

## Ethical And Religious Values In African Traditional Religion With Christian Analogies

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### Abstract

Many Christian fundamentalists think it is outrageous and even blasphemous to compare African traditional religion with Christianity, believing that there is no parallel between the two religions in terms of values. According to Joseph Raz, “Value is the great uniter and the common bond of mankind.” This paper argues that, African traditional religion is pregnant with rich ethical values that stand in accord with Christianity and other religions. It further affirms that morality is another area where there is significant relationship between Christianity and African culture; this is probably due to the fact that morality flows naturally from religious creed.

**Keywords:** *Ethical, Religious, Values, African Tradition, Christianity*

### Introduction

In African traditional cultures, there are strong ethical religious values that are still vibrant, that to speak of them as straw-men theories would be inconsistent with contemporary religious teachings that are practice in Christianity. The major aim of this paper is to sensitize the readership to the fact that African traditional religion and Christianity are pregnant with rich ethical and social values that are compatible, which can be studied alongside each other. Little wonder Raz states that “values are

universal”, by pursuing these values, we are sharing the same goal and we are all united in the same pursuit (Raz, 2004). Even though the African traditional culture has undergone so much deterioration following Western influence, the researchers have gone back to the source of African ideals to see what the traditional African believes in; and this does not in any way claim any attempt to explore all the ethical and religious ideals that the African holds, however, it adopts a new method by making a comparative study of the value systems in African traditional thought and Christianity.

### **A cursory glance at Traditional African Religion**

Information on traditional African religion is at times difficult to access as no written records were made of it until the Europeans came to the continent. Religion was passed down from generation to generation through oral tradition. This means that there could have been some distortion in its documentation as this in many cases was eventually done from a non-African perspective, usually by missionaries (Munemo, 1994). African tradition or culture has its own authentic institutions and patterns of behaviour and values; it upholds cultural values such as, honesty, hospitality, respect for elders, respect for the sacredness of life, communal life, liberty, social justice, and consciousness of the divine with high esteem.

The primary function of traditional African religion was that of fighting evil in society and making life more bearable. Society used religion to address the problems of drought, famine and other disasters. Wherever the African was so was his religion; he took it to the fields when he was

working, he went hunting with it in the forest. Worship for the African took place wherever and whenever they were in need, either asking for help from the gods, deities or living-dead or giving thanks to them for their help (Mbiti, 1969).

Traditional African society believed in the existence of gods which has led to insinuations that African traditional religion is polytheistic. In traditional African religion there exists a very strong belief in evil, which was thought to be inimical to life, strength, health, fertility and prosperity. Africans saw evil as all that detracts from or destroys life, illness, infertility, pestilence, famine and sudden or inexplicable death (Kiernan, 2001). Many activities had symbolic meaning to the African; to the African for instance, the playing of drums was a spiritual thing and doing so symbolised a unification of the player and his living-dead. Coupled with this was the dancing, which was also a symbol of being at one with one's living-dead, and it was through his dancing that the living-dead or deities took possession of that individual. Africans believe working with the body in ritual releases spiritual forces which ensure natural and social harmony (Gray, 1990).

### **From African Traditional Religion to Christianity**

The growth of Christianity in Africa has been very spectacular, Africa is on record as the continent with the highest numerical Christian growth rate in the world (Barrett, 1982), and the Bible has been identified as "a major contributor" to this phenomenal growth of Christianity in Africa (Mbiti, 1986). The Bible is certainly very much valued and used by African Christians. Also, it is important to note that Africans were not embracing religion in a completely new way when

they adopted the Christian faith but rather something which fulfilled what they already knew (Munemo, 1994). The main function of traditional religion had been to give protection to the people from evil as observed earlier. With the coming of Christianity the fight against the forces of evil involved the same approach, and thus to the African the 'new' faith retained the functions of their traditional religion. The Christian missionaries with their exorcisms, the use of holy water, the wearing of rosaries, and the use of emblems of Maria to cast out evil were not new to Africans; these things were replacements of their old charms, medicines and amulets; despite the fact that, the Africans were being asked to embrace new forms of 'charms', the concept behind their use was the same, so the Africans did not find it very difficult to change to this type of religious observance (Munemo, 1994).

Christianity has a monotheistic conception of God; their God is an omniscient, omnipotent, super-sensible supreme being, whereas for the Africans, the gods' existence is both material and spiritual. His belief assures him that gods exist, and their affirmation and justification of their existence is the fulfilment of their contractual obligations but in the Christian sense God is accessible by reason and human spirit (Nze, 1981). Also, the African, contrary to the Christian manner, is in daily direct contact with his gods for the good of all. In Christendom, religion is a personal thing for the salvation of the individual. In contrast, African traditional religion was usually a communal affair, practised not just for the spiritual and physical benefit of an individual or his immediate kin, but for the well-being of all within the purview of the celebrant. Shrines of deities erected in compounds and in villages

generally honoured these deities and invited them to protect and prosper all within the compound or village. For Christianity, as for African culture, values were upheld in high esteem and no human action or behaviour good or bad, escapes the vigilant attention of both God and the earth god (Chieka, 1998).

## **ETHICAL AND RELIGIOUS VALUES IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION WITH CHRISTIAN ANALOGIES**

### **In the religious sphere**

In Africa, there is widespread belief in a supreme God, unique and transcendent. Africans have a sense of the sacred and a sense of mystery; there is high reverence for sacred places, persons and objects; sacred times are celebrated. It is difficult to separate the life of the African from his personal inclination to the divine. It is in this regard that he does everything with the consciousness of God. John Mbiti puts this succinctly in his celebrated classic and epoch-making book, *African religions and philosophy*:

Wherever the African is, there is his religion. He carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting new crop, he takes it with him to a beer parlour or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician, he takes it to the house of parliament (Mbiti, 1969: 2)

This aspect of his daily life was such that,

The African man had many taboos to observe, and many daily rituals to perform, either to appease the community or the divinities. If he was not an indirect or unconscious slave of the dominant conscious, he held perpetual allegiance to one divinity or another. If he was ‘free’ with men, he was not free with nature or his environment. Suppose

community and environment allow him to live his life with fewer burdens, he would still have to pay the debts owed by his past ancestors (Njoku, 2004: 157).

It is true that the traditional religious practices of the African are anthropocentric in the sense that all their religious practices invariably point to one objective, namely, human life and its preservation. Prayers and sacrifices offered to the gods and the ancestors all have one end in view, namely, the welfare of man (Maquet, 1972). There is harmonious interplay between the Decalogue and the African moral code. In view of the first Decalogue which makes us duty bound to God, African ethics similarly has an unreserved respect for the divine. His everyday life is pervaded by the thoughts of the sacred. The accordance of respect to our parents is the content of the fourth Decalogue; the African culture goes many miles beyond the requirement. Stealing and perjury are frowned at in relation to the sixth, seventh and eighth commandments of the Christian scripture respectively. These are strongly imbedded in the values already upheld by the African.

In connection with the transvaluation of religious values, one must not forget the African's great value of ancestor worship. "Everywhere the African is first defined by reference to his ancestor" (Maquet, 1972). The ancestors, "living or dead" are the great intermediaries between the African Great God (with different names in different African nations). On becoming a Christian, the African easily sees Christ, the only mediator between God and man, as "a proto-ancestor." This interpretation is advanced by African theologians in their effort to Africanize the church or incarnate Christianity in the local culture.

Also, since urbanization as a modern African value is really inseparable from such other concomitant values as industrialization and Christianity, the African's great love for large families, extended family-hood and community is practiced on a much higher level in Christianity, since the African Christian sees the church as one large institution housing all members of the one family of God. All people become brothers under one God, as all strive for the same home and destiny, namely, heaven. Consequently, the African Christian sees not only the members of his natural family, but all human beings as brothers and sisters. In the same way, Christianity professes the same common Father and hence a common brotherhood for all people.

### **In the religio-social sphere**

The African sense of '*Hospitality*' is one of the values that are still quite alive. Hospitality is a duty and is the most common value in African Traditional Religion. Between kith and kin and people of the same clan there is a very strong sense of sharing and of solidarity and belonging. Efforts are made to secure and promote justice and peace within the community. The nuclear family and the extended family have been the pivots of the African social system. Respect for authority, sanctioned by the ancestors, is strong and represents the common will. The poor and the sick are taken care of; widows and orphans are looked after.

Africans are generally known to be hospitable and accommodating. Visitors are well received and treated, with the African conviction that visitors are bearers of blessing and as such whoever welcomes a visitor welcomes peace. Everyone is a potential visitor because the host today may become the visitor to the hosted tomorrow, and sharing of meals is

not usually preceded by notification (Ujah, 2007). In relation to the Ette people, their sense of hospitality is unique,

There are people who are living here in Ette that are not ‘son of the soil’, but they are welcome on their arrival and even given land to farm or build on. Any one of them who is married in Ette and stays up to ten years is automatically called the ‘son of the soil’ (Edoyi, 2009).

In a like manner, Ireogbu views the African spirit of hospitality thus,

No special rendezvous is required to join in a meal in another family one has just visited during a meal. On arrival, once there is food, the visitor is invited is invited to eat. He or she is treated is kindly, just as one would like to be treated when visiting another home. Sharing with a needy neighbour who comes for assistance is a value that is highly cherished in African culture (1994: 88).

The Christian scripture advises that “Let your foot be seldom in your neighbour’s house lest he become weary and hate you” (Prov 25:17). This passage of scripture encourages hospitality, however it warns against those who take advantage of people’s hospitality.

The adage “A single tree cannot make a forest” finds a potent expression in the *Communal* character of African life. Communal living which breeds solidarity makes the African to realize his need in the community. Mbiti (1969), a popular African Philosopher expresses the African concept of community in these words, “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am”. According to Joseph Omorogbe (1994), because of the place community occupies in the life of an African said that “African makes no distinction between brother, half

brother, nephew, cousin. Whosoever has the fortune of being even little better off than the other members of the extended family comes to the aid of others. The misfortune of one member of the extended family is shared by all, and the fortune of any member is shared by all.” The Acts of Apostles chapter 4:32-5:1-17, praise the community life of the early Christian community; they shared their possessions with each other so that those who have nothing shared in the wealth of those who had enough.

Another virtue highly honoured by Africans after life itself is ‘Purity’. It encapsulates most importantly, chastity and marital fidelity. From this perspective, adultery, flirting or premarital sexual unions were serious crimes against the family and community at large. And if a man has a sexual intercourse with a woman who he is not married to, the rites of purification would have to be performed. In the Christian scripture there are many calls to embrace purity of life: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord I am Holy, and have separated you from the people that you should mine” (Lev 20:26), “You shall not commit adultery” (Exo 20:14).

Still on the religio-social sphere, Olowo Ojade (1990) pointed out that as regards ‘Gratitude’, Africans are charming. As such, many African proverbs abound in reference to gratitude, to which every member of the society is called to imbibe. “When you are unwell, you promise a cow, but when you recover a chicken would do”. “Friendship with a ferry man right from the dry season means that when the rain comes, you would be the first to cross”. The gratitude emphasized by the African culture is also parallel to the Christian scripture’s insistence on

gratitude: "It is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord" (Ps 136: 2), "Give thanks unto the Lord for he is good" (Ps 107:2).

### **In the religio-cultural sphere**

In the sphere of the religio-cultural, man is located within his environment as the centre of reality and making him feel at home in it of utmost importance. Tradition is handed down through stories, poems, hymns, proverbs, riddles and art. The whole community is involved in the training of the young, and education itself has a necessary community and social aspect. The moral education of youth is taken seriously. Everyone older than the other is respected by the younger in Africa (Addo, 2011). Formal education, a result of colonialism, radicalized the traditional values of the African and introduced some completely new ones. Mazrui (1980) puts it thus, "The colonial impact, transformed the natural basis of stratification in Africa." Instead of status based on, say, age, there emerged status based on literacy. Instead of classes emerging from the question, "Who owns what?" class formation now responds to the question, "Who knows what?"

Elders are seen as both spiritual and moral guides who are endowed with wisdom; that is why it is said that "what an elder sees when he is seated, a child cannot see even when he is standing". This respect is not only restricted to the elders within one's area but to all elders, wherever they are met. It is in this regard that Nwako (2009) said that moral values are common to all Africans and that respect is given to elders irrespective of social status or position. We give them their due respect because they are the custodians of traditional norms and customs. In the

Yoruba culture, prostration before an elder is a form of greeting, sometimes bowing and removal of caps are also signs of respect. And because of the place the African cultures gives to elders, they must make out time in the evenings to train the conscience of young men and women through proverbs, stories and folktales. Through this practice, virtues are learnt by African children from their childhood.

Against the background of this great African value, a person is an individual to the extent that he is a member of a family, a clan or community. Another great value in traditional Africa is *Respect* for old people (senior citizens), particularly one's parents, grandparents and relatives. Together with this value, one must also consider "ancestor worship" as an important related value in African culture. In fact, the basis for the honour and respect accorded to old people in the traditional African culture is their closeness to the ancestors, for in his ontological conceptual scheme the African places his old relatives closest to his ancestors or dead relatives in his great hierarchy of beings. The African teaching on respect for elders also has parallels in Christianity: "My son, hear the instruction of your father, and forsake not the law of your mother" (Prov. 1:8). "Honour your father and your mother that your days may be long upon the land which your Lord your God gives you" (Exo 2:12).

Africans conceive 'humility' as a wise policy which must be patronized at all times. It is therefore not surprising that many African proverbs and stories insist on humility. Proverbs such as "Bending down to a dwarf does not stop you from rising from your full height afterwards"; this proverb teaches that humility does no take away anything from

anyone. “It is the water that doesn’t fill the pot that makes the most noise”, this proverb teaches that those who brag around are those who are empty or have nothing to offer. “The bird that imagines itself on the same level with the turkey would soon find itself on the grill”, this proverb teaches humility is a path to learning. The same insistence on humility is also found in the Bible which teaches that: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Mat 5:5). “Whoever shall exalt himself shall be abashed, and he that humbles himself shall be exalted” (Mat 23:12).

### **In the religio-moral sphere**

Morality is another area where there is considerable parallel between Christianity and African culture. This is probably due to the fact that morality flows naturally from religious creed and that man, in both the African and the Christian cultures, has a hereafter whose condition is determined by the quality of one's present life. According to African culture, to gain that hereafter as a place of comfort one must behave in ways consonant with the demands of the divinities and ancestors (Amucheazi, 1980).

Amongst the African, there is respect for life; children are treasured and abortion is an abomination. The sacredness of human life is guarded by taboos and rituals. There is respect for the dignity of man; each man has his own inalienable *chi* (destiny). Sin is perceived in both its personal and communal dimensions. Moderation in the use of alcohol is inculcated: only adults may drink. Drunkenness is shameful. Indeed moderation is required in every aspect of human behaviour. For Christianity, as for African culture, no human action or behaviour good

or bad, escapes the vigilant attention of both God and the earth god, Ala respectively: they reward or punish man according to his actions, good or bad. Christianity and African Culture diverge from each other only in their choice of the instrument for the execution of the reward or punishment (Amucheazi, 1980).

Africans believe that life comes from God, and as such has a transcendental dimension. The sacredness attached to life due to designation of God as its source is evident in the names Igbo people give to their children: *Chiwendu* (God is the owner of life), *Chikerendu* (God made life), and as such in Igbo traditional society *Igbu Ochu* (murder) was the greatest abomination. To kill merited either capital punishment or total banishment from the community.

To touch a person's life, starkly put, to shed blood, especially innocent blood is the greatest evil on earth, against the earth and against humanity. It is Nso Ala (taboo) that has the mightiest sanction in the world (Ireogbu, 1994: 84).

The African values the whole of creation as sacred. To him nature is neither uncanny nor for subjugation and exploitation, but something sacred, participating in the essential sacred nature of God Himself and of all reality. Open spaces, fields, forests, trees, oceans and lakes are sacred to him and consequently important as places reminiscent of the ashes of his fathers and the sanctuaries of his gods. The African traditional religious life has always considered all life to be the sphere of the Almighty, the powerful (the Otumfoo), the Omnipotent (Gye Nyame). He is wise, and all seeing and all knowing. He is the Great Spider (Ananse Kokroko), and the Ancient of Days (Odomankoma).

In the private and public life of the African, religious rites, beliefs and rituals are considered an integral part of life. Life then is never complete unless it is seen always in its entirety. Religious beliefs are found in everyday life and no distinction is made between the sacred and the secular. The sacred and the secular are merged in the total person of the individual African. Life is not compartmentalized. Thus, there are no special times for worship, for everyday and every hour is worship time. There are no creeds written down because through the traditions of the elders all creeds and functions are carried in the individual's heart. Each individual by his very nature and life style is a living creed from the time one rises until one retires at night.

Life is therefore considered sacred and held in high esteem. Right from the womb, life is protected and the greatest joy of a family is the birth of a child. This is why Africans do all that is in their power to save life, and whatever harms life is their greatest enemy. Issues like abortion and Euthanasia are foreign to African vocabulary. In the Christian Decalogue there is also the instruction: "Thou shall not kill" (Exo 20:13).

Also fundamental to Africans, is the value of 'honesty', a man's word is held in bond, especially when it pertains to affirmation or negation or are evidence themselves. For the African, "Judgment is based on confidence" (Achebe, 1958: 151). And because of the place honesty occupies in African life, some elders are conferred titles based on their truthfulness and their ability to dispense justice without fear or favour, and any injustice or unfairness destroyed confidence. The ontological foundation on which the African love for truth rests is the belief that

truth is life. It is therefore not surprising that right from childhood, children are taught the value of honesty in stories and proverbs. Commenting on the values of honesty and sincerity in the African culture, Ireogbu said,

Both were together the test of the inner and outer integrity. The Igbo put this ontological principle in the maxim: *Eziokwu bu ndu* (truth is life). In Igbo Ethical ontological praxis, not only in the moral sense is the utterance of truth a life affirmation. In the ontological order, the true is the living (1994: 27).

## Conclusion

The submission in this paper is that African traditional religion and Christianity have ethical and religious values in common. This is probably due to the fact that morality flows naturally from religious creed. And from this understanding, one can conclude that for the African, Christianity is not something totally alien, but something which fulfilled what he already knew. There was already the seed of Christian values in African traditional thought even before the arrival of missionaries to Africa.

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