

# The Role of Ethics in Global Discourse and its Implications for African Social Hegemony

**KEHINDE EMMANUEL OBASOLA, Ph.D**

*Department of Religious Studies, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria  
blessnuel@yahoo.com*

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**Abstract** - *That the world view about the standard of moral life is generally expected to be unflinching is truism. In Africa however, the dynamism of culture based on contemporary influences, affects external evaluation of ethical life. This paper is an examination of the perception of ethics (its indispensable nature and the actual impact expected for the society) as an all-important role player in the arrangement of universal life. This is romanced alongside spectacular determinants such as prominent in the African environment.*

**Keywords** – *Ethics, Global Discourse, Africa, Social Hegemony*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The ethics of a society is embedded in the ideas and beliefs about what is right or wrong, what is a good or bad character; it is also entrenched in the conceptions of satisfactory social relations and attitudes held by the members of the society; it is implanted, furthermore, in the forms or patterns of behavior that are considered by the members of the society to bring about social harmony and cooperative living, justice, and fairness. The ideas and beliefs about moral conduct are articulated, analyzed, and interpreted by the moral thinkers of the society.

African societies, as organized and functioning human communities, have evolved ethical systems, ethical values, principles and rules intended to guide social and moral behaviour. But, like African philosophy itself, the ideas and beliefs of the African society that bear on ethical conduct have not been given elaborate investigation and clarification and, thus, stand in real need of profound and extensive analysis and interpretation. This topic makes the African moral language its point of departure, for the language of morality gives insight into the moral thinking or ideas of the society. The centrality of the notions of character and moral personhood, which are inspired by the African moral language, is assessed with the social character of African ethics; and highlighting its affiliated notions of the ethics of duty and of the common good.

## Meaning of Ethics

The Greek word *ethike* from which the English word ethics derives means ‘character.’ *Ethos* mostly depicted ‘ethics’ is defined by Aristotle as ‘the study (or, science) of character’ - *he ethike*. While custom may be defined as the cultural norms of the society, ethics is the human social relations to which the cultural norms make a contribution. The idea of ethics in a society may be obvious; the same clarity may not obtain with regard to ethics in another society or the modern world as a whole.

The term ‘ethics’ is technically used by philosophers to mean a philosophical study of morality (morality is understood as a set of social rules, principles, norms that guide or are intended to guide the conduct of people in a society), and as beliefs about right and wrong conduct as well as good or bad character. Even though morality is the subject matter of ethics, it is most often used interchangeably with ethics. In spite of the philosophical inquiries or analyses undertaken by individual moral philosophers regarding morality - analyses which often result in diverse positions or conclusions - nevertheless, the basic features, the core elements of the morality of a society, those moral principles and values that actually guide and influence the lives of a people, continue (Meriel & Kelly, 1978).

What individual moral philosophers try to do is to explain, clarify, refine, sharpen, or enlarge the understanding of the concepts and issues of morality. Even though the moral beliefs and circumstances of

their own societies constitute the immediate focus of their philosophical activities, they do not imply that the results of their reflective activities are to be tethered to their own societies as such. They believe, to the contrary, that, in the light of common humanity, which speaks to the common sentiments, purposes, responses, hopes, and aspirations of all human beings in respect of certain situations, the conclusions of their reflections would have implications for humankind. Thus, moral principles and rules may emerge from or evolved by a particular human society; even so, they are principles that apply to all human societies inasmuch as they respond to basic human needs, interests and purposes (Ebijuwa, 1996).

### **Ethics in Global Discourse**

The universal level is more of a conceptualization of the philosophers' thoughts than of the individual in traditional or modern society. But this is in line with the professional philosopher's task of conceptualization and abstraction of objective entities, notwithstanding the subjective awareness of the members of society, and in individual cases of traditional societies.

On the whole, the persistence of the traditional ethical strand in the contemporary milieu makes the concept of what is traditional real rather than an illusion. Cultural identities are constantly enhanced, which cannot be given another connotation. The synthesis is an enriching experience in the mind of the individual, enabling critical appreciation of the cultural and intellectual wealth of each of the two cultural traditions and an appreciation that one belongs to both intellectual traditions. Nevertheless, what probably emerges clearly in view of the conflicting cultural and ethical traditions is a sense of doubt as to how one can proceed out of the apparent conflict, whether to give primary importance to what is traditional or to what is alien and how to merge the two. While it may not be possible to resolve this skepticism, it could itself be a positive disposition because it could continue to sensitize to the importance of both traditions.

The main idea here is to draw attention to the persistence of a strong ethical tradition inherited from traditional milieu. This exists together with the European ethical tradition, colonial impingement notwithstanding. The perception of the authoritarian strand is drawn from the education system in the traditional society that emphasized socialization of the individual into the established knowledge already created by former generations. Much of this knowledge was custom, which carried with it a very strong communal content. While the sense of relationship and community underlies traditional

ethics, in contrast to the European sense of autonomy, the individual is not perceived as just a mere presence in the community. As an individual, he is perceived both as the centre of the relationship and also as contributing to its sustenance. Hence, he possesses an ethical status and contributes a role in the ethical and entire social spectrum.

### **Ethics in Africa**

When a speaker of the Akan language wants to say, "He has no morals", or, "He is immoral", or "He is unethical", "His conduct is unethical", he would almost invariably say, "He has no *character*" (*Onni suban*). Again, the statement, "He has no morals", or "He is unethical", is expressed by a speaker of the Ewe language as, *nonomo mele si o* (which means "He has no character"). In Yoruba language and thought the word *iwa* means both character and morality (it also means 'being' or 'nature'). Furthermore, in Igbo language of Eastern Nigeria, the word *agwa*, meaning character, is used in such a statement as "he has no morals" (*onwe ghi ezi agwa*). In Shona, the language spoken by a substantial majority of the people of Zimbabwe, the word *tsika* means 'ethics' or 'morality'. But when they want to say of a person that "He has no morals", or "He is unethical", they would often use the word *hunhu* which directly means 'character'. Thus, *Haana hunhu* means "He has no character", "He is not moral", "He is unethical".

Finally, in South Sotho, a language spoken widely in Lesotho and southern Zimbabwe (*Matebeleleland*), there are no words that are the direct equivalents of 'ethics' or 'morality'. References to the moral or ethical life are made using words that mean behaviour or character. Thus, moral statements such as "he has no morals" or "his action is unethical" will be expressed by words such as *maemo* which means character or behavior. Thus, *maemo a mabe* means "he has a bad character" or "his behavior (action) is unethical" When a person acts in ways that are morally right, "he has a good character", using the words *lokileng* or *boitswaro*, both of which mean good character or good behavior.

Definitely, it is clear that the inquiries into the moral language of several African peoples or cultures indicate that the word or expression that means 'character' is used to refer to what others call 'ethics' or 'morality'. Discourses or statements about morality turn to be discourses or statements essentially about character. In Islamic moral philosophy the word used for ethics, *akhlaq* means character. The implication here is that ethics or morality is conceived in terms essentially of character. For the Greek, as for the

African and the Arab, the character of the individual matters most in general moral life and thought.

As regards development and morality in society, this topic sees the irresistible need to place them in the appropriate historical and social context. In the case of Africa, this context has been determined by the encounter of two cultural and ethical paradigms. The position of this paper is that while we may perceive a contradiction in the conceptualization of the paradigms, the social reality is that they do co-exist. This contradiction and co-existence calls for a critical inquiry from which we can discern fundamental elements vital for development. To start with, co-existence is stressed. This is what most scholars would refer to as the reality of synthesis. Secondly, Africa is seen as problematic in the process of change; to some the idea of Africa, let alone an African as a single entity, is an illusion. And again, human relationship in African ethics attempts to present the substance of African traditional ethics. Fourthly, the problem of social and moral change discusses the social paradigm that emerged subsequent to the cultural encounter, which were both a destabilizing social pluralism and an enriching experience.

The meeting of the African ethical tradition and the European ethical tradition conceives ethics in the contemporary African context. This dichotomous position causes conflicts in our ethical conception and empirical experience. Despite the conflict, there tends to be a synthesis between the two traditions. Indeed, historically contemporary Africa in most of its social domains is to a large extent a combination of the European and African cultural dynamics. In fact, what is happening in the moral sphere of contemporary African society is a manifestation of the convergence of European ethics and traditional African ethics, and, subsequently, a synthesis between the two emerges.

From the African experience, however, one notices the problematic identity. Whereas on the one hand, some people conceive and suggest a heightened awareness and strong attachment to African cultural values (including the ethical values) that underlie Africa's socio-cultural change, on the other hand, some incline towards alien values as more relevant to the modernization entailed in the change. In the former position, there is a perception and concern for the relevance and continuity of African cultural values; hence a manifestation of the perception of continuity of African identity. This position, however, does not deny the importance of European values. While the African values are seen as more fundamental to the change, that is, as having primary importance, the European values are considered secondary.

### **The Role of Ethics in Global Discourse**

With this dual social orientation, morality in the society is changing from inclination to the collective good to personal morality. This, however, tends to be perverted, rather than to be based on personal autonomy and inner conviction. From this follows a perversion of the sense of moral value, leading to its increasing deficiency. The radical departure constitutes barrier to adopting the new social milieu with its new moral orientation and its moral implications. There is a fundamental moral challenge in synthesizing the two conflicting moral tendencies of individuality and the collective good, let alone the need to identify oneself with the common good as entailed by the diversity. As a consequence, appropriate moral values could not evolve. This is a major role for ethics.

In the contemporary society, the increasing consciousness of personal freedom and personal interests, coupled with the increasing social pluralism and increasing diversity of individually-oriented interests, without a corresponding increase in appreciation of social obligation, makes the fundamental moral challenge still more problematic. The individuality of the person and the diversity of interests in them do not hinder the development of a moral unity of individual interests within the 'globalizable' common good. Rather, it is the failure of the mental orientation of the individual to appreciate the moral question and its ramifications. The sense of self and personal interests (the negative sense of individuality) tends to override the sense of a social being to pursue one's interests while at the same time being attentive to the interests of the others.

Within the context of the nation and the contemporary urbanized society generally, which is increasingly becoming pluralistic and materialistic, a sense of identity and belonging is present but not adequate. The materialistic inclination that makes the conception of value more utilitarian manifests itself in the increasing practice of corruption and generally in the pursuit of life in the society as an economic activity. Primarily, economics is pursued without due regard to the rights and interests of other persons, except where they add to one's economic advantages. There is an increasing trend towards materialization and commercialization of human and social life, at the same time, provoking great ethical concern and, in many instances, a public call to return to traditional ethics. This advocates the relevance of African ethics to contemporary African society.

Furthermore, with regard to the question of identifying with the common good, though there is continuity in the sense of humanity and its derivative sense of corporate existence, both deriving their roots

from morality, society tends to fail to appreciate the meaning and relevance of moral order. Thus, moral locale is taken for granted. One fundamental practical consequence of the moral deficiency, besides the intellectual inability to grasp its nature, let alone its solution, is the increasing polarization between individualism and the common good. This dichotomization is compounded by the lack of a conscious institutionalized effort by the society to grasp the problem and seek a solution.

However, where the problem of ethics has not received a serious critical discussion by scholars, the relevance of ethics to contemporary society has manifested itself in the theorization by scholars of the relevant political and economic theory for contemporary development. Thus, the ethical heritage persists to the present, but its meaning cannot be sufficiently appreciated. This presents a fundamental challenge to contemporary society and particularly to education. However, the presence of the African and European ethical tradition would not in itself be an absolute condition for realizing synthesis, which would enhance society's well-being. Whereas the material orientation and sense of individuality when perverted hinder the realization of the sense of community, the communalistic character of the traditional society and its attendant social obligation impinges on the sense of individuality and the motivation for self-realization. Thus, another fundamental challenge is posed to education, namely, to guide the individuals between what would be positive and rational, on one hand, and negative and irrational, on the other, to an appropriate synthesis fostering the well-being of society.

### **Implications for African Social Hegemony**

In view of the discussions outlined in the previous subtopics, the mention of Africa tends to raise skepticism in many quarters, especially with regard to the concept of 'culture' in contemporary times. The issue is whether one can justifiably talk about 'African society' 'African culture' and hence 'African ethics' in the context of contemporary changes. The underlying idea is that as a result of the cultural change in Africa, especially during the last century, African culture is undergoing a process of erosion. The true (although extreme) position is that we cannot have a viable existence of the 'African' given the overwhelming impact of alien elements, leading to what is perceived as a collapse of traditional culture and of traditional ethics. The impact of globalizations whose propelling cultural and economic elements are

predominantly alien (especially European) enhances this skepticism.

However, the viability of Africa can be justified in the sense that the continuity of her cultural content cannot be established with certainty. In fact, African culture and ethics did not disintegrate. Instead they lost their intrinsic importance in people's thinking and assumed a peripheral role in the event of colonization and its attendant cultural impingement. The contemporary debate is recognition not only of the persistence and relevance of traditional thought and values to the contemporary milieu, but also of the importance of a critical study and evaluation of the concepts and values. They are central to traditional thought as they underlie human culture and play a significant role in influencing change and thought in contemporary African society. The influence, nevertheless, quite often tends to be subtle and not easily noticeable. It is, indeed, this society's perception of the continuity and relevance of culture that nourishes the scholars' perception of the persistence and relevance of traditional thought in the contemporary setting, placing particular interest on ethical concerns.

Furthermore, the fundamental unity between the different human beings in the community (unity of human relationship) underlies traditional African ethics. African ethics 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. 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. Mbiti, (1969), a renowned churchman and scholar of immense dignity, is of the view that:

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 morality of 'conduct' rather than a morality of being or of personal morality.

This morality occurs in contrast to emphasizing an individual's sense of self, autonomy or being, that is, of the self which does not place much value on the social relationships. The former was a strong awareness of one's existence and relationship with others in the community, a strong sense of social self. 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, one notes a collaborative relationship between the individual and society that helped to build and sustain a moral character in a person and moral order (social harmony) in the society. These elements build a strong sense of belonging and identity in the society.

However, the fact that African ethics emphasizes human relationship shows the significance attached to the individual human being. The human being is perceived as the centre of the relationship, and as an active agent and participant in the relationship. The emphasis is not on the autonomy, freedom, and critical inclination of the individual in the sense of ethics, but on an appreciation of the status and role of the individual in the ethical and socio-economic pattern, which entails the individuals' active agency and participation. One could thus say that while Western ethics conceives the individual as an intellectual being, emphasizing the faculty of reason as the basic tenet in moral conduct, African ethics conceives the individual as an ethical entity. It is, indeed, this ethical perception that makes the relationship human. Quite often, however, Africans fail to appreciate the ethical individuality of the human being in African ethics because most of the authors have concentrated on the element of African communalism and given an impression that the human individuality is swallowed up by the sense of collectivism and not so predominant.

## II. CONCLUSION

This paper attempts a probe into the changing role of ethics in global discuss and its implication for Africa. It is arguable; that a new moral consciousness is coming up and people who strive to live morally are applying to their environments. It is also established that while ethics is often used to humanize and domesticate power, the private virtues enforcing moral strength must be transformed into public values appropriate for an interdependent world that is integrating and fragmenting at the same time. This is a renewed preoccupation with values in public life. To probe this is to raise the question posed by Socrates, 'What is a virtuous man and what is a virtuous society which educates virtuous men'. Shodehinde, (2003), buttresses that:

there are many voices urging the return of the public intellectual who can speak in academia and in the larger society. Certainly, the community needs to help de-politicize the public discussion of values, to help make it less partisan. It is all too often the case that advocates of morality in the society - those who speak most loudly about promoting good values - are constantly in the argument and opposition against the common citizen. It is therefore, high time for the African society to apply the concept of virtue in ways that uplift rather than downgrade, heal rather than hurt, build rather than destroy.

What then should the next generation of moral habits encompass? Kenneth, (2006), submitted that writing about virtue could be lucrative when he identified ten virtues that he considered essential to good character, 'self-discipline, compassion, responsibility, friendship, work, courage, perseverance, honesty, loyalty and faith'. In looking at ethical leadership for a changing world, we are left, therefore, to ponder the question posed by Socrates, 'What is a virtuous man, and what is a virtuous society?' Of course, today one is more likely to ask, 'What is a virtuous man or woman and is it possible to build a virtuous society? While there are views that argue that it is difficult to separate public values from private virtues, which is to a large extent, correct, Martin Luther King, (Wikipedia, 2014), avers on this dimension, that:

paramount is the need to link the individual's duty to embrace the responsibilities of citizenship with the obligation to act in concert with others to ensure citizenship rights. This is seeking to transform both individuals and society.

Again, a broader approach would be required to sensitize society in regard to education. Curriculum development in the entire education system needs to be more conscious of the problem of the moral order and give more attention to the paradigms of the ethical dilemma. The consciousness of the relevance of cultural and ethical heritage to the contemporary society needs strong development in the educational system. At the same time, education needs to evolve a concept of development that is not biased in favour of material orientation or motivated by the sense of individualism. Education must synthesize the individual and also human relationships.

It is apposite to conclude by suggesting that one can neither understand nor appreciate the changing role of ethics in global discuss without trying to understand the many voices urging a return of respect for the spiritual dimension and without trying to understand why religion is playing such a large role in global discuss. Many folks, whether Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Jew or some other affiliations of spiritual connection, are tending to the belief that man is not here alone, he does not exist for himself alone and he is a part of something bigger and more mysterious. It is not yet clear what role religion will play in the search for either common ground or public values, but there are many reasons to believe that the search for a higher level of being is a reflection of the human condition. And it is the common search, rather than different answers, that will provide the basis of unity.

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