



REFLECTIONS ON AFRICAN ETHICS: A CASE FOR CULTURAL RELATIVISM

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ABSTRACT

Though some contemporary philosophers have tried to modify the position of pioneer scholars that African Ethics and Religion are inextricably intertwined, the fact still remains that for African Religious ethicists, this position is as true today as it was yesterday. The claim that African Religion derives moral initiatives from nature and its stipulations with the premium idea of a common humanity is a partial truism. The genre of works by anthropologists shows the diversity of various cultures on matters of morality. However, the necessity of maintaining the identity of other cultures no matter the interactions with foreign cultures is not emphasized. In this paper I set out to make a case for the invocation of African ethics/moral values in the evaluation of certain ethically controversial issues. To achieve this, I am employing a qualitative and analytical method of religious study. Insights are drawn from sociology, anthropology, ethics and cultural hermeneutics. I went further to stress the need for cultural sensitivity as against the bane of ethical imperialism. I recommend a respect for individual cultures and by extension their ethical inclinations.

KEYWORDS

Africa. Ethics. Culture. Sovereignty. Cultural relativism.

1. INTRODUCTION

The world is a global village. We live in a rapidly changing world which is increasingly bringing people of various cultures into closer contact with each other. Consequently, ethical discourses in Africa have imbibed western thought patterns which rely heavily on such analytical philosophies such as consequentialism. For a given dilemma, even if it is not clear how any of these western philosophical principles of right and wrong action could resolve it, one can identify many of the considerations that each would conclude is relevant. The field in contrast, is largely unaware of an African account of what all right and wrong actions have in common. Neither are they aware of the sorts of factors that are cardinal to developing a sound response to a given problem (METZ, 2010, p. 49-58). In the place of power derived from a belief in one's culture and system of thought, such as have helped China, India, and Japan to develop on their own, what Africans have is a vaguely diluted culture, the product of which is an almost incurable self defeatist mentality (MAINA, 2008, p. 18). Under this pitiable condition, there is the possibility of even disowning one's culture as well as the belief and thought systems which are products of that culture.

The intrusion of external culture in Africa was such that it did not allow reciprocation between the two cultures so that both would benefit from each other. Instead, Europe began a process of uprooting the African culture from its "natural habitat", and infusing its own culture, hence, beginning a problematic social change. The process was problematic in the sense that it favored the colonizer and set a trend towards marginalization of what was African, both by the colonizer and the colonized. The change also involves an increasing tendency towards social pluralism in the ethnic, cultural, religious, political, and economic areas of the society. With this dual social orientation, morality in the African society is changing from inclination to the collective good (the communalism characteristic of traditional society) to personal morality. This became the source of the perceptual instability manifest in the conflict of the African ethical tradition and the European ethical tradition.

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 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, those interests that are universal.

A long standing debate surrounds the question whether ethics is relative to time and place. Many scholars argue that cultural relativism threatens the discipline of ethics since if values are relative to a given culture then this must mean that there are no universal moral absolutes by which the behavior of people can be judged. Therefore, if there is no observable control transcending all cultures, no eternal book of rules, then right and wrong are a matter of opinion and it does not matter what we do: anything goes! Thus, we cannot go around passing judgment on what other people do. For,

[...] if all morality is relative, then what moral objection could one make to the Nazi holocaust, to the economic deprivation of a Latin American underclass, or to a militaristic nation's unleashing nuclear devastation on others? And what would be wrong with conducting painful experiments on young children, using them for case studies on the long-term psychological effects of mutilation? In a world where no moral court of appeal exists and might makes right; the only appeal can be to power (HOLMES, 1984).

Cultural relativism developed because the facts of differences in these concepts of reality or in moral systems, plus our knowledge of the mechanisms of cultural learning, forced the realization of the problem of finding valid cross-cultural norms. In every case where criteria to evaluate the ways of different peoples have been proposed, in no matter what aspect of culture, the question has at once posed itself: "Whose standards?"

This paper argues for the universality of morality but expresses concern for the globalization of morality without

sensitivity to cultural diversity. This is seen as a form of moral imperialism. Cultural sensitivity is recommended in the place of ethnocentrism and moral imperialism. The harmonization of positive elements of traditional ethics with Western culture for a better moral society in contemporary Africa is also recommended. We shall give a contextual definition of cultural relativism and finally make a case for cultural sovereignty/independence through a reflection on the core of African Ethics.

2. REFLECTIONS ON AFRICAN ETHICS

The question whether or not African ethics exists cannot be addressed without due cognizance of the answer to the question whether or not, an African philosophy exists. In trying to buttress the relationship between ethics and philosophy, Bertrand Russell (1964, p. 14) sates that a conception of life and the world which we call “philosophical” are a product of two factors, one of which is inherited religions and ethical conceptions, and the other is the sort of investigation which may be called “scientific” in a broader sense. This goes to confirm that ethics is actually a constituent of Philosophy. Ethics is technically used by philosophers to mean a philosophical study of morality. Morality 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 (AGULANNA, 2007).

The question of the existence of African philosophy was first raised by early European missionaries and anthropologists like Levy Bruhl who claimed that, the African mind was pre-logical, pre-rational and antiscientific and therefore incapable of philosophical discourse. It is useful to note that while this question is asked of African philosophy, it is not asked about Western or Oriental philosophy (MBUGUA, 2009, p. 70). It is taken for granted that these philosophies exist without question. This type of argument is made insignificant by the fact that morality is a universal feature of all human societies. Besides, the argument itself cannot be sustained by evidence or by any rational proof. Tracing the trend of the

debate concerning an authentic African philosophy, Nel (2008) identified the following turns African philosophy has taken: from denying it (Hountondji, 1983), to qualifying it as “primitive philosophy” (Levy-Bruhl, 1963), Bantu Philosophy (Temples, 1969), consciencism (Nkrumah), Negritude (Senghor, 1996), Pan-Africanism (Nkrumah) and sagacity or sage philosophy (Odera Oruka, 1991) to deliberate efforts towards engaging with mainstream Western philosophy as self-critical reflection (Wiredu, 1980).

African ethics is that branch of African philosophy, which deals with the critical reflection on the manner, or nature of life, conduct, behavior and character of the African. It is the conceptualization, appropriation, contextualization and analysis of values within the African cultural experience. African ethics presupposes a regional ethic (AZENABOR, 2008, p. 233).

Some scholars like A. G. Leonard (1968) – the colonial administrator in-charge of eastern Nigeria – have observed that Africans are a deeply religious people. For them, religion so deeply permeates all spheres of their lives that it cannot be distinguished from nonreligious aspects of life. The African cultural heritage is intensely and pervasively religious (LEONARD, 1969, p. 429). Historical evidence indicates that many colonial administrators in their dispatches to their colonial metropolis used to refer to Africans as “this incurably religious people”. Assertions about the religiosity of the African people have led some scholars to maintain that there is a connection between religion and morality in African ethics. That some connection may exist between religion and morality is conceivable in an environment that is widely alleged to be pervasively religious. But the nature of the connection needs to be fully clarified.

By one account, African life and thought is religious through and through. Ethics is only a special case of this orientation namely: that everything in morality, as regards both meaning and principle, comes from God. A most eloquent articulation of this view is found in Bolaji Idowu’s (1962) *Olo-dumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. After rejecting any suggestion that morality derives from society’s need for self-preservation or that morality is “the product of commonsense”, he asserts “our own view is that morality is basically the fruit of religion and that, to begin with, it was dependent upon it” (IDOWU, 1962, p. 144-145). The claim implies in turn that the moral

beliefs and principles of the African people derive from those of religion. Again that religion provides the necessary justification for moral values and beliefs. And that moral concepts, such as good, bad, right and wrong, are defined (or, must be defined) in terms of religious prescriptions or commands.

On the other hand, scholars, such as Placid Temples, Kwasi Wiredu, Sophie Oluwole deny the religious basis of the moral systems of the societies they studied. For them, ethics is not founded on religion, rather, where human beings become handicapped in the enforcement of moral violations, they take recourse in the Gods. They argue that African morality is not founded on religion but on rational reflection as to what is conducive to human welfare. African traditional ethics is thus based on natural light of reason with conscience playing a central role. African moral standards derive from the very nature of things and African traditional ethics is not founded on religion but on consideration for human welfare (OMOREGBE, 1993, p. 140). The stance of these scholars is understandable as they are philosophers writing from a philosophical viewpoint. Both pioneer and contemporary philosophers agree that African traditional ethics is essentially interpersonal and social. However, religious ethicists assert that religion articulates and inculcates morality in Africa. In all, African ethics could rightly be termed to be deontological.

There are those who think that, to speak of African philosophy or Ethics (as the case may be) is to make a huge generalization because as it stands Africa is not a homogeneous continent. It is a vast region made up of over fifty countries and numerous ethnic groups each with a unique identity. This is quite true. However, ethics here is addressed just as religion in the sense that it is a known fact that there are various religions in the world but religion is studied as one common entity through the common themes in all the various religious traditions. African morality is seen in terms of common or dominant themes in African cultures and traditions, which are derived from their common sense beliefs and real-life experiences by a process of generalization and abstraction. Truth is, there are deep underlying affinities such as Communalism, Kinship, Welfare and Rationality running through these cultures which justify speaking of an African ethics. One of these African communalism forms the next sub-section.

2.1 AFRICAN ETHICS AND COMMUNALISM

A fundamental unity between the different human beings in the community, (a 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 humanity. It could be said that in a way African thought is, indeed, more concerned with the community than with its components. All human behavior is expected to conform to this value to ensure social harmony. Communal life and social harmony are vital elements in the African sense of moral aesthetics. In an African traditional setting there is no individual human being without the community. The community is a “communion” of individuals. Moral reasoning is a process in which an individual makes rational decisions concerning morality without forgetting that one is a member of a community. Individual morality affects the flourishing of a community in an African ethic.

For Black Africa, it is not the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”) but an existential *cognatus sum, ergo sumus* (“I am known, therefore we are”) that is decisive. This can also be clarified in the common African maxim: “I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am” (MAINA, 2008, p. 193-194).

This corporate existence signified a responsibility of many for one. First, the others had to look after the well-being of the individual, signifying 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 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. 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 Socratic ethics, but on an appreciation of the status and role of the individual in the ethical and socio-economic pattern. This entails the individuals' active agency and participation.

The idea of communalism is not just a set of ideas, belief systems, values, or ways of life but also a methodology by which Africans morally, socially, politically organize their lives and thoughts, acquire and justify beliefs, solve problems and explain phenomena (IKUENOBE, 2006, p. 15). It is established that society developed deliberate institutions and practices that ensured a communal and harmonious society. The existence and belief in a mystic force, the use of customary morality and the subjection of these societies under the authority of elders and ancestors ensured the institutionalization and intensification of communalism in traditional Africa. It was a deliberately desired social structure which was established and zealously sustained by a people's will and desire to survive under the most certain and tried condition. As Ejizu (2014) observes:

For traditional Africans, community is much more than simply a social grouping of people bound together by reasons of natural origin and/or deep common interests and values. It is both a society as well as a unity of the visible and invisible worlds; the world of the physically living on the one hand, and the world of the ancestors, divinities and souls of children yet to be born to individual kin-groups. In a wider sense, African traditional community comprehends the totality of the world of African experience including the physical environment, as well as all spirit beings acknowledged by a given group.

Every other feature of African traditional ethics such as, humanism, utilitarianism and socialism rests on the concept of communalism. In sum, the most justified normative theory of right action that has an African pedigree is the requirement to produce harmony and to reduce discord, where harmony is a matter of identity and solidarity.

2.2 UTILITARIANISM

The notion of the common good features manifestly in African ethics. The common good is not a substitute for the

sum of the various individual goods. It does not consist of, or derive from, the goods and preferences of particular individuals. It is that which is essentially good for human beings as such, embracing the needs that are basic to the enjoyment and fulfillment of the life of each individual. If the common good is achieved, then the individual good is also achieved. Thus, there should be no conceptual tension or opposition between the common good and the good of the individual member of the community, for the common good embraces the basic good of all the members of the community. If the common good were understood as the basic good as human good, there would be no need to think of it as a threat to individual liberty as touted by Western liberal (individualist) thinkers, for, after all, individual liberty is held as one of the basic goods of the members of the society.

2.3 SOCIALISM

A humanistic morality, whose central focus is the concern for the welfare and interest of each member of community, would expectably be a social morality which is enjoined by social life itself. Such is the nature of African morality. Social life or sociality is natural to the human being because every human being is born into an existing human society.

The idea and structure of human society for traditional Africans, are essentially part of a world-view that is fundamentally holistic, sacred and highly integrated. Human community, therefore, has its full meaning and significance within the transcendental centre of ultimate meaning. Hence, the belief in ancestors and the supernatural order, in addition to its inherent religious import, provides traditional African groups a useful over-arching system that helps people organize reality and impose divine authority and sanction to their life (EJIZU, 2014).

African social ethic is expressed in many maxims that emphasize the importance of the values of mutual helpfulness, collective responsibility, cooperation, interdependence, solidarity, and reciprocal obligations. Let me refer to a few of these in Obolo repertoires and their corresponding meanings:

- *Ejire ge* (We are one).
- *Uwon ama ikwek inyi otutuk kiji* (the good of the land is our collective responsibility).
- *Karo ngwang kwuu ijo inu gege* (do not do anything to hurt your brother).
- *Udung ore unye* (your back is your strength that means those behind around you determine how strong you are).

All these maxims simply point to the fact that the good of the land is the ultimate responsibility of members of the community. One is affected directly and indirectly by the plight of his/her neighbor and is obliged to sympathize and possibly proffer solutions to the problems of his/her neighbor. Insensitivity to one's brother is seen as sheer wickedness and is repudiated in African communities. Life is about mutual assistance and no man/woman is ever self sufficient. The other important thing about this maxim is that the word "neighbor" or "brother" does not necessarily refer to the person next door or in one's community but to any other person in one's community and beyond.

3. CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Makinde (2007, p. 13) quotes an anthropological definition of Culture as a people's traditions, manners, customs, religious beliefs, values and social, political, or economic organization. Culture can thus be broadly understood as an integral system which demonstrates the values, beliefs, customs and institutions of a particular community, or group of communities. Culture is the ways a people have organized themselves to express and preserve their identity and way of life.

Cultural relativism is the view that as a matter of fact, different groups, societies, cultures, differ in their view of what is good or bad, right or wrong, in relation to character and conduct. The view that whatever is good or bad, right or wrong, in respect to character and conduct, is so only relatively to a situation or the judging of the situation. This can mean that some rules can have exceptions; circumstances sometimes change cases or that all rules can have exceptions. It can also

mean that moral opinions are true or false, correct or incorrect depending on the individual whose opinion it is or to the group or society, whose opinion it is (MAUTNER, 2000). Ethical relativism reminds us that different societies have different moral beliefs and that our beliefs are deeply influenced by culture. It also encourages us to explore the reasons underlying beliefs that differ from our own, while challenging us to examine our reasons for the beliefs and values we hold.

Cultural relativism is not the same as ethical relativism. Cultural relativism has an exclusive cross-cultural reference; whereas ethical relativism is essentially intra-cultural in its focus. The first raises the question of the validity of applying the criteria that sanction the behavior and guide the thinking of the people of one society to the standards of another; the second raises the question of whether any standards can be drawn to direct individual conduct within any one society. Cultural relativism does not advocate individual or ethical relativism. So far anthropological and sociological studies show that no society tolerates moral or ethical anarchy (HERSKOVITS, 1973, p. 88).

Cultural relativism is an axiomatic principle developed by Franz Boas and popularized by his students (Ruth Macklin and her contemporaries) of anthropology in the 1940s. It became conflated with moral relativism during the meetings of the Commission of Human Rights of the United Nations in preparing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1946-1948. As such, the intellectual phenomenon of cultural relativism developed synchronously with the birth and growth of the international human rights legal regime. Technically speaking, cultural relativism within the discipline of anthropology is a heuristic tool. It reflects the principle that says an individual's beliefs make sense in terms of his/her own culture. On the other hand, moral relativism reflects the principle that all cultures and all value systems, though distinct, are equally valid. However, between the two World Wars, the phrase "cultural relativism" reflected the rejection by American anthropologists of Western claims to universality. It was used as a tool for salvaging non-Western cultures from "Westernization". "Cultural relativism" before the Universal Declaration thus bears striking resemblance to "moral relativism". Thus,

the term is no longer solely in the purview of American anthropologists (PERRIN, 2005).

Donnelly (2008, p. 400) noted that two extreme positions on cultural relativism exist: radical relativism and radical universalism. Radical relativism holds that culture is the sole source of the validity of a moral right or rule. On the contrary, radical universalism holds that culture is irrelevant to the validity of moral rights or rules which are universally valid. Both factions are on to something, yet both miss something significant as well. Those who whole-heartedly embrace relativism note salient respects, in which ethics is relative. However, they erroneously infer that ethical values are noxiously subjective. Those who reject relativism do so because they think ethics is subject to rational scrutiny and that moral views can be correct or incorrect. But in rejecting objectionable features of relativism they overlook significant yet non-pernicious ways in which ethics is relative (LAFOLLETTE, 1991, p. 146-154).

Relativists can be arrayed along a somewhat broader continuum namely: 1. those who call for a respect of particular cultural histories, traditions, and experiences in the midst of a growing regime of legal rights and obligations; 2. those who are willing to give recognition to “perspectives” on human rights such as “African” or “Asian values.”; 3. those who caution against the hurried subjection of cultures to legal norms that cultural groups may not be prepared to accept; and 4. those who insist that it is wrong to require all cultures to adhere to legal norms that are foreign to them.

While relativists in the first group support recognition of a group’s right to implement their own systems of law so long as those laws do not suppress some other individual human rights, members of the second group recommend that states should be given time to adjust their juridical and political practices. Also, that societies should be given time to adjust their cultural practices to bring them in line with human rights norms. Members of the third group posit that universal human rights are an implausible goal. They accuse proponents of the notion of universal human rights of a cultural imperialism that continues the suppression by “the West” of “the Rest” (PERRIN, 2005).

3.1 THE CASE FOR CULTURAL RELATIVISM

For quite some time now, observant scholars have noted that conceptions of right and wrong differ from culture to culture. If we assume that our ethical ideas will be shared by all cultures, we are merely being naïve (BENEDICT, 1934, p. 15). Cultural relativism is an undeniable fact, moral rules and social institutions evidence an astonishing cultural and historical variability.

The most serious and credible attack on diversity and cultural relativism comes from those who argue that if there are no absolute values, we will not be able to ascertain the difference between good and evil. They also argue that if we abandon reason and objectivity, we will not be able or willing to continue the fight against oppression and injustice. I dare say here that arguments over moral matters often stem from factual disagreements. However, cultural relativism is itself a moral idea which affirms human dignity and the principle of equality. These choices involve the recognition and accommodation of differences. These are choices which threaten to alter the power structure of our society. With diversity has come the introduction of the counter – hegemonies against cultural preferences and taxonomies existing in groups marginalized by the existing social order. The power of counter-hegemonies lies in the ability to reclassify social categories and offer alternatives to existing and dominant systems of classifications (POST, 2008).

Contrary to what many scholars think, cultural relativism does not in any way advocate ethical relativism. Cultural relativism is not the same as ethical relativism. Cultural relativism has an exclusive cross-cultural reference; whereas ethical relativism is essentially intra-cultural in its focus. The first raises the question of the validity of applying the criteria that sanction the behavior and guide the thinking of the people of one society to the standards of another. The second raises the question of whether any standards can be drawn to direct individual conduct within any one society (HERSKOVITS, 1973, p. 88). Cultural relativism does not in any

way imply individual or moral relativism. So far, anthropological and sociological studies show that no society accommodates moral or ethical anarchy.

Just recently, His Excellency Dr. Goodluck Jonathan President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria signed a bill on January 13th that criminalizes same-sex relationships. The penalty stipulates about 10 to 14 years in prison. He argues that homosexuality is against the country's religious and cultural disposition. Just like the President, every other Nigerian who has argued against the institution of gay relationships in the country has based his/her arguments on the cultural and or religious realities of the country. Subsequently, just about two days after the announcement, the United States, through her Ambassador to Nigeria, Mr. James Entwistle threatened to scale down her support for HIV/Aids and anti-malaria programs in response to the Federal Government's position on the gay rights issue.

This event exposes the greatest point of friction between Western culture and African traditional culture. More bedeviling is Ethnocentrism – a blatant failure or refusal to view reality from the perspective of the other, which causes one to reject the other's contribution as valid, simply because it differs from one's own ideas. The above scenario is a practical case of cultural/moral imperialism against a "supposedly" independent and sovereign nation and remains a problem of the globalization of moral rules. The question remains thus: if moral laws were made universal, what would be the yardstick for the declaration of such rule? What authority do Westerners have to impose their own concept of universal rights on the rest of humanity?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 and its fundamental law, the Charter of the United Nations (UN), laid the foundation of a human rights movement that changed the face of the world. How *universal* was the UDHR especially considering the fact that majority of the members of the UN as we see them today did not participate in the drafting, debate and adoption of the declaration because their respective countries were still under colonial rule? These questions become necessary with the evident difference in certain moral values of Western culture and that of traditional African society.

Cultural relativism deals with more than just morals, ethics and values. It is also concerned with judgments of time, space and volume, differences in perception and cognition, as well as of conduct. Cultural relativism does not imply that there is no system of moral values to guide human conduct. Rather, it suggests that every society has its own moral code to guide its members. However, these values are of worth to those who live by them, though they may differ from others. These values nonetheless, only have worth and meaning to that society, and cannot be and should not be used to measure the morality of another society. Our individual ethical behavior is shaped by our inculturative experience, by the manner in which we have been socialized to behave in a given social context. Every society has its own socialization process, which inculcates into members behavioral patterns that are morally acceptable (HERSKOVITS, 1973, p. 52).

Contemporary African society is lamenting a moral world fallen apart. Today the African society seems to be in a state of near chaos in the realm of morality. One way to describe the present situation of moral degeneration is to contrast it with the values or virtues appreciated in traditional African society. The virtues and values of traditional African society is that in traditional Africa a shared morality functioned as a cement of the African society.

African Culture	Western Culture
Communalism	Individualism
Socialistic	Capitalistic
Austerity	Materialism
Utilitarian	Egoistic
Duty based	Rights based

It is a pity that due to exposure to western culture, the average African has given up the African identity. The underlying idea is that as a result of the cultural change in Africa, especially during the last 100 years, Africanity is undergoing a process of erosion. An 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) and tend to be hegemonic enhances this skepticism. Today, as we realize the gaps of modernization, especially its de-emphasis of the traditional (in fact, traditional and modernity are perceived as contradictory terms, and culture as inimical to modernization), we revisit the past in order to develop new conceptual paradigms and find for modernization a strong ethical content.

We would excuse our disposition to western morality due to our colonial experience and long exposure to western languages. For as Makinde (2007, p. 15) observes, when a person learns a foreign language, it exposes him to the culture and philosophy of that particular language he has learnt. However, if this leads to a conflict in cultures, the question of which of the ethical system to adopt becomes determined by emotional attachment to our own language and culture, philosophical temperament, ethics and even National pride. Hence, the contemporary critical investigation of values and culture, a kind of cultural renaissance, is a question for cultural and ethical renewal. As a response to the dominant tendencies of the West with its rather inhumane and technocratic associations, scholars such as Asante propounded certain principles like Négritude and Afro-centricity seeking to re-locate the African person as an agent in human history in an effort to eliminate the illusion of the bounds. Hear Asante (2007):

For the past five hundred years Africans have been taken off of cultural economic, religious, political, and social terms and have existed primarily on the periphery of Europe. We know little about our own classical heritage and nothing about our contributions to world knowledge. To say that we are de-centred means essentially that we have lost our own cultural footing and become other than our cultural and political origins, dislocated and disoriented. We are essentially insane, that is, living an absurdity from which we will never be able to free our minds until we return to the source.

Afro-centricity as a theory of change intends to re-locate the African person as subject, thus destroying the notion of being objects in the Western project of domination. A reform like this can occur when the world is made to acknowledge the

reality of difference, the value of this difference, and the fact that emotional and psychological commitment to the dominant can impede the recognition of the value of difference. The world should be willing to accept the need for participation in the decision-making process by individuals who see where aesthetic cultural differences come into play. Because members of culturally-subordinated groups exist and are forced to learn the dominant culture, they see the orthodoxy of the dominant culture for what it is – a product of acculturation, a conventional perspective that is an expression of preferences, not an absolute or universal standard (POST, 2008).

4. CONCLUSION

In a number of important issues, modern society is infected by relativism which stems from the fact of the variety of views in the world, particularly between different cultures. Negative attitudes towards other cultures and/or ethnic groups arise out of ethnocentrism, while positive attitudes are the result of a culturally relativist approach. If people are going to be successful in today's multicultural, information age, world society, they will need to develop a culturally sensitive frame of reference and mode of operation.

We can understand the appeal of cultural relativism then, despite its shortcomings. It is an attractive theory because it is based on a genuine insight: that many of the practices and attitudes we find natural are really only cultural products. Moreover, keeping this thought firmly in view is important if we want to avoid arrogance and keep an open mind. These are important points, not to be taken lightly. But we can accept them without accepting the whole theory (BENEDICT, 1934, p. 34). The flaws of cultural relativism are redeemed by a productive paradox: by forcing us to act as if the human social world were divided into discrete islands, cultural relativism disciplines the imagination, prompting us to observe carefully while avoiding the temptation to take much for granted. In so doing, it lays the foundation for bridges between these islands and, eventually, to a recognition that they are not islands after all. There is no denial that there

exist certain fundamental ethical principles that ought to be applied across national and cultural boundaries. However, failure to recognize cultural differences and variations in the understanding of moral issues can lead to ethical conflicts and even threaten the sovereignty of a nation. We should strive for a rational yet relativistic ethics. Although there exists the dangers of cultural relativism being abused by oppressive forces I encourage cultural relativism as this is one major way of ensuring the sovereignty of all cultures.

REFLEXÕES SOBRE A ÉTICA AFRICANA: UM CASO DO RELATIVISMO CULTURAL

RESUMO

Embora alguns filósofos contemporâneos tenham tentado modificar a posição dos estudiosos pioneiros de que ética e religião africana estão inextricavelmente interligados, ainda permanece o fato de que, para os eticistas religiosos africanos, essa posição é tão verdadeira hoje como era no passado. A alegação de que a religião africana deriva de iniciativas morais da natureza e de suas disposições com a ideia primeira de uma humanidade comum é um truismo parcial. O gênero de obras de antropólogos mostra a diversidade das várias culturas sobre questões de moralidade. No entanto, a necessidade de manter a identidade de outras culturas, independentemente das interações com culturas estrangeiras, não é enfatizada. Neste artigo, propomos um caso para a invocação da ética e dos valores morais africanos na avaliação de determinadas questões eticamente controversas. Para isso, empregamos um método qualitativo e analítico do estudo religioso. Reflexões são tomadas da sociologia, antropologia, ética e hermenêutica cultural. Fomos além com o propósito de salientar a necessidade da sensibilidade cultural contra a maldição do imperialismo ético. Neste texto, recomendamos respeito às culturas individuais e, por extensão, às suas inclinações éticas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

África. Ética. Cultura. Soberania. Relativismo cultural.

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