

PLURAL VALUES, VALUE CONSTRUCTION, AND SOCIAL SOLIDARITY IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Within the emerging new world order boundaries which otherwise serve to delineate local narratives and values are beginning to collapse. What happens in one place cannot be isolated from global concerns. It is difficult for societies to completely rely on themselves for survival and social solidarity. As a direct consequence, developed economies are pressuring weaker economies to further open their boundaries. This presupposes a challenge – a meta-narrative of some sort. It is the contention of this paper that although values may vary from context to context and with time, such variations do not preclude the existence of cross-cultural assessment that defines human progress and global solidarity.

Introduction

I have for quite sometime been attracted to the issues of universal morality as a platform upon which the transcultural legitimation of knowledge claims is possible. But this seems to suffer some setback because of the insistence of some deconstructionists on the dislocation of metanarratives or what Lyotard calls the illegitimate scheme for legitimizing knowledge claims, insisting that recognition of universal values fails to respect diversity of language games in terms of historical truths and ethnical accountability. This seems to belie the point of universalist. The unfolding events in

the emerging new world order suggest to a large extent that boundaries which otherwise serve as the locus of values priorities in diverse societies and forms are beginning to collapse, responding to the ever changing pressure of international trends, which suggest that what happens in one place cannot be isolated from global concerns.

The above appears a response to two isolated but related issues: first, recall that the competitive world which human beings live today has made it difficult for societies to completely rely on themselves for the supply of the basic ingredients of survival and social solidarity. Secondly, and as a direct consequence of the above, the influence which developed economies bring to bear on the weaker societies so to say, is enough to pressurize them to open up boundaries with the assumption that it will positively lead them out of the woods. (Ebijuwa, 2004). This presupposes a challenge – a metanarrative of some sort. Deconstructionist, on the other hand sees this as oppressive and destructive to norms and values of local narratives. No doubt local narratives gain support from the claim that societies are not constituted in the same way. But this platitude alone is insufficient to answer the basic question of survival inherent in many developing societies today. (Ebijuwa, 2002). This goes to say that the claims that local values are context dependent, for example, democracy, does not lose touch with the fact that, although democracy may respond to historical and cultural circumstances, it does not lose track of its basic tenets, such as freedom, justice, fairness etc which gives democracy its universal appeal. “And this is the reason when anybody’s right is violated, it can be subjected to the scrutiny of world opinion (like the gruesome murder of Ken Saro Wiwa and nine other Ogoni human rights activists by General Sanni Abacha former military leader of Nigeria) when that treatment violates widely recognize standards – the furtherance of which has come to be conceived as an overriding obligation upon everybody within and across societies” (Ebijuwa, 200:58). The argument here then is that, although values may vary from context to context and with time, such variations do not preclude the existence of cross – cultural assessment which defines human progress and global solidarity. Before we go into this, let us look at the platform upon which the arguments of the proponent of local narratives are constructed.

Platform for Local Narratives

The trust of the claim of the proponents of local narratives derives from our quest in contemporary African to reflect on the Africa project and thus embark on the search for a platform that would best account for the needs and challenges of Africa in a more satisfactory manner. This quest is associated with those held by some scholars in the social sciences in terms of the ways social structures influence value judgments. Values judgments, some believe, are determined by the traditions, customs, and folkways of each society, which are not necessarily shared by every society. As Sumner puts it, what is right, is determined by the folkways of each society (Sumner, 190:446). If we add to this fact of cultural variation the issue of how an individual's values reflect those of his own social group and time, we may then begin to question the universal validity of moral claims. This is based on the claim that our moral attitudes and judgments lean on our social environment. Even our deepest convictions about justice and the rights of man are originally nothing but the internalized views of our societies. This reasoning is the source of the problems we find in Africa and many parts of the world today. For, many are wont to use the facts of the variation as a basis to affirm the superiority of one culture to another.

The result of this ethnocentric attitude in many cases is as D.H. Munro (1967:114) says, an intolerable excess of interference. This no doubt will not only lead to the disruption of viable moral ideals in other culture, it will in addition lead to the destruction of the mechanism for the promotion and preservation of those moral ideas and ideals. This ethnocentric attitude may be, as J.J. Kupperman points out, a combination of two factors: "absolutism in ethics" (that is, the belief that something may be right or wrong independently of what any culture or individual happens to believe), and the belief that in fact one's own culture has arrived at the correct answers to existential problems. (1970:74).

The sense in the concern for tolerance is not difficult to see here. Narrativists urge us not to speak of practices or beliefs as absolutely right or wrong, but rather to speak of them as right or wrong, relative to a culture or social context. Presumably, then, instead of worrying about

whether certain customs are really right or wrong; we should say they are right or wrong relative to a given people or culture.

What follows from this is the assumption that moral values cannot be interculturally evaluated. Benedict puts this view clearly in her descriptions of three cultures with great sympathy and perceptiveness. She sees them as equally valid patterns of life which mankind has created for itself from the raw materials of existence (1946:278). Each is selected among human potentialities. Some potentialities she says can be realized at great cost but if any society wishes to pay that cost for its chosen and congenial traits, certain moral values will evolve with this pattern, however bad it may be. This cannot be assessed by any external standard.

Benedict's position raises as Otunbanjo observes, two related issues. First, it challenges the claim that there is a universal, independent, ethical standard in terms of which one can evaluate moral values in other societies. It proposes that the assessment and explanation of any moral judgment should be done within the framework of the society or culture to which it applies (1979:149 – 162). The implication is that the moral norms of any society are the standard. The claim then, as L.M. Himnam puts it is that:

The standard against which criticism is possible are internal to the ways of life itself and are distinctive from those which are found in other ways of life; with the consequences that there are no common standards against which two different ways of life may be compared to the advantage of one of them (1983:341).

The assumption here is that moral ideas, principles and actions are tied to other presuppositions in a society, which we can understand after we have laid bare the systems of knowledge, values and symbols that structure the mind of the people. In this way, each community becomes an autonomous arbiter of its meaningfulness and justification. This presupposes, gratuitously though, that sets of such absolute presuppositions are equal in number to existing cultures or societies.

This assumption poses a threat to the existence of universal morality. In fact, it rules out completely the existence and operation of those normative patterns of behaviour which constitute shared human practices,

customs and institutions. It is the implications of, and the challenge posed by, universal morality that will be our concern now. Before this, let us look at the ground for the appeal of the quest for local narratives.

Appeal of Local Narratives

One of the reasons for the appeal of local narratives can be traced to the role played by social and cultural factors in the development of moral ideas. The issue here concerns the view that each culture is dominated by control mechanism, the existence of which evolves a unique set of regulatory ideas that shapes the individual into a unique kind of human being. By this we mean that each culture is seen as a set of symbolic devices for the control of human behavior and for giving the individual a set of definitions of himself and of others. Through these devices the value systems of each society gradually take shape. In the course of the development of these values, the inhabitant of each society organize their experience into a coherent whole. The point here is not only to show that the diversity of values are result of social experience of different cultures, but also that these value are what characterize the identity of cultures. This conscious effort of differentiation along the line of social experiences is usually used to confer an inestimable value upon cultures and to justify their claim to a separate existence.

What this suggests is the view that, where different societies are conditioned by their ways of viewing themselves and interpreting their place in history and nature, it is inappropriate to judge the beliefs and practices of one form of life with the standard of another. An example of this is provided by Benedict concerning the moral standards of the Zuni and those of the Dobu islanders.¹

Among the Zuni, we are told, the value system is based on the pursuance of peace and orderliness. Aggressive behavior is not only discouraged but morally disapproved and cooperation, as one would find in most other systems, is morally approved. This picture is in contrast with the moral values of the Dobu islanders where aggression, promotion of ill-will, strife, suspicion, fear and hatred between one another, are morally judged differently. According to Benedict,

All existence appears to him (the Dobuan) as a cut-throat struggle in which deadly antagonists are pitted against each other in a contest for each of the goods of life. Suspicion and cruelty are his trusted weapons ...he gives no mercy, and he asks for none (OP.Cit 124)

Here, we must be careful not to assume from this that there is a state of complete anarchy among the Dobuans. On the contrary, the treachery and hostilities which are allowed and honored within the group are surprisingly controlled and directed by law and custom. What this indicates is that it is the way of life of the Dobuans which explain their cultural identity in terms of which they characterize their lives in ethical terms. This cannot be used as the yardstick to appraise the lives of say, for example, the Zunis, whose social experiences are completely different from that of the Dobuans. This view is what most relativists usually use to support their claims, namely, that the imposition of external values will not only amount to intolerance and dogmatism, it is also, as earlier remarked by Munro, what has provided relativism with much ethical appeal.

Problems of the Quest for Local Narratives

But in spite of its appeal, the quest for local values has some problems some of which are discussed below. The first one concerns the claim peculiar to proponent of local narratives that the moral ideals and judgments of each society originate from its customs, folkways, traditions etc. It is true that in our everyday conversation we use the word morals to cover matters that may be brought under customs, folkways, traditions, etc. So, in discussing the morals of a given group of people, we usually refer to such things as the rules of marriage, sex conduct, their manner of organizing mutual aid, and their system of reward and punishment. Things of this kind will certainly reveal a lot about their values, but the point is that not all these values would be moral values.² There is a significant difference between customary values and moral values properly so called. Whereas, one cannot contemplate moral values without a renewed sense of universal obligation, values arising from customs may not involve this

sense of universal obligation. Here, Wiredu gives an example:

An Akan living in Akan land is expected, as a matter of course, to observe, for example Akan rule of greeting. It goes without saying that other people living in other lands need not feel any such obligation. On the other hand, whether you are a Ghanaian or an American or a Chinese or of any other nationality, race or culture, truth-telling is an indefeasible obligation upon you (1995:35)

The point here is to say that, while it is possible to envisage a society without the rule of greeting elders, it is impossible to have a society that is devoid of the moral rule of truth telling. On this consideration, truth – telling would be binding on everybody. For if truth –telling were not binding, and everybody could tell lies without hindrance, no one would trust any one’s word and social life to use Wiredu’s phrase would become intolerably Hobbesian.

This is the source of the mistake of some relativists. They tend to conflate the rules of customs with the rules of morality. So, when relativist says that morality is relative what they may mean is simply that the obligatoriness of custom is relative. Strictly speaking, however, the obligatoriness of moral rules is unconditional. This unconditional nature stems from the fact that moral rules unlike customs are not conditioned responses to environmental stimuli; comprising the results of training and of rewards and punishment in a given society as we can see from the case of greeting in Akan society. Although, many customs are structured to achieve the well being of societies, and we may suppose that some do actually succeed in this. But this is not a moral fact. The reason is that, there are plenty of rooms for variation in the efficiency of customs. A custom that is good in one society may be considered bad in another society. Or it may be good in a given society at a particular time without being so in another time and circumstances.

This susceptibility to being overtaken by changing time, place and circumstance is part of what distinguishes custom from morality. Yet, because there is, as already remarked, a broad concept of morality within which custom has been assumed to be a part, it is easy for people, on the basis of observation of the great variety of customs among the different

cultures of the world, to conclude that morality is relative in the sense that moral rightness consists in being approved by a given culture.

Another problem implicit in the assumption of relativists is associated with their appeal for tolerance. As we can see from the preceding discussion on the relativist's point about moral beliefs is that their existence depends on certain other beliefs of a society which provide the framework within which human experiences is interpreted in its social and cultural setting. As a result of this, and in particular, because moral beliefs perform certain roles in the lives of the people, relativists claim that they must be respected. In other words, whatever the nature of any moral practice, for example, the killing of twins as was once practiced in Calabar (Nigeria), it should be tolerated.

The question then is, if moral beliefs are to be understood in terms of the role they play in the lives of the people and on that basis is tolerated; does it mean that such beliefs are free from critical appraisals? Hedenius, for example, noted that "the fact that for some reasons it is necessary to tolerate a practice P, must regard P as morally right" (1981:131). Many practices may be tolerated though we regard them as morally wrong. This indicates that tolerance does not just entail the existence of a wide range of beliefs and values, and the freedom of individuals and groups to fully express their diverse beliefs, practices and life – stance, it also presuppose the possibility of change (Kurtz:1995:16). By this we mean that moral beliefs are not static. The dynamism of moral beliefs is borne out of the fact that, when such beliefs are in conflict with other beliefs, which as Ross says, stand better, the test of a true moral reflection (Ross:1963:10), they are "bound" to obey the forces of change.

Here, a moral conviction that stands the test of a true moral reflection will be that the existence of which is not only suitable to contemporary social life, but also whose beliefs and practices leads to the promotion of human essence. This, therefore, explains the diversity of values and how such values that is not in line with the "test of a true moral reflection can be appraised. Now, the question of the "distance" of a people's moral conviction from the promotion of human essence might pose a problem here; relativists are likely to argue that such judgments are personal expressions of speakers. But this cannot lead us to how moral values can be adequately assessed.

The assessment of moral values here imply that one unprejudicially see his own conception of values as that whose limitations can be reviewed when compared with others in terms of their adequacy in realizing their goals. In other words, what tolerance requires is not that we endorse all moral beliefs or conceptions of values however repugnant they may be, but that we see our conception of values as being open to revision.

This is to show that the diversity of cultural beliefs and practices does not preclude the possibility of cross cultural evaluation of moral values. The issue here is that, even if we grant that there is an unlimited variety of mores occasioned by the diversity of values, there may nevertheless be reasons for preferring some to others. For example, it is possible to say on the score of happiness and satisfactory human relationships that some “experiment in living”, to use Macbeth phrase, are more successful than others (1970:103). On this consideration, it is possible for some features of a society to be criticized and changed without necessarily bringing down the “whole structure”.

We acknowledge the influence of anthropological and historical findings on the position of ethical relativism. There is now a greater understanding of the impact of such findings on the moral beliefs of peoples in different societies. However, it is important to note the need for shared moral convictions if human society is to be stable. As Dorothy Emmet remarks, “there are ways of carrying a certain amount of instability and of resolving conflicts besides that of re-asserting beliefs in a single existing set of beliefs” (1970:103). This partly depends on people being able to question some features of their norms. There are situations where people are unwilling to conform to what is traditional, that is, unwilling to change what has been regarded as the given in their society. But this is not to undermine the fact that morality, like culture, is not static. It is something that changes from time to time inconsonance with the dynamics of human struggles.

Here, relativists may concede that values and judgments do change but most of them insist, however, that the criteria in terms of which they are assessed should not be external to the forms of life of which they are a part. This view is equally problematic. The reason is that, even if moral beliefs, practices and judgments, are to be located in their context, this does not mean that morality must remain so for the society to survive.

Murdock for example, rejects the relativist's claim that cultural elements can only be understood in the context of the culture to which they belong (1965:146).

Such claim, Murdock says, is destructive to comparative studies. Secondly, Murdock rejects the view of Herskovits that given the equal validity and dignity of all culture, no evaluation of norms should be made across cultural boundaries. He rejects this because everywhere he sees people changing their moral ideas, especially ideas that are no longer existentially beneficial.

People relinquish cannibalism and head hunting with little resistance when colonial governments demonstrate the material advantages of peace. Such evidence indicates that different cultural adjustments to similar needs are by no means of equivalent utility or practical worth. Some must manifestly be superior to others in at least a pragmatic sense if they are always chosen in preference to the latter when both alternatives are available (Murdock: 1965:147-148).

Here, Murdock places choice at the heart of social change and developments, believing that context-dependent value judgment do not create room for change. Relativism, therefore, on this view, is part of what Murdock calls the "conservatism which hope to arrest social change" (Hanson, 1978:43).

However, the above claim by Murdock cannot be taken to mean a general assertion of the superiority of some values over others; we must, rather, take this claim to mean that there are certain values in some societies that satisfy basic human wants and needs, such as human survival and the provision of conducive atmosphere for social cooperation, better than others. This view, however, is only partially correct. For, there is more to social values than the satisfaction of basic human wants and needs.

What one can infer from the above discussion is that Murdock seems to be particularly interested in questions that concern the relative ability of different societies to satisfy human wants or needs. Now, if question of this nature were the only ones faced in societies, then Murdock would have a telling argument against relativism. But there is more to know about societal values beyond their ability to satisfy people's wants and needs.

One can ask about their logical structure; the way they presuppose, imply or contradict each other in a complex cultural system.

Here, relativism is the only appropriate approach, for our concern is with the intrinsic meaning of cultural values. The meaning here represent what the people in a given culture do in fact think, believe and aspire to. “Their ideology is forged in specific socio-historical circumstances and takes specific forms”. And this can be grasped by looking at cultures in their own terms, in their logical relations with each other.

But this is the source of the problem. Cultures are not so perfectly integrated to warrant such holism. Our point about relativism thus far does not contain any claim that a people’s culture is impervious to the outside world. In fact, as Lawuyi argues, to say that values are context –dependent, is to create the illusion that we know everything about man and his environment from the knowledge of ourselves (1992:47). This is because cultures do overlap and societies with different cultures do interact with and influence one another. On this consideration, we cannot legitimately talk of any form of moral evaluation that is peculiar to a society. This is to say that the localization of ideas cannot be the final word in any cultural authority. This is because sometimes what happens in one society may affect or restrict the activities of people in other societies – in which case we cannot only say that cultures are local and separate, but that given the fact of the inter – locking relationships of cultures, we cannot but be concerned with the activities of people of other culture.

Let us now examine the reason for the appeal of ethical relativism. Relativists reject any attempt at placing moral values on an evolutionary scale in terms of criteria of values developed outside a society. They argue that since cultures differ in the way they interpret their experiences and because they operate with different assumptions about morality, a people’s moral system can only be understood by unveiling those assumptions which guide their interpretation of experience. And since different interpretations suggest the reality of different cultural identities, no society can claim to have the final word on the meaning of morality.

It is important to note here that, relativism has some merits. It is a fact, for instance, that the interpretation of human experience vary from one place to another. And that even within a society interpretation may vary with time. Now, if interpretation of experiences vary in these ways

then it should be correct to say that no way of interpreting human experiences should be regarded as the given.

However, the trouble with the above view is not with the contention that social experiences vary. It is with the mistaken assumption that the diversity of these experiences and their attendant variation of values are sufficient to establish ethical relativism. This is because it is possible for one to accept the facts of cultural variation and deny ethical relativism without contradicting himself. W.T. Stace, for example, argues as follows while rejecting the analysis presented by Benedict:

Ruth Benedict tells us that the Dobu islanders disagree with (the) advice of Jesus Christ about loving your neighbour...she seems to conclude that treachery and ill-will are, for the Dobu islanders, good. My contention is that the Dobu islanders are simply mistaken... People are often mistaken about what will be good for the health of their bodies. That is why we have moralists. The Dobu islanders need someone to correct their ...moral mistake (1950:211-212).

This is to say no matter how profound or great the differences in the moral beliefs or our social experience may be, it is possible to hold that some of these beliefs are true and others false. The fact that societies differ about what is right and what is wrong, does not mean that one society cannot have better reasons than another for holding to its views. The question is how do we know which reason is better than the other? Here, we believe that a society's reasons are the results of a value system that have as its priority the satisfaction of the needs of its people and the promotion of human socio-economic cooperation (Ebijuwa, 2003). This being the case, it will be "counter-productive" for relativists to use the facts of the diversity of social experiences which expresses their cultural self-identity to say that their value systems cannot be evaluated by criteria of values alien to their social environment. In this sense, the appraisal of a foreign cultural activity will involve what has been called "cultural cross-breeding" (Oladipo, 1996:81). By this we mean that we take the good aspect of a given cultural value and blend it with the good ones of another society's cultural values, for example, the technologically oriented way of life, which are essentially beneficial to mankind (Ibid). However, the rec-

ognition and adoption of the beneficial aspect of another cultures value should not in any way be taken as the imposition of superior values. After all, no society lives in isolation. And so cannot lead to intolerance and dogmatism as some relativists are wont to believe. This being the case, it will not be difficult to see that the existence of different social experiences and their associated value systems does not eliminate the possibility of cross – cultural assessment of values (Ebijuwa, 2006). In fact, Edmund Burke is right when he observes that a state without the means of some change is without the means of its own conservation.

Conclusion

Thus far, we have argued that moral values cannot be completely relativised. And also that the evidence from anthropological findings reveal that value judgments are context – dependent. However, we have also seen that the facts of this diversity of values cannot as Protagoras and postmodernists thinkers have argued establish ethical relativism. For, it is possible, as stated earlier, for a society to have a belief in a particular value system and for that belief to be false. This being the case, then universal morality is possible.

Endnotes

¹ The Zuni Indians can be found in the Pueblos of New Mexico and the Dobus on an island north of the eastern end of New Guinea. For further characterization of this groups of people – see R. Benedict.

² I owe the distinction between customs and moral values to Kwasi Wiredu, see his (1995) “custom and Morality: A comparative analysis of some African and western conceptions of morals” in his *Conceptual Decolonization in Africa philosophy Ibadan: Hope publications, P.35.*

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