



AFRICAN RELIGIOUS ETHICS AS A MORAL FOUNDATION FOR PROFESSIONAL COUNSELORS

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Abstract

The African Religious Ethics, Philosophy, and Theology are interrelated streams of thought that influence moral thinking, worldviews construction and spiritual life that take place within African societies. The paper explores critically the basic principles and relations existing between African religious ethics, indigenous philosophy and African theological expression, underlining its relevance to the current ethical and social problems. The study is based on qualitative and conceptual analysis, in which the African philosophical concepts of communalism, personhood and the sacredness of life as well as the religious ethical concepts of Christian theological interpretations and within the African context are utilized. In this paper, it is argued that African religious ethics have a holistic ethic, which infuses spirituality, morality and communal responsibility unlike the predominantly individualistic approach of the ethics of Western world view. Ethical values like solidarity, justice, respect for elders and harmony with the spiritual world are explained and applied in African philosophy. Theology further interprets such African values and values, in the present case, African Christian theology interprets these values from the biblical story and doctrinal reflections thus forming a contextualized ethical frame of reference that resonates with African lived realities. Moreover, the study examines the relationship between ethics, philosophy and theology in its bearing on the ways and means of answering the challenges of social injustice, moral decay, leadership crises and cultural identity in the present times in modern Africa. The paper underscores the relevance of maintaining African religious ethics for contemporary theology and the importance of dialogue between ancient and modern beliefs, values, and ethical practices for the betterment of moral integrity, social cohesion, and spiritual health. The study finds that there are religious values, ethics, philosophy and theology in Africa that are coherent and dynamic enough to serve as a foundation for ethical reflection and be a source of theological discussion that is meaningful to the global conversation about ethics, faith and human dignity.

Keywords: African Religious Ethics; African Philosophy; African Theology; Morality; Worldview



Introduction

African Religious Ethics, Philosophy and Theology are very central to appreciating moral values, religious consciousness and social organisation in African societies. Recent African scholarship has begun to validate the idea that the moral systems of Africa are inextricable from religious belief and philosophical speculation, and that they constitute a unified world view that shapes both personal behavior and communal life (Kanu 2019). In Africans' view, the disciplines of ethics, philosophy, and theology are not distinct from one another, but rather are all interdependent, with the spiritual, moral, and social aspects of human life all being inextricably linked.

Recent African religious ethics research has highlighted the community over individual orientation of morality in African context. The ethical evaluation of the conduct is based on the extent to which it promotes social harmony, the common good and human dignity (Metz 2018). The African religious ethic is based on the idea that moral laws are approved by the spiritual world and are upheld by the norms and practices of the community. Therefore, the moral failure is seen as not just a personal fail, but also one that messes with social and cosmic balance. This ethical perspective highlights respect for life, justice, solidarity and responsibility toward the living and the ancestors.

These ethical values are expressed and interpreted from the context of African philosophy. Today, African philosophers maintain that personhood is not the result of individual isolation but of relationships and moral involvement in the community (Chimakonam 2019).

Relationality, interconnectedness and community identity are concepts which inform the philosophical discussions on Africa and the promotion of ethical accountability. This philosophical perspective rejects the ethical models of western society that emphasize individual autonomy and rights, instead proposing a relational model that considers the value of the individual and also the collective community.

African Christian theology has been increasingly embracing the indigenous ethical and philosophical contexts in its attempt to contextualize Christianity in African real life. Orobator (2019) note that African theology is not just about the Christianisation of African symbols, rather it is a conversation with African moral frameworks in order to solve real problems in society.

This theological encounter gives an affirmation and acknowledgment of African religious ethics as sources for theological reflection and at the same time confronts the contemporary challenges of moral decline, corruption, leadership challenges, and social injustice. Ukah (2020) also argues that theology in Africa serves as an ethical voice in the community, influencing the ethics of the public in the process. In the era of globalization, modernization and cultural change, religious ethics, philosophy and theology in Africa are becoming more marginalized. However, their continued significance as tools for moral renewal, identity reconstruction, and social cohesion has been highlighted through recent scholarship in the years 2018-2020. This study therefore focuses on the interrelationship between African religious ethics, philosophy and theology as a basis for tackling the current ethical dilemmas and achieving human dignity in the African societies.

Objectives of the Study

To analyze the conceptual relationships between African religious ethics, philosophy and theology in African perspectives.

2. To recognize and examine the underlying moral values of African religious ethics and their philosophical basis.
3. To examine the understanding and incorporation of indigenous ethical and philosophical systems in the approach of the African theology to current issues in society.
4. To examine the relevance of African religious values, philosophies and godliness in fostering moral integrity, social cohesion and human dignity in modern Africa.

Research Questions

1. How conceptually are the African religious ethics, philosophy and theology linked to one another in African worldviews?
2. What are the key moral principles of African religious ethics and how are they manifested in African philosophies?
3. How does African theology relate to indigenous ethical and philosophical frameworks to respond to social and moral issues in the present?
4. What role can the religious ethics, philosophy and theology of Africa play in the renewal of morals and social cohesion in modern African society?



Literature Review

Conceptual Foundations of African Religious Ethics

The aim of this course is to examine the conceptual foundations of African religious ethics. There has been considerable interest in the discussion of African religious ethics as an integral part of the African worldview where morality, spirituality and social life are intricately related. In Western ethics, moral values are often divorced from religious values, concepts and spiritual realities in favor of abstract conceptions of moral rights and duties. Mbiti, (2019) on the contrary, African ethic is derived from a comprehensive cosmology where moral values are embedded in religious beliefs, communal traditions and spiritual realities. According to a variety of scholars, Africans' ethical values are derived from divine sanction, their ancestors, and the notion of a morally organized world with spiritual agencies (Gyekye 2018,). The works of recent literature put attention on the African ethics which is pragmatic and inter-personal, prioritizing harmony in the community and harmony between the human and spiritual realm Onyewuenyi (2020). The consequences of moral actions to the common good are assessed rather than just by individual intention. This moral attitude promotes values in the modern African societies like respect for the elderly, sanctity of life, hospitality and social responsibility, even in the face of globalization and cultural change which has taken place in the modern world.

African Philosophy as a means of ethical meaning.

African religious ethics are mediated through African philosophy, which gives them the conceptual and intellectual framework. Ikuenobe (2018) and Metz (2019) argue that African philosophy is not fundamentally individualistic, but relational, with a relational notion of personhood. In African concepts of personhood, it is not just a biological state but a moral state; it is a condition of moral accomplishment achieved through good behaviour in the community (Gyekye, 2018). This philosophical perspective is not only expressed in academic work, but also is inscribed in African proverbs, adages and folktales, which are practical expressions of ethics. For instance, a maxim from Africa is "A person is a person through other persons" (Ubuntu), which is a statement that embodies the relational personhood and communal life. In a similar way, the Yoruba saying "Eniyan ni aso mi" (people are my covering) underlines the notion that people's identity and security are based upon social relationships. In the Igbo society, the saying of "Igwe bu ike" ("unity is strength") also reflects the idea of community spirit, and collective responsibility. The philosophical idea of human beings functioning in a web of social and spiritual relationships is vividly illustrated in these proverbs with a focus on moral responsibilities toward harmony and care. Indigenous expressions also communicate the moral value of hard work to which African moral philosophy is rooted. The Yoruba proverb, "Ise ni ogun ise" ("work is the antidote to poverty"), and the Igbo proverb, "Onye ruo, o rie" ("he who works should eat") both convey a moral message of diligence, responsibility, and productivity. These sayings remind us that personhood is endorsed by a contribution to the communal well-being and in so doing it gives one a greater idea of how Gyekye's (2018) says that the main criterion of personhood is moral achievement.

African folktales also help to illuminate these philosophical concepts. In Yoruba mythology, for example, almost every tale about the tortoise (Ijapa) illustrates the repercussions of selfishness, trickery, and considerationlessness for the community. By contrast, stories about working together and giving up promote the values of unity and moral commitment. In these stories, African philosophy becomes a living and a pedagogical system that influences ethical conduct from generation to generation. This philosophy of communalism as noted by Metz (2019) is therefore acted out in these cultural aspects in which the morals are conveyed in an easily understood and memorable manner. The proverbs and stories are normative, they normativize behavior, they promote harmony in the community, and they maintain community values. In addition, African thoughts on the sacredness of the life are also caught in traditional sayings and beliefs. Proverbs such as "Life has no duplicate" or "He who preserves life preserves the community" reflect a life is a gift from God and should be preserved and cared for. This follows Onyewuenyi's (2020) view that the sanctity of life is an integral part of African ethical systems which strengthen the African approaches to human dignity and social cohesion. By doing so, African philosophy can serve as a connecting discipline between metaphysical conceptions of reality and moral expectations. The presence of its expression in proverb, adage and folklore makes the principles of the moral life communalism, hard work, personhood and the sanctity of the human life more than just abstract concepts; it is an actual reality that shapes social conduct, social leadership and social justice in African societies.

African Theology and Contextual Ethical Reflection

African Christian theology has developed as a conscious attempt to read the Christian faith in the cultural and ethical settings of Africa. According to scholars (Bujo 2019) African theology does not disregard the indigenous moral



value but critically engages with it, reinterpreting it in the light of biblical revelation and Christian teachings. This theological perspective is a positive affirmation of the African identity and a solution to the ethical questions that are not only important in African societies but relevant to Africans. According to Bujo (2019), the ethical values of the African Christians are major themes of theology: life, community, and responsibility. Themes are related to the religious ethics and philosophy of Africa, producing a dialogue between native and Christian morality. African theology also uses inculturation as a methodology and thus, theological reflection is able to be relevant to socio-moral issues in Africa like injustice, leadership challenges, poverty, and moral decay. Theological reinterpretation of African ethical values is a factor in a contextualized moral framework that is relevant to lived experiences. This framework is an examination of imported theological models, which might not incorporate African communal values and spiritual sensibilities. Thus, African theology is a bridge between tradition and modernity and provides ethical guidance that is drawn from religion and culture. The relationship between Ethics and Philosophy, as well as Ethics and Theology.

Interrelationship between Ethics, Philosophy and Theology

African religious ethics, philosophy and theology are now considered as integrated and not separate fields of study in contemporary scholarship. According to Ikuenebe (2018) there is no ethical reflection in Africa without philosophical clarity and theological foundation. Philosophy gives coherence of ideas, religion gives moral support, and theology gives depth of interpretation. They constitute an integrated view of the moral life of Africa. The interdisciplinary dynamic facilitates African moral frameworks to respond to intricate moral issues in contemporary settings. Metz notes that African ethics, supported by a rigor and theological sensibility, can make a meaningful contribution to the universal ethical conversation, for example, on human dignity, social justice, and community responsibility. The coming together of these disciplines strengthens the local presence of African thought.

The current relevance and scholarly debates. Recent literature emphasizes that the African religious ethics can be applicable to the problems of today's Africa such as corruption, decline of moral values, inadequate leadership and cultural alienation (Onyewuenyi 2020). There are arguments that the failure to incorporate indigenous ethical practices into solely Western ethical systems has made it difficult for many African societies to be morally oriented (Gyekye, 2018). Meanwhile, discussion continues about the relevance of conventional moral frameworks in contemporary pluralist societies. There are some scholars who warn against romanticizing African traditions, but others believe that if one is critical enough to engage with African traditions while also being contextual enough and reinterpret them with today's knowledge, these traditions can remain relevant (Bujo 2019,). This debate is a reminder of the need for a constant dialogue between ethics, philosophy and theology to confront changing moral realities. Overall, the literature shows that the African religious moral framework, as a product of philosophy and enriched by theology, is not only viable, but also dynamic for ethical reflection in Africa and elsewhere.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, conceptual, and interpretive design to examine the relationships among African religious ethics, indigenous philosophy, and theology through critical analysis of existing literature. Using purposively selected secondary sources from African ethics, philosophy, and theology, the study analyzes relevant texts through thematic and hermeneutical approaches. This method identifies key ethical and philosophical themes and interprets theological texts to show how African Christian theology rearticulates indigenous moral values, enabling an integrated understanding of ethical, philosophical, and theological perspectives.

Discussion and Findings

The conclusions of this research provide support for the importance of holism and communalism in the African religion ethics, which are similar to the views of the previous studies and have been suggested that the moral thinking of Africans cannot be separated from their spirituality and social life. As Mbiti (2019) said Africans are "notoriously religious", the study proves the moral values of Africans are based on a worldview in which moral thinking is influenced by the divine, the presence of ancestors, and the duties of the community. This is in contrast to Western moral philosophies, which focus on personal freedom and ethical ideals. Values, like respect for elders, sanctity of life, and social responsibility, have continued to be relevant in the face of globalization and cultural changes in Africa, indicating the strength of such values.

This dialogue also exposes that the African philosophy gives conceptual clarity to understand the formation and sustenance of ethical values. Relational personhood is an important part of the argument that moral identity in African thought is not merely ascribed but achieved, one that Gyekye (2018) makes in his study. African philosophy places personhood in the context of communal engagement, thus reinforcing ethical responsibilities for social



solidarity, care for one another and harmony. This discovery is in line with Metz's (2019) perspective that African moral ontology is relational, and can contribute to human dignity and justice, a perspective that is extended in this book. As a result, African philosophy is an important link between metaphysical views on God and ethical living.

With respect to the theology, the findings revealed that African theology has a transformative and mediatory role in the reorganization of the indigenous ethical values into the Christian theological value systems. African Christian theology does not dismiss African moral traditions, but critiques them in a way that makes them relevant and appropriate to the local context, that is by contextualization and inculturation. This reinforces Bujo's (2019) view that African theology is about identity and yet at the same time is dealing with the urgent concerns of morality injustice, leadership problems and moral degeneration. Theological engagement then keeps African ethics alive and vibrant in the face of the real world while sustaining their cultural and spiritual traditions.

The interaction among ethics, philosophy, and theology emerges as a defining feature of African moral thought. The study confirms that ethical reflection in Africa is inherently interdisciplinary, requiring philosophical coherence and theological depth to remain meaningful. As Ikuenobe (2019) suggests, isolating these disciplines weakens ethical analysis, whereas their integration enhances moral relevance and applicability. This interdisciplinary synthesis enables African ethical systems to respond effectively to modern challenges, including corruption, cultural alienation, and moral disorientation.

Finally, the discussion highlights ongoing scholarly debates regarding the adaptability of African ethical traditions in pluralistic and rapidly changing societies. While some scholars caution against idealizing traditional ethics, the findings suggest that critical engagement and contextual reinterpretation sustain their relevance. The study therefore contributes to contemporary discourse by affirming that African religious ethics, when informed by philosophical rigor and theological reflection, remain a dynamic and viable framework for ethical reflection. Moreover, these insights position African ethical thought as a meaningful contributor to global conversations on morality, faith, and human dignity.

Conclusion

It is the conclusion of this study that African religious ethics, philosophy and theology are an organic and evolving framework for moral reasoning in African societies. African religious ethics are saturated with a cultural concept of the world, which links spirituality, morality and social life, maintaining ethical values like respect to elders, sanctity of life, justice and social responsibility. These moral pillars are strong and continue to be valid in the face of globalization and cultural transformation. The study also demonstrates the conceptual foundations of studying ethical meaning in terms of African personhood based on relationality and African communalism. African philosophy emphasizes the moral dimension of personhood, established through social interactions, which are linked to ethical responsibilities in fostering solidarity, human dignity, and social harmony. African theology, and specifically African Christian theology, fits into this paradigm by reinterpreting the moral values of Africans using contextual and inculturational perspectives in a way that allows the theology to adequately meet contemporary African moral issues without alienating the cultures of Africa. In general, the integration of the consideration of ethics, philosophy and theology is found to be integral to the maintenance of meaningful consideration of ethics in Africa. The interdisciplinary/integrative nature of their work is instrumental in strengthening the ability of African moral thought in the solution of contemporary problems like leadership crisis, moral decay, corruption, and cultural alienation. The study, therefore, confirms that there is still potential in the African religious ethics for both local and international ethical dialogue.

Recommendation

Documenting, teaching and critically analysing African religious ethical values like communal responsibility, sanctity of life, and moral accountability should be sustained by scholars and educators in African religious studies. The values we discussed can be incorporated in religious education and moral education curriculum, which will help maintain the indigenous moral consciousness in the face of globalization and cultural change in a constructive manner.

The philosophical understanding of personhood and communalism in Africa should be enriched in academic settings and among researchers. Continued conceptual development and application of these principles to current ethical issues such as integrity in leadership, social justice, and affirmation of human dignity in the face of changing societies are needed.

Theological institutions and other faith-based bodies should increase contextual and inculturational theological methods that critically reflect on African cultural and religious thinking. All these will ensure that theology is



relevant to the present-day socio-moral realities and support and preserve the identity of Africa and its African heritage.

The scholars, policymakers and religious leaders should promote and facilitate interdisciplinary approach among others like philosophy, theology, sociology and cultural studies. This will make African ethical frameworks more practically applicable and impactful to solve complex social problems.

African scholars need to remain in the international arena and make African religious ethics relevant in other international ethical and theological conversations through comparative research. This will not only add to the discussion taking place all around the world but also bring African perspectives to the intellectual table.

Professional counselors need to make it a conscious effort to incorporate African philosophies into counseling practice using proverbs, story, folklore, and other indigenous systems of knowledge as therapeutic tools. Such culturally sensitive approaches can create more meaningful avenues to approach psychological and relational problems in an African context, increase client engagement, and encourage self-reflection.

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