must be cherished and made a robust feature of global ethics in our contemporary world. It is a fortification against developing intolerant attitudes towards peoples of different cultures or skin colors who are also members of the universal human family called race.

The Evolution of Moral Conduct in African Humanism

According to Ihuah (2007), many ethicists consent that the human nature constitutes of reason and passion. For this reason, man could be defined as a moral being whose actions are either morally rights or morally wrong. Throughout the history of human existence, it is established that every one constantly faces certain kinds of situations, which are usually to called moral or ethical situation. [1] Clearly as we recognize or classify such situation as moral, we are not always sure whether our classification is right or wrong. Such situations are so diverse in nature and context that we may fail initially to see them as having anything in common. Still, ethical problems are related, and if we give heed, less to the new situations than to the questions they raise, we will see that in these very questions is found the relatedness that links diverse situations as ethical ones. An ethical reflection is directed toward certain kinds of questions about human situations and problems, no matter how diverse they may seem. Accordingly, 'Ethics' is derived from the Greek word *'ethos'* which means "character" and, in the plural, "manners". The synonym morals derive from the Latin *'moralis'*, which Cicero used to render the Greek *'ethikos'* and also means "character" and "manners" or "customs". [2] Such etymologies suggest that the ethical refers to one's own relationship (character) to

his and other's manners and customs. In reference to philosophical usage, this is partly right, yet *partly* misleading. Ethical experience and reflection are about human conduct but, what is omitted is the problem of evaluation, of judging by reference to the right and the good; the fundamental principles of the moral law. Thus, ethics is a normative science of human conduct concerned with the way men, in all their endeavors, ought to behave. It is the norms of conduct to which human action ought to conform. The development of the field of ethics has three levels:

i. The *First* is largely descriptive and seeks to identify the moral experience in a descriptive way.
ii. A second level of inquiry is *normative* ethics (normative means what we ought to be). Here ethicists try to work out acceptable judgments regarding what ought to be in choice and value. "We ought to keep our promises" and "justice is a virtue" are examples of normative judgments that are found acceptable.
iii. Finally, there is a third level called *critical* or *meta-ethical.* On this level, philosophers seek to work out a theory of the meaning and justification of our judgments of obligations and value.

There is also the field of *social behavior,* including institutions, programs, and 'social actions' such as punishment and war and science and technology. These too are the subject of reflective philosophical concerns; for problems of choice, value and obligation arise with regard to them as well. For instance, one may ask a number of questions, Is war good or right as a means of national policy? Does the welfare state support or hinder the development of moral values? Is Punishment justifiable as a social

institution, if so, why? What does the good life for one of the members of the community consists in this era of threatening forces of techno-scientific civilization? How is the theoretical knowledge of man to be used in setting him properly on the road to his dignity and destiny in the community? [3] To understand the content and contexts of African morality and make moral evaluations and decisions we will have to discuss the nature of African moral humanism.

The concept of African Moral Humanism

African moral humanism is a morality that is determined by the full development of the African personality. It advances a morality of human integration. From the foregoing, in mind, we may look at morality as the emergence within us of a distinct way of looking at life, interpreting issues, directing attitudes and evaluating actions. This way of looking at life is not in itself as yet an endorsement of any particular moral point of view, but the recognition of a certain dimension to be sustained in all human actions. It is the recognition of a certain dimension in life, certain considerations that must be taken into account, if we are to be true to ourselves as human beings. This, (Ihuah 2007), calls African humanism; an African morality that promotes rules of good conduct in the achievement of human well-being, it explores the primacy and indispensable status of the human persons over things. Some characteristics of moral value that guarantee and promote the good of the human person as basis of a sound and authentic civilization are outlined below:

i. Moral value can only exist in a free human being's acts. We can only become morally good by willing it; it cannot come about by accident.

ii. Moral value is universal in the sense that what holds for one holds for all in the same conditions, because moral values show the level of man's responsibility, his measure as a human being.

iii. Moral value is self-justifying in the sense that it does not depend on any extrinsic reasons.

iv. Moral value has a pre-eminence over every other value. A moral value can be compared only with another moral value.

If a moral value conflicts with another type of value, this other one must take a subordinate place (128).

The analysis above alludes to the fact that we do form for ourselves an ideal of human conduct and an ideal of what constitutes a human being in action, the ideal conduct and the ideal human being are not two distinct ideals, for a man's conduct is his life. It is only good conduct that can make a good person. Such an ideal is part and parcel of the moral judgment itself. Such an ideal is moral, good for the person. We have an ideal of the perfectly self-controlled and self-conducting human being. As far as a man approaches this he is good; as far as he defects, he is bad. The ideal is good in itself, not as leading to something else distinct from it. In suggesting that morality is a dimension of all human actions, we are not claiming that morality has a monopoly on life as if all other

dimensions should be sacrificed in its name, but rather it is possible to claim that morality is an essential ingredient of every human action without impoverishing other dimensions.

In every human decision, certain values must be upheld. People are conscious of their activities as rational activities and their implications, people become implicitly aware of a certain need to evaluate their actions against their rational source in human hand itself. In recognizing that need to integrate source and action, a people emerge or act as morally responsible persons. Such a need does not emerge inevitably because it, too, is subject to the dynamics of free rational behavior. Although moral value is essential to human decision-making, it is not the sole motive of such decisions. Rather, morality is a reframe within which we make our choices. All human beings choose themselves as the goal of their aspirations. But there is a perverted self-choosing and an authentic self-choosing. One who imbibes self seeking, perverts chooses and places himself at the center of all being and thereby desecrates and manipulates everything and, in the process destroys himself.

In the light of our acceptance of the morality of human integration as the standard of morality; We submit that African moral humanism is understood here as the ethic which rests upon the idea that every person and everything is related to every person and everything, and that human nature is good and instinctively seeks the divine and that humans only become dysfunctional when they grow up on a sick culture which produces violent and damaged humans. It is, thus, argued that this ethical evaluation places limits on the foundation of human life.

corroborated by Mbiti (1975) when he said, unlike the disgruntled malignant spirits of the departed, who have not reached the spirit land, ancestors are good spirits that look after the welfare of their kinsmen. They return to their human families from time to time and symbolically share meals with them. They are interested in what is going on in their families. They act as guardians of family affairs, traditions and ethics, a violation of these moral codes is ultimate offence against the ancestors, who, in their capacity, act as invisible police of the families and communities; and they could reward or punish appropriately for moral misdemeanor.[7] Different African communities observe certain customs and traditions, which regulates the people's morality by enforcing compliance to the dos and don'ts. It is believed that once such rules sustaining the customs and traditions are violated, the individual, who violate them incur the wrath of the society, while obedience produces peace, harmony and prosperity.

Essentially African moral values cover African political, social, economic and religious life. However, since the totality of the African life is subsumed in religion, the moral values form important and inseparable part of African Religion.[8] These moral values in African humanism vary and could be classified into two broad categories: the approved behavior and disapproved conduct.

i. Approval behaviors and actions: According to Aderibigbe (1993), truth is an approved behavior. Individuals are expected to be truthful and honest in all their dealings. It is believed that by this honorable conduct, one's life could be prolonged and blessed by the supreme-Being and divinities. Kindness is

another value in Africa. When one is kind, it is concluded that his interpersonal relationship with others is good and generally considered as approved conduct. The act of hospitability is practically shown, especially, to strangers. Africans are always prepared to take care of guests as long as they care to stay. It is often implied that Africans are prepared to share with a visitor an on-going meal, no matter how small and inconveniencing it may be. When one is kind and hospitable, Africans believe that he would have blessings, both spiritually and materially, hence, children are thought to be hospitable to people right from the beginning of parental upbringing. Chastity is important aspect of African humanism, where both men and women are enjoined to live a chaste life. In this regard, men were not expected to seduce other men's wives; similarly women were most expected to uphold chastity. For instance, a faithful young woman who was undefiled before marriage was regarded as a good family ambassador,' and symbolic items representing chastity were sent to her parents. While a woman who was not faithful at marriage becomes a disgrace not only to herself, but to her family. In Africa, honor, loyalty and respect are given to elders generally. The children must respect and obey parents. The father must play his role to cater for the well being of the family and also be, prepared to protect them at all times. On her part, the mother's duty is to look after the family, respect and obey her husband, and teach the children to remain faithful to him.

Africans consider humility as essential, a child who wishes to grow and progress must inculcate a sense of humor and not pride so that he might not be cut down at a tender age. Humility, attracts favorable dispositions from divinities and the human communities.[9]

ii. Unapproved behavior and conduct: stealing is generally forbidden in African communities. When someone is caught stealing it evokes severe ridicule and attracts instant punishment. Murder is another unapproved behavior, which Smith (1950), totally condemned in ernest. It is considered a crime, punishable by the supreme-Being and the divinities and has moral implications on the doctrine of common good in African society.[10]

Incest is a socially disapproved conduct in African society. Taboos have to do with conduct which works against the good and well being of the community, individuals and the gods. Idowu (1962) embraces everything that could be considered taboo as sin. Taboos are important because they seek to promote the needed sense of mutual responsibility and communality on which the African culture and religion are solidly built.[11]

Moral Humanism and the Concept of Common Good in African society

In Africa, religion, societal norms and moral values are interwoven and are responsible for holding in place the communitarian African society to enhance the attainment of peace, happiness, satisfaction, justice, equity, dignity and mutual respect etc. The notion of the common good assumes a prominent look in African ethics. For

instance, among the Tiv people of Central Nigeria, moral thought refers to the common good as i*yo ilun a mtom mhar* (a snake with double heads, while in Akan moral thought, the notion of common good is expressed most vividly in an art motif that shows a *siamese* crocodile with two heads but a single or common stomach (Stanford 2010). The motif relevant to moral thought is the single stomach the basic interests of the crocodiles with double heads. The common stomach of the two crocodiles indicates that at least all the members of the community are indistinguishable. It can therefore be interpreted as symbolizing the *common good*, the good of all the individuals within a society.

The common good is not a replacement for the sum of the various individual goods. It neither consist of nor is it derived from, the good and preferences of particular individuals in a given community. It is that which is essentially good for human beings as such, embracing the needs that are *basic* to the enjoyment and fulfillment of the life of each individual in the community. If the common good were the aggregate of individual good, it would only be contingently common, but not essentially common and, on that basis, not all the individuals in a society will benefit from it. When the common good is achieved in a given society, then the individual good is also achieved. In this way, there will be no conceptual tension or opposition between the common good and the good of the individual member of the community. This clearly indicates that common good in a society embraces the basic good of all the members of the community. If we realize that common good affects individuals basic good, there would be no need to think of it as a threat to individual liberty and freedom. After all, individual liberty is one of the basic good of the members of the society. The contents of the common stomach, in the symbolic art of the crocodile with double heads, would not conflict with the interests and needs of either of the crocodiles, for they all eat and swallow into the same stomach. Common good embraces the following goods and more; peace, happiness, satisfaction, human flourishing, justice, dignity and respect, many others. There is no human being who does not desire peace, security, freedom, dignity, respect, justice, equality, and satisfaction. It is such a moral notion that represents the fundamental good that is intrinsic to human fulfillment and to which, all individuals desire to have access referring to it as the notion of common good.

C**onclusion**

The beliefs in the notion of common good is supported by everyone in a community because, moral values such as social justice and equality on the one hand, and the spontaneous, universal denunciation of acts such as murder and cruelty on the other, are certainly inspired by this notion of common good. Similarly, the institutions of various kinds, legal, political, economic, moral, etc, have nexus in pursuit of certain commonly shared values and goals, that is, a common good which a human society desires to achieve for all of its members. The institution of government or legal system is surely based on a common understanding of the need for societal values of social order and social peace. It is, thus, pretty clear that the common good is that, which inspires the creation of a moral, social, political, or legal system for enhancing the well-being of people in a given community. The common good is a notion that is conceptually affiliated to the notion of community and, thus, to the notion of human society. The common good is an essential feature of the ethics espoused by the communitarian African society. Where, the pursuit which is for the good of all is the goal of a communitarian society. This is typical of the African society. A sense of the common good which is a core of shared values is the underlying presupposition of African social morality.

Recommendations

From the fore going, the researchers recommend among others the followings:

i. It should be borne in mind that, moral value can only exist in acts arising from a free human being. Therefore, we can only become morally good by willing it; it cannot come about by accident.

ii. Since moral value is a universal phenomenon in the sense that what holds for one holds for all in the same conditions, man should demonstrate his measure as a human being, because moral values show the level of man's responsibility.

iii. It is also imperative that we humans do form for ourselves an ideal of human conduct and what constitutes a human being in action, the ideal conduct and the ideal human being are not two distinct ideals, for a man's conduct is his life. Therefore, only good conduct that can make a good person. While, bad conduct makes a bad person.

iv. That although, moral value is essential to human decision-making, it is not the sole motive of such decisions. Rather, morality is a reframe within which we make our choices. All human beings choose for themselves the goal of their aspirations.

v. The Supreme-Being is the main source of moral values in Africa and that the basic of Africa morality is the divine nature and essence of God. This is because the supreme-being made man and implanted in him the sense of right and wrong.

vi. Moral values in African humanism vary and could be classified into two broad categories: the approved behaviors such as truthful, hospitability, honest, kindness etc. While, the unapproved behaviors includes; stealing, murder Lies etc.

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