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Morality and ethics in Western and non-Western societies have similar importance in that human social and interpersonal behavior is under the necessity of the adjustment of interests among individuals for attaining the general well-being of the community. In all societies the concepts of right and wrong are determined by perceptions of what constitutes the good life for individuals, on the one hand, and the general good of society, on the other. Divergences of moral norms as between Western and non-Western societies are largely due to variations in cultural traditions and to ecological, sociological, and other existential differences. At the risk of being accused of ethnophilosophizing, I will attempt an account of the wellspring of morality in Africa (and parts thereof) for the purpose of facilitating the proper analysis and appreciation of the foundations of that morality.

In this regard, one can boldly affirm that the wellspring of morality and ethics in African societies is the pursuit of a balance of individual, with communal, well-being. It is not unusual to get the impression that African cultures extol the virtues of community, that moral obligations are primarily social rather than individual, and that communal factors often take precedence over individual rights or interests. The impression exists, furthermore, that morality is predicated on a religious foundation. When these suppositions are meant as derogatory commentaries on the moral universe in which Africans live, they are based on an improper understanding of the principles that fashion the moral and social fabric of African societies.

Consider the idea that each person is a representative of himself or herself as well as of his or her family. This has the implication that an individual has to consider not only how a course of action contemplated by him will affect him personally, but also how it will affect his family, either directly or in terms of the way in which they will be perceived in the society. For example, one is expected, even as one pursues one’s own goals, to be careful not to tarnish any tradition of excellence in conduct established by one’s lineage. But this does not diminish the responsibility that society has to the individual.

What is this responsibility? This is a very serious and all-important question. It may seem that morality is a personal thing, first and foremost. This is only partially
true, from the African perspective. The artificial separation of individual moral responsibility from that of society is the result of superficial thinking. It is obvious that the context in which moral obligations arise is an interactive one. It is the social milieu in which competition for the scarce resources of the environment takes place. But it is not only the resources of the environment that are scarce. The human resources of love, patronage, recognition, compassion, companionship, etc. are also scarce, and require deliberate efforts in both their generation and equitable distribution. Here lies the crux of the moral responsibility of society to its members and to itself. And this fact is represented in numerous ideas in African moral thought.

Commenting on African ideas of community and individuality, Gbadegesin has written:

From this it follows that there need not be any tension between individuality and community since it is possible for an individual to freely give up his/her own perceived interest for the survival of the community. But in giving up one's interests thus, one is also sure that the community will not disown one and that one's well being will be its concern. . . . The idea of individual rights, based on a conception of individuals as atoms, is therefore bound to be foreign to this system. For community is founded on notions of an intrinsic and enduring relationship among its members. (1991: 66–7)

If we shift gears a bit, we will immediately understand the full meaning of the above reflections. The suggestion that Africans are “in all things religious” and that religion is the basis of their morality misses the relationship between religion and morality. That view has been disseminated by such African theological scholars as Bolaji Idowu, John Mbiti, and J. O. Awolalu and their Western mentors, such as G. E. Parrinder, R. S. Rattray, and A. B. Ellis. These authors fail to understand what makes religion important in African life, namely, the welfare of the individual and that of society. This is why many reflective students of morality in Africa will easily recognize Wiredu’s position that the basis of morality in Africa is human welfare. According to him (1997), the basis of morality is universal in all societies, though what is moral in concrete moral situations may not be universally the same in all societies. In Philosophy and an African Culture, Wiredu says:

It has often been said that our traditional outlook was intensely humanistic. It seems to me that, as far as the basis of the traditional ethic is concerned, this claim is abundantly justified. Traditional thinking about the foundations of morality is refreshingly non-supernaturalistic. Not that one can find in traditional sources elaborate theories of humanism. But anyone who reflects on our traditional ways of speaking about morality is bound to be struck by the preoccupation with human welfare: What is morally good is what befits a human being; it is what is decent for a man – what brings dignity, respect, contentment, prosperity, joy, to man and his community. And what is morally bad is what brings misery, misfortune, and disgrace. Of course, immoral conduct is held to be hateful to God, the Supreme Being, and even to the lesser gods. But the thought is not that something is good because God approves of it, but rather that God approves of it because it is good in the first place – a distinction which, as Socrates noted in the context of a different culture, does not come easily to every pious mind. (1980: 6; my emphasis)
I might mention that I have italicized a sentence in the quote from Wiredu to bring attention to my dissent with it. Wiredu claims that traditional African sources will not show elaborate reflections on the humanistic foundations of ethics. This is inaccurate, as the Yoruba Ifa demonstrates serious efforts to show that the basis of morality lies in the concern for human welfare (see Gbadegesin 1991). This point is not considered a serious issue here and will not be pursued further. Instead, we will return to the question of the humanistic foundations of ethics in Africa.

Wole Soyinka (1988) laments the tendency toward a socially disintegrative individualism in American society. In a chapter entitled “Between Self and System” (ibid. 61–85), he pays attention to the dislocation between intellectual and artistic efforts in American thought. For him there can be little separation, if any at all, between the ends of art and the ends of ethics. This is not unexpected, as in Yoruba thought there is an inseparable integration between ethics and all aspects of life. In particular, there is often the characterization of that which is moral or ethical as that which is beautiful – that is, as that which is aesthetically pleasing. Roland Abiodun (1983) dilates this relationship between beauty and good character, concluding that both are inseparable in Yoruba ethics and aesthetics. Thus, Wiredu’s views are in tandem with this conception. Wiredu says:

There is an aesthetic strain in our traditional ethical thought that is worthy of special mention in this connection. As noted already, what is good is conceived to be what is fitting…what is fitting is what is beautiful…. There are, indeed, aesthetic analogies in the moral language of other cultures. But aesthetic analogies are taken much more seriously and have more extensive moral relevance in our traditional thought. (1980: 6)

Elaborating a little on the humanistic basis of indigenous morality, he later observes:

The first axiom of all Akan axiological thinking is that man or woman is the measure of all value…. And every Akan maxim about the specifically moral values that I know, explicitly or implicitly, postulates the harmonization of interests as the means, and the securing of human well-being as the end, of all moral endeavour. (1996: 65)

The circles of obligations, rights, and privileges which radiated from the center of household relations of kinship to the larger circumferences of lineage and clan affinities provided a natural school for training in the practice of sympathetic impartiality which, in its most generalized form, is the root of all moral virtue. (ibid. 71)

All the foregoing is contrary to the notion that the basis of African morality is to be found in religion. Still, there is some relationship between religion and conduct in African society, and we need to be clear about it. Briefly, in African society religion is both an instrument of cohesion and a factor of order, bringing to the fore the creative genius of members of society. In essence, it is being suggested here that religion developed out of human necessity and served the human need for knowledge and security. The injunctions of morality, insofar as they are related to religion in the African environment, will be found to be motivated by humanistic
considerations. Thus the invocation of the Supreme Being, the divinities, the ances-
tors, and other forces in moral matters is mainly intended to lend legitimacy,
through an already available reinforcement mechanism, to what is often taken for
granted as morally obligatory in a humanistic sense. Being morally upright is not as
much a matter of pleasing the supernatural forces as it is of promoting human
welfare. It is in the light of this that the attitude of the Yoruba people pertaining to
the place of religion and the supernatural forces in morality becomes easy to under-
stand. Devotion to the deities is not as much in the interest of the deities as it is in
the interest of the people; and when a deity fails to bring benefits to society, people
feel free to sever the relationship.

Some Ethical Concepts in Yoruba Philosophy

To gain a more concrete idea of the substance of an African morality, let us con-
sider a number of related concepts used in the assessment of behavior in Yoruba
ethical reasoning. In Yoruba philosophical discourse, ethics relates to the norms
that govern human behavior, on the one hand, and the behavior of the supernat-
ural beings in their relationship with humans, on the other. As the above suggests,
it is not only humans that have to be ethical: the gods too do.

In Yoruba language, ethical behavior and morally approved conduct is called,
variously, *iwa rere, iwa pele, iwa irele, iwa tutu*, or *iwa omoluwabi*. A morally upright
person, a person who exhibits such virtues as honesty, respect (for himself, the
elders, and for others, in general), decency, benevolence, etc., is *oniwa rere, onirele,
oniwa tutu, oniwa pele, Omoluwabi*. Such persons are highly valued and respected in
Yoruba society, and are rewarded by society in various ways for their goodness.

The first concept that I want to examine here is *ese*, or sin. This concept has
gained much currency in religious discourse because of the influence of Christian
ethics in many African societies. This is not to suggest that it was absent originally
from the lexicon of Yoruba people, contrary to Bolaji Idowu (1962: 148). But it is
important to note a fundamental distinction between *ese* and the Christian concept
of sin. In the Yoruba language *ese* refers not only to religious infractions against the
Supreme Being, the deities, and the ancestors, but also to infractions against fellow
human beings. Indeed, the religious cases are *ese* only because the infractions are
ultimately against fellow human beings. Thus, while a person may have done
wrong, it does not necessarily follow that the person has sinned, if sin is understood
in the purely Christocentric sense. One may speculate that probably the disintegra-
tion of the moral fabric of the Nigerian polity is a consequence of the substitution of
an alien concept of right and wrong for the indigenous ideas of morality. This
substitution seems responsible for the apparent feeling that infractions against
fellow humans are not so very grave, since they are no longer regarded as
sins, which are now only possible against God, Allah, Olodumare, Chukwu, or
Osanobuwa, depending on each person’s religious terminology.

The Yoruba concept of sin (*ese*), then, defines a broad category covering infrac-
tions against persons as well as supernatural beings. But there are important sub-
categories of *ese* that are of use in the understanding of Yoruba ethics. This brings
us to the concepts of eewo, aimo, egbin, abuku, allebu, ibaje, aidaa, among others. It is only possible here to discuss a few of these briefly.

I begin with eewo. This concept has two aspects. It is often translated as tabu by theological writers on African religions in their attempt to understand Yoruba beliefs. Tabu or eewo in this sense relates to things prohibited by the Supreme Being, the divinities, and the ancestors. However, there is the more secular meaning of eewo or tabu which relates to morality simpliciter. Eewo, conceived in this sense, means things that are wrong to do and for which sanctions will be incurred. When one says “sanctions,” this is not to be construed as meaning punishment formally enforced, as in legal punishment. It may be in the form of simply losing stature, status, or face in the community, whereas in the religious sense, some atonement or sacrifice has to be made to assuage the unseen forces that may have been offended.

Another important concept in Yoruba moral discourse is abuku. Literally, this concept translates as “blemish.” In the Yoruba understanding of morality, to act against moral expectations is to exhibit a moral blemish on one’s character. Human beings with moral blemishes are deformed by the blemish, and will, for instance, be shy, as a consequence, to raise their voice in public to participate in the discussion of community affairs. In fact, to have such a blemish is to be unworthy of communion with one’s peers or of holding a responsible office in the community.

I come now to the concept of aimo. The word aimo has two meanings, one epistemic, the other moral. In the epistemic sense it means “lack of knowledge” or “absence of knowledge” (Hallen and Sodipo 1986). Aimo in this sense could lead to infractions in the ethical sense, for ignorance can be a liability in many ways. But our main concern is with the moral sense of the term. In this sense aimo is very close to the blemish of abuku discussed above. The difference is that aimo is a more episodic failure and is easier to expiate and be rid of. There are many things that may create aimo for a person, some of them small, others big. The significance of these acts of vice can be cumulative, and their destructive effect on one’s image, as well even as on one’s own self-conception, can be very real. Accordingly, Yoruba moralists are especially keen to urge all and sundry to be mindful lest one’s personal integrity be overtaken by an accumulating aimo.

An equally interesting, though somewhat more striking, concept is that of egbin. The word egbin, with but a variation in tone marks, expresses two polar ideas. On the one hand, superlative beauty in a person or thing is characterized by comparing the person or thing to a beautiful animal by the name egbin. On the other hand, when an act is despicable and odious to the senses, capable, so to speak, of causing nausea, it is said to be egbin.

In the moral meaning of egbin, it is clear that the Yoruba have calibrated the degrees of moral decadence that members of the community are cautioned against. Children are brought up with a clear sense of the differentiation of all these degrees of defect of behavior or character, and they mature with the consciousness of the need to internalize the virtues of good behavior that are highlighted by the delineated polarities. If these imperatives are implemented in actual conduct, one result is that the subject wins the good opinion of his peers and, indeed, of the community at large, a consideration that is of the last consequence in a communalistic society.
Other concepts that space does not permit us to discuss here, but which we mentioned, are aleebu, ibaje, and aidaa. These three are related, in a variety of ways, to those that we have discussed above. Aleebu and ibaje are cognate to abuku, while aidaa is cognate to aimo, except that the latter is more easily detected in behavior, while aidaa may be concealed to the unwary, only to come to the surface when critical situations arise.

It may merit mentioning here that acts that are described in Yoruba ethical discourse as bad or less than good concern not only requirements to do various things, but also one’s manner of carriage in society and such things as discretion and the ability to keep peer confidence. These are clearly factors that are seriously viewed in judgments of character and evaluation of conduct. And it would be strange to see an adult in Yoruba society who is not aware of all the aspects of personal and public morality noted here.

**Concluding Remarks**

Clearly it might be said that what we refer to as moral concepts reflect practical nuances of right and wrong conduct. This is true but incomplete. Morality in most civilized societies does not start and end with mere notions of right and wrong, dissociated from the emotions and feelings of members of society. What makes moral dictates so powerful is not the mere rationality of the grounds for their determination. What gives moral notions the imperativeness of their purport is the fact that persons and communities feel that infractions of the demands of morality constitute serious challenges to the survival of human life and culture.

Moral education consists in both prescriptions and proscriptions. The concepts discussed above form the basis of various proscriptions. Together they give a vivid, though incomplete, portrayal of Yoruba morality. In a more extended discussion one would not only cover more concepts for proscriptions but also treat of those concepts that motivate the prescriptions that help to define the Yoruba ethic. In some cases, however, as in the present one, the negative can be quite effective in highlighting the positive.

It has been suggested above that ethics in Africa may be described as humanistic. If care is not taken to clarify what is intended by this, it may be asked: ‘If so, why do we see so much human disaster in Africa?’ The interlocutor may want to know why there is so much leadership disorientation and violent conflicts with their attendant socio-economic catastrophes. The proper understanding of the fundamental factors that have led to this situation is deeper than what a cursory glance can unravel. Suffice it to say that many of the leadership crises experienced today are consequences of a breakdown in the indigenous ethic. This has been the result of the adoption, in a largely adverse historical process, of various alien cultural elements. Thus, for example, the ethos of politics, law, and business operative in contemporary Africa is in many ways alien to her indigenous cultures. When this is taken account of, it becomes clear that the human disasters current on the continent are predictable and unavoidable.

Finally, the interplay of specific rules of behavior with general ideas about morality in this discussion is typical of traditional African life and thought. It signalizes
the integration of the concerns of the moral life with those of the philosophical understanding of the same.

References


Further reading


ETHICS AND MORALITY IN YORUBA CULTURE


