

African Traditional Approach to the Problems of Evil in the World

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KEYWORDS African. Traditional. Approach. Evil. Society

ABSTRACT The paper is centered on what the average African calls evil and the efforts put in place to checkmate its occurrence. The relative nature of evil from society to society is not at all in doubt. However, the paper reflects on the efficacy of the measures put in place to combat them in contemporary times. It concludes with a note of caution that evil should be frowned at no matter who commits it if Africans must move forward as a people.

INTRODUCTION

The meaning of evil is certainly a question where at the most, we can hope for a glimpse of truth, not a finished and fully established understanding. It is true that evil is relative to good. It follows necessarily that to think of virtue is to presuppose a vice as its counterpart, and the two ideas imply one another. Echekwube (1999) said that if good develops within the system of culture, so does evil. The main thrust of this paper is to explain as lucidly as possible what the traditional African call evil. It will be part of this explanatory task to review what exactly is regarded as evil in African worldview. This is deemed necessary because, it will enable us to have a better understanding of the possible steps employed in Africa in the combat of evils (especially moral and natural evils). A further attempt would be made to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the efforts made towards fostering a society that is less evils.

EVIL IN AFRICAN WORLD VIEW: AN OVERVIEW

The worldview of a people is a very important aspect of their life-style for it reveals the totality of their belief and thought system. Okolo (1992), posits that in the case of the African, whatever he or she does, carries the authority and approval of conviction, apart from which it is considered abnormal and asocial, and indeed, in some cases, an abomination. This review exercise, will help in no small measure to consolidate the position maintained by Okolo (1992) who asserts that "African Philosophy is unique and distinct for its subject matter, African experience in its totality (past, present and the future) is unique and distinct." It becomes appropriate fol-

lowing the position of Momoh (1989) that African worldview or philosophy should be defined from the area perspective of metaphysics, especially as many Philosophers agree that it is a philosophy rich in metaphysics....

Agidigbi (2001) puts it differently thus: African Philosophy could basically proceed from metaphysical principles to tackle its most pressing religio-socio-political problems. This becomes obviously the case as metaphysics is an all-embracing discipline which examines among others, "Being as Being" in its totality, viewing the universe in its component parts: God, Deities, Heaven, Human communities, Inanimate objects, et cetera.

In the light of the above, the foundation of the African's sense of good and evil is knitted closely to their philosophy. By this, we mean that the African sees an existing relationship between morality and the ontological order. In the same vein, Agidigbi (2001) again opined that Africans see morality not as an arbitrary creation of the gods or anybody but rather as something demanded by the very nature of things. However, he added that this does not mean that God is indifferent to morality.

God in traditional African thought is concerned about morality. This becomes truer because, He is concerned about the welfare of human beings. Put syllogistically,

1. God cannot be indifferent to human welfare because he is a good God.
2. Because he cannot be indifferent to human welfare, He cannot also be indifferent to morality.
3. Therefore, he (God) ensures justice by rewarding the virtuous and punishing evil doers through the agency of the gods who serve Him.

The syllogism above, help to better explain

why in Africa, it is only an exercise in futility for anybody to think that he can commit a crime in secret and go unpunished. This, development, Izibili (2003) sees as the supernatural dimension of ethics. To him, moral standards that guide man from evil, are man-made to an extent; but it becomes more reliable when a kind of appeal is made to a power that is over and above the moral agent (man). Here marks the fusion of religion and ethics.

The question that comes to mind readily is: What is evil to the African? This question becomes relevant because our understanding of what Africans see as evil will facilitate the efforts put in place to combat evil in the society. In addition, our understanding of goodness in African thought will make this task much easier. Africans in their traditional ethics places some level of emphasis on goodness of character. Goodness of character consist of virtues such as kindness, generosity, hospitality, justice, respect for elders while the elders ensures that they stay off anything that is capable of bringing disrespect; others are obedience to legitimate authorities and humility.

Wiredu (1983) refers to evils to the Africans as vices like killing, stealing, adultery, and disrespect for elders, telling lies, incest, and cruelty or doing harm in any way to other people. The essence of evil in African traditional thought consists in doing harm to others. To this extent, morality is essentially interpersonal and social in contest, anchored on the well-being of human beings. Traditionally, the African is his brother's keeper and is concerned about his well-being.

However, a distinction between customary behaviour, taboo and morality, each with its own rule of conduct, is a necessity at this point. Among the Akan people of Ghana for example, as explained by Wiredu (1983), there are some actions that are regarded as customary. Customary actions are justified on the basis that it is the custom of the people to perform such action. To this end, the fact that an action is customary and they have been done from time immemorial is enough reason for continuing to do them.

Some actions are referred to as taboo. The justification of taboos is always in terms of the adverse consequences that would follow if they were done. If any forbidden act by taboo is performed, adverse consequences are believed to follow with certainty. Okoruwa (2004) stated for example, that it is a taboo among the Ugboha

people of Esan South East Local Government Area of Edo State, for a man to have sexual intercourse on a farmland. No scientific explanation is given as to why actions forbidden by taboo are wrong except that the gods hate such things and anybody who gets involved in them would incur the wrath of the gods. Like in the case cited earlier about the Ugboha people, the reason given by the elders is that it affects fertility. Agbebaku (2004) in unequivocal terms said that the gods of fertility will be offended if sexual intercourse takes place on a farm land.

Placid Tempels (1959) observes that in Bantu society, "objective morality is entirely ontological, immanent and intrinsic. In addition, Bantu moral standards depends on things ontologically understood. In other words, Tempels (1959) means that the Bantu people sees doing virtuous or evil acts, not as an arbitrary creation of the gods or anybody, but rather as something demanded by the very nature of things. Flowing from the understanding of 'ontology' it clearly implied that for the Bantu people, the performance of evil act or its avoidance is chiefly derived not from the world beyond or from gods.

In the Bantu idea of evil or good, it does not rely on a power over and above man. Rather, it is based on reasoning and not on religion. Morality in the words of Oluwole (2000), is always seen in the social context. This is why any violation of the moral order has a social aspect, which attracts serious social consequences. The society as a whole, is affected, for every evil act is an anti-social act which has adverse effects on the community at large.

From the foregoing survey, it is the case that evil, no matter who is involved, is frowned at by every virtuous conscious African. Not necessarily because of the fear of the gods and the probable consequences, but for the harmonious co-existence of the people. The traditional African way of life, which is basically communal, can be seen today in the extended family system. Mutual help and interdependence characterize this. We have established, following Omoregbe (1998) and Agidigbi (2001) that the essence of goodness in African traditional ethics consists in doing good to others, while the essence of evil consists in doing harm to others. Thus, morality in African traditional thought is essentially inter-personal and social, with a basis in human well-being. The understanding of the worldview of Africans concerning evil will again be further

exposed when the series of steps taken in combating evils are properly understood. This will form our next issue for discussion.

COMBATING EVILS IN THE AFRICAN WAY

Traditionally, Africans see themselves as their brothers' keepers. This is the main reason responsible for the concern shown about his well-being. Africans do not talk about individualism because it is abhorrent to the traditional African mentality. This constitutes the heart of African traditional ethics. The whole extended family, share in the fortune or misfortune, as the case may be of its members. This takes different forms. For example, the traditional African call and treat any relation as a brother or a sister. There exists no sharp distinction between 'brother', 'half-brother', 'half-sister', et cetera. All of these gestures are geared towards creating a society that will be free of evil.

In spite of the communal co-existence that is from all indications expected to make the society a morally conscious place, there are serious violations of the moral order in African traditional ethics. There is a school of thought that holds the view that one of the serious violations of moral order in Africa is the employment of mystical forces (witch-craft) to do harm to one's neighbours. This, according to them, is a typical evil. One would make haste to ask, what is witchcraft? It is the employment of mystical forces to harm one's neighbour. This force is seen as typical example of evil; hence, it is uncompromisingly condemned in almost all parts of Africa.

In the view of Oluwole (2000), witchcraft power is the power that some body can use to affect another person or make some one else do what you want. From this definition, it does not mean the power you are using to affect the other person is necessarily evil. It is the decision of the person having the power to use the power positively or negatively, depending on what the person wants to achieve. Put differently, power can be used for anything. You can use power either for good or bad things just like you can use your money to either purchase some thing good or bad. Money is power; power to purchase things. Eimionoria (2004) said that witchcraft is also power, a power to make things happen, good or bad.

Africans honour good names and good character. In doing this for example, among the Esan

speaking people of Edo State, Age Grade system is put into operation. This system, among other reasons is put in place to foster hard work, diligence, and integrity. If any young man among the given age grade is alleged to have stolen, the leaders of the said group will investigate the allegation. This investigation takes different forms; for example, divination, interviews, et cetera. After thorough investigation and the accused is found guilty, a public show of him is normally made around the street naked with humiliating songs of reproach and ridicule. This action is carried out to serve as deterrent to other youths. It follows therefore, that if any one hates ridicule and reproach, such must stay off stealing.

Another example is the step taken to discourage adultery especially among Esan women. If any woman is caught in the act of adultery, the eldest woman (wife) in the family stead will be informed. She will in turn bring the information to the knowledge of the eldest man in the family. He will give approval to her to carry out the necessary actions geared towards putting a stop to the ugly act.

What are the necessary actions one may ask? Before now, it should be that the woman who commits the act (adultery), will be paraded half naked through the major streets of the village; after which she will provide a sizeable she goat and a chicken to appease the gods. This was the effort made towards putting to an end such disgraceful evil acts. In contemporary times, the idea of getting the woman half naked and walk through the streets in the village in broad day light like that has been stopped. She will only be asked to make provision for a goat for the elders and she will be prayed for.

In some African communities, they adopt the traditional policing system. This is done in order that there may be security. The able bodied young men are selected for the job. They can arrest any suspected evildoer and bring such person to the court of the elders for prosecution. What is left to be x-rayed here is whether these steps taken as enumerated above are truly successful or not. If not, what are the reasons for such? This and others will form the next part of this paper

TRADITIONAL MEASURES EMPLOYED IN COMBATING EVIL IN AFRICA: THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

It is truisms that the various ways in which

evil acts was checkmated in African traditional setting, have undergone as they still do, and changes under the influence of modern and external cultural factors. Every culture is dynamic and not static; this assertion become truer when we take into consideration the sociological and anthropological point of view. All cultural changes have occurred owing to modernization inevitably. The question that looms large is whether the existing changes have been favourable to the progressive and qualitative development of the people is a question for posterity to answer.

We have earlier in this chapter established that in Africa, emphasis is placed on goodness of character. A man is considered good when he refrains from vices. The community rulers (Obas, Enigies, Emirs, et cetera), takes it upon themselves to honour such people with respected titles for their goodness as demonstrated in the development of the community especially in the cultivation of moral virtues. These rewards and awards served as encouragement to those who emulates good things and shorn evil entirely.

Unfortunately, the conferment of chieftaincy titles in modern era is not a true test of those who merit it. Thugs, robbers, cruel people are today honoured by the traditional rulers. The reason for this is because of the material gains they may get from the recipients. This is a major weakness. Nobody again ask, what does *Inegbenoise* do for a living? The moral virtue of accountability is no more valued and appreciated. Fugitives are made to be celebrities in most African communities because of greed.

The measure employed in combating sexual promiscuity among married women, has changed seriously. Civilization has enabled the Esan people of Southwestern Nigeria for example, to stop the 'uncivilized method of ensuring that any woman caught in the act of adultery, is paraded nude through the village streets. Rather, she is asked to plead and pay some fine to both the fellow women in the family stead and the elders of her husband's family. After this, the husband is advised to accept her as a wife again. There exist a worrisome aspect of these systems (both the so-called un-civilized and the civilized). When a married woman is caught in the act of sexual unfaithfulness, why is it that nothing is seriously said about the man with whom the evil act is committed? Could it be said that men are not to be held culpable when they have sexual relationship with a woman other than their wives? The

failure to address this aspect of the adjudication of justice, is a major weak The amplified virtue of dignity in labour is a commendable one. In order that this may be sustained, any member of the extended family who has the fortune (economically) than others comes to their aid. This is one of the reasons why today all over Africa, as maintained by Omoregbe (1998), children of the poor parents are being helped to acquire education by relations. In this modern world, in the words of Nyerere, there is an urgent need for the traditional African "brotherhood" or "familyhood" to be extended beyond the confines of the extended family and made to embrace the entire nation, the whole of Africa, and possibly even the whole human race. It therefore follows from the above that every Nigerian, every African and every human being, for example, should be seen and treated as my brother. This project of oneness would have been done, when young men and women are cared for and meaningfully engaged in worthy vent

CONCLUSION

We have been able to give an overview of the various approaches among selected communities in Africa about evil. It is revealing to know that there is no perfect congruency on the reason why man in Africa should stay off evil and pursue good. While some tied morality to religion, others see it as a product of human reason. We made effort too to as clearly as possible distinguish between customary practices, taboos and morality. We posited that there are rational or religious reasons for following the standard of living either seen as custom, taboo or ethics; and this is to ensure that there is peace, tranquility and progress in the society.

We made bold to conclude this paper by making a clarion call on Africans both at home and in diaspora to shorn anything evil that will not only impede our destiny as a people but will also make us look more like the animals the Westerners have mistaken us for all along. Evil cannot give birth to good. This realization is borne out of the negative things affecting us as people that positive. This is showcased in the incessant and endless civil wars that have ravaged most African nations. It is no controversy that one evil person can cause harm to one million people if he so wishes and if he/she has such powers. this does not mean that evil is more than good. Oluwole (2000),said 'we do not know a society where the

evil people are more.' On the whole, evil is evil no matter who is involved. We must learn to say no to evil and embrace virtues; then Africa will be peaceful and progressive.

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