Ethical Perspective of Human Life in Relation to Human Rights in African Indigenous Societies

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Abstract

The issue of human rights and human life are *sine qua non* to positive mental attitude among various people especially, the Africans, who place much premium on human life which forms the basis of human existence. However, the Africans have come under strong criticisms by the Western world as people who do not have the basic rudiments that will sustain the essential fabric of the social hegemony; rather, they are castigated and condemned as not having the basic understanding of human right. Suffice to say that the Africans belief that human rights is subsumed under the notion of human life. Human life is considered sacrosanct and every human have the right to enjoy it irrespective of status or religious affiliation. In this regard, human right is fundamentally a function of human life which is considered as divine and guided by the Supreme Being and enforced by the divinities. Therefore, this paper posited that in indigenous societies in Africa and particularly among the Yoruba, human rights and human life is guided by ethical demands which help in regulating social relationships and inter personal relationships thereby guaranteeing social equilibrium.

Keywords: Africa, Ethics, Human Life, Human Rights, Indigenous Societies.

1.1 Introduction

Traditional Africa is widely stigmatized by outsiders as a 'dark continent' that is ruled by barbarism and savagery. Early travelers' reports which as E. Evans-Pritchard rightly noted were concocted according to a standard "recipe" (Evans-Pritchard, 1971:144-145), greatly contributed in creating such an impression. Hence, many of the colonial governments do not today have much difficulty in absolving themselves from many of their questionable activities in Africa on the pretext that they are on "a civilizing mission".

The same early travelers' accounts "made African religion appear to be a morass of bizarre beliefs and practices" (Ray, 1976:3). References to human sacrifices, cannibalism, slavery and taboos like the killing of twins, litter the pages of their publications. Missionary hagiography rather than help matters continues to blur the picture even further. By excessively eulogizing the humanitarian activities of expatriate Christian agents, it implicitly leaves the impression that generally life in traditional African societies is highly precarious and devalued.

Be that as it may. We do not intend to get bogged down by wild tales of people whose main interest in Africa was to provide a catalogue of the curious and who wrote primarily to tickle the fancy of a credulous audience back home. Such tales, as it is well known, are largely a product of racial and cultural prejudice. They are highly exaggerated and distorted. Our intention is rather to take a holistic view of African religion with the aim of finding out to what extent human life is esteemed, enhanced and protected in traditional societies. Specifically, we shall be examining traditional African beliefs and values to discover the level of consciousness there is about their perception of human rights and how this is instrumental to their socio-political development.

Finally, we shall be interested in finding out what definite institutions and systems that were evolved to ensure that such rights were upheld and that life was made meaningful in the society. We shall rely largely on our knowledge of Yoruba and Igbo indigenous religious cultures and societies for a greater part of our illustration. For a clearer understanding to be elicited, it is significant to clarify concepts.

2.0 Conceptual Clarification

The notion of Human rights could be regarded as an institution that is as old as mankind. This is based on the fact that mankind was molded in the 'image of God', and this suggests that God gave mankind His mark of approval as a divine stamp of importance. Man's divine nature therefore accords him a sense of worth and value as posited by Callaway and Harrelson-Stephens, (2007:21). This divine nature confers on human beings the greatest of all rights and makes mankind a different species of being on earth. The essential fact to be noted here is that these rights have a divine origin. It is on the basis of this that Callaway and Harrelson-Stephens, (2007:27) stated that:

> Because these (rights) stem from a divine source, they are inalienable by mortal authority. This concept is found not only in the Judo-Christian tradition, but in Islam and other religions with a deistic base.

Indubitably Human rights could be regarded as the essential structure for a lucid, resourceful, cognizant atmosphere and it is the bulwark for a peaceful coexistence and sustainable development of any society. According to Chukwudozie, (2000:3), "they are indivisible and do not constitute a gift item from authoritarian governments. In other words, they are man's property and can never become acts of political charity to be dished out to the masses … at will". Therefore, human rights are those inalienable attributes of human beings which aid them in accomplishing their naturally- ordained duties and to function harmoniously with one another within an organized society and they are mainly directed towards providing minimum standard of decent living worthy of man as a human being.

It could be inferred that human rights are essential to human sustenance and development and no person should be willfully denied of it, because it is God – given and every human being has the potential ability to enjoy it without any bias. These rights include the right to speak freely, to dissent, to practice one's faith, to join with others to promote change, the right to decent living, the right to promote one's culture and the right to self determination. But more significantly, is the right to life by every member of the society.

In addition, human rights may be relatively a recent expression. But some of its central ideas have in one way or another been recognized in various societies including those of traditional Africa for a long time. As defined by Eze, (1984:5) "human rights represent demands or claims which individuals or groups make on society, some of which are protected by law and have become part of *ex lata* while others remain aspirations to be attained in the future". He groups such rights under five sub-headings: civil, political, social, economic and cultural.

There is more to human rights than the fact of its legal status. The human and the moral aspects are much more fundamental. He maintains that a legitimate claim to certain rights is based on the concept of the human being as a "person". Only persons have rights. We do not, strictly speaking, talk about the rights of animals, except in so far as they belong to persons. He rightly concluded that: "the fundamental assumptions of human rights arguments therefore, rest upon the fact that human beings are persons who by virtue of their very nature have legal and moral claims that are intrinsic to them".

Traditional Africans clearly recognize the unique nature and individual personality of human beings. Although their patterns of social organization and political economy prior to the advent of colonialism might have differed from those of modern Western society, traditional African people had evolved and lived by legal systems and customs which paid "particular attention to the human being and to all that appertains to him, particularly his rights" (Eze, 1984:13). African indigenous religion is clearly "a religion of structure" (Zuesses, 1979:7).

African indigenous religion refers to the rich corpus of beliefs, myths, practices, ritual symbols and institutions, which various African groups cultivate as a result of their experience of the mystery of the universe. These differ from one group to another in accordance with the varying socio-political life.

3.0 Life (*Ndu/Emi)* as a Primary Value among the Africans

The indigenous Igbo word for a human being *mmadu or mma ndu* translated as "the beauty of life", appear to sum up as well as provide a clue to the rich traditional African perception of the uniqueness of human beings, their life and place in creative order. No doubt, the traditional cosmology of the different African people sees the Spirit world as superior to, and more powerful than the human world. However, it is man and his world that form the focal point of the traditional African vision of reality. African traditional cosmology is ostensibly this world-affirming and life-centred.

Various versions on the myth of origin found in different parts of Africa narrate that each individual human life proceeds from the Supreme Being, at times through the intermediary of tutelary deities. They further characterize man as a microcosm with the different constitutive elements interrelating the individual to various aspects of reality both visible and invisible realms. According to the *Nri, Chuckwu* simply sent down the first name and his wife, *Eri and Namaku,* directly from heaven (Afigbo, 1981:31-67). The Barnbuti Pygmies of the Central African region depict God as a skilled Potter who formed man from clay. God made the body of the first man by kneading, and then covered him with a skin and poured blood into his lifeless body. Then the first man breathed and lived. Among the Yoruba, Idowu, (1962:) posits that *Olodumare* commissioned the arch divinity, *Obatala* or *Orisa nla* to create the lifeless body of man while the vital principle was put into this lifeless body by the Supreme Being. By this act, the Africans believe that man shares in the essential attribute of God as a being that has life in him. They postulate the concept of every man as both a unique creation and the work of a unique creator.

The right to life, property and basic justice of the weak, the helpless and the poor, as well as the orphan are upheld and anchored in religion. The fortunes of this category of people are believed to be particularly dear to the Supreme Being. Numerous folktales and legends repeatedly emphasize the prompt manner in which spiritual beings intervene on the side of such people. Against such a rich conceptual background human life, which is essentially sacred, is a primary value and highly esteemed among the Africans. The individual right to life is generally protected. The traditional Igbo have such personal names as *Ndubuisi* (life is the primary value), *Nduka* (life is the greatest thing). They further advised that one should swallow his/her life rather than surrender it to any adversary – *Ndukaaku, Onye apubalu*

nkeya, ya nyoya n'afo. Furthermore, tutelary deities like Ala and ancestral spirits are directly linked with people's life. They are believed to serve as protectors and sustainers.

Various African groups equally evolved different kinds of measures and customs which are firmly anchored in their religious traditions for the protection of the life of people, including the unborn baby. In many places pregnant women and their husbands were required to offer occasional sacrifices to tutelary deities and ancestral spirits for the protection of the life of babies yet unborn. Pregnant women are shielded by numerous taboos mainly to ensure that the baby's life is safe. Mbiti records that "among the Akamba and Gikuyu, for example, all weapons and all irons are removed from the house of the expectant mother before the birth takes places. People believe that iron articles attract lightning". The Ingassana on the other hand, require the expectant mother and her husband to keep away from fire prior to the birth of the child. "These and similar prohibitions" Mbiti concludes "illustrate the care and protection which both mother and child should and do receive" (Mbiti, 1969:111-112).

From infancy through puberty, adulthood to grand old age, there are various kinds of religious rituals in different societies made by parents, relations and individuals themselves aimed at fostering life. Included in such rituals are those connected with initiations, the enshrining of one's personal guiding spirit and patron deities. Prayers (private or public, individual or communal), remain however the watershed in the expression of the vital place of religion in the promotion of human life. As a key motif, life is rarely absent in any indigenous African prayer. In fact, one of the Igbo expression for prayer is *Igbo Ndu* (blessing for life) … All thoughts, all actions should be directed to fostering the individuals as well as community life. No one should jeopardize either his life or that of the other members.

The shedding of blood, except perhaps in the extreme case of warfare, is always a very grave and abhorrent act. It is the greatest abomination among the Igbo, particularly against the earth-deity *Ala,* which is believed to be the 'owner' and 'sustainer' of all lives. (Ikenga-Metuh, 1981:67). The death of a pregnant woman is particularly abhorred. To emphasize the identity of the child, such a woman had to be first operated upon, the baby pulled out and given a separate burial from the mother. So highly esteemed and sacred is human life among traditional Africans that no extent of physical disability, infirmity or pain is allowed as a sufficient reason to warrant its termination. Neither is the individual free to take his life. Suicide is always a very grave abomination that is believed to pullet the affected family, community and the earth as well as distabilize the cosmic equilibrium. As a clear demonstration of its detestable nature, such a person is normally neither buried nor mourned.

4.0 African Religion and Human Rights Protection

In addition to encouraging certain fundamental rights of people, African indigenous religion equally plays the vital role of ensuring that the rights were duly upheld and protected. As a typical "religion of structure", it legitimizes and empowers all worthwhile events and institutions. The characteristics holistic vision which it articulates as well as the vital features of sacredness and cosmic power which it introduces into life and human affairs readily makes it the most crucial factor of social control in the traditional African background. It is in this connection that Kalu (1988:4) suggests that the traditional gods serve as 'policemen'.

Moral norms, like human life itself, have their meaning and significance in religion. The gods and cosmic forces may be invisible. But they are very powerful, oftentimes aggressive and keenly interested in the activities of men. Moral norms and the customary code of conduct are hallowed and explained as ordinances of the gods and founding ancestors. Human behaviour is so crucial in the maintenance of the delicately balanced equilibrium existing between the spirit world and the human world. Any grave misconduct or infringement of the accepted code would upset the balance and thereby imperil the fortunes of men. Hence, as Kalu rightly

commented, "this perception of human existence meant that the moral order must be maintained so that men can live in peace and have abundant life". A number of controls had to be constructed. And a great value is placed on character which is neither beauty nor wealth. Rather, it "referred to moral uprightness, peace with gods and peace with men. Kalu, (1998: 42) is of the view that "purity is essential in averting the anger of the gods or the ruins of the evil spirits".

More specifically, the belief in deities and patron spirits provided a potent instrument for human rights protection. Individuals and groups dedicated themselves, their property and profession to certain powerful deities and tutelary spirits. This serves to deter people from inflicting harm on such persons, groups or property. This is not yet the case of the untouchables (*Osu*). There are such groups as the *Umunri* and the *Aro* groups among the Igbo, for example, who, even in the hey-days of trans-Atlantic slave traffic, traveled far and wide unharmed. Similar immunity was enjoyed by individuals and groups who were known to enjoy special relationship with powerful deities in many parts of traditional Africa. As for property and profession, the idea of deities who served as protectors, was very widespread and effective. Some deities like *Akpa* and *Amadiaoha* among the traditional Igbo were believed to be particularly effective in ensuring the safety of property. Generally, misplaced things were more often than not left untouched since people were very mindful of the vengeful role of tutelary deities to whom such items might be dedicated. Without undergoing full initiation into the cult of spirit beings that are believed to underpin such specialized professions like black-smithing, medicine-making and divination, it was thought to be extremely precarious to engage in the practice.

5.0 Ethics and Dignity of Human Life in Africa

"Ethics", refers to "the fundamental attitude toward good and evil, and the principles to put it into action" (Swidler, 1992:67). In this context, it clearly appears that the foundation of ethics is in one hand the concept of "good and evil" and on the other hand "the dignity of the human being" which implies the respect of "human rights" and by extension, respect for human life. Life is sacrosant and it should be treated as such. This is why among the African people human life is worth living by virtue of the interrelationship that exist in the society. That is to say, in concurrence with the general notion, that in the African world view, human life is not defined on the basis of the family or the collectivity, but one has rights to life by the fact of being a human being. This presupposes the "inviolability" of the dignity inherent in the human person which enhances his life.

The concept of respect of human life means that people must avoid doing to others what is not good. It corresponds to the golden rule in the expression of "what you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others." It has a clear ethical vision, it contains in a sense some ethical principles ("dignity of human being..."), and it considers ethics the foundation of the genuine way of enhancing human life.

According to the traditional ethics, moral conduct is evaluated according to the attitude toward life *(Bumi)*. This is classified as good which protects and promotes human life, and evil which destroys or alters human life. *Bumi* is the supreme value in the Luba ethics, which is completely concentrated on the "respect of human life." For the Baluba, as for many other African peoples, religion and ethics are so anthropocentric that Mbiti could say, "in Africa, it is as if God exists for the sake of man". The Africans are so deeply concerned about the preservation and the promotion of human life that religion itself becomes a tool to reinforce the "respect for human life" Mbiti (1990: 223-256).

This concern for "human life" is possible only because the Africans believe strongly in the "dignity" of every human being. In the African ethics, a person fulfills her/his humanness

when she/he is capable of respect for her/himself and for others. Whenever a person does not "respect" the life and dignity of other persons, she/he automatically empties his/her life force (essence of a genuine human being) because this is the essence of the human person. Any conduct that does not respect the dignity of human life is bad. What contributes to the protection and the intensification of human life is good. The same can be said of other African cultures. In fact, according to Mbiti (1990), Idowu (1962) Awolalu and Dopamu (2005), among the basic principles of "African ethics" we find: truth and rectitude as essential virtues, justice, generosity (the opposite of selfishness), hospitality, protecting the poor and weak, giving honor and respect to older people, chastity before marriage and faithfulness during marriage, avoiding hypocrisy, stealing, and falsehood, and keeping a covenant. This is verified for instance in the Luba society where ethics is based on two poles: evil, bad, sin, ugliness and goodness, righteousness, purity, beauty. This is the basic believe of the African people distinguishing between the bad person and the good person.

In addition to this, apart from this concept of human dignity among the indigenous people, there exists the spirit of "togetherness" which generates a spirit of hospitality and solidarity and this distinguishes African ethics from the Marxist notion of "class struggle". In this respect, the ethics of human life in the African context presupposes the underlying principle of unity and solidarity in all spheres of life and this is what makes social life bearable for the people. A fundamental unity between the different human beings in the community, i.e., a unity of human relationship, underlies traditional African ethics. African ethics therefore, places considerable value on conformity of the individual to the social group in order to preserve the unity of human relationship. It could be said that in a way African thought is, indeed, more concerned with the relationship than with the different entities which constitute the relationship. All human behaviour is expected to conform to this value to ensure social harmony. Human relationship and social harmony are vital elements in the African sense of moral aesthetics.

According to Mbiti (1990: 108-109), it is only in terms of other people that the individual himself is conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." This is "a morality of 'conduct' rather than a morality of 'being,'" Mbiti (1990:214), Gyekye (1996:58-62) or of personal morality. It is a morality of conduct in the sense that it is one's relationships and, therefore, conducts in the social sphere that dictates one's sense of morality. The support of others was more important than one's capacities to achieve one's existential ends—hence the value of corporate existence.

Corporate existence signified a responsibility of many for one. First, the others had to look after the well-being of the individual, i.e., the responsibility of many for one. Second, the individual had to look after the well-being of others. The latter was motivated by the former. Here we note a collaborative relationship between the individual and the society that helped to build and sustain a moral character in a person and moral order (social harmony) in the society. These two elements helped build a strong sense of belonging and identity in the society.

6.0 Conlusion

Our survey may give the impression that the African tradition is perfect. That is not the case at all. We know that the daily life of people does not always correspond to the ideal. The purpose of our paper was to deal with "the system of values" as it relates to the people's perception of human life and its worth at personal and social levels of relationship. This portends that the indigenous culture attaches great significance to human life and this accounts for the sanctity and respect attached to the human person. From our brief analysis we can understand clearly why the African indigenous cultural practices appeal for the promotion of the "positive traditional values" that predispose the people to be interested in the issue of human development as this constitute the pivot upon which African social life is based.

Therefore, human life represents what is probably the primary ethical concern among the African people. My opinion, at the end of this survey, is that Africans are today very concerned with the issue of human life as this helps to project the consciousness and the ethical belief of the people and the violation of this concept is vigorously rejected as it negates the essence of the human person who has the right to life and dignity. Therefore, respect for human life and human dignity is an aspect of the cultural dimension of the Africans which places premium on their social well being in both social and political lives.

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