

Culture, Religion And African Philosophy

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Abstract

The paper discusses ways in which ideology orients man toward the world and helps him to define his position and potentialities in that world by providing comprehensive systems of beliefs. An essential function of each society's ideology, then, is to help its members to answer the very personal question of life, the paper further contends. The paper which utilized relevant secondary sources of data, reveals that in most African countries, traditional values which gave meaning to life were displaced by new religious and philosophical values, which while contradicting the previous ones, were often not well adjusted to the African's present problems, needs and aspirations. The vacuum created and the shortcomings of religion has entrenched moral depravity in every facet of life of the people. The paper however recommends a return to Africanism, that is to the African way of life and thought or a synergy of the new and old religious and philosophical values.

Introduction

Every culture provides implicit or explicit answers to questions such as: what is the world like?; How did it get that way? And what is man's relationship to the world? As Bock (1969) rightly

observed, cultures go far beyond what is directly observable in orienting men to a universe of which their first-hand knowledge is necessarily limited. Culture also provides answers to many questions which do not have any objective answers but which must be answered if human society is to function.

Similarly, Womack (1998) asserted that it is by means of culture that people interpret their experiences and define appropriate behaviour. Anthropologists agree that cultural beliefs and values are organized according to a generally coherent world view, though there is disagreement on how consistent that world view is for all members of a particular society. A child does not see the world in precisely the same way as an adult and a religious specialist may not have the same view of the world as an economist. However, they are likely to share a language used to describe the world and to define their experience of the world as being similar. Our world view includes implicit assumptions about the nature of the universe and these assumptions shape our view of the natural and moral order. This view results from our socialization into a particular culture. However, our world view necessarily limits and is limited by our experiences.

Belief systems, then, include all kinds of historically developed and socially transmitted ideas. Some of these ideas are relatively obvious (for example, that the earth is spherical and rotates and that the sun travels across the sky from east to west every day); other conceptions of the world as rightly noted by Bock (1969) are based on more elaborate inferences from observations (that men evolved from lower forms of life or that there exist various classes of spiritual beings which are interested in human affairs). Within a given culture, however, the ideas held about the nature of the universe and man's place in it tend to form a relatively coherent system. A homogeneous and well-integrated culture is by definition one in which all such beliefs are reasonably consistent with one another and mutually reinforcing. Every society has some such conceptions and these

are transmitted to each generation through the process of enculturation along with the rest of its traditions.

The importance attached to these socially transmitted ideas stem from the moral foundation they inculcate on members of society and their capability to engender an aggregation and congregation of individuals from diverse background through the power of a system of ideal, beliefs, practices and relationships. However these ideas have failed to influence to a large extent the positive direction of society and its institutions so as to ensure public probity and good governance. In Nigeria, the vacuum created by the shortcomings of these handed down traditions have entrenched corruption and criminality in their different shapes and manifestations.

Culture: That Complex Whole

It is important that you realize that the anthropologist uses culture to indicate a much broader range of phenomena than this term covers in ordinary speech. From an anthropological perspective, members of a society view the world in a similar way because they share the same culture; people differed in how they view the world because their cultures differ. Robbins (2001) observed however, that the good place to start to understand the concept of culture is with the fact that members of all human societies experience specific life events such as birth, death and the quest for food, water and shelter. All societies he contended have what are for them appropriate rules for courtship, ideas about child rearing, procedures for exchanging goods, methods of food production, techniques for building shelters and so on. But from society to society, the meanings people give to such events differ.

A classical anthropological definition of culture was suggested by Sir Edward B. Tylor in 1871: "Culture... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". More recently, Robert Redfield has suggested that culture may be briefly defined as: "the

conventional understandings, manifest in act and artifact, that characterize societies”. In both of these definitions, the emphasizes is upon the ideas and ideals learned and shared by the members of a social group.

Every culture provides a set of categories and standards to be used in evaluating human behaviour. Some of these standards are (ideally) the same for all persons; the Golden Rule, the ideal of “self-determination”, and the ideal of a single law “for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you “(Exodus 15:16); they are universalistic standards, intended for all human beings. Other standards are particularistic; they are meant to apply only to certain persons or within specific social groups – and not to outsiders. According to Bock (1969) every society has numerous particularistic standards. The most important of these are the role expectations; for example, conceptions of how a “good” father or a “good” employer should behave. But even where moral standards are stated in universalistic terms, it is generally the case that certain particularistic standards take precedence over them.

Cultural values on the other hand may be briefly defined as shared conceptions of what is desirable: they are ideals which the members of some social group accept, explicitly, or implicitly and which therefore influence the behaviour of group members. Some values relate to very specific objects or events while other values are much more general and relate to a variety of situations. As with other rules of culture Bock (1969) noted, values may be “violated” and individuals may “use” values to achieve their own private purposes. But since such actions take place within a cultural context, they often testify to an awareness of the very conceptions they violate,. It is often the revolutionary who is most ware of his society’s values because he wishes to change them.

The study of variation brings out one of several paradoxes built into the concept of culture: although culture is universal, each local or regional manifestation is unique. Friedl (1976) reported that every group of people has a culture and

shares a way of life, yet in each region of the world, different sets of experiences and particular ecological and historical factors impinge upon the culture, resulting in regional variations. The universals of culture provide a framework within which this variety occurred. The second paradox of culture Friedl reported, is that while it is stable and predictable for the people who share it and use it as a basis for organizing their lives, it is at the same time undergoing constant and continuous change. The third paradox is found in the fact that we are to a large extent unconscious of our culture and unaware of many aspects of it. This is in part due to the way in which we learn our culture. We internalize our way of life to the point where it becomes so “natural” that we do not pay attention to what we do,. We become unconscious of the rules that govern our behaviour because we are so used to following the patterns prescribed for us. No individual ever knows his entire culture, for each is acquainted with only a portion depending upon his position in society. There are many social positions that are mutually exclusive; that is, if we occupy one position we are automatically excluded from another.

Religion: A Conceptual Framework

It seems that a complete definition of religion has not been possible because it is so complex and varied in nature. The best people have done, has been to recognize its traits or common denominators. And even these are often differentially emphasized by different scholars.

Religion was first defined by Sir Edward Tylor over a hundred years ago as the belief in supernatural beings. Durkheim (1915:47) also defined religion as a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things”. In his view, religion involves a set of beliefs and practices that are uniquely the property of religion – as opposed to other social institutions and ways of thinking. Durkheim (1912) 2001) argued that religious faiths distinguish between certain events that transcend the ordinary and the everyday world. Emile Durkheim

emphasized three aspects of religion (1) the social context of religious systems; (2) the sacred aspect of religion; and (3) the moral basis of religion in society.

The third point made by Durkheim, is that religion imposes a moral compulsion upon people to act in a certain way. As a part of the system of beliefs about the nature of the universe, religion offers a guide to behaviour among people, including a system of rules they must follow. Further more, because the religious beliefs are so deeply ingrained in the individual through his cultural training, religion offers a pattern of social control. When an individual violates a religious rule governing his behaviour, he feels guilty, whether or not he is actually caught and punished. At the same time, when he follows the rules, he feels good about it and his beliefs are reinforced. We are all familiar with this notion of religion, in which a belief in salvation and an after life (heaven) is directly linked to the proper adherence to a code of behaviour during one's earthly life.

DeCraemer, Vansina and Fox (1976:459-60) defined religion a "a system of symbols, beliefs, myths and rites experienced as profoundly significant, primarily because it provides individuals, groups and societies with an orientation towards ultimate conditions of existence. Religion provides an individuals collective self-definition. It shapes man's cosmology and related patterns of cognition and is a fundamental source of social solidarity. Some of the problems of meaning to which religion is addressed are transcultural in the sense that they are confronted and experienced by members of every society. Other problems of meaning are more culture-bound.

Given the traits mentioned and the attempts at definition, we shall view religion in this context as man's total reaction to the challenges and impressions of life (Audah, 1988). According to Audah, one can also understand why the investigation of religion is beset by what Ruth Benedict sees as a fundamental difficulty. Broadly speaking, religion performs a function in collective and individual human life of integration either of

group life as described by Durkheim, or of individual life. It helps give meaning to many aspects of life which require meaning in relation to others to form a cohesive harmony for social solidarity, as well as delineate between right and wrong and good and bad in effort to contain 'evil' according to each society and following from this, universal man's definition of these categories. Religion provides the normative moral code clearly demarcating the good from evil. Religion also serves as positive integrative function through prescribed rites and beliefs which guide behaviour in most other events in human life, especially situations such as conception, pregnancy, birth, puberty and marriage and death. Due to its nature and function, religion pervades and embraces almost all areas of life.

Religion in itself is not dysfunctional and does not lull men into passive acceptance of the injustices of an oppressive society, neither does it encourage the exploitation of the lowly by the dominant class in society; instead it provides an avenue for the spiritual development of man and communication with God and serves as a guideline for moral uprightness as well as a framework for his practical, social, economic and material upliftment in society. It is thus a deviation from and the negation of the basic tenets of religion or its outright distortion in order to serve the selfish interests of privileged few that produce threats with negative implications for the stability and smooth functioning of societies. Even Karl Marx, before his indoctrination with the communist philosophy, noted that religion teaches the ideal towards which all strive; that is to sacrifice one's self for humanity (cited in Ada, 2002). That moral depravity or corruption has eaten deep into the fabric of contemporary Nigerian society is no longer an issue for debate. For several years, Nigeria has earned the unenviable record of being one of the most corrupt counties in the world despite the large number of churches and mosques littering the streets of the country. In 2003, the Switzerland based Transparency International rated Nigeria as the second most corrupt nation in the world after Bangladesh (Vanguard, 2003). Corruption which

is an index of moral decadence, comes in various forms such as bribery, deceit, examination malpractice, judicial killings, police extortion of money at road blocks, election rigging, fraudulent court judgments, etc. Both the religious and the so-called irreligious are caught in this web of moral depravity.

Vanguard (2004) noted that incidentally, the moral depravity of Nigeria is accompanied by a high level of religious behaviour characterized by a high proliferation of numerous religious organizations such as spiritual and pentecostal churches running into thousands, daily newspaper treatises of Islamic and Christian ways of life and daily inundation of religious programmes on radio and television. In a survey of people's religious beliefs conducted by ICM for the BBC programme, what the World Thinks of God this year, the results showed that 100% of Nigerians believed in God, prayed daily and would die for God as against 91% in the US, 67% in the UK and less than 10% in Russia. For regular church/mosque attendance, Nigeria again topped with 91% in contrast with 21% in the UK and 7% in Russia.

In the face of the central role of religion as the pivot for the moral formation, development and functioning of the Nigerian society, its efficacy has been largely constrained by sundry factors including hybridization, balkanization, schism, compromise, unholy alliance with the state, governmental ineptitude, social pressure, human depraved nature and the question of choice (Ejumadudu, 2009). These factors provide the basis with which this paper seeks to examine the problems of corruption as well as the attendant failure of religion to check the threat posed by corruption in the country.

According to Haralambos (1990), religion has been balkanized and enmeshed in schism such that it has become a failed institution with a weak capacity to provide the envisaged direction and inspiration that will necessarily check the wave of corruption through attitudinal religion-orientation in the various decaying institutions in Nigeria. Haralambos further noted that religion has become so balkanized and fragmented that it is

losing direct influence over the ideas and activities of man and cannot efficaciously help to build, construct, maintain legitimate social institutions by locating and entrenching them within a sacred frame of reference. Worse hit by this balkanization and schism he continued, is Christendom, which is presently of all shades, doctrines; practices that have contained, rather than enhance their capacity to positively affect the society particularly, the Nigerian society.

Giddens and Duneier (2000) contended that the depraved nature of man and the choice issue have significantly contributed to and aided social problems, particularly corruption in society, especially in Nigeria. Even though some anthropologists and sociologists opposed it, biological and psychological theories have been developed suggesting that crime and other forms of deviance are genetically determined. However, the depraved human nature explanation is more generic when compared with the narrow dimension of the biological and psychological theories. This is because the depraved nature and innate propensity in man makes him to love corruption, criminality and other social evils. Man is, in fact prone to commit crime except he has been regenerated. This innate propensity that propels man to gravitate towards corruptions and criminality is also reinforced by the choice question.

Cornish and Clarke (1986 cited in Giddens and Dunener 2000) averred therefore, that while some theories see corruption and criminality as inadvertent and uncalculated and as a reaction to outside influence, many people engaged in corruptive and criminal acts, whether regularly or sporadically on purpose; recognizing the risks they are running. As Branham (1953) observed, many people with this natural and biological predisposition toward corruption and criminality who refused to change even when the opportunity presents itself may be fore-ordained unto everlasting destruction by the predestinated will of the supernatural deity. As a consequence, they will manifest their nature, destination and choice before the foundation of the world (Branham, 1965). This perhaps explains why some

people facing the same conditions, as others are criminals and deviants only need the atmosphere that will make them manifest their criminal and corruptive tendencies.

Religion has also compromised its enviable position by embracing worldliness which is further compounded by its unholy alliance with the state that has corrupted the institution and rendered it powerless and placing it as an integral part of the societal decay which in fact, it is supposed to check. For instance in many States of the federation, there are notable bishops and pastors who fraternize openly with governors and their agents and even openly campaign during election for these governors. Their lifestyle and utterances betray their status as “men of God”. This compromise accentuated by the wholly alliance with the state in Nigeria is not new, for in the Middle ages, there was a union between the church and the state in Europe. The accompanying effect is the inability of religion to occupy its pride of place in reinforcing society’s values.

African Philosophy

A study of African social and cultural systems reveals that African social life is distinguished by a uniquely strong sense of community. Reasons for this include as listed by Dogbe, the ontological structure of African religion; the manner of authority distribution; African peoples’ unique concept of culture; the nature of and emphasis on group harmony and co-operation and the all embracing African philosophy of being (Dogbe, 1980).

The ontological structure in indigenous African thought stresses that man, far from being the measure of all things in the universe, is one of the measures in creation destined to co-ordinate all equilibrational efforts in the universe and also to co-operate with all natural phenomena in maintaining harmony and balance in creation. Age sets in Africa, for example, represent social sets. As such, they serve as socio-political checks and balances in society. Social sets are based not on socio-economic factors but on physical, psychic or spiritual powers which criss-cross to make a person a member of more than one social set at a

time. Communities and even nations were sometimes formed into specific trans-community or trans-national sets as determined by a common experience of special social-historical events. African concepts of culture stress harmony, co-operation and relatedness between members of the immediate community and the larger community of beings; a community in which the gods, spirits, nature, the ancestors, the elders and the people interplay to enrich life. According to Dogbe (1980; 797), a philosophy of “Weism” (I am, because we are and since we are, I am) and the theory of harmony and co-operation have usually determined the types of structures that community services agencies in African society should have. Social services are usually directed toward socialization, unification, reunification, integration, reintegration, conciliation, reconciliation and finally, group cohesion.

Religion is for instance a binding force in Onitsha society. As rightly observed by Henderson (1972), “through the idea of god (chi) man becomes a microcosm of the universe and the universe becomes moral in man’s image. Religion and kinship are intimately connected in the Igbo social system. Thus, the son receives from his father not only physical life but also religious faith and the objects which symbolize it. There are in fact fundamental connections between social structures, the religious and spiritual world and the symbolism that links them so intimately. As Andah (1988) rightly observed, it seems in this respect the use of the phrases “ancestor cult” ancestor worship in talking about African cultures, would seem to be semantically inappropriate, analytically misleading and theoretically unproductive. Since the term ‘ancestors’ sets up a dichotomy where as we have observed, there is a continuum.

By conceptually separating living elders from ancestors, anthropologists have tended to introduce Western connotations to the phenomena thus labeled. Consequently, Andah (1988) lamented, they have had to deal with paradoxes of their own creation and with complex solutions to them. African ‘ancestors’ are more mundane and less mystical than the dead who are

‘objects’ of ‘worship’ in Western eyes. African elders on the other hand, are more mystical than Western man is willing to allow the living to be. Africans treat their living elders more “worshipfully” than the English term “respect” conveys but treat the ancestors with less “respect” and more contentiousness than the term “worship” allows for.

According to Kopytoff (1971), these are paradoxes which stem from the difficulty of English vocabulary to accommodate the fact that African living elders and dead ancestors are more similar to each other than Western living and dead can be, that an elder’s social role does not radically change when he crosses the line dividing the living from the dead; that African “ancestralship” is simply an aspect of the broader phenomenon of eldership. Usually, African ancestors are vested with mystical powers and authority. They retain a functional role in the world of the living, specifically in the life of their living kinsmen; indeed, African kin groups are often described as communities of both the living and the dead. The relation of the ancestors to their living kinsmen has been described as ambivalent, as both punitive and benevolent and sometimes even as capricious. In general, ancestral benevolence is assured through sacrifice and propitiation; neglect is believed to bring about punishment.

Ancestors are intimately involved with the welfare of their kin group but they are not linked in the same way to every member of that group. The linkage is structured through the elders of the kin group and the elders’ authority is related to their close link to the ancestors. In some sense, the elders are the representatives of the ancestors and the mediators between them and the kin group (Kopytoff, 1971, 129).

The second feature about African thought derivable from the general pattern of life is that most Africans have traditionally perceived the universe as a “religious entity, with individuals constituting the nucleus of this religious phenomenon. The indigenous African is ideally a deeply religious being who lives in a universe that is filled with or populated by other religious

beings. Consequently, religion in Africa now traditionally permeates into all the departments of life so much so that it is difficult for the outsider to see any formal distinction between the religious and non-religious and between the spiritual and the material areas of life. The above fact led Dogbe (1980) to assert that religion in African is a communal phenomenon of which the individual is only a part. Traditionally, African religion was not proselytized. It had no Mosaic tablet; no creeds of recitation. Rather, the creeds are written in the heart of the individual and each is himself a living creed of his religion. At the end of this religion, however, is the Supreme Being (that is the Being above all beings in the universe). While this assertion may not hold true for all Africans and for all times, it is certainly true of many African peoples today and is largely an outgrowth of the impacts of the slave trade and colonialism.

The above religious attitude is largely responsible for a world view which is ontological as well as an ontological structure of the entire cosmos. Dogbe argues convincingly that five categories serially ordered but fussed, belong to this ontological structure. He lists them as:

- The being above all beings which is the ultimate explanation of the genesis and sustenance of both man and all things.
- Spirits made up of superhuman beings and the spirits of men who died a long time ago.
- Man, including human beings who are alive and those about to be born.
- Animals and plants; or the remainder of biological life and
- Phenomena and objects without biological life.

This ontological structure constitutes what “Africans” “regard as the larger community”. For harmony and peace to exist in this community of beings, good communal relationships need to be established between all the five ontological categories, through rites, offerings, sacrifices and invocations. This sometimes requires man to establish a mystical relationship with

animals, plants and other natural phenomena. He believes he has to pacify the evil spirits to prevent chaos and invoke the good ones for prosperity, all in an effort to create an equilibrium in the provision of the things which make his food (plants and animals) grow: the water full of fish and other marine animals.

Dogbe who has treated the problem of African philosophy argues cogently that socio-political sets in Africa are a very complicated socio-cultural web of segmentations that are psychologically, psychically and spiritually intertwined with each other, territorially within the same area, extra-territorially without the same locality and more important and finally, meta-territorially within the entire universe (Andah, 1988). The great value placed on man's humanity to all beings in indigenous African society seems to have its foundation in this complicated concept of community.

Finally, the pervasive influence of African peoples' perception of the universe, Andah (1988) observed, is reflected in the fact that African cultures are Theonomic since African societies recognize god-activity in the history of "Man" and theocentric because these cultures have as their foundation, the laws of the gods, as these laws are carried over from age to age by the people themselves, or as they are mediated by the ancestors and passed down from generation to generation by the elders and/or educational institutions or other socializing agencies. Collective action, group involvement and social self development of the individual are markedly countenanced within the cultures. African cultures are so hemononic in the sense that reality is viewed as backdrop of deliberations that took place among beings that lived and continue to live in a we-ethos or a we-cosmos.

Conclusion

In most Western oriented Urban settings in Africa, the basic ways of life are being invaded positively and negatively. In such parts of African countries, "traditional" values which gave a meaning to life were displaced by new religious and

philosophical values, which while contradicting the previous ones, were often not well adjusted to the African's present problems, needs and aspirations. Western type of technology also introduced on a massive scale, has modified or is profoundly modifying interpersonal relationships, hitherto marked by the warmth of historical and mythical ties.

As succinctly observed by Andah (1988), the effects of Western cultural and technological aggression are felt at many levels of the lives of African peoples and states especially government and urban centres. They continue to disorganize the integrating patterns and cause confusion and conflict both between members of families and group organization particularly in the towns and cities. The national societies in particular, no longer have the same homogeneous and unitary aspect. They are no longer whole but are rather increasingly fissured and fragmented. The resultant effect is the existence of two often diametrically opposed worlds: the classical and the "modern". In the latter world, collective institutions are losing their power; there is a continuing shift from group patterns and extra family level; in systems of concubinage, monogamy is replacing polygamy; biological mothers and less so fathers, are becoming the owners of their children; in such settings often, infesting these with different promises and values.

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