

AFRICAN SOCIAL ETHICS AND THE GLOBAL ETHICAL CHALLENGE

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Abstract

The contemporary African continent and the world in general are confronted with various ethical challenges needing urgent attention. More often than not, such solutions are sought from Western ethical thought with little or nothing taken from traditional African ethical ideologies. This work explores ethical values inherent in African religion and its responses to global ethical challenges such as individualism, health, ethnicity, war, crime, and civil disobedience. However, the paper understands the problem of applying traditional mechanisms of social control given development in science and technology, and social change. Yet, the paper concludes that since many global ethical challenges have a cultural dimension, there should be place given to African Social ethics in the global ethical values project.

Introduction

The contemporary African continent and the world in general are confronted with various ethical challenges needing urgent attention. More often than not, such solutions are sought from Western ethical thought with little or nothing taken from traditional African ethical ideologies. This is a handicap for the project of reducing immorality in Africa and in other countries where traditional moralities are ignored. We believe that in spite of the strong campaign for the universality of morality, a course pioneered and popularized by Immanuel Kant, one fact, which remains indisputable,

is that, certain ethical values are relative to specific people, places and times in their application to social relations.¹ Graham and Benedict Kath have seriously defended this view.² This presupposes that there is no one way for seeking solutions to ethical problems, especially since many of them have a cultural flavour. Africa, as one of the largest continents in the world, is known for its many linguistically differentiated ethnic groups, which none the less bound them together.³ Fundamentally, African social ethics is firmly rooted in her religions, which also provides significant meaning to African philosophy, business, economics, psychology and metaphysics. For example, the African social ethics echoed in religious customs, regulations, taboos, proverbs, myths, arts, signs and symbols.⁴ On the account of this, this paper examines African social ethics in the context of its relevance in meeting global ethical challenges.

African Ethics and its Social Elements

It is important to know what ethics is and the context in which the word is used. Without going into too much detail, ethics can be defined simply as a normative science of human conduct, dealing with norms or standards of human behaviour. In other words, Ethics is concerned with the question of right and wrong in human behaviour with emphasis on how men ought to behave and why they behave in a particular manner, some of which are regarded as in certain ways right and others wrong.⁵ Using this definition as a good background to understanding the meaning of ethics generally, we can define African social ethics, the do's and don'ts in the context of African religious and secular mentality and with a foundation based on African culture. Regarding its context, content and intent, African social ethics is predominantly communal in outlook. It is essentially interpersonal and social with a concern for human well being because its essence consists of doing good to others. Corroborating this, Mbiti remarks that:

...the essence of African morality is that, it is more 'societary' than 'spiritual', it is a morality of 'conduct' rather than a morality of being. This is what one might call 'dynamic ethics rather

than ‘static ethics for it defines what a person does rather than what he is.’⁶

Beyond theory, the essence of African social ethics is practically demonstrated because Africans always show concern and how the behaviour of an individual affects the entire society since a higher premium is placed on *We* rather than *I*. The basic African notions of individual’s vis-à-vis society are that of “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am”. This means that the communal well-being of the Africans is more important than that of the interests of the individual, a thought-form, which seems to underlay Weldon’s organic theory of society that has informed the bedrock of democracy in the world.⁷ The communal features of African social ethics are also manifested in the following ways: community life, good human relations and hospitality. The African sense of community life is explicitly expressed in a Lozi proverb which says: Go the way that many people go; if you go alone, you will have reason to lament.⁸ Africans perceive their community as the custodian judicial and religious centres where behaviour of individuals and group of individuals are assessed and upon which judgement is pronounced. The community in turns gives the individual adequate protection, which will enhance the individual’s as well as the community’s well being.

For this important reason and other related ones, an average African looks at himself/herself as his/her brother’s/sister’s keeper; therefore, individualism is abhorrent to the traditional African mentality. It is in this sense that Africa historical heroes like Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere and Leopold Senghor argue that the traditional African society is based on communalism. In fact, Julius Nyerere has seriously popularized this thesis in his theory of African socialism, which we know as Ujamaa; Ujamaa, in its literal sense means “togetherness” or “familyhood”.⁹ This communal nature of the traditional African way of life is also evident in the extended family and in several aspects of social relations. Africans normally do not make a sharp distinction between a brother, half-brothers, half-sisters, etc. Hence, the traditional Africans refer to all blood, relations close and distant, as “our brother or our sister”, “brother and sister”.¹⁰ From the above, we can then argue that in African social ethical concepts there is

practically no egoism and reclusivism. In the African traditional way of life, emphasis is placed on the philosophy of human relations. Thus, interpersonal and intercommunity relationship is realized in African communities without any difficulties. This humane living among the African people is a notion, which Ifemesia has defined as “a way of life emphatically centred upon human interests, and values; a mode of living evidently characterized by empathy, and by consideration and compassion for human beings”.¹¹

To Africans, the relationships between individuals in the community are based on the recognition of the worth of the human being and not only on what they possess or what they can do for each other, which is only a secondary consideration concerning reciprocity, and interpersonal relationship. It is this same sense of being our brother/sister’s keeper which makes Africans to incorporate strangers and give them hospitality in the wider sense; land to settle on, food to eat, and at times, clothes to wear, and shelter to live in. Okafor aptly summarizes this phenomenon as follow:

In traditional African culture, whenever there is food to be taken, everyone present is invited to participate even if the food was prepared for far fewer numbers of people without envisaging the nature of visitors. It would be a height of incredible bad memory for one to eat anything, however small, without sharing it with anyone else present, or at least expressing the intention to do so.¹²

This explains while economic problems like poverty and unemployment was not rampant in the traditional African society. Even today where traditional social ethics is still in practice, social well-being of co-fellow is still considered important. The impression of an average African person is that every moral action done by an individual, whether negative or positive has serious implication, for both the perpetrator as well as his family, (nuclear or extended family) and the culture community. It is in this note that the family and the entire community act as agents of inculcating morality in African society in dealing with several unethical practices such as adultery, stealing, lying and covenant breaking because they are conceived as socio-ethical issues.¹³

Foundations of African Ethics

There are two major sources of African social ethics. These are religion and human rationality. But one point that should be made clear is that the two are mutually exclusive. Discussing them one by one is for the purpose of emphasis, which we shall allude to later. African religion, no doubt, is the main foundation of African social ethics. However, a few scholars think that human rationality must be considered as basis for discussing the subject. But as a matter of fact African morality has a religious connotation, as we will unfold later. To describe African traditional religion, as the basis of African social ethics is no exaggeration because in the words of Mbiti and Idowu, Africans are notoriously religious in everything because religion permeates all departments of life so it is not easy or always possible to separate them.¹⁴

Taking this seriously, we can argue that to overlook the role of African religion in African ethics will mean a lack of understanding of African behaviour. Religion is generally thought to be the strongest element in which the greatest African character influence upon the thinking and living patterns of African people. In practical terms, social order and peace are recognized by Africans as essential and sacred to well being. Most African peoples accept or acknowledge God as the final guardian of law and order, and of the moral ethical codes. The popular opinion held by Africans is that ethics is rooted in their religious dogma, that is to say, God is the absolute source of ethical values, the supervisor of man's actions and the ultimate goal of human striving and ambitions.¹⁵

There is no demarcation between religion and morality in the African thought system, because God is conceived as a moral being, who created man as a moral being, possessing the potentials not only to know what is right but also to behave rightly. Africans believe that the moral quality inherent in man is manifested in his possession of conscience, which God implanted in him during creation enterprise. As the Yoruba would say that conscience is the oracle of the earth or *eri okan* that is, the witness of the heart.

The African belief in God the originator of morality is also expressed in their beliefs in divinities, ancestors, spirits and magic and medicine. All these constitute the five principal beliefs of African traditional religion. African people believe that the divinities are ministers of God who perform the duties of inculcating ethical values and punish their defaulters. Divinities such as *Sango* (god of thunder) and *Ogun* (god of iron) are taken as upholders of social morality among the Yoruba because they believe that they will punish thieves and liars or covenant breakers with their mysterious powers.¹⁶ The ancestors too, which Mbiti describes as the living dead, are the past heroes and heroines who during their lifetime lived good moral lives worthy of emulation.¹⁷ Because of their records, Africans regard them as the guardians of family affairs, traditions and ethics. Therefore, they regard them as being able to afflict any member of the family who behaves immorally with sickness, failure in trade, and even death. Thus, they have power to coerce the recalcitrant and the intransigent. Conversely, they also equally reward family members who are of good moral behaviour with success in trade, good luck and robust health.

In addition, a third tier of divine beings that takes charge of morality is made up of spirits, some bodies very akin to the Greek daemons which exert great influence on the moral behaviour of members of the society. For Africans perceive that everything possesses spirit, which can hunt and harm evildoers. For example, African people believe that whoever steals another man's yam will be seen and punished by the spirits of the earth, the sky, the sun and the general environment where the stealing has taken place. Africans also take magic and medicine as instruments of moral control. This explains why they are used as tools by religious functionaries such as priests and priestesses as tools for inculcating morality within and without their religious milieu. Africans in general believe in the potentiality of magical charms that can enhance fidelity in marital life. Talismans of this kind are meant to reduce premarital, extramarital as well as promiscuous sexual relations in the society.¹⁸ In some African societies—the Yoruba example comes to mind—once the magical charm is put on women or men, the victims cannot have sex until it is removed. In fact, the use of this magical talisman to control sexual morality in society is still very common in rural areas where strong emphasis is placed on fidelity in marriage

or virginity before marriage. The practice has remained persistent despite the onslaught of the influences of Christianity and Islam in the African continent.

As mentioned earlier, human rationality also constitutes a good source of African social ethics. This view is popularized by African philosophers such as Wiredu¹⁹, Oluwole²⁰, Temples²¹ and Claude Summel²², who argue that man's quest for a moral life is conditioned by the fact that he is a rational being. They contend that to be obliged by the moral law is part of what it means to be a human being, for it is also part of man's rationality.

They interpret morality as a product of man's rationality rather than God's rule, because to them man is a rational being, his rational faculty will tell him that certain actions are bad and must be avoided and others are good and should be done. However, they accept that divinities are agents of inculcating morality in the society and acknowledge the role of taboo as a factor regulating the behaviour of African people.

We quite appreciate the argument for the rational basis of African Social Ethics since it at least points to the fact that one does not necessarily need to be religious before one can be morally upright. However, this statement is not totally valid in the traditional African society, because, as we have said repeatedly above, religion manifests itself in every aspect of life including man's rationality. And does this account for the philosophers' acceptance of the important roles of divinities and taboos in the moral life of African people? To our mind, what Oluwole and others failed to recognize is that man's rationality, which they make as the basis of African social ethics, is believed to be created in man by God. For this single reason, there is no doubt that African religion is the main basis of African social ethics.

Basic Socio-Ethical Principles in Africa

We turn to the basic socio-ethical principles, which are the standards of moral behaviour, the norms on which man's conduct in African society should be founded. These principles provide guidance to human conduct; they indicate certain things or ways of behaviour, which they

should either avoid or entertain. For Idowu, a renowned author of a book on Yoruba religion, *character (Iwa)* is the essence of Yoruba ethics and upon it depends even the life of a person. He argues that the people often say that gentle character enables the rope of life to stay unbroken. Again, it is good character that is man's guard, which is manifested in the following ways: chastity before marriage and faithfulness during marriage, hospitality, generosity, honesty as essential virtues. Others include: keeping a covenant and avoiding falsehood; protecting the poor and the weak, especially women, giving honour and respect to older people and respecting the authority.²³

What Idowu has catalogued as the essence of Yoruba ethics is also the essence of ethics in Africa in general. But besides these, there is a long list of acts, which one must avoid because they can be both self-destructive as well as being ruinous to the society where one lives. These include murder, stealing, adultery, incest, rape, false oaths, cheating, selfishness, hatred, hypocrisy, suicide, backbiting, etc. We must note at this juncture that the ethical principles outlined above serve the purpose of protecting the society's ethical values. By this, we mean those types of behaviour, which are desirable for human existence, and survival. A high premium is placed on these values. They include the fundamental human values, such as human life - the highest value on earth, the value of justice, the value of honesty, fidelity, human freedom, etc. For example, the moral principle which prohibits the killing of human beings is meant to protect the right of every man to the ownership of his property; while the principle which prohibits telling lies is meant to protect the value of honesty and so on.²⁴

The articulation of the ethical principles in African society is a collective responsibility of religion, social, business, economics and political institutions. Adherence to the ethical values or principles by the individual is taken as a duty. In fact, this is one part of the contract a person makes (implicitly) when he becomes a member of society. This is what makes life in society possible and meaningful. As Henry Benson has put it, it is for one's interest to live a moral life by observing the moral laws of the society.²⁵ It is in this sense that Albert Schweitzer correctly remarks that,

“the prospering of a society depends on the moral disposition of its members”.²⁶ Consequently, the lists of what should and should not be done in Africa are so long and detailed that they constantly confront one with moral demands throughout one’s life time.

Contemporary Socio-Ethical Issues and the African Response

This section deals with examination of some contemporary global ethical issues and African’s response to them. Today, there is no doubt, that the contemporary world is bedeviled with some ethical issues demanding urgent and serious analysis. These, among others, include selfhood and community, sex, family, divorce, the gap between the rich and the poor, war, violence, suicide, euthanasia, abortion, authority etc. We will discuss each of these briefly.

Sex and Marriage

For Africans, sex is sacred in all its forms and interpretation. The sanctity of sex is such that talking about it overtly is certainly not easy. The religious sanctification of sex shapes the thinking of all the African peoples for there exist many taboos and rituals, which regulate its performance and the time of its performance. For example, for traditional Africans, sexual intercourse is restricted to nighttime in one’s own room and rightly between spouses. Thus, premarital and extra marital sexual relations are prohibited in African society. To act otherwise is to incur the wrath of the community god, goddess, and divinities in charge of morality. It is no wonder that activities such as kissing and petting are not only alien to Africa, when indulged in around public places, but are indeed counter-culture in African traditional societies. Anything that relates to romance and sex is to be done secretly.²⁷ The practice of pornography, which is common in the contemporary society, is morally objectionable because of its tendency to lead people to show disrespect for woman and her private parts. Pornography itself manifests a kind of behaviour, which violates the moral principles of respect for persons. And in the African way of life it is taken also as treating women as mere sex objects to be exploited and manipulated.²⁸

Arising from the sacredness of sex in African society is the quest for sexual purity and discipline among those who by tradition qualify to engage in sex. In traditional African society, acts of adultery, homosexuality, masturbation, lesbianism, incest, rape are counter-culture. Therefore, they are condemned as unethical practices which are to be avoided in whatever forms they are manifested in the traditional past and contemporary African society. Marriage in the traditional African worldview is maintained as an important institution and is controlled by ethics. A fundamental African traditional notion about marriage is that “everybody must get married and bear children.” The desire to propagate is extended to those it is pertinent and compelling to arrange surrogate marriages to produce heirs. Africans believe that it is through procreation via marriage that they can preserve the individual’s name. An unmarried person is considered antisocial; if he dies, he cannot become an ancestor worthy of worship. Consequently, eunuchs are made to marry for their brothers to bear children who will normally answer the names of the eunuchs.

A typical African marriage ceremony is often elaborate because it is one of the ways marriage can be solemnized between a man and a woman. Bridegroom is expected to present bride-gifts to both the bride and her parents. African customary marriages bring the families of both parties together in at least two or three occasions. This is a way of legalizing and solemnizing the marriage through several religious rituals, which accompany marriage ceremony in Africa, and any breach of the traditional course is taken as breaking the morality under girding marriage institutions.

One ethical issue in marriage is manifested in the high premium placed on virginity. African morality demands that the bride must remain a virgin until the night after wedding when they expect the husband to deflower her.²⁹ Therefore, every young girl must follow what her parents and the society teach about sexual morality as a matter of duty. Such training will make her understand the importance of sacredness of sex. Therefore, a virgin lady will bring glory, honour, praise, dignity, and respect not only to herself but also to her parents and relatives while the one who has lost

her virginity before marriage will incur shame, molestation, the husband's disrespect, and become a disgrace to both herself and her entire family. This is the reason why Africans emphasize fidelity in premarital and marital lives.

Africans are known for the practice of polygamy which allows a man to marry two or more wives, depending on his economic or social status. It is a social duty for husbands to take care of their wives; traces of inability or unwillingness on their part to take up their responsibilities of feeding, maintaining and providing shelter and security for their spouses often attract condemnation by society. The wife on her part is expected to love and be faithful to her husband. Strict adherence to both obligations helps to reduce cases of divorce in African society. The relatively rarer occurrence of divorce among Africans than other races is due to many factors. A widow for instance is put under the care of the deceased's brother to take over the affair of the woman in regards to matters of care and procreation. Thus, they permit levirate marriage in Africa. Also, when there are misunderstandings between husband and wife and in order to thwart divorce, members of the extended family always intervene to settle the dispute through dialogue, persuasion and marriage counseling. At times, the elders of the extended family, as a punishment, could be on the side of husband if he is guilty of offending the wife. Thus, for all traditional Africans, marriage is a lifetime affair, which is maintained by the principles of honesty, dedication, faithfulness, respect and honour.

Selfhood and Community

We have established in our foregoing previous discussion the fact that African society is communal in outlook. This suggests that selfishness, egoism and other activities of man entailing self-centeredness are abhorred. It is true that man is by nature selfish and self-seeking, but Africans in general do not encourage egoism. Thinking mainly of oneself at the expense of the society is regarded as morally wrong for anyone; therefore, the society teaches man to be altruistic. This accounts for the practice of the extended family system in Africa. By extension, because Africans are their brothers'/sisters' keepers, the society also takes care of the poor,

destitute and even strangers.

The application of the principle of altruism to social relations in Africa is discernible in what are regarded as rights and duties, responsibilities and obligations of the rich toward the poor, the unfortunate, and invalid and the handicapped. For instance, a man has the obligation to cater for the widow and orphans of his dead relatives. The rich are expected to provide for the poor. This is why finding someone in the community without help is difficult; hence, no beggars existed in the unadulterated traditional African society. Even today, some of those who beg are doing so because they are not contented with the financial assistance or support their family and relatives offer them. Offering moral or financial support is praiseworthy and inability or unwillingness to help the needy earns strong public opprobrium.³⁰

Sanctity of Life

Suicide, abortion, euthanasia are acts that terminate life of self or of another person. Africans regard all these acts as unethical practices, which are unacceptable in the traditional African social setting. Africans possess a very strong view of the sacredness of life. For Africans, God is the giver of life and He is the only one who has right to end it. Consequently, Africans believe that no human being, for any reason, has right to end his own life (by committing suicide) or terminate other people's life through abortion, war and euthanasia. Africans abhor the shedding of blood. Life of man is taken as a sacred element, which at all time must be handled with a high sense of sacredness. Little wonder the decision to go to war, which involves killing, is taken, only when necessary that is, when all formal and normal courses of action to search for peace have failed. Letting blood out is defiling even during wartime or in self-defense. For this reason, someone who has killed a human being, whether during war or during an attack cannot partake of communal meals with undefiled persons without first performing ritual cleansing. Africans therefore consider abortion as sinful if not outright criminal. To avoid the problem of committing abortion, traditional Africans had their birth control methods,

which involved the use of magical talisman such as a ring, which was worn on a finger before engaging in a sexual intercourse. Sexual intercourse engaged in under such condition will never lead to pregnancy. The sacredness associated with life goes to explain the African emphasis on the protection of a bride's virginity before marriage. In the African belief system:

The blood of virginity is the symbol that life has been preserved, that the spring of life has not already been flowing wastefully, and that both the girl and her relatives have preserved the sanctity of human reproduction.³¹

From these considerations, the idea of the sanctity of life from African perspective makes it an abomination for anyone, under any circumstances to take his own life. Thus, any form of materialism, medical activities, scientific and technological advancement which ultimately add to the destruction of life are strange to and destructive of the African culture and idea of human life. Preservation of man's life is taken as the highest human value in Africa.

Ethnicity

We must note that nepotism and tribalism in their past and present forms are not offshoots of African social ethics. In fact, studies carried out on tribalism by some scholars in Nigeria affirm the fact that ethnicity which is manifested in nepotism and tribalism is not indigenous to the traditional African cultural ideas and practices. We can, therefore, argue that their slight appearance in the body politics in present day African societies can be associated with European cultural contact. As mentioned earlier, Africans have a very high sense of hospitality. This value enables them to know that the other man from another tribe, clan, community is his brother and is equally a human being.

Respect for Authority and Civil Responsibility

For the African, God is the highest authority, but traditional politi-

cal heads which Mbiti describes as the earthly viceroy or vicegerent of God act for helping him. The traditional rulers, too, are in turn helped by the elders in the community. For Africans, old age is maturity, so, strong emphasis is placed on eldership as divine authority in African societies. In the words of William Canton: Africans generally have deep and great respect for old age, and even when we can find nothing to admire in an old man, we will not easily forget that his gray hairs have earned him right to courtesy and politeness.³²

This, as a matter of fact suggests that elders deserve respect because of their long experiences. Indeed, we take elders as the repository of communal wisdom and therefore, are always called upon in the affairs of the society in the maintenance of customs and traditions. As the youth show respect for the elders in form of greeting them each time they meet, help them carry their loads, run errands for them, the elders too, are duty bound to reciprocate the good gestures of the young ones by commending and giving them presents and gifts regularly. In addition, younger persons are not expected to stare at the faces of their elders, abuse them, or refuse to run errands for them. On a final note, the care of the aged is taken as a family responsibility. Every member of both nuclear and extended families always comes together to take care of aged people. Africans so cherish these practices that there is hardly the need, in the African setting, for the establishment of homes for the aged as obtains today in Europe and America.

Crime and Punishment

Although traditional African societies do not have written legal documents setting out their laws yet, they have what makes up crime. Crime is interpreted as violation of ethical rules or principles earlier discussed (adultery, breaking of covenant, burglary, fornication, incest, kidnapping, irreverence and unkindness to elders and parents, murder, swearing falsely, theft, sodomy, malice, etc).³³ They are thus morally bad as well as being criminal acts.

Culprits meet each form of crime with appropriate punishment.

Justice comes into play in determining the type and forms of punishment for each crime. For example, an adulterous woman could be warned verbally, and if she fails to change, could be beaten, ostracized and made to do rituals to appease the gods of the community. A thief could be ostracized, songs about his deeds in the public to ridicule and disgrace him. He shares the ridicule, molestation and mockery along with members of his own family and relatives. At times, they may be denied marrying within the community from where he has stolen another man's goods.

One important feature of the African attitude towards crime is the emphasis on instantaneous judgement. Africans believe that justice delayed is justice denied. They mete out punishment for an offence according to the degree of the offence. For instance, murderers are executed to serve as deterrent to others.

African Social Ethics in Global Milieu

Having discussed the response of Africans to some contemporary ethical issues, it is important to evaluate, and assess the African social ethics milieu in a global context. We must note at this juncture that African social ethics is not indifferent to the wind of social change being swept across the African continent by Western and Arabian religions, to be specific, coupled with the wave of modernity occasioned by the advancement of science and technology, which have tremendously affected African social ethics. For example, few people in African society today have doubted the powers of ancestors, divinities, spirits, magic and medicine and even that of God to punish any person who erred morally. Like in the words of Bultman, many Africans of twenty-first century have opined that:

It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless, and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of demons and spirits.³⁴

In the light of this, some African people feel under no pressure to believe in ancestors, divinities as agents of inculcating ethical value just

because their forebearers had believed. The influences from both the oriental and occidental worlds on African societies have also led to cultural diffusion which today pose great threat to the belief in what constitutes the basis of African social ethics. For example, we have cases of harlotry, adultery, individualism, suicide, abortion and other forms of crime very common now among Africans. This is the negative effect of acculturation. Another important fact which needs to be understood while assessing African social ethics in the global context is that ethical values are universal. The only point of difference, say, between African social ethics and European social ethics, is the application of the especial ethical values to social relations. For example, while both the Africans and Europeans place strong emphasis on fidelity or faithfulness in married life, there are differences in terms of their practical application to marital life. For example while the European does not permit sex outside marital life, the African does not see it wrong if it is done to preserve the name of a dead brother as earlier explained. The differences are associated with the fact that while Europeans insist on monogamy, progressive monogamy at least, Africans permit levirate marriage and even polygamy. The case being made here is that, some of the morally accepted practices in Africa (polygamy for example) are morally unacceptable in Western Europe or America.

On the other hand, some of the things done and morally acceptable in Europe and America such as kissing in the street or in public places or the settling of one's aged parents in homes for the aged rather than taking care of them in one's own house, as earlier discussed, are morally unacceptable in Africa. It is true that people of different cultural background do have different moral practices or a people may take that what a certain culture considers as right for wrong from another culture. This does not, however, mean that morality is relative. Similarly, it does not show that the basic moral principles are not universal. For example, the concept of fundamental human values, which from the legal point of view are interpreted as fundamental human rights across the globe is a universally accepted concept; its degree of acceptance might vary from place to place. For this reason, we can argue that African social ethics is not in dissonance with the global ethics.

The fact is that ethical principles are objective in nature; they are good on their own account, independent of our emotions or feelings towards them. For instance, honesty as a moral principle is good in itself, because it is good to be honest. A liar will not want others to lie unto him, rather, he expects people to be truthful in their relation towards him. It is in this sense that people often say “honesty is the best policy”.

Concluding Remarks

The basic support underlying African social ethics is African religion. African social ethics is manifested in the sense of community, of good human relation, of the sacredness of life, of hospitality, respect for instituted authority. In relating African social ethics to the global society, we discover that ethical values such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, and truthfulness among others are universal; they are not peculiar to African countries, but certain ethical practices are relative to Africa in terms of their application. In other words, African principles are similar to what operates, say, in Europe or America; hence, there is a universality of ethical values. While European and American countries apply the principle of sexual ethics loosely, Africa applies it rigidly. However, an important issue to be noted is that African social ethics is today experiencing an unprecedented change occasioned by social change in the global milieu of social ethics. These Western influences through Christianity, Islam and modern technology have greatly challenged the authenticity of African traditional religious beliefs, which are the bedrock of African social ethics. This, notwithstanding, Africans are still known globally for the peculiarities of certain ethical practices which, even today as before constitute the pride of Africa. What is left to be done is provision of allowance and opportunity for explorations of the ethics within the agenda of globalization ethical apparatus.

Endnotes

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