



Virtue Ethics as a Model for Addressing Moral Decline in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Every culture espouses distinct moral values systems which serve as the blueprints guiding behaviours of members of a society. Ghana as a country has a rich moral value system that shapes its citizens' worldviews and informs the way they relate with other human beings. A reflection on, past moral values of Ghanaian societies, however, reveals a moral deficit. This situation throws up the following crucial questions. What is the future of Ghanaian societies given the current state of moral decadence? What can be done to salvage the present state of moral decadence? The paper is approached qualitatively, using interviews, and proposes a significant return to moral virtues where societies will have to teach and ensure that the young ones practice moral values through examples of virtuous living.

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INTRODUCTION

Christian A. Ackah, Peter Sarpong, and Kwame Gyekye, among other scholars, have articulated in various ways the communitarian lifestyles of people in traditional Ghanaian societies albeit a few isolated cases of individualism. In communitarian societies, members were generous to one another by way of sharing food, clothes, and money as well as helping one another on their farms, and providing shelter even for strangers.¹ In other words, each person was the other's keeper. In such communitarian environments, elders could correct disrespectful children without the prior consent of the parents or guardians of the child in question. It was an acceptable phenomenon to engage anyone's child(ren) to run errands since it was a common belief among the members of the traditional society that every child was seen as *everyone's child*.² Furthermore, there was a piece of overwhelming evidence that every member of the society espoused the values of truthfulness, honesty, togetherness, humility, respect for the elderly, kindness and faithfulness among others. Thus, any member of the society who went contrary to these values was perceived as an enemy of the society's unity and growth and was reprimanded by the chiefs and elders.³

¹ Peter Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, (reprint 2006) (Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974), 36, 66; Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996), 35-38; Christian Abraham Ackah, *Akan Ethics: A Study of the Moral Ideas and the Moral Behavior of the Akan Tribes of Ghana* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1988), 89, 102-104.

² George Anderson Jnr., "Traditional Akan Ethics: Relevant or Trash to Ghanaians Today?" *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 4, no. 1 (2015): 55.

³ Ackah, *Akan Ethics*, 89, 102-104.

Personal observations, sporadic interviews and media reportages (especially news items) have shown that many changes have hit today's Ghanaian society. It is obvious that in contemporary Ghanaian society, the youth show less respect for elderly persons in speech and deeds. They indict their parents and old folks as witches, insult, spit on and scream at them, and, in some unfortunate instances, beat them for the fact that they (the children) have been reprimanded in society.⁴ Apart from these scenarios, the act of corruption, bribery, theft, embezzlement and extortion are on the surge in the domains of politics, education, trade, governance, and religion *inter alia*.⁵ These issues throw up serious socio-religio-ethical concerns. The reason is that in traditional and contemporary Ghanaian societies, religion is deeply tied to morality in a manner that religion and moral values are taught in tandem at home, in churches and schools. Hence, there appears to be a unanimous consensus in Ghana that the more religious one is, the more moral the person is and vice-versa. Existing records show that about 71.2% of Ghanaians profess Christianity, 17.6% profess Islam, and 5.2% proffers African Traditional religion.⁶ Given Ghana's moral values system vis-à-vis this statistical index in religious affiliations, one is likely to envisage a positive nexus between how the values system and religion affect the moral apprehension of Ghanaians while noting the close affinity between religion and morality in Ghana as they are confronted with the issues identified above. The following questions then arise. What could be the possible reasons accounting for the current moral downturn in Ghana? Could it be that a moral deficit exists in the application of moral values by a majority of Ghanaians as they are confronted with moral issues? This paper seeks to answer these questions by rehearsing some of the core moral structures of the past that were used to shape the social structures of society and then propose a revisit of the past in search of and the application of those important positive life-changing values in today's practical life of the Ghanaian to ensure sustainable futures in Ghana.

METHODOLOGY

This study is purely qualitative. The use of this approach is important because it has ensured flexibility and in-depth investigation into the underlying motives, emotions and desires of respondents of such a fluid variable under inquiry.⁷ The study's design is historical and descriptive. The historical design was used since a critical inquiry into the past is needed to find out from the old folks, how society and its members lived, and the kind of values that were upheld to shape their moral lives. Regarding historical design, William Wiersma has shown that the design helps to produce an accurate description and interpretation of past events.⁸ The descriptive design was used since it described the past and present state of the subject under investigation.⁹

Consequently, the primary data was accessed via face-to-face qualitative in-depth interviews with twenty (20) opinion leaders from five different communities (Ajumako Ochiso, Apewosika, Elmina, Breman Asikuma, and Ejisu Essienimpong). The primary data from these interviews were supplemented by observation and reviews of relevant related literature. From the five traditional societies, four respondents each comprising three old men and an old woman were purposively sampled. The age range of the respondents was between sixty (60) and eighty-five (85) years. Selecting this age range was significant because it places the respondents into an appropriate year context where the respondents could be said to have lived to witness how members of society lived in the past. Besides, the age range depicts respondents' experience and authority on the subject under inquiry.

⁴ Anderson Jnr., "Traditional Akan Ethics," 61.

⁵ George Anderson Jnr., and Makafui M. Tayviah, "Corruption in the Wake of High Religiosity in Ghana: Questioning the Possibility", *E-Journal of Theological and Religious Studies* 1, no 2 (2019): 117.

⁶ Ghana Statistical Service, *2010 Population and Housing Census: Summary Report of Final Results* (Accra: Ghana Statistical Service, May, 2012): 63.

⁷ Cartik R. Kothari, *Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques*, (2nd rev. ed.) (New Delhi: New Age International (P) Limited, Publishers, 2004): 3.

⁸ William Wiersma, *Research Methods in Education: An Introduction*, (4th ed.) (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1986).

⁹ Kothari, *Research Methodology*, 2.

The study was framed by the following research questions. In what manner did members of a society live in the past? What moral values were mostly cherished and practised by members of past societies? How are the moral values of today different from that of the past?

Conceptualising Moral Terms

Morality is the study of human conduct while ethics is the theoretical study of morality. However, morality and ethics are often used interchangeably. Austin Fagothey has shown that morality is concerned with describing the conduct of a moral agent as either right or wrong.¹⁰ The morality of the moral agent is determined by *the act itself* (what the agent wills, considering it not in the physical but in the moral codes), *the motive* (what the agent personally wishes to achieve by the act over and above what the act naturally tend to) and *the circumstances* (the accidental surroundings of the act).¹¹

Bernard Gert has also observed that morality can be descriptive or normative. Descriptively, morality refers to the important attitudes of individuals. The normative sense of morality refers to a universal guide to behaviour that in plausibly specified conditions, all rational persons would put forward for governing the behaviour of all moral agents.¹² From the perspective of Kwasi Wiredu, morality is universal and essential to human culture. This is because morality is concerned with the observance of rules for the harmonious adjustment of the interests of the individual to those of others in society. He adds that morality does not just refer to conformity to the requirements of the harmony of interests, but rather a conformity to those requirements inspired by an imaginative and sympathetic identification with the interests of others even at the cost of possible curtailment of one's interests.¹³

Following Wiredu, Gyekye has also argued that morality leans itself to a set of social rules and norms intended to guide the conduct of people in a society. For him, such rules and norms emerge out of and are anchored in people's beliefs about right and wrong conduct and good and bad character. In other words, morality is a social construct or phenomenon arising out of the relations between individuals in a given human society.¹⁴ From the ongoing, it is gathered that morality is the quality of the moral agent's conduct or behaviour which is considered within the framework of what society has endorsed as pursuable actions binding all members of a society. Any behaviour or conduct that digresses from what society has endorsed is considered undignified and punishable by moral authority.

Overview of the Concept of Values

Daphna Oyserman has shown that modern theories of values are grounded in the work of Kohn (class and values), Rokeach (general value systems), Merton (social structure and values), and Kluckhohn (group-level values). Oyserman cites Rokeach who defines values as shared proscriptive or prescriptive beliefs about ideal modes of behaviour and end states (outcomes) – what is worth striving for.¹⁵ Kanu refers to Dzobo who explicates values to mean the practical moral virtues borne out of the past, and present life experiences of society detached from divine revelation. For Kanu, values are the cultural outlook of a group of people which brings about meaning to the belief and moral systems of the people in question.¹⁶

¹⁰ Austin Fagothey, *Right and Reason: Ethics in Theory and Practice*, (2nd ed.) (Rockford, IL: Tan Book and Publishers, 1959):112.

¹¹ Fagothey, *Right and Reason*, 145-150.

¹² Bernard Gert, *The Definition of Morality*, The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, (Fall 2012 ed.), Edward N. Zalta (Ed.), Retrieved on 17th July, 2013, from <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2012/entries/morality-definition/>>

¹³ Kwesi Wiredu, "The moral foundations of an African culture," in *African Philosophy Reader*, ed. P. H. Coetzee & A. P. J. Roux (London and New York: Routledge, 1992):306.

¹⁴ Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996):55.

¹⁵ Daphna Oyserman, "Values, Psychology of," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd edition, Vol. 25, ed. James D. Wright (Oxford: Elsevier, 2015):37.

¹⁶ Macaulay A. Kanu *The Indispensability of the Basic Social Value in African Tradition: A Philosophical Appraisal*, (2010): 149, 151. Retrieved from <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/og/article/view/57930/46296>. Accessed on October 13, 2022.

According to Oyserman, values can be conceptualized at the individual and group levels. At the individual level, values are internalized social representations or moral beliefs that people appeal to as the ultimate rationale for their actions. At the group level, values are scripts or cultural ideals held in common by members of a group; the group's 'social mind.' Differences in these cultural ideals, especially those with a moral component, determine and distinguish different social systems.¹⁷ Kanu alludes to the following categories of values; moral, religious, spiritual, economic, political, aesthetic and social.¹⁸ In this paper, the focus is on moral values which otherwise also means social values. This synonymous use of the two terms is deemed justifiable since it has been argued by many African scholars including Gabriel E. Idang¹⁹ that in African society, some social values, cannot exactly be separated from religious, moral, and political values.

Moral Values

Moral values are guiding principles, virtues, or standards of behaviour, which are regarded as desirable and important and are held in high repute by a society or an individual. The values guide the moral agent in his or her interaction with other moral agents.²⁰ On the part of Gyekye, moral values are those forms or patterns of conduct that are considered most worthwhile and cherished by society. For him, moral values are not only principles of behaviour but also goals of social and individual actions.²¹ For Sarpong, moral values may be peculiar and differ from one culture or society to another; yet there are some values such as respect, truthfulness and honesty inter alia which are universal.²²

The source of moral values may be derived from either one's family, personal experience, society or traditions, religion, school or the self. In Ghana, some of the moral values upheld include but are not limited to honour, respect, hospitality, gratitude, truthfulness, obedience, unity, godliness, hard work and courage. Any member of society who flouts these values is regarded as a nuisance and considered to lack the goodwill of the society and its members.

On the foundations of the morality of Africans and Ghanaians especially, a long-standing debate exists. Whereas Mbiti, Idowu, Asare Opoku, and Parrinder²³ among other scholars attribute the determinant of morality to religion, Gyekye, Danquah, and Wiredu among other scholars have argued that society or tradition is the source. Yet, these scholars do not deny the role religion plays in shaping the morality of Africans and Ghanaians. In this paper, it is held that religion and society or traditions are the sources of the morality of Ghanaians. This assumption is evidenced in the symbols, songs, and arts and crafts of the Ghanaian people.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Moral Values in Practice: Past Experience

Responding to the research question (*in what manner did society members live among each other in the past?*), all the respondents gave a narrative on how society was characterized by the practice of communitarianism and adherence to moral values by its members. The respondents held the view that although few individuals appeared to be reserved or individualistic,²⁴ society in its totality was seen as a family unit characterised by harmonious living and recognition of every member. Opanyin Annu, Darko and Obaapanyin Akua, for instance, narrated how they gave helping hands to members of the society who needed assistance to clear their piece of land and to harvest their farm produce especially on cocoa, cassava and corn farms. Obaapanyin Akua on her part indicated that there were countless

¹⁷ Oyserman, "Values, Psychology of," 37.

¹⁸ Kanu, "The Indispensability of the Basic," 151.

¹⁹ Gabriel E. Idang, "African Culture and Values" *Phronimon* 16, no. 2, (2015):103.

²⁰ Anamika Banerjee, "Moral Values: A Necessary Part of the Curriculum," *Indian Journal of Research* 3, no.5,(2014):57.

²¹ Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 55.

²² Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, 64-67.

²³ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (2nd rev. ed.) (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1989): 1; Geoffrey E. Parrinder, *Religion in Africa* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969): 28-29; Bolaji E. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans Group Ltd, 1962): 146; Kofi Asare Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship" in *The Black Experience in Religion*, ed. Eric C. Lincoln, (New York: Doubleday, 1974): 286.

²⁴ Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 35.

occasions she prepared 'fufu' (a staple Ghanaian cuisine which is a mixture of pounded cassava and plantain with soup) and distributed it to people in her community.²⁵

The narratives of the respondents resonate with the observations of Sarpong. For Sarpong, in the past, it was considered a moral obligation for members of the society to accommodate and provide assistance to people (including strangers) food, free shelter and sometimes money in order for people to be at ease with their life's challenging issues.²⁶ Inferring from the views of the respondents, one comes to understand Gyekye when he posits that Africans including Ghanaians place a great deal of emphasis on communitarian values. This is because of the very nature and structure of African societies which has created a sense of community that characterises social relations among individual members of African society. By this, members of a community demonstrate a concern for the well-being of others, do what they can do to advance the common good and generally participate in community life.²⁷ He adds that the doctrine emphasises the activity and success of the wider society rather than, though not necessarily at the expense of, or to the detriment of, the individual."²⁸ This explanation of the term resonates with what Bujo and Mbiti emphasise on the relationship between the individual and society. For Bujo, the value of communitarianism reflects the black African philosophy of an existential *cognatus sum, ergo sumus* ("I am related, therefore we are").²⁹ Mbiti on his part relates communalism to his popular expression; "I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am"³⁰.

On the second research question (*what moral values were mostly cherished and practised by members of society?*), the respondents identified respect for the elderly, obedience, humility, truthfulness, justice, and patience. It must be emphasised here that although there is a gamut of moral values that existed in Ghanaian traditional societies, the ones identified here by the respondents are considered for discussion for the purpose of this paper.

The value of respect for the elderly is one of the most cherished values all the respondents alluded to and spent time deliberating on. On this value, the respondents cited different Akan proverbs to explicate the need for one to show respect to the elderly in society. According to the respondents, in Ghanaian traditional societies, the elderly is believed to be the head of the family, responsible for the well-being of all the members in the family, an embodiment of knowledge and life experience, and a teacher of morals.³¹ Besides, it is a belief among traditional societies that the words of the elderly have the power to make or unmake a person. Given these, it was anticipated that everyone respected the elderly, be it or not one's family member, father, mother. By way of showing respect to the elderly, the youth eased the burden of the elderly and run errands for them. Moreover, in a public or home gathering, a child was expected to offer his or her seat to the elderly person. Furthermore, to show respect to the elderly, it was mandatory for a person to either bow or remove his hat or cap before he or she shares greetings with the elderly person.

According to Kanu, among the Yoruba, the way the young ones salute the elders was and is regarded as evidence of morality or lack of it, instead of as a matter of etiquette. He adds that a young man is described as totally immoral simply because he would not prostrate for his elders. The author goes on to refer to an Igbo proverb or maxim which says, "He who listens to an elder is like one who consults an oracle." For him, the oracles are believed to give the infallible truths, thus, the elders are also believed to say the truth and the words and instructions are heeded for the promotion of good behaviour among the young. The respect given to the elders, according to Kanu, has a practical effect

²⁵ Personal interview with Opanyin Annu on February 1 – 15, 2021; Darko on March 2 – 17, 2020; Obaapanyin Akua on October 5 – 25, 2020.

²⁶ Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, 66.

²⁷ Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 35, 36.

²⁸ Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 155.

²⁹ Benezet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001): 4.

³⁰ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (2nd ed.) (London: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1969): 108-109.

³¹ Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect*, 65; Kanu, *The Indispensability*, 156; Sjaak van der Geest, "The Elder and his Elbow: Twelve Interpretations of an Akan Proverb", (Indiana University Press. *Research in African Literatures* 27, no 3, 1996): 110-111.

on the maintenance of custom and tradition.³² Ebhomienlen has also observed that among the people of Esan land in Nigeria, a child must not look the elderly person in the eye, and talk when elders are talking. Any child who does these show disrespect to the elderly and it is an indication of bad home training.³³

Opanyin Annu and Darko, and Obaapanyin Otsiwah shared the Akan proverb, “*Esen w’agya tsentsen a, nna nnye wo pen bi a.*” This proverb literary means, “*If you are taller than your father, it does not follow that he is your equal.*” In other words, one’s height does not depict maturity. In an actual sense, this proverb admonishes one to be mindful of the fact that no matter how well-off a person is in life, that person must show respect to all those who are superior to him in age.³⁴ Given this belief that was held and inculcated in society members, the study’s respondents indicated that no elderly person was abused or disrespected in society. The respondents added that one could not pass insinuations or insults at an elderly person or someone’s parent without being reprimanded. A person who insults an elderly or another person’s parents was summoned together with his or her parents before the chief and his elders. The culprit with his or her parents was asked to either render an apology or pay a fine of a goat or sheep, bottle(s) of schnapps and an amount of money to compensate the offended. This outcome, according to the respondents, put fear into members of society and served as deterrent to those who may plan to commit similar offense.

Obaapayin Sesema and Opanyin Ato shared another Akan proverb, *Opanyin ano sen suman*, which literary means, “*The mouth of an elder is more powerful than a talisman.*” By this proverb, the respondents explained that whatever an elderly person says happens, thus, one must heed the advice of the elderly.³⁵ This proverb also resonate with some of the proverbs Sjaak van der Geest catalogues among the people of Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town on the Kwahu Plateau in South-eastern Ghana. According to him, his respondents shared the proverb *Abofra kotow opanyin nkyen*. This literally means *the child squats near the elderly*. For Geest, his respondents argued that children are supposed to heed the calls of the elders and sit quietly at their feet to listen to their wisdom. Thus, any child who disrespects the elderly gets into trouble and disgrace.³⁶ These proverbs point to one’s need as a moral obligation to show maximum respect to the elderly in society.

Apart from the value of respect discussed above, the respondents talked about patience, humility, truthfulness and justice. According to the respondents, these moral values were cherished and every member of the society was to observe them in their lives. This is because adherence to them makes life very easier, and thus, ensures social cohesion. On patience, for instance, Obaapanyin Otsiwah underscored that without patience, one makes mistakes in life and loses very valuable things. The respondent further noted a proverb which says, if one takes time to dissect an ant, one locates the ant’s intestines. This literary means without patience, it becomes very difficult for one to attain success in life endeavours. Opanyin Fosu on his part referred to an Akan proverb which says, *Efa wansema ho abufuw a, ibur wokur*. Basically, this proverb means “*if you get annoyed with the housefly, you bruise your sore.*” From the proverb, the person provoked is represented as having a sore that a fly tries to infect. The import of the proverb is that the person in question must try to drive the fly away patiently, each time the fly attempts to infect the sore. This suggests that when the person loses patience he or she may, in attempting to kill the fly further bruise his or her sore. Thus, this proverb is a reminder that patience is important and must be applied in every sphere of a person’s life to realize his/her aspirations.³⁷

The respondents further shared their views on humility, truthfulness and justice. For them, a person who is humble and truthful earns much admiration from the elders and everyone in society, and

³² Kanu, *The Indispensability*, 156.

³³ Thomas Oseyi Ebhomienlen, “Negative Attitude of Modern Youth on African Ethical Values: Its Detrimental Blow on the Esan Nation of Nigeria,” *IJASOS- International E-Journal of Advances in Social Sciences* 3, no. 8, (2017): 694.

³⁴ Personal interview with Opanyin Annu on February 1 – 15, 2020; Opanyin Darko and Obaapanyin Otsiwah on March 2 – 17, 2020; Ackah, *Akan Ethics*, 52.

³⁵ Personal interview with Obaapanyin Sesema and Opanyin Ato on February 1 – 15, 2021.

³⁶ Sjaak van der Geest, “*The Elder and His Elbow*,” 111.

³⁷ Ackah, *Akan Ethics*, 53.

such persons are entrusted with positions. The arrogant and disrespectful are reprimanded and not a single position is entrusted to them. Opanyin Essuman had this to say, *Ede ndabraba tu kwan a idur; na mbom nnsan w'ekyir bio*. This proverb literary means, “if you travel with fraud you reach your destination but are unable to return.” The import of this proverb is that if one tries to achieve anything through fraud, lies and deceit, one may get what one wants; yet someone will surely discover that fraud and deceit and that eventually makes that person lose everything. Obapanyin Otsiwah added to Opanyin Essuman’s proverb by indicating that lies are easily detected in a person’s narrative. This is evident in how inconsistent one’s narrative unfolds. Such behaviour brings disgrace and dishonesty to the reputation of the person in question and his/her family.³⁸

On justice, the respondents indicated that society abhors cheating but rather endorses fairness by giving each his or her due. Obapanyin Sesema, Akua, Mansah and Opanyin Borboor related this value to the adjudication of cases by the elders in the palace. The respondents argued that because the value of justice is very crucial to living in society, any member who felt cheated was encouraged to present his/her case to the chief for arbitration. The belief is that for one to find peace in his or her existence, there is a need for society to ensure that its members have justice. Opanyin Borboor argued that God ensures that all humans get justice. In that same manner, it is incumbent on humans to treat everyone fairly in society. The respondent cited an Akan proverb which says, “*abowa a onnyi dua, Nyame na ɔpra no ho*.” The proverb literary means, “God drives away the fly from the body of the animal which has no tail.” These proverbs echo the Akan belief that God likes goodness and abhors evil, and wishes to ensure that there is justice and fairness for all, irrespective of their class, status or condition in life.³⁹

From the foregoing, one could realise that in the past, societies had a strong urge to uphold and practise society’s moral values, and thus ensured discipline among its members. Moreover, rewards and punishment were readily made available to those who flouted the established code of conduct to serve as a deterrent to others who are likely to go contrary to the moral dictates of society. Here, the researchers seek not to present the past as overly rosy for as it has been shown already in the data, there often were hitches. However, there was strict conformity to social order and values systems; given that every family sort to have a good name and standing in society.

Moral Values in Practice: Present Realities

The respondents shared their sentiments on the research question, *how are the moral values of today practised differently from that of the past?* On this question, all the respondents indicated that a great change has hit Ghanaian societies today. For them, this change is not positive, but a devastating and bad one characterized by bad Western cultural influence, abuse and man’s improper understanding of democracy and human rights. By this observation, Ackah has this to say;

“the growth of the cities has produced an urban society cut off from, and forgetful of, the traditions of their forebears. Rural life itself has started to decay with the drift of the young to the cities in search of work and wealth. Foreign influence has penetrated to some degree even to the most remote villages through improved transport facilities and the radio network. Unless careful and painstaking studies of Akan traditional beliefs and practices are undertaken at once, much wisdom of the past will be lost forever.”⁴⁰

Respondents such as Opanyin Annu and Ntow, Obapanyin Otsiwah, Obapanyin Sesema, Opanyin Kwamina and Opanyin Nimo for instance, lamented how disrespectful the majority of the youth today act towards the elderly in society. They cited one Twene Jonas – a Ghanaian-US-based social-media activist who rains unprecedented insults on the elderly and important personalities in Ghanaian society (including politicians, kings and chiefs and the President of Ghana). Commenting

³⁸ Personal interview with Obapanyin Otsiwah and Opanyin Essuman on March 2 – 17, 2020; Opanyin Fosu on October 5 – 25, 2020.

³⁹ Personal interview with Obapanyin Sesema on February 1 – 15, 2021; Obapanyin Akua on October 5 – 25, 2020; Obapanyin Mansah on May 6 – 20, 2019; Opanyin Borboor on March 2 – 17, 2020.

⁴⁰ Ackah, *Akan Ethics*, 19-20.

on his lifestyle, the respondents argued that the traditional culture of Ghanaians does not allow a child to insult an elderly person. When it was found out that the child was right, yet wrongly punished and the elderly at fault, the latter is scolded in the absence of the child and the child reprimanded. Today, most children beat and insult their parents publicly and refuse to run errands for them.

The respondents also indicated that in recent times, the moral value of communitarianism appears to have given way to individualism. This is because their present observations are that one would hardly notice people who live in the same house cook together, share food, and wealth, lend money and share ideas among themselves. Almost everyone cooks indoors and hoards his or her food intending to eat the remaining the next day. At certain times, the leftover food in one's kitchen is not given out to children who have nothing to eat, rather, such food is disposed to their pets. In contemporary Ghanaian society, it is hard to receive assistance from affluent people. Such people hardly help the poor and needy, and strangers in society. Even if they would, they assist based on condition.⁴¹ Opanyin Borboor for instance narrated the ordeal his daughter went through in her search for employment. He noted that his daughter's chance of being employed was dependent on her succumbing to her employer's demand for sexual intercourse, which she refused.⁴²

The respondents mentioned that at present because there is a moral deficit among society members coupled with hardships, young women panoply their nude pictures and videos on different social media platforms. The males are so engrossed in ritual money, and internet fraud. Most of the male youth live extravagant lifestyles, and politicians who fuel riots use them during national elections.

A Return to Moral Virtues

The last forty years have witnessed a remarkable growth in the interest of virtue ethics as an opportunity to resuscitate the moral values of the past along African traditional lines of thought. The renewal of interest in virtue ethics resonates with the development of moral character in contrast to the approach that emphasises duties or rules (deontology) or that which emphasises the consequences of actions (consequentialism).⁴³ For example, a consequentialist will help someone because of the end benefits of the act, a deontologist will assist someone because she must act in accordance with a moral rule while a virtuous person will help someone just because helping the person is charitable or benevolent.

The morality of right or wrong action, rather than the morality of character can be said to have been introduced to Africa during the Enlightenment periods that culminated in the colonial expansion of the capital and the idea of a "civilized mission". Before colonial education, the people of the then Ghana, Gold Coast, had their system of education evidenced in the writing of John S. Mbiti⁴⁴ and Jakayo Peter⁴⁵ among a host of other scholars. Some of the major goals of traditional African moral education were to develop character, promote a sense of belonging and active participation in family and community affairs and inculcate respect for elders and those in the position of authority.⁴⁶ However, colonialism disrupted this form of education and replaced it with a morality of indoctrination designed to use religious instruction to teach moral values.⁴⁷ The practice of using religion to teach morality persisted until 2015 when there was an overwhelming consensus to separate the teaching of morality from religion. Hence, in 2015, the defunct National Council for Tertiary Education (NCTE) in the Harmonized Statutes for Collage of Education suggested that moral education should be taught

⁴¹ Personal interview with Opanyin Annu, Obaapanyin Sesema, and Opanyin Kwamina on February 1 – 15, 2021; Opanyin Ntow on October 5 – 25, 2020; Opanyin Nimo on May 6 – 20, 2019.

⁴² Personal interview with Opanyin Borboor March 2 – 17, 2020.

⁴³ Rosalind Hursthouse, and Glen Pettigrove, "Virtue Ethics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), forthcoming URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/ethics-virtue/>>.

⁴⁴ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*.

⁴⁵ Jakayp Peter Ocitti, *African Indigenous Education* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1973).

⁴⁶ Babs Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974): 20.

⁴⁷ Colin G. Wise, *A History of Education in British West Africa* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1956):9

in consonance with civic education in a secular manner while religious education should be taught as a separate subject of study.

Despite these interventions, one hardly notices any change in moral practices as the moral deficits in Ghana keep soaring. These interventions have failed woefully in promoting close social relationships that existed in traditional communitarian societies, respect for elders and unanimous condemnation of acts of cruelty and moral turpitudes as shown in the foregoing analysis. What the foregoing show is that Ghanaians cannot continue to practice morality the colonialist way which has failed to promote appropriate moral values in Ghanaian societies. To correct the above moral deficits in Ghanaian societies, the researchers propose a return to the traditional African conception of morality rooted in moral virtues. First, there must be a return to the notion of the development of character and personhood which are central to the African conception of morality. Kwame Gyekye, for example, has argued that “good character is the essence of the African moral system, the linchpin of the moral wheel.”⁴⁸ To impart moral virtues in societies is to impart moral knowledge through leading exemplary lifestyles so that the young ones in the societies could learn, making them aware of the moral values of the societies and how to live virtuous lives. This way of imparting moral values could also be achieved through telling morally-freighted proverbs and folktales to young members of a society and encouraging the media to showcase instances of virtuous actions of charity, benevolence, courage, honesty, integrity, and temperance among others.

Societies must teach the young ones how to live authentic moral life from moment to moment through examples of virtuous living and be a custodian of moral values. To be a custodian of moral values is to perpetually monitor the moral slips of members of societies in order to correct such slips. Teaching morality in schools alone is not enough strategy for the development of excellent character traits. It is important to bridge the gap between schools and communities within which these schools are situated so that teachers and parents can both take up the responsibilities of moral training. The point is that virtuous living cannot be taught as a form of instruction in schools without an exemplary lifestyle from adults. Teaching morality in school is only capable of imparting moral knowledge without actually translating it into a good and appropriate moral habit.⁴⁹ Character, is thus, a behaviour pattern that is not separated from the person. So moral virtues arise through habituation more than they arise through classroom instruction.

Another means of returning to the past is to go back to reorient persons as moral persons. In most African languages, especially Akan, when a person misconducts himself or herself, he or she is said not to be a person.⁵⁰ In addition, in the Yoruba language, the focus is placed on the normative dimension of a person so that when one deviates from core moral values, he or she is said to be not a person.⁵¹ This means that African traditional thought systems use morality as a basis to distinguish an individual as a ‘human being’ and an individual as a ‘person’. This means that moral virtue is considered central to one’s personhood. The notion of personhood as being central to moral virtues bacon Africans back to the virtues of the past. Moral values should be about the development of a person’s character but not his actions as directed by consequentialist and deontological theories.

Morality should offer the person a sense of moral agency to act virtuously in all situations as and when they arise. The researchers' notion of morality just like the morality of the past, should be communitarian and socially situated because as Taylor argues, human beings are naturally social.⁵² Hence, to restore human dignity and integrity, moral values should focus on society because one cannot develop personhood outside the society from which he finds him or herself. This will help African societies to be more communitarian in the face of liberalism, which undermines social cohesion, and

⁴⁸ Kwame Gyekye, African Ethics. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2011 Edition, 4), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL=<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/african-ethics/>>.

⁴⁹ Gyekye, *African Ethics*, 5.

⁵⁰ Gyekye, *African Ethics*, 5.

⁵¹ Segun Gbadegesin, *African Philosophy. Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991):27.

⁵² Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of Moral Identity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

ties that bind people together. This is likely to bring about development and enhance the prospects of sustainable futures for African societies.

CONCLUSION

The paper looked at the phenomena of moral decline in Ghana. It paid particular attention to the manner members of a society lived in the past, and the moral values that were mostly cherished and practiced. The paper further looked at how the moral values of today differ from that of the past. Such a reflection revealed that a moral deficit exists in today's Ghanaian society. Given this, the paper proposes a return to moral virtues. By this, the paper proposes a significant return to moral virtues where societies will have to teach and ensure that the young ones practice moral values through examples of virtuous living. Moreover, there is the need for society to go back to reorienting persons as moral persons since moral virtue is considered central to one's personhood. In other words, moral values should be about the development of a person's character and not his actions as directed by consequentialist and deontological theories.

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