



The Foundation and Nature of Traditional African Morality: A Review of Selected Literature.



Richmond Osei Amoah¹  & Augustine Kojo Peprah¹ 

¹ Department of Social Sciences, St. Louis College of Education, Kumasi, Ghana.

ABSTRACT

A plethora of questions are asked when discussing moral issues concerning traditional African societies. Common among them are, is African morality dependent on religion only or has its foundation solely on the society, and what is the nature of the traditional African morality? These questions when answered would solve the myriad of ethical issues inherent in the African Traditional Religion. This article looks at the foundation and the nature of traditional African morality. The article establishes theocentric, communalistic, anthropocentric, utilitarian and shame-oriented as the nature of the traditional African morality. It fills the gap that both God and humanity are the foundations of African morality. The authors reviewed selected literature from various scholars. The paper also affirms that God and human society are the foundation of traditional African morality. It recommends that the theocentric and anthropocentric elements of African ethics must be brought together to have a true nature and source of the traditional African morality. This article seeks to contribute to the debate on the nature and foundation of traditional African morality.

Correspondence

Richmond Osei Amoah

Email: foseiamoah@yahoo.com

Publication History

Received 4th May, 2022

Accepted 27th June, 2022

Published online 8th July, 2022

Keywords: *African Tradition, morality, religion*

© 2022 The Author(s). Published and Maintained by Noyam Publishers.

This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

INTRODUCTION

The concepts of nature and foundations are key to understanding and appreciating a phenomenon. The morality of the African is not fully understood and appreciated by some European scholars. The authenticity of African morality is also sometimes challenged due to the lack of understanding of what really is the foundation and nature of the traditional African morality. Alfred Burdon Ellis for instance, comments that morality among the Akan tribe of Ghana is sin, and is not linked to religion in any way. He posits that religion and morality merge when humanity is socialized by a higher culture.¹ Ellis goes on to mention that in the Akan culture, they limit sin only to offences against the gods and not crimes against humanity like murder and stealing.²

Kofi Asare Opoku refutes the assertions made by Ellis and describes them as wrong and disparaging. Opoku insists that morality and religion are indissoluble when it comes to African ethics, and morality springs from religious considerations.³ He points out specifically that the Akan morality has its basis in

¹ Alfred Burdon Ellis, *The Tshi-Speaking Peoples of the Gold Coast* (London: Frank Cass, 1966), 10-11.

² Ellis, *The Tshi-Speaking Peoples of the Gold Coast*, 10-11.

³ Kofi Asare Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International Private Limited, 1978), 152.

religion.⁴ African ethicists and philosophers such as Kwame Gyekye also contend that African morality has the society and the welfare of humanity as its basis.⁵

The paper contributes to the widespread debate that religion is the basis of African morality and elucidates on the true nature of traditional African morality. It fills the vacuum created that African moral beliefs have no infractions against humans but only on the gods. The morality of Africans is fashioned on their interaction with their fellow humans and with the divine. The foundation and nature of traditional African morality are theocentric and anthropocentric. Exploring the foundation and the nature of African ethics contributes to comprehending and valuing traditional African morality.

Religion as the Foundation of African Morality.

Laurenti Magesa contends that those who think human traditions created morality are oblivious to the fact that, their very human life comes from God. “Tradition contains the moral code and prescription for ethical life.”⁶ He makes his point clearer when he opines that morality which helps to make people conform to the norms of society is geared toward the maintenance and enhancement of life. The spate of immorality and nonconformance to the traditions handed to Africans by their ancestors weaken the life of the community. Good life in a traditional African society is attained through close ties with religion, God, the ancestors and other humans.⁷ Magesa does not only blame human actions for destabilizing the life of the community in African Traditional Religion but also opposes spirits that can be beseeched by humans to cause harm. In the same way, benign spirits can be called upon to protect and prompt people to do good.⁸

John S. Mbiti also believes that many African societies believe that God is part of the social life of the community. The moral order in the African societies was given to them by God in order that people would live gladly and cordially with one another in the society. The moral order from God aids humans to work and have knowledge of what is good and evil, what is right and wrong. The customs and institutions like the chieftaincy institutions in African societies that have sustained the morality of Africans from the past to the present were created by people through the moral order given to them by God. He does this to ensure that the life of the individual and the community is protected.⁹

Opoku also shares the view that in African traditional societies, religion is the basis of morality. Religion in Africa, he continues, is so all-encompassing that religion and morality cannot be detached from one another. Religion to him is the binding force and the source of moral codes that regulate the life of the African society.¹⁰ God is believed to be the custodian and the final authority in all matters in the African Traditional Religion. He mentions the Akan of Ghana, the Fon of Benin and the Yoruba of Nigeria as examples of African societies that see God as the final judge when the life of the African on earth is ended. Opoku specifically mentions that the Akan see God as the guardian of law and order and morality flows from him. This is expressed in the Akan maxim *Onyame mpe bone* “God does not like evil.”¹¹ Opoku also highlights that among the Akan, the ancestors also have a vested interest in the moral life of the living.¹² The gods too are not left out when it comes to shaping the moral life of Africans. They punish and reward their devotees based on their character.¹³

E. Bolaji Idowu affirms the stance of Magesa, Mbiti and Opoku that “morality in the traditional African society is basically the fruit of religion and that it is dependent on it.”¹⁴ Idowu indicates that the

⁴ Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 156.

⁵ Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, (Accra: Sankofa Publishing Co. Ltd., 1998), 41.

⁶ Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Tradition of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 35.

⁷ Magesa, *African Religion*, 52.

⁸ Magesa, *African Religion*, 53.

⁹ John S. Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion*, (Lusaka: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1975), 36.

¹⁰ Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 152.

¹¹ Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 153.

¹² Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 156.

¹³ Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 156.

¹⁴ E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans Group Ltd. 1962), 144- 145.

Yoruba also draw their morality from God, *Oludumare* who has “the Pure” and “the Perfect King” as his attributes. *Oludumare* is the judge and the standard of morality. He judges the character of humanity. He is omnipresent and has his eagle’s eyes on the morality of his subjects; no one can escape the judgment of God.¹⁵

The assumptions of the African philosophers who ascribe to the widespread view that African morality depends on religion are of the view that African morality comes from God, the divinities and the ancestors. They enlighten people to do what is right, reward the good and punish the evil. This makes religion indispensable in determining morality in Africa.

Humans and Society as the Foundation of African Morality

In the 17th century, the generally held notion that religion was the foundation of morality and that without religion, morality cannot exist was challenged.¹⁶ In 1690 Pierre Bayle¹⁷ posited that “religion is neither necessary nor sufficient for morality”.¹⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer is one of the Western philosophers who did not believe that morality should be based on religion. Religion according to him makes people behave morally because believers are promised an eternal bliss that would be attained in life after death. Many Christians live morally because they want to be in Heaven. Buddhists, on the other hand, behave ethically due to the promise of *Nirvana* and Muslims abide by the moral teachings of the Quran and the Hadith because of *Jannah* which Quran 31:8 describes as a “garden of pleasure”. This motivation for doing what is good on the basis of religion according to Schopenhauer is ultimately founded on “selfish egoism”.¹⁹ Schopenhauer also declares that “if any action has as its motive an egoistic aim, it cannot have any moral worth”.²⁰ In one of his writings on ethics, Schopenhauer posited that morality rather has compassion as its foundation and not religion. Compassion is a day-by-day occurrence, free of any clandestine motive. It involves sharing and alleviating the suffering of others.²¹

In Africa, Kwame Gyekye and Kwasi Wiredu both Ghanaians and Akan are the stalwarts when it comes to African ethics. They made great use of the Akan culture to elucidate their moral concept. The duo belongs to the school of thought that does not ascribe to the idea that African morality should be based on religion. Gyekye observed that because Africans are said to be notoriously religious in every aspect of their life, hence, the popular notion that morality is based on religion. He rejects this popular notion to state emphatically that “the religious basis of African moral values is greatly mistaken.”²² Gyekye tries to explore how Ghanaian morality in particular and African morality, in general, are expressed in maxims, folktales, artistic symbols, institutions and practices of the people.²³ Gyekye argues that if Traditional African Religion is not a revealed religion and does not have scriptures and prophets or founders to guide their moral life, how come Africans have elaborate moral codes that have stood the test of time? If it consents that African religion is a natural religion, that is created by the people’s own experience and from their world view, then morality too was created by them to regulate the behaviour of people in the society. Moralities of African societies are “formed based on their knowledge of the nature of society, human interactions, aspirations and the value of human life. This means that their morality will not be based on religion, but on the considerations of human welfare”.²⁴ Gyekye again cites some writers of this school of thought and their views to buttress his claim. Godfred Wilson cited by Gyekye has said that among the Nyakyusa of Tanzania and Malawi, ethics is not

¹⁵ Idowu, *Oludumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 3.

¹⁶ Stephen Gaukroger, *Objectivity: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: University Press, 2012), 91.

¹⁷ Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) was a Calvinist French Philosopher, Author and Lexicographer, accessed 4/02/2021. <http://www.britannica.com>.

¹⁸ Gaukroger, *Objectivity: A Very Short Introduction*, 91.

¹⁹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Basis of Morality*, trans, A. B. Bullock (New York: Dover Publications, 2005), 7.

²⁰ Schopenhauer, *The Basis of Morality*, 7.

²¹ Schopenhauer, *The Basis of Morality*, 16.

²² Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 41.

²³ Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 41.

²⁴ Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 42.

related to religion and again moral virtues are not made in religious provisions. In Rwanda, J.J. Marquethas hinted that the morality of the Banyarwandar has no links to the command of God. These comments Gyekye believes are “unequivocal statements to support the stance that religion is not the basis of the morality of at least in some African societies.”²⁵

Kwasi Wiredu also holds the view that religion should not be the foundation of African Morality. He claims “The will of God, not to talk of that of any other extra-human being, is logically incapable of defining the good.”²⁶ Specifically, on the Akan morality, Wiredu says “ in fact, I deny that Akan moral thought is “supernaturalistic” to any extent”²⁷ These bold statements of Wiredu run contrary to the views of Idowu and Magesa who claim that the supernatural, God, the gods and the ancestors have roles to play in determining what is moral in Africa. He also disagrees vehemently with Opoku on the fact that Akan morality is founded on religion.²⁸

Wiredu proposes humanism as the foundation of African morality by analyzing the Akan maxim *Onipanahia*, “A human being has value.”²⁹ Wiredu by this asserts that to be moral is to value humans and there is no need to appeal to religion to determine the worth of what is moral. Another aspect worth mentioning about Wiredu’s moral theory is his idea of “welfarism” when it comes to African morality. *Welfarism* is the claim that human well-being “is the only value which an ethical theory needs to take seriously, ultimately and for its own sake”.³⁰ Wiredu contends that every good action of an individual should seek the welfare of humans and the society. This he expressed by saying “human well-being is an irreducible presupposition of all morality ... every moral endeavour is a certain kind of quest after human well-being”.³¹ *Welfarism* according to Wiredu hinges on the fact that “Every Akan moral saying assumes the harmonization of interest as a means. These moral sayings aim at securing human’s welfare as an end. Human’s welfare is the basis of all moral venture.”³² Motsamai Malofe summaries Wiredu’s *welfarism* that, “actions are right or wrong insofar as they produce or lead to well-being or wrong if they detract from it.”³³

It must be appreciated that both schools of thought have contributed to the African concept of morality. It can therefore be said that morality in African societies has both religious and social foundations. Those who speak for the motion highlight the religious foundation of African morality. They proposed a theistic foundation or theocentric view of African morality. On the other hand, those who do not agree that African morality is not based on religion but on the welfare of the society also propose a humanistic or anthropocentric view of African morality. Another issue to be noted is that the widespread view that African morality is based on religion is neither influenced by the advent of Christianity nor Islam.

The Nature of African Morality

The discussions above offer five (5) main characteristics of traditional African morality. They are theocentric, communalistic, anthropocentric, utilitarian and shame-oriented.

²⁵ Kwame Gyekye, *African Ethics*, 2010, accessed 16/02/2021. <https://plato.stanford.edu>.

²⁶ KwasiWiredu, “Moral Foundations of An African Culture”, In KwasiWiredu and Kwame Gyekye, eds, “Person and Community,” *Ghanaian Philosophical Studies*, 1, Washington DC, The Council for Research in Value and Publishing, (1992):194.

²⁷ KwasiWiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 234.

²⁸ Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*,234.

²⁹ Motsamai Molefe, “A Critique of KwasiWiredu’s Humanism and Impartiality”, *ActaAcademica*, 1,(2016): 94, accessed 6/02/2021.<https://www.researchgate.net/publication>.

³⁰ Leonard Wayne Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 3.

³¹ Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 64.

³² Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 65.

³³ Molefe, *A Critique of KwasiWiredu’s Humanism and Impartiality*, 95.

Theocentric: Magesa,³⁴Mbiti,³⁵Opoku³⁶ and Idowu³⁷ underscore the fact that morality in traditional African societies has religion as its foundation. They believe that the Supreme Being, the gods and the ancestors play vital roles in moral development. They give humanity, laws to govern the society to bring about peace in the community. They inspire people to do what is right. They punish and reward people and the community for their moral deeds. The divine cannot be separated from morality in African traditional societies.

Communalistic: The morality of the traditional African society as communalistic has been held by Gyekye and others. Gyekye believes that morality in Africa is based on the common good of the society and not that of the individual. "Seeking for the interest of others is central to the meaning and practices of morality in traditional African societies."³⁸Kollman also says that "African morality and ethics ... cannot be conceived outside of the community."³⁹

Anthropocentric: Benezet Bujo claims fundamentally the morality of the African is anthropocentric.⁴⁰ Wiredu asserts that humanity is the value and centre of all that is good and moral. He stresses that it is "not God/gods but humans that are relevant to the conceptual foundations of morality in the Akan thought."⁴¹ This characteristic places value on God as an object of respect and worship and not one whose will is to be obeyed. What must be obeyed are the will and the welfare of the society.⁴² According to Gyekye, it suffices to say that "Morality in traditional African societies is essentially social, arising out of the relations between individuals. This means that if there is no such thing as human society, there would be no such thing as morality."⁴³

Utilitarian/Pragmatic: Bujo⁴⁴ and Wiredu⁴⁵ use the term "utilitarian" to qualify traditional African ethics. The latter even goes further that among the Akan, the value and adulation of the gods depend on their usefulness to humanity. Segun Gbadegsin also intimates that morality in Africa is acts of humans that solve the problems of the world.⁴⁶

Shame-oriented: Ruth Lienhard argues that an individual's orientation in life contributes greatly to eliciting feelings of guilt and shame. When a bad act is committed shame is experienced by the individual who is honour oriented. In the same way, a transgressor will feel guilty if he is justice-oriented. In relation to the problem of sin and reconciliation, when one transgresses, the person is restored to his relationship with the divine and the community through the expression of shame and guilt associated with sin. This links reconciliation and sin very well in African society. Justice must be served to restore the guilt and honour of the penitent.⁴⁷ Moral transgressions in traditional African societies evoke feelings of being dirty and ugly.⁴⁸

³⁴ Magesa, *African Religion*, 1997, 52.

³⁵ Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion*, 36.

³⁶ Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion*, 152.

³⁷ Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 3.

³⁸ Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 4.

³⁹ P. Kollman, "Tribalism and Justice", *African Christian Studies*, 4(2)(1988): 59.

⁴⁰ Benezet Bujo, *African Christian Morality at the Age of Inculturation* (Nairobi: St. Paul, 1990), 49.

⁴¹ Kwesi Wiredu, *The Moral Foundations of African Culture*. (In Coetzee, P.H. & Roux, A.P.J., eds. *Philosophy from Africa*. Halfway House: International Thompson Publishing (S.A.) 1998. 307.

⁴² Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 65.

⁴³ Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 41.

⁴⁴ Bujo, *African Christian Morality*, 50.

⁴⁵ Wiredu, *The Moral Foundations of African Culture* 307.

⁴⁶ Segun Gbadegsin, *Individuality, Community and the Moral Order*. (In Coetzee, P.H. & Roux, A.P.J., eds. *Philosophy from Africa*. Halfway House: International Thompson Publishing (SA). 1998), 305.

⁴⁷ Ruth Lienhard. "A "Good Conscience", Difference between Honour and Justice Orientation." *Missiology*, 29(2) (2001): 136-139

⁴⁸ Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 101.

The penitent and the community are dishonoured and covered with shame due to sin.⁴⁹

CONCLUSION

The debate whether African morality is based on religion or on society would never cease. The two schools of thought should be annexed to conceptualize the true nature of African morality. The humanist view of African morality tries to imply that one can be moral without being religious. This view also corroborates the fact that there are nonreligious sources of African morality like proverbs, arts and symbols. It is proposed that the two should be put together to say the foundations of African morality are both from religion and society. Kwame Gyekye even concedes that if African morality is gleaned from their social interactions and not based on religion, “religion cannot be completely removed from the area of moral practice”⁵⁰ This affirms the conclusion that African morality is both a creation of God and humans and because God created the human society, it can be ascribed to him. Hence the widespread view that African morality depends on religion.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alfred BurdonEllis, *The Tshi-Speaking Peoples of the Gold Coast*, London: Frank Cass, 1966.
- Asare-Danso, Seth, *African Traditional Religion*, Cape Coast: Beret Outlook Press 2019.
- Bujo, Benezet, *African Christian Morality at the Age of Inculturation*, Nairobi: St. Paul, 1990.
- Gaukroger, Stephen, *Objectivity: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: University Press, 2012.
- Gbadegesin, Segun “Individuality, Community and the Moral Order”. (In Coetzee, P.H. & Roux, A.P.J., eds. *Philosophy from Africa*. Halfway House: International Thompson Publishing (SA). (1998) 292-305.
- Gyekye, Kwame, *African Ethics*, 2010. Accessed 16/02/2021. <https://plato.stanford.edu>.
- _____. *African Cultural Values*, Accra: Sankofa Publishing Co. Ltd., 1998.
- Idowu, E., Bolaji, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, London: Longmans Group Ltd. 1962.
- Kollman, P., “Tribalism and Justice”, *African Christian Studies*, 4(2)(1988):49-70.
- Mbiti, S. John, *An Introduction to African Religion*, Lusaka: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1975.
- Megasa, Laurenti, *African Religion: The Moral Tradition of Abundant Life*, Mary Knoll: Orbis Books, 1997.
- Molefe, Motsamai “A Critique of KwasiWiredu’s Humanism and Impartiality”, *Acta Academica*, 2016.1, 9. 91-110. Accessed 6/02/2021. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication>.
- Opoku, K., Asare *West Africa Traditional Religion*, Accra: FEP International Private Limited, 1978.
- Lienhard, Ruth, “A “Good Conscience”, Difference between Honour and Justice Orientation.” *Missiology*, 29(2)(2001):131-141.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The Basis of Morality*, trans, A. B. Bullock, New York: Dover Publications, 2005.
- Sumner, L., Wayne, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.
- Wiredu, Kwasi, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996.
- Wiredu, Kwasi “Moral Foundations of An African Culture”, In KwasiWiredu and Kwame Gyekye, eds, “Person and Community,” *Ghanaian Philosophical Studies*, 1, Washington DC, The Council for Research in Value and Publishing, (1992):194.
- Wiredu, Kwasi, “The Moral Foundations of African Culture”. (In Coetzee, P.H. & Roux, A.P.J., eds. *Philosophy from Africa*. Halfway House: International Thompson Publishing (S.A.) (1998). 306-316.

⁴⁹ Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion*, 177.

⁵⁰ Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*. 42.

ABOUT AUTHORS

Richmond Osei Amoah and Augustine Kojo Peprah are priests of the Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi and tutors at the Department of Social Science, St. Louis College of Education, Kumasi-Ghana. Their areas of research are Religious and Moral Education.