Traditional African Spirituality and Ethics - A Panacea to Leadership Crisis and Corruption in Africa?

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Abstract

Africa, today like the rest of the world in the age of globalisation, is being confronted with diverse issues of ethical nature. The issue of the problem of leadership and corruption within the African continental leadership is a known factor. A close look reveals that these problems within the African set-up are of monumental proportions. As such it is evident that nobody who is seriously concerned about the welfare of Africa can afford not to address the issues of African leadership crisis and that of the corruption in Africa.

The idea of trying to pose the traditional African spirituality and ethics as a panacea to the leadership crisis and corruption in Africa has to do with, among other things, trying to open other perspectives within the scope of the search for solutions to these problems of Africa.

Introduction

Besides the abounding opportunities to be found within different societies as a result of globalisation, many other issues exist which raise questions of profound ethical concern and importance to the global community. The global community today is being confronted with diverse ethical issues. These include, amongst others, the issue of ethics in the public as well as private spheres. Leadership in any society usually touches these two spheres. The ethical issues concerning leadership are such that, though it is being addressed, they still need to be addressed worldwide from different points of views.

Africa, like the rest of the world in the age of globalisation, is being confronted with diverse issues of an ethical nature. The problem of leadership and corruption within African continental governments is a known fact. A close look reveals that these problems within the African setup are of monumental proportions. As such it is evident that nobody who is seriously concerned about the welfare of Africa can afford to not address the
issues of African leadership and corruption.

These issues have been busying many people, both individually and collectively. Numerous efforts have been made, and are still being made, towards finding solutions to these problems of, and within, the African leadership. However, the phenomenon of leadership crises and corruption within African societies has defied all serious efforts and has grown into a very complex disease eating up the fabric of these societies. The repercussions of this situation are present in all spheres of African society.

Trying to pose traditional African spirituality and ethics as a panacea to the leadership crisis and corruption in Africa has to do with, among other things, an attempt to open other perspectives to these problems of Africa.

Traditional African Spirituality and Ethics

Within contemporary African philosophical thinking, ethics is primarily and normatively concerned with thoughts about the basis and justification of moral rules and principles, and accounts of how people actually behave in situations requiring moral action, that is to say, descriptive ethics.

The primary focus here is the question as to what should be done from the perspective of traditional African spirituality and ethics with regards to leadership in order to adequately address the issue of corruption. It is not only a crisis of corruption within the African leadership, but an issue that pervades all facets of African societies.

This recourse to traditional African spirituality and ethics does not imply that there have not been efforts made at finding ethical solutions to these problems. But the fact is that, like in many other spheres where problems abound, in Africa, the ethical issues involved are far more complex than the efforts ventured by most contemporary philosophies and philosophers, African and non-African.

Talking about spirituality and ethics within our context may not be philosophically out of place. One needs to recall that:

The question of the relationship between morality and religion has preoccupied philosophers since the inception of philosophy. Plato puts this question well: ‘Do the gods love piety because it is pious, or is it pious because they love it?’ Put in this manner, the question becomes a variant of the age-old ‘is-ought’ problem. For this Socratic question is really interested in the logical connections between what the gods’ will is, and what we ought morally to do. Is there a logically persuasive connection between what the divine will is, and what we as humans ought to do? Does this divine will derive its moral force of appeal from the simple fact that it is willed by the gods? Or is there a logical gap between the is and the ought such that we can derive the moral force of the ought to independently of the gods’ will?
From outside, it is easily, but mistakenly, assumed that traditional African societies had a simple morality. This led many to erroneously think that Africans live without morality. The reverse is the case. Within the traditional African societies there is no differentiation between life, religion, and morality. This does not imply the lack of any of these aspects, but rather an intrinsic unity between the three of them. This is implied in the existential unity of the situation of every human being in his or her search for consonance, and avoidance of dissonance, with the laws of life.2

Traditional African spirituality and ethics are, in a way, a triangular relationship which incorporates, firstly, the natural beings in their relationship with other natural beings. Secondly it pertains to the relationship between natural and spiritual beings, and then that of existing spiritual beings in their relation to one another. Ethical and moral issues go beyond the issues that arise within the context of interactions among natural beings. That is to say, issues of ethics do not only come into question when considering the implications of human actions vis-à-vis other humans and animals. It has wider and deeper dimensions.

The question of ethics in African leadership has been addressed by scholars from different points of view.

Implicit in their work is the assumption that (just as in mainstream contemporary Western philosophy) ethics in Africa is about those action-guiding principles on the basis of which individuals within a community (and, of course, the community as a whole in relation to individuals, or in relation to other communities) regulate their conduct with other human beings (and, of course, with other communities). Morality is primarily a this-worldly affair in which we focus on issues of co-operation, actions, attitudes, emotions, character, etc., vis-à-vis relationships with other sentient human beings and animals.3

While it is undeniable that ethics is, and should be, a secular affair, the idea here is that since the issue of corruption within African leadership and societies is such a complex issue that has persistently defied all efforts toward getting it curtailed, it would imply that this secular perception of ethics is a limited view of ethics that is not in a position to fully address these issues within the African context. This is more so when one recalls that ethics, in traditional and contemporary African societies, is about more than just the nature and quality of interactions between sentient natural beings.4

African traditional ethics entails a supernatural dimension. It is in this sense that moral issues, even when they are issues between human beings, also involve the relationship between spiritual and human beings. Further aspects of traditional African ethics include the view of ethos as indicator of life. Traditional African moral norms serve the central purpose of enabling life.
Enabling Life and Equilibrium

The measure and indicator of all morals and religiosity is the human being. The purpose of any particular object is determined by its use to human beings, and not some being outside of them. Even the deities are there to serve the interest of men. The African deities are for man, instead of man being for the deities. Life in the community does not only consist of the visibly living, but also the living-dead (ancestors), the yet unborn, and the spirits. The norm of behaviour is the enabling of life; it is from here that the concepts like justice, truth (truthfulness), freedom, and love are determined.⁵

Communal life in African communities has, at its root, the concept of equilibrium. All the different beings that exist in reality require harmony which the community enables. One always finds within the African world polarities and relational principles which should sustain or enable equilibrium. The principle of equilibrium is consequently a principle of enabling life.⁶

The sense of community is not restricted to relations with human beings alone. There is community with nature since man is part of nature and is expected to cooperate with it; and this sense of community with nature is often expressed in terms of identity and kinship, friendliness and respect ... The need to remain in harmony with nature often takes a religious form when features of environment are personified ... Remaining in harmony with nature also means preserving nature, hence the concept of taboo as a ritual prohibition designed to protect nature is found in African societies.⁷

Such taboos express African man’s responsibility in preserving nature. Africans assume firmly that, in order for the well-being and wholeness of human life to be maintained, much depends on cosmic harmony.

Furthermore, from the African perspective, the community and its members, as well as its environment, constitute a complex whole and there is a moral inter-relationship between social relations and natural events.⁸

Morality – A Relation of Consequences

Within the African worldview, the quality of human action defines itself according to the two possible directions of interaction. African traditional societies do not know or recognise objects or ideas as “good” and “evil”. They also do not believe in “good” or “bad” actions as such, but rather believe in the orientation of interaction, or the consequent connotation of an action which could then be termed “good” or “bad”.⁹

A person is not simply good or bad; instead he or she may act in a good or bad way depending on the consequences of his or her actions. According to J. Mbiti, “One act may be good in certain circumstances, while
it is evil (sinful) in others, depending on its impact upon the relations of the parties involved.\textsuperscript{10}

It is less the intention leading to, than the consequences or repercussions of an action which accords moral values to the particular action. The morality of an action is the direction of a relation between two or more beings on the positive or negative pole of reality.

Due to the fact that the community, the folk, and the extended family consist of persons whose wellbeing are interdependent on the wellbeing of the community, the individual persons find their care and warmth within the community, but the community is also dependent on the individuals. The welfare of a community, or of individuals within the community, gets disturbed when a single person experiences misfortune, breaks away from this order, or acts against the will of the community. This is because the effects of such actions do not only touch the individual, but also the corporative.

Leaders and elders within the communities of African societies are “corporate personalities”. This means that the whole community, as well as their dead, and yet-unborn members, can act as a single person, and it is through those people who are called to lead and represent the particular group that such action can take place. This idea of corporate personalities who represent the whole group implies a shared, intrinsically organic, existential link between the community and its leader.

Corporate personalities constitute the crystallization point of the community’s common desires, actions, and suffering. The life gestalt, fate, and destiny of the community are literally constituted in these persons. Such a concretization can occur in different ways: It is not only through participation in, and joint suffering of, the same fate, but also through a creative “keeping awake” of their common goal and tradition, and an awareness for the concerns and intentions of the community. This occurs through the formulation and presentation of their desires.\textsuperscript{11}

African ethics is a social ethics which builds on relation without which an act or action cannot be morally determined. An isolated and equally private or secret “sin” is unknown here. Even J. Mbiti argues that “many, if not all, African languages have no word for sin”.\textsuperscript{12} That which neither builds up nor destroys life remains an ambivalent action without moral value.

This does not mean, however, that the evil does not exist, or that the issue of evil is ignored. Instead:

The human being, according to the traditional African spirituality and ethics, is responsible for evil because he/she tries in an inexplicable way ignorant or negligent of his/her dependency on the unity of the whole to increase his or her life at the cost of the life of the co-world and environment. Also misfortune, destructive natural occurrences, sicknesses, and premature deaths are interpreted by the traditional African as result of
negligence of the laws or principles of life. An act hence subsequently or with regards to the future proves to be evil from the fact of its life-destructive consequences.$^{13}$

This leads to the question of anthropocentrism and theocentrism. Given that for man, a mutual and communal relationship occupies a central position within the African worldview, many tend to argue that African morality is anthropocentric and not theocentric, and that it cannot do any deed against god. A direct relationship between god and man, which is a base for a theocentric ethics, can only be realised through an anthropocentric approach. The African anthropocentrism and theocentrism do not exclude one another; they build a unity, on whose account god could only be talked of anthropocentrically.$^{14}$

"The man-to-man relationship and man-to-God relationship are inseparable. (Arden)"; "If a man wishes to be in the right with God, he must be in the right with men, that is, he must subordinate his interests as an individual to the moral order of society (Evans- Pritchard)"; "So long as your relationship with other men, both living and departed, is right, then you know that God is pleased with you, and there is no need to bother God" (Kibicho).$^{15}$

Is Traditional African Spirituality and Ethics a Panacea?

The positions of philosophers when it comes to the relationship between religion and ethics are obvious. The majority of them maintain that:

[The] conception of ethics as a field in which the primal focus of attention is the relationship amongst natural beings. Morality and ethics are primarily about human conduct within human communities. Ethical questions are raised about those human conducts that affect other humans and other natural beings …(R)eligion and the spiritual realm are outside of the moral equation in the sense that questions about the proper role of religion in ethics are pertinent only in issues of the source, origin, bases or ultimate justification of moral rules and principles.$^{16}$

This notwithstanding, the fact that the African worldview has African typical peculiarities makes an uncritical, wholesome adaptation of just any conception of ethics within the African context not purposeful. These peculiarities could easily be identified in such areas as African worldviews, anthropocentrism, an understanding of society, the sense of community and its purpose, and leadership roles. A separation between religion and ethics, especially with reference to certain issues (such as corruption and leadership), will have to give room for an approach that will be African ethically. This includes trying to search for a solution to the African leadership crisis and corruption in Africa from a spiritual-cum-ethical point
of view. This is because in African culture morality (among other things, ) does not exist outside of religion in its this-and-other-worldly view of ethics. This is due to the fact that the spiritual and natural planes of existence form the same continuum … .17

Another important argument would be the failure of imported non-African ethics in helping to solve the African leadership crisis and problems of corruption. This is coupled with the gravity and resistant nature of these problems. It is clear that it may not be correct to implicitly claim that these non-African ethics have failed, without crystallizing the causes of such failures. But the point being driven at here is that even when this stance may be incorrect, the inadequacy of tackling these problems and addressing the issues at stake from a non-African perspective is clear.

The need for checks and balances within any society, its leadership, and facets other of the community, is an established fact. This has to do with not only the ability of the people being led and the chances they have to apply these moral tools both in their relationships, but also with their leaders and the forms of leadership they get. In our case, African spirituality and ethics stand a good chance at making respective African societies capable of fulfilling this function. This not only has to do with their relationship with their leaders, but also with their relationships among themselves. It will help to establish a deeper, wider, and more effective sense of moral responsibility.

A final note on this point is that it might be argued that this approach to the African leadership crisis, and efforts at curtailing corruption, has found meaningful application at the points where efforts in this direction have already been made. In the area of conflict management and resolution an example could be found in the case of the truth and reconciliation commission in the post-Apartheid South Africa. In as much as this approach alone could not justifiably be put as the only factor that led to the success of the whole venture, nobody would deny the fact that African spirituality and ethics played a very vital role here. It is worth mentioning that specific efforts were made towards, among other things, identifying the African peculiarities of the issues at stake.

Relevant arguments could thus be made for the possibility of the traditional African spirituality and ethics as being a panacea to leadership crisis and corruption in Africa.

Selected Bibliography


3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Rücker, p. 149.
6. Ibid p. 150.
8. Ibid., p. 78.
12. Ibid.
15. Wilson, M., quoted in Rücker, ibid.
17. Ibid.