Ethics and Morals in Indigenous African Context: Implications for Contemporary African Societies

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of ethics in promoting a desirable traditional African society, and its implications for contemporary African states. It considers why the current era, including individuals, the public and private sectors are largely unethical, and why there is widespread lack of consideration for the interest of all members of society. A major reason given by a number of philosophers for this turn of events is that African humanism has become obsolete in the contemporary era. The paper argues that only a recourse to a virtuous life can repair the extent of degeneration in the world.

Keywords: Ethics; morals; humanism; African identity; cultures; traditions; sympathetic impartiality; revivalism; ethic of becoming.

Introduction

The concepts of ethics and morality are not exactly the same. However, they are interlinked. Therefore, they will be used interchangeably in this paper and will approximately be taken to refer to the same thing. Traditional African societies consider ethics as a measure of right and wrong and as relating to goodness of character. Goodness of character proceeds from the individual's development of virtues such as mutual respect, honesty, kindness, compassion and justice.

A number of early westerners to the African continent denied the existence of ethics and morality in traditional African societies, probably as a result of their ignorance of African cultures and traditions. However, some of them eventually realised the existence of well constituted standards of morality, a contravention of which attracted severe punishment [Udokang, 2014: 266; Ekeopara & Ogbonnaya, 2014: 34]. According to African philosophers, there are well defined systems of morality which play a significant role in regulating the lives of community members. However, the source of traditional African ethics has been contested by various theorists. While some philosophers consider religion as the source of African morality, others such as Wiredu and Gyekye claim that society and rational thinking, and not religion, shape the morality of individuals. They argue that African morality results from occasions when people take into consideration the impact of their thoughts, words and actions on others, and not as a result of metaphysical intervention [Udokang, 2014: 268; Anderson, 2013: 165-166; Kazeem, 2011: 265-271].

The system of ethics and morals in indigenous African context largely differs from what obtains in the contemporary era, where almost every facet of life seems to be characterised by moral laxity, including rivalry, contestations, selfishness, individualism and secularism. As a result, a number of theorists, such as Matolino and Kwindingwi assume a defeatist attitude towards the myriad of ethical challenges that plague the current era. They call for the end of Ubuntu (African humanism), claiming that as an ethical framework, it does not possess the context and the capacity to represent an ethical inspiration or moral code in the contemporary era. Although the extent of immorality in Africa is disconcerting, this paper will argue that a recourse to a life of morals and values is the best means of rectifying everything that has gone wrong in the world at large, and in Africa in particular.

Interrogating Ethics and Morality in Traditional African Societies

Ethics in the traditional African context relates to the norms, values, principles and moral standards that regulate the behaviour of community members [Udokang, 2014: 267]. It provides the measures of right and wrong conduct for individuals and the society at large. The traditional African society considers ethics and morality as relating to goodness of character. An individual is considered good if he refrains from bad actions and thoughts such as stealing, adultery and cruelty to others. Goodness of character also entails the cultivation of virtues such as respect, kindness, compassion, justice and obedience to constituted authority [Ekeopara & Ogbonnaya, 2014: 37]. Gyekye [in Anderson, 2013: 164] considers morality as constituted by social rules and standards aimed at regulating the behaviours of community members. These social rules and norms, according to him, result from what the people consider as constituting good and bad character, right and wrong. He considers morality as social in nature, and emanating from individuals' sense of duty to promote and realise cooperative and harmonious coexistence. Bujo [in Dolamo, 2014: 3-4] considers the humanity with which individuals relate to each other as the bedrock of morality. He opines that African ethics neither conceives the individual as ontological act nor as self-realisation. Rather, it conceives the person as a process of coming into being in the reciprocal relatedness of society and the person. Therefore, human beings cannot be ethical or moral if they fail to relate well with other community members.

A number of philosophers posit that African ethics does not proceed from religion. However, another school of thought claims that ethics in traditional African society cannot be separated from traditional African religion, because most moral precepts have a religious or metaphysical undertone, while African ethics hinges on reference to God. For the latter group, African morality relates to the kinds of behaviour that enables humans to avert the wrath of the deities, to be upright and blameless, and to attract blessings and favours from God [Ekeopara & Ogbonnaya, 2014: 37-38]. An enquiry into the moral language of most traditional and even contemporary African people and cultures, including the Akan people of Ghana, the Yoruba and Ibo people of Nigeria, and the Sotho and Shona people of Southern Africa reveals that ethics and morality are expressed and understood in terms of the character of community members, their connection to the common good, and the ethics of duty. The ethics of traditional and contemporary African societies is

"embedded in the ideas and beliefs about what is right or wrong, what is a good or bad character; it is also entrenched in the conceptions of satisfactory social relations and attitudes held by the members of the society; it is implanted furthermore, in the forms or patterns of behaviour that are considered by the members of the society to bring about social harmony and cooperative living, justice, and fairness"
[Obasola, 2014: 120]

A number of African philosophers posit that a clearly outlined and well-ordered system of ethics and morality can be found in traditional and contemporary African societies. Prior to the advent of colonialism and missionaries in Africa, the lives of community members were regulated by a properly outlined system of African moral codes and ethical principles. Precolonial African societies possess a deep sense of wrong and right, and this has given rise to traditions, taboos, rules, laws and customs which are observable in each society [Udokang, 2014: 267].

The prevalence of ethics and morals in traditional African societies is disputed by early westerners to the African continent. They contend that ethics and morality was non-existent in precolonial Africa. They further assert that the idea of morality in Africa is the creation of Christian missionaries and Europeans [Udokang, 2014: 266]. These skeptics did not consider any of the indigenous African practices and belief systems adequate [Dolamo, 2014: 6]; and they *ignored and even denigrated indigenous African cultures for hundreds of years*" [Bell and Metz, 2012: 81]. Many of them disputed the existence of religion in traditional African society. Emil Ludwig [in Ekeopara & Ogbonnaya, 2014: 34] and his counterparts argued that traditional Africans lacked any knowledge of God because they were considered inferior, unable to display any cognitive capacity and as a result, could not conceptualise the ideas of God. Many like-minded westerners concluded, therefore, that there was no foundation for morality in precolonial African

societies. These wrong observations of ethics, morality and religion by the early westerners were used to justify their negative perceptions of the moral and psychological characters of traditional Africans, whom they considered as crude and ignorant of the differences between right and wrong [Udokang, 2014: 266]. They termed Africa a dark continent; and traditional Africans as lost souls, primitive, uncivilised, irrational, pagans and backward. As a result, they set out to correct all their observations by any means they considered necessary. Their approach resulted in the destruction of substantial aspects of African tradition, social life, and family values, which were structured on moral, religious and communal basis [Dolamo, 2014: 6].

Contrary to initial pronouncements that the word morality had no significance in the vocabulary of pre-colonial Africans such as the Ibos in Nigeria, some of the early westerners, such as Basden eventually realised that there are theoretically well defined standards of morality among the Ibo communities [Udokang, 2014: 266], a contravention of which attracted severe punishment. He gave instances where unfaithful wives and their accomplices were punished by torture or killed [Ekeopara & Ogbonnaya, 2014: 34]. By noting that transgressors were punished signifies the practical nature of the traditional Africans', and specifically, the Igbo moral code. Perhaps the early westerners held their early negative views as a result of their prejudice and ignorance of the cultures and traditions of the traditional African societies [Ekeopara & Ogbonnaya, 2014: 34].

The cultures of traditional African societies were subsumed in different customs and beliefs. Every member of society was expected to adhere to them in order to prevent curses that could befall them for contravening laid down precepts. The moral precepts of these societies discouraged all forms of unethical conduct, including theft and adultery. They also forbade community members from causing harm or injuries to others, including foreigners, unless the person is guilty of immoral conduct [Idang, 2015: 104]. Mbiti [in Udokang, 2014: 104] posits that a breach of the moral precepts of each society was considered bad, wrong or evil for distorting communally accepted peace and social order. Perpetrators were punished accordingly or even ostracised. In cases where suspects deny the charges levelled against them, custom demands that they prove their innocence by either taking an oath or taken to a soothsayer for spiritual divination. Such deterrents played a significant role in maintaining a crime free community as no one would want to be subjected to public ridicule [Idang, 2015: 104].

The system of ethics and morals of each community was preserved in their customs and traditions, and therefore in tandem with the overall metaphysics and worldview of the people. Each pre-colonial African society maintained its solidarity and social order through the laws, taboos, customs and prescribed forms of behaviour which became their moral code. Temples [in Udokang, 2014: 267] notes that the social dimensions of morality were well-known to Africans in such a manner that any serious contravention of the moral code had severe social implications. All evil acts were considered anti-social in nature and as a result, had ramifications for the

society at large. African theorists, such as Kalu and Nwosu concur with Tempels' observations, in their claim that the willingness of community members to be guided by the dominant norms and values played significant roles in ensuring peace and stability, in promoting the welfare of community members and in enhancing the correct functioning of society. A violation of ethical norms and standards was also considered a violation of the cosmic order, and this would require individual or communal atonement through appropriate rituals and good deeds. In the Igbo ethics, for instance, the Igbo people enforced conformity to their traditions through their customs.

Many traditional African societies, including the Igbos believe in a metaphysical or religious conception of morality. For these societies, morality relates to having a close relationship with the ontological order of the world. A violation of this order is equated with a violation of the order of the universe and results in a physical disorder through which the fault is revealed. There was no clear distinction between moral and religious laws in traditional African societies. Moral and religious values were the same. The society rejected what religion forbade, and sanctioned what religion approved. The Yoruba tribes of Nigeria do not distinguish between moral and religious values, since doing so would lead to negative consequences. In essence, traditional African societies conceive the universe as held together by a worldview that binds ethics and religion together in a manner that conceives morality as based on the commandment of the deity. Anyone that contravened the moral codes is, as a result punished

by the Supreme Being, the deities and ancestral spirits [Udokang, 2014: 268].

A number of philosophers reject the notion of religion as the source of morality. According to Anderson [2013: 165-166], Gyekye and Wiredu are some of the prominent scholars who deny the role of religion in moral development. Rather, they argue that the morality of a group or community is determined by society and the traditions of the people. While Gyekye agrees that religion plays a crucial role in the development of the moral life of the Akan people of Ghana, he posits that society and not religion shapes morality. He contends that in the system of morality of traditional Africans generally, and the Akans in particular, the consequences of human actions on the society and people determine their morality. By this Gyekye means that African morality does not proceed from divine pronouncements, but from taking into account the interests and welfare of human beings. He further posits that actions are good when they promote the interest and welfare of the people, while the actions that do not consider the interest and welfare of others are bad.

Wiredu neither considers religion or God as the source of morality, nor morality as dependent on divine instruction and revelation. He posits that religion was not the source of morality for the Akan people of Ghana [Udokang, 2014: 268]. He argues that although human beings may act ethically in order to avert punishment from the deities, this does not confer on them a sense of moral obligation. For instance, he claims that a robber may refuse to commit an offence for fear of arrest; but he would not have thought of committing the crime in the first place if he had any sense of morality [Anderson, 2013: 166[. Wiredu [in Udokang, 2014: 268] considers rational thinking on what is best for human welfare as the basis of morality. For Wiredu, the Akan people did not consider doing good as dependent on God's directive since they did not have a belief in a revealed religion. They never had a set of moral precepts that they considered as proceeding from God to the human race. Consequently, the Akan people did not have any inclination of a religious or revealed morality. Wiredu's treatise in this regard amounts to saying that

> "**African ethics is humanised. It is essentially interpersonal and social, with a basis in human welfare and well-being. This is why the African man is essentially his brother's keeper and is ultimately concerned about his welfare. Community of life or communalism ranked over and above individualism; hence the stress on communal solidarity. The African man's concern for the well-being of his brother and neighbour is at the heart of traditional ethics and morality**" [Udokang, 2014: 268]

For Wiredu [in Kazeem, 2011: 265], morality is the motivated quest for sympathetic impartiality. In other words, human behaviour and conduct should always show consideration for the interests of other people. A person is said to have shown due concern for the interest of others when in the process of thinking about the consequences of his actions on other peoples' interests, he hypothetically puts himself in their shoes. For Wiredu, the principle of sympathetic impartiality is a human universal that is applicable to the moral conduct of all non-brutish human races. In other words, he claims that sympathetic impartiality has a universal appeal since all societies that prefer nonviolence would subscribe to it. Oruka [in Kazeem, 2011: 271] disagrees with Wiredu's moral notion of sympathetic impartiality, claiming that sympathetic impartiality may not be necessary because Rawls' principle of rational egoism, which entails calculating impartiality, is a sufficient conceptualisation of morality. Rather, he claims that human beings lack sympathetic impartiality in Rawls' state of nature, while they also fail to acquire it in a civil state, because if they did, there would be less need for prisons, class wars and the police force. Although human beings remain self-centred, they are still rational; and that is why society has not completely degenerated into chaos.

Kazeem [2011: 272] believes that contrary to Wiredu's position, morality is not necessarily universal in all communities and is not solely based on the principle of sympathetic impartiality. Rather morality may also result from Rawls' principle of calculating impartiality. In Rawls's theory of justice [Jacobs, 2014: 547], which examines how to ensure impartiality in a state in the distribution of social goods in view of various moral doctrines competing for prominence, Rawls posits that citizens must abstract themselves from their obligations, worldviews, knowledge, moral commitments, community affiliations, and any other personal characteristics that allow them to be guided by their prejudices. This process would result in an impartial or egalitarian distribution of rights, obligations and benefits, and as a result, receive the approval of all the citizens.

What Kazeem is saying in essence here is that, since morality connotes both the good and the bad, a universal moral doctrine should be constituted by both sympathetic impartiality and calculating impartiality, which together account for the constitutive elements of morality. He considers Wiredu's position as problematic for undermining and underestimating the true nature of human beings in the community as rational, egotistic, irrational, selfish, altruistic and loving. Morality actually unites these diverse human characteristics in order to promote societal good. Therefore, morality for Kazeem, attempts to unite the characteristics of human beings for the betterment of society at large [Kazeem, 2011: 272].

In contrast with Wiredu's notion of sympathetic impartiality, Molefe [2016: 4-12] argues that morality in the African context should be considered as partial in nature, because impartiality is not consistent with the level of commitment that various aspects of African tradition are subjected to. In defence of his claim, he alludes to three aspects that are subsumed in partiality, namely the high value placed on family structure, ancestral worship and the idea of personhood; and the high regard that a number of theorists place on various aspects of African tradition. These include Wiredu's and Appiah's consideration of the family as the best institution for moral education; Oruka's consideration of the family as the best model for the African community; and Ramose's argument for the prioritisation of Ubuntu (humanism) towards a family member before according the same privilege to others. He notes that the African tradition of ancestral worship occurs mainly within a family blood-line or extended relations; while in cases where the whole community participates in the celebration, some aspects of the ritual are performed in private. He further observes that in the concept of personhood, the individual "*must prioritise one's project of self-perfection, achieving moral virtue, and one must work hard to take care, firstly of one's family and then, if possible, the wider community*" [Molefe, 2016: 16]. The point Molefe makes here is that this evidence negates the notion of sympathetic impartiality that Wiredu advances, because the manner in which Africans attend to these issues are subjective and partial, and therefore, a reflection of the moral framework of Africans.

Molefe makes a critical and valid point regarding the partial outlook of African moral thought in the sense that Africans in particular and other races in general are largely partial in the manner in which they relate to others. However, the fact remains that such a moral framework cannot be promoted as the sole basis of African morality, especially in view of the extent of atrocities and unethical behaviour that result from a partial moral worldview. While human beings are selfish by nature, the only means of ensuring a just and ethical society is by promoting an objective and impartial approach to all aspects of existence.

Anderson [2013: 165-166] disagrees with Wiredu and Gyekye's claim that religion is not the source of morality. He reasons that by arguing in the manner they did, Gyekye and Wiredu are in essence claiming the existence of a religious free society in Ghana. However, Anderson does not believe that there is any community in Ghana that lacks religious influence. Rather, he claims that almost all the traditional societies in Ghana, including the Akan societies have religious imports and thrive on religion. In fact, Anderson believes that the influence of religion in the Ghanaian societies is so prevalent that it permeates every aspect of their life, including the government, the dress mode of the people, their speeches and even their food.

Wiredu makes a valid point in rejecting religion as the source of morality. However, this is also contestable depending on the perspective from which it is viewed. It is true that a person may be ethical or moral not because he is religious, but because he believes in doing the right thing and because he would prefer not to be harmed by others. This makes the sense of morality universal since all rational beings would always want the best for themselves and rationality should prevail on them to treat people in the same manner that they would want to be treated. The problem in this case is that human beings are naturally selfish. Many people only want the best for themselves without caring about the interests of others or about the consequences of their words, thoughts and actions on other people. It makes sense to believe that a person can be ethical without being religious, while another person can be moral as a result of the influence of religion in his or her life. It is logical to submit here that human beings can become ethical as a result of religious, rational and societal influence, because they believe in treating people in the same manner that they would expect to be treated, and or as a result of their personal convictions.

The Humanistic Nature of Traditional African Ethics

African traditional ethics, according to Ekeopara and Ogbonnaya [2014: 39-40] is not ideologically individualistic, but communal in nature because it takes into account the existence and interest of the individual and other people. It recognises that an individual cannot exist alone, but in communion with other human beings. As a result, an individual recognises that his or her existence is not for the purpose of satisfying only personal interest. Rather, they must also ensure that they do not infringe on the interests of other people. In view of this recognition, African traditional society is also communal in nature. This communalism becomes the foundation of the concern that Africans show for the welfare of their neighbours. The traditional African society therefore condemns self-centredness and individualism, and promotes solidarity as a major virtue.

African traditional ethics promotes humanism since it considers all human beings as existing together while rendering complimentary assistance to each other [Ekeopara & Ogbonnaya, 2014: 40]. African worldviews, according to Murove [2010: 383] believe in the interrelatedness, interdependence and interconnectedness of all beings in a manner that the flourishing of one entity affects the flourishing of the others. They also consider it the duty of human beings to protect nature and the environment for the benefit of all. Adedutan [2014: 44] further claims that entities

> 66 **whether human, divine, animal or vegetal, operate within a principle termed general laws of vital causality. In this system, a being, by virtue of the strength of its force, can either harvest more strength from another being, or, in contrast, lose some strength to a stronger being. Man, as a being, for example, can either strengthen or weaken the being of another man; the being of man can also affect the subordinate being of animal or plant.** 99

In contemporary Southern African languages, the term Ubuntu or Hunhu denotes humanism towards fellow beings. It emphasises the interdependence and common humanity of human beings, and the responsibility that proceeds from human interconnection [Letseka, 2012: 54]. The moral theory of Hunhu or Ubuntu "*is not only a dialogical African moral theory; it is also a way of life. This means that hunhu/ ubuntu does not only evaluate and justify moral acts in African settings but it is also a world view for Africans*" [Mangena, 2012: 11]. As a constitutive element of African ethics, Ubuntu is founded on culture and religion. It relates to the dignity and integrity required of individuals; it represents what makes an individual human and the elements that promote the attainment of individual and communal fulfilment [Dolamo, 2013: 1-3]. This moral worldview of traditional Southern African communities considers human nature as having worth. Preeminence is placed on mutual moral responsibilities such as cooperation, solidarity, compassion, respect, loyalty, harmony, reciprocity, dignity, care, collective responsibility, and humanity towards each other [Letseka, 2014: 547].

The moral theory of Ubuntu, according to Bell and Metz [2012: 81] shares a number of common features with the Chinese moral tradition known as Confucianism. Both moral philosophical thoughts recognise the interrelatedness of all beings as well as the "*the role that ancestors should play in our ethical lives [...] the value of harmony in thinking about our proper relationships to one another, to animals, and to the natural environment*" [Bell and Metz, 2012: 81]. All proponents of the communitarian ethics of humanness or Ubuntu believe that the humanity of individuals is premised on their acceptance of fellow human beings in their differences and uniqueness. This core principle affirms that the identity of a person depends on the community both metaphysically as well as causally, while an individual is duty-bound to contribute to the well-being and progress of the community. This communitarian ethics which exposes human beings as normative and relational is gender neutral because it applies to community members irrespective of their gender and accords everyone consensual democracy in line with the values of Ubuntu [Oyowe & Yurkivska, 2014: 86].

Ubuntu further signifies that human beings should attach sacred and premium value to human life. In other words, the ultimate goal of a person should be to aspire towards a genuine or authentic lifestyle. By claiming that a person can derive Ubuntu through others implies that a person has the moral obligation to be the best human being possible, living together in harmony as members of one community, and deriving personal fulfilment without being selfish. In the traditional Southern African society, an individual who failed to relate communally with others or who showed negative or antisocial attitude towards others was considered to be inhuman or an animal. Society considers individual actions to be right or as conferring humanness on others when members of a community share the same way of life, show care and concern for each other's quality of life, identify with each other and show solidarity with each other. The dignity of a person results from his or her capacity to be friendly, to live harmoniously together and to respect human rights [Metz, 2011: 537 - 559].

Although Ubuntu is mostly associated with communalism and interdependency, it is not anti-individualistic because the respect that Ubuntu has for the personhood of other people also means respect for oneself or for individuality. Since a person assumes personhood as a result of his or her relationship with others, a human being is therefore human through others [Letseka, 2014: 548]. While the Igbos, for instance, are known to have strong communal dispositions or attachment, they are also known to possess a high level of individualism. Scholars have termed this seeming sense of contradiction the antinomy of providing a balance between the high level of individualism among the Igbo tribes with their strong loyalty to their community. The high level of loyalty that the Igbos have towards their community does not take away their unique individuality. Neither does it totally submerge them in their communities nor does it discourage self-reliance, personal initiatives, or the development of their individualities [Agulana, 2010: 293].

Implications of Traditional African Ethics and Morals for Contemporary African Society

The high level of moral consciousness that traditional Africans displayed is obvious from the preceding thoughts. However, many contemporary Africans cannot be said to genuinely adhere to moral principles. This reflects in all the things that have gone wrong in society; such as the high level of crime, lack of care and concern for others, greed, corruption, individualism, selfishness, loss of family values, and the general level of inhumanity that human beings display towards others. As a result of these observations, it is not surprising to note that some theorists such as Matolino and Kwindingwi have lost faith in the ability of human beings, especially Africans to seek the ideal.

Matolino and Kwindingwi [2013: 198] contend that the promotion of humanism or the moral theory of Ubuntu in South Africa in particular, and in Africa in general ought to come to an end. They argue that the ideology of Ubuntu "*is not well rooted in the ethical experiences of modern people qua moral beings; and [...] that Ubuntu as a conceived ethical solution lacks both the capacity and the context to be an ethical inspiration or code of ethics in the present context*" [Matolino and Kwindingwi, 2013: 198]. They consider Ubuntu stagnated as an ethical theory and a way of life, and as a result of its complex principles and failure "*to transform itself from a descriptive worldview to a prescriptive construct adequate for modern extraction of subjectivity*" [Chimakonam, 2016: 225]. Matolino and Kwindingwi, according to Chimakonam [2016: 227] find the rapid decline in the influence of Ubuntu on the moral conduct of contemporary Africans to be expected because the

socio-cultural context within which Ubuntu was accepted as a way of life in the past is no longer the same for contemporary (South) African communities.

Matolino and Kwindingwi [2013: 197] argue that the aggressive manner in which Ubuntu is promoted in post-apartheid South Africa by the new black elite is aimed at the creation of a black identity and the restoration of the dignity of the black people. They question the need for "*Ubuntu as a mark / guide of the spirit of the nation [...] the disjunct that exists between the metaphysical conditions necessary for the attainment of Ubuntu and the stark ontological and ethical crisis facing the new elite and our people*" [Matolino & Kwindingwi, 2013: 197]. According to Metz [2014: 65], Matolino and Kwindingwi argue that the conditions in present day South Africa as well as in many other parts of the African continent negate any appeal to the moral theory of Ubuntu. They contend that the political elite and others

> "**who have most influentially invoked Ubuntu have done so in ways that serve nefarious social functions, such as unreasonably narrowing discourse about how best to live, while, philosophically, these authors contend that the moral ideals of Ubuntu are appropriate only for a bygone pre-modern age. Since there is nothing ethically promising about Ubuntu for a modern society, and since appealing to it serves unwelcome purposes there, Matolino and Kwindingwi conclude that Ubuntu in academic and political circles has reached its end**" [Metz, 2014: 65]

The most problematic aspect of Ubuntu theory, according to Matolino and Kwindingwi [2013: 204], which further negates its relevance and existence as understood in the academic and political arenas is

> "**its failure to strike a coherent balance between its central claims of authenticity as a lived-out mode of being and what the circumstances of Africans are as moral beings living in the here and now. Its yearning for the restoration of a pristine mode of being is disjoined from the reality of ordinary people. Although the elite may have political interests in defending the project, its efficacy on the broad and general level will never be realised.**"

In their critic of Ubuntu, Matolino and Kwindingwi [2013: 198 & 201] claim that while Ubuntu could have been the dominant ethic, one of the issues that must be examined before it can be considered to be an authentic mode of being African relates to the disadvantages of what they term revivalism. By this they refer to the 'narrative of return' which they consider as the quest by academics, political leaders and others to identify past values which they believe are capable of revitalising an obsolete way of life and inspiring a better society. They question the revivalists' articulation of everything African as having proceeded from the perfect pre-slavery and pre-colonial Africa; and they posit that all Africans do not have the same conception of what it means to be an African. They contend that these people probably hold competing values that cannot be interpreted on the

basis of Ubuntu, and that the philosophy of Ubuntu can only be effective in small and undeveloped homogenous communities. They further claim that through mutual interdependence and recognition

> "**members of these communities foster the necessary feelings of solidarity that enable the spirit of Ubuntu to flourish [...]. Without the existence of such communities the notion of Ubuntu becomes only but an appendage to the political desires, wills and manipulations of the elite in the attempt to coerce society towards the same ideology reminiscent of the aforesaid earlier attempts by some political leaders on the continent**" [Matolino and Kwindingwi 2013: 202]

For Matolino and Kwindingwi [2013: 202-203], the belief that the 'narrative of return' reflects the best desirable interpretation of reality is not always the case. They disagree with the belief that everyone can easily understand this narrative and naturally desire to act in line with its provisions. They further reject the notion that anyone who tends to act in contrast with its dictates is inhuman or un-African. Rather, they posit that the narrative cannot be naturally apparent to everyone since such a claim can be interpreted to mean that the narrative proceeds naturally from Africans through a supernatural force. No one on earth, they claim, is metaphysically inclined to possess any moral quality, to be communal, social, antisocial, or selfless. Rather, they believe that such qualities are motivated by specific objectives and result from specific conditions.

Metz]2014: 65] challenges Matolino and Kwindingwi's con-

tentions that the current state of affairs in contemporary South Africa and in most parts of the African continent does not justify any appeal to the moral theory of Ubuntu. Rather, he claims that scholarly research into Ubuntu and its political application thereof has only commenced. He considers their arguments as insufficient basis for their conclusions, and asserts that the ethical theory of Ubuntu has a significant role to play in the development of the morality of people and organisations. Metz, according to Matolino [2015: 214], argues that Ubuntu can be defended as both a way of life and as an ethical theory, and can play a significant role in how contemporary (South) Africans conduct themselves. For Metz [2014: 71]

> "**Ubuntu, when interpreted as an ethical theory, is well understood to prescribe honouring relationships of sharing a way of life and caring for others' quality of life. Sharing a way of life is roughly a matter of enjoying a sense of togetherness and engaging in joint projects, while caring for others' quality of life consists of doing what is likely to make others better off for their sake and typically consequent to sympathy with them.**"

Matolino [2015: 214-219] responds to Metz's objections, claiming that Metz's defence of Ubuntu is unphilosophical, weak, indefensible and dogmatic. He condemns what he terms Metz's utopian propagation of Ubuntu, as neither new, nor holding any promises for Africans. He defends his response by alluding to the failures of the earlier revivalists of pre-colonial African values, such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyere-

re, Leopold Senghor and Kenneth Kaunda, whose philosophical flirtations resulted in disastrous consequences for post-colonial African states. These include the failures of one-party dictatorial governments which were founded on the need to revive the true African identity.

For Chimakonam [2016: 225-227], the significance of Matolino and Kwidingwi's conclusion regarding the end of Ubuntu lies in its methodical and philosophical import as opposed to its validity. It is neither advisable to dismiss their claims as Metz does, nor to accept their conclusions as dogmatic truth. Rather, Chimakonam proffers that their claims be considered a philosophical problem or a conundrum that needs to be critically examined.

Koenane and Olatunji [2017: 275] agree with Metz's position that Matolino and Kwindingwi have not been able to advance valid arguments for the abolition of the moral theory of Ubuntu. They consider their claim pessimistic, an attitude that Africans ought to dissuade from their consciousness. Koenane and Olatunji [2017: 274] concede that unethical conduct, violence and crime cannot be justified, and that moral persons who possess Ubuntu will abhor wrong actions and behaviour. However, they believe that there is no justification to call for the end of Ubuntu. Rather, they believe that the moral crisis that confronts contemporary African states makes a stronger case for human beings to uphold the moral theory of Ubuntu.

In opposition to Matolino and Kwindingwi's criticism of Ubuntu, Koenane and Olatunji [2017: 263] posit that Ubuntu "is

still alive, relevant and can play a vital role in civil society". Koenane and Olatunji [2017: 263] consider Ubuntu to be an all-inclusive worldview, which represents the universalised values of humanness such as respect, compassion, honesty, empathy and tolerance and which various cultures have in common. They subscribe to Metz's claim that Ubuntu is just beginning. Contrary to Matolino and Kwindingwi's misrepresentation of the complete notion of Ubuntu, Koenane and Olatunji posit that

"Ubuntu is an ethic of becoming: it promotes a certain attitude towards a relationship an individual should have in order to live harmoniously with others. As an ethic of becoming, the Ubuntu ethic or Ubuntu conduct is a continuous process of developing morality and should be promoted" [Koenane and Olatunji, 2017: 275]

It is indisputable that the world at large and Africa in particular is confronted by a deep moral crisis. The challenge here is to seek adequate means of confronting them. The solutions advanced by Metz, which Matolino terms dogmatic, do not render them less effective in resolving ethical challenges. Perhaps, the world needs to embrace elements of dogmatism and de-emphasise some aspects of rights and freedom in its quest for an ethical society because it appears as though many people employ the principles of rights, equality and freedom to indulge in unethical conduct.

Conclusion

This paper explored the conception of ethics and morality in traditional African societies and their implications for the contemporary world. It reveals that indigenous Africans were largely ethical and religious, while most of their interactions and conducts were guided by values. This cannot be said to be the case in the contemporary era where many people act without recourse to ethics and morals. Rather, almost every facet of life seems to be characterised by moral laxity. The implications of such conduct can be seen in the myriad of challenges and complications that the current African societies experience, including the lack of care for each other, selfishness, corruption, inadequate service delivery, inhumanity towards others, rivalry, contestations, individualism and secularisation. Perhaps Matolino and Kwindingwi's rejection of the moral notions of Ubuntu in the current era proceeds from their observations of the unethical practices that contemporary African societies face. They have called for the end of Ubuntu, claiming that as an ethical solution, it does not possess the context and the capacity to represent an ethical inspiration or moral code in the contemporary era.

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