

The Integral Nature of African Cultural & Religious Values As Ethical Values

Professor Dr. Obiora Ike

Director

Catholic institute for Development Justice and Peace (CIDJAP)

Enugu Nigeria

1. BASIC QUESTIONS - INTRODUCTION

*“When God created the world, he gave the Europeans the CLOCK (Watch)
and gave Africans TIME”.*

Amazing or perhaps, as simple as this assertion may sound, there is something which attracts a deeper inquiry from the traveler, the researcher and scientist, the drivers of business and captains of industry, academics, tourists and historians and many others who travel through the continent as they observe in contra-distinction from the experiences made of other continents in our one globe, Africa’s quite distinctive attitudinal belief in and practice of *“take-it-easy lifestyle”* found often in such statements as *“God is in control”* and *“tomorrow is another day”*. This paper is not about generalizations. It is about identifying specifics of the African worldview and asking questions about the inherent rationality in the cosmology and interpretation of the universe by the African traditions and religions, often done in holistic and interconnected terms. This is different from a Cosmo-vision found often and generally in western philosophies, which identifies reality in clearly spelt out separated and isolated beings, each linear and particularistic in terms, separated analogically from each other.

The point being made here is that Culture matters precisely because Culture and its ingredients provides the key to a proper understanding of reality and subsequently solving problems based on this reality as they emerge. What comes to my mind is the oral interview I once conducted and the statement accredited to Ozor Neife Ozoike, a really wise and old man of about one hundred years from Umana Ndiagu in Ezeagu land of Eastern Nigeria who said that *“people who do not look back to their posterity cannot look forward to prosperity”*.

How do you otherwise explain a certain ease in the African mind with an elastic attitude to “Time” vis -a -vis the mentality of a clear mechanical dependence on the electronic Clock called “Watch” found particularly amongst peoples of the Western hemisphere? The language known as **African Time** has thus emerged and has become both entrenched and easily accepted as an *operandi* in African lingual expressions, wherever one may travel to within the continent. **Lateness is excused on the grounds of African Time**. As one may be allowed to generalize on this topic therefore, it does seem that there is more to this phenomenon which makes the African peoples take life much easier, relax much more, laugh a lot and tell stories when compared to their contemporaries elsewhere from

other continents of the world. How does this mentality affect Business and Ethics in the African context and in universal application?

This offers a valid reason for the current exercise, attempted in these pages to understudy the “*Integral Nature of African and Cultural Values considered as Ethical Values*”. All over the continent of Africa, there is an amazing identity of how people consider business, how they take Ethics and its questions and how they understand the concept of Time, not just as an exact moment but something around an event. Why is this so?

Without bias and prejudices, an opportunity to present an African perspective without the use of interpreters in the search towards *knowledge and its transfer across cultures* is both necessary and critical. As has become clear in intercultural exchange, Cultural divergence amongst the peoples of the world has led to much misunderstanding, prejudices, injustices, exploitation, xenophobia and even wars. These consequent negative tendencies are unhealthy for the peace of nations and the sustainable balance needed for individuals and communities worldwide to be happy and fulfilled in their essence. *The challenge is to launch a new intercultural and intercommunicative dialogue that presents itself as a fundamental human right as we emerge in the new millennium of the 21st century.*

2. BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION

Background to this reflection and indeed its justification in **Understanding Africa from the African Perspective** is a reminder that much of what is known or written about Africa, has been described by non-Africans (experts, intellectuals, traders, anthropologists, travelers, missionaries), most of whom, in general tendency, seem in their writings, observations and works to look down on Africa and its peoples who are considered primitive, barbaric, uncivilized and lacking in any ability for rigorous philosophical, ethical or even scientific development comparable to external paradigms of the Western Euro-American, or the Arab-Islamic and even the Eastern traditions of peoples of the world.

The postulation being made here about Africa and Africans, (not necessarily in general terms) by virtue of available facts and the realities on ground, and based on credible works of research by many African writers, especially since the last 100 years, contends that *the African world view, its cosmology and philosophical foundations, its religions and ethical foundations have an inherent rationality and ability that interprets the universe in holistic and interconnected terms and not in isolated, linear and particularistic terms, separated from each other.*

What is the idea and philosophy in African societies surrounding such concepts and practices as the understanding of the Earth, the attitude and use of Land, property and ownership, family values, respect for the elders; reverence of the ancestors; the role of gender – men, women and youth; what is the African attitude to life, to the divine milieu, to God, religion, the spirits and the spiritual realm? How is consensus built in communities? What is community to the African and how is the spirit and practice of Community life practiced? Is there Governance and structures in village social affairs?

One would wish to reflect on aspects of medicine and health, work and its relations to the past present and the future; what is the concept the purpose of law? What of the adjudication of cases where they arise? What of concepts of Morality, Democracy, management, profit and price allocation, transparency, environment and ecology?

The rediscovery of cultural and religious values translated into ethical values shall focus on other areas of production and work such as industry and enterprise, manufacture and commerce, trade and agriculture, hunting and game, taxation issues, contracts and labour relations, money and capital including the factors of production, markets and competition, supply and demand factors in the economy. One overriding question remains to be reflected upon on how community harmony takes precedence over individual rights? Is there an Ethics in Business in the AFRICAN WORLDVIEW? Can there be an African Business Ethics?

The fundamental thrust of this paper is the ambitious claim which postulates that there is an African Business Ethics, the challenge of which is to rediscover these Traditional African Values and apply them into modern Africa, thus building a sound Foundation for doing Business in an Ethical manner and making them known to the rest of the business community. The paper takes as its point of evaluation, African Business Values and Ethics, virtues that have pre-eminence and much of which is known and still existent in various communities all over the continent.

Some of these values include respect for the divine and the sacred; respect for elders; keeping to one's promise and standing to one's word; honesty at all times; justice and fairness in dealing with others; legal consciousness and keeping to the rules; the interest of the community over private and individual interests; avoidance of conflicts of interests; transparency, disclosure and accountability in every situation; preservation of the common good; respect for life and the protection of life and the environment of nature and humankind; prudence in speech and not harming others; contentment and absence of greed;

These values as identified would be regulated and applied to modern issues of sustainability, the Corporate Governance Function and the service of the Common Good. Our search therefore is rediscover these inherent traditional values and principles of sustainability, subsidiarity and solidarity and apply them to modern models of a global culture that speaks of Corporate Governance, Corporate Social Responsibility, Business Ethics to maintain contextual best practices within an African milieu. We are able to establish thereby the integral nature of African cultural and religious values considered as ethical values.

3. AFRICAN IDENTITY AS THE UNITY OF PAST PRESENT AND FUTURE

African cultures and philosophies as found from the Horn to the southern Cape, from the Western Atlantic shores of Senegal through the massive forests of Central Africa to the Indian Oceans washing the shores of Kenya express three levels of existence that incorporate the PAST (ancestors from whom traditions, ethics and cultures derives its

origins); the PRESENT (the community to whom the individual belongs); the FUTURE (yet un-born ensuring the continuity and sustainable management with generations incoming). This is a cardinal point in understanding an African view of the relationship between culture and religion; tradition and ethics; private and public interests; the human community and the world of nature in general including animals and trees and the animate and inanimate beings. Although customs varied from community to community in matters such as marriage, burial rites, title taking, there still remained a central link for various African communities on the “*ultimate questions of life concerning the origin of human existence; the purpose of life; death, the why and how of things; moral laws; land and markets to mention but a few*” (Ike).

4. AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

African philosophy is one of COMMUNITY, expressed in the phrase of “**I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am**” (Mbiti). In the original African society, the areas of culture, religion, law, economy, politics, history, morality and trade are not easily separated. This is a tradition that identifies the peoples at their deepest levels of consciousness and accompanies their every activity. Any external evaluation needs to take into consideration these factors of the interplay between the sacred and the secular in African societies: “*the connection of the seen and the unseen, the union of the dead with the living, the spirit with the ordinary human and the dependence of the earthly human who is seen on the spiritual which is unseen*” (Uzukurwu).

- **Culture** (Omenala) understood as the entire way of Life of the people (past present and future), is the traditional law in African societies, a central thread guaranteeing the protection of life and property, the harmony of members of society among themselves and with nature, their linkage to the divine through the ancestors and the deities. It is said that every people have a culture, a way of life that links their past to the present and the future. Even though culture is not static but steadily dynamic, some of the elements that provided rationality for cultural practices in the past may have disappeared in the face of modern realities of migrations, new technologies, scientific discoveries, wars to mention but a few ingredients. Nonetheless, there is need to enhance the linkage and sustainability of cultural developments and its interpretation at least on the levels of principles that identify these societies even in the face of a modern age. In the African milieu, whether amongst an agricultural people or nomadic tribes, Culture (Omenala) provided a proper foundation for a sustainable economy where the preservation of the environment, the enhancement of principles of equity and fair play and the promotion of an economy that recognizes both individual interests and communal protection existed alongside.
- **Intergenerational Context:** It is this African culture (The Omenala) which is transferred from one generation to the next by oral tradition, through symbols and rituals, in fables and dances and in the moral formation and religious traditions of the peoples of Africa: “*as soon as a child is born into the community of ‘Umunna’ (brethren), life is affected by the intricate network of restrictions and*

all that they represent. Immediately a child is able to speak and understand issues, ...it is exposed daily to the do's and don'ts of the society and parents drum it into its ears, through fables told in the night around the fireside and exposure to the various forms of rituals and other observances, the gravity of committing abominable acts" (Olisa).

- **Property Rights:** Private Property, understood as a “*Social Mortgage*”, emphasized the right of access of all persons who belong to the community to the gifts of nature, including the various factors of production such as land and labour. Even though the community respected the right of individual ownership of property, this did not imply the amassing of wealth by a few to the detriment of the majority. In other words, ownership of property was subjected to its universal destination and use by all the members of that community. The idea of a philosophy founded on the principles of “*it belongs to me but I belong to the community*” (Umunna; Ubuntu) ensured that property rights were guaranteed but not in an absolute system as found in capitalist societies. A property right was limited by overall social (stakeholders) interests.
- **Religion** which relates man to the unseen universe of the deities and the gods in a sense conveying humanity’s dependence on the world and spirits beyond man emerged in African cosmology as a natural thing. This interconnectedness between the spiritual and secular signifies interrelatedness of past, present and future generations, all considered in decision making processes. Thus the taboos of many African societies, even in unwritten and pre-literary symbols and traditions which protected the overall environment, including land, animals, water, forests and nature via religious codes. *Respect for nature is noticeable in the many traditional societies on the continent, since humanity attained both continuity and history through the elements – a truly organic understanding of ecological sustainability and a philosophy still practicable and noticeable in many business practices in contemporary times.* The thesis here is that there is no African without a sense of religion, a practice of religion and a link to some form of religious adherence. *Many therefore say that atheism is unaffrican.* Authors in their research works prove the point which is corroborated with the various experiences of daily live in the reality of traditional religions existent on the continent and “*in the many African cultures and societies all of which show that to be African is to be religious. About the African it is said that “they eat, drink and live religiously. There is no unreligious African”* (Mbiti). African religion is not an isolated abstract but is again embedded in culture and is considered as part of culture, which is a way of life of the people. Igbo cosmology of Nigeria did not distinguish between religion and the secular society but created room for an interdependent world where “*the secular is so interwoven with the sacred that one does not exclude the other, nor could one be conceived without the other, whereby giving religion an anthropocentric outlook*” (Odoemena, A).
- **Linkage between Culture, Society, Economy and Religion:** There emerges an inter-woven-ness between religious beliefs and cultural practices, the attempt of

which to de-link them during the Islamic and Christian religious missions have proved impossible as mistakes are currently being corrected under a so-called agenda of inculturation. Win-Win scenarios emerged from this world outlook and practice, thus, making it possible to evolve out of the Omenala (traditions) unique principles that gave an integral understanding to economy, society, culture and environment. Thereby, traditional African religious values, philosophies and cultural practices are being unearthed and re-branded into the new and emerging religious space on the continent.

- **Values guide Life:** The point being made here is that African traditional religion is essentially a philosophy and a spiritual way of life, which permeates, pervades and animates the traditional social institutions, norms and celebrations. Every Igbo ritual act of the peoples of southeastern Nigeria, including sacrifice, dance and festival had a philosophy or idea behind it. In other words, action was motivated based on values which involved a basic belief, a philosophy, an underlying principle or an idea. These values thus generated actions and behavior, which in turn influenced individuals and groups.
- **Business Ethics is always Social Responsibility.** Even though the study of Ethics is classically made distinct from morality and emerges on the philosophical and scientific scene especially in modern times as the rational basis for the oughtness or wrongness of actions by humans (in relation to what is right and wrong), Ethics here does not refer simply to cultural beliefs, traditions or religions but to the rational basis of establishing the fact that it is rationally fair or unfair to treat people outside the ambient of justice. This Western model of Ethics which continues to gain ground in the many humanistic and speculative sciences and other areas of human endeavor, elicits its scope and array in such disciplines as business ethics, media ethics, bio-ethics, social ethics, political ethics, economic ethics, environmental ethics, legal ethics, gender equity and the list continues to grow. In an African ambient, doing business is always an ethical matter. In this context therefore, *Business Ethics entailed social responsibility, where community is an extension of the Business and business an extension of the community.*
- **Ethics is Culture:** A discussion however of ethics within the African ambient must necessarily involve a discussion of both the African philosophies, cultures and their moral and overall ethical practices. That point of linkage between religion, morality, law, social and economic realities is the domain where the African locates tradition, the “Omenala” (CULTURE) which is the foundation for Ethics, therefore the rational background for living together. In summary, this contribution from the African point of view achieves the *promotion of stakeholder participation* which enhances communal living and values based on principles of “*onye anwuna ma ibe ya efula*” which is “*live and let live*” implying the age-old Social Ethical Principles of justice, fairness, solidarity and subsidiarity.

- **Life is the highest Moral and Ethical Value:** The integral nature of African Cultural and Religious Values as Ethical Values begins with an understanding of Life which is considered SACRED and had to be preserved, protected, promoted and generated. In this sense, homicide, murder, suicide and other unnatural forms of death inflicted on another was considered a crime against the Earth and breach of the bond between humans and the deities and the earth itself. It was a destruction of the communal foundations upon which society existed and had to be pacified by all means by the entire community even where the culprit and his family had to undergo expulsion from that environment. In serving Life, the Omenala in its ethical dimension sought to serve communal harmony; respect the past heritage of ancestors and the laws of the land founded also on religious beliefs; progress the economy by protecting the earth and making laws that discipline erring persons that thwart the laws of the land.
- **Modernity still contains Tradition:** It is amazing but the reality on ground shows that the Omenala, (culture) which was and is the link between the ethical, religious and secular realities as well as the basis for the legal system and morality in general does exist even as strongly today as it was yesterday. Africa's beliefs in traditional religious practices, cultural practices and even the lifestyles of the present are still found in the many big cities of the Continent. Many modern cities carry the cultures of their peoples and we find them in Lagos, Abuja, Accra, Cape Town, Johannesburg, Enugu, Cairo, Tunis, Nairobi, Lusaka and Harare to mention but a few.

5. CONCLUSION AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS:

The main issues from an African perspective on this integral linkage between Religion, Culture and Ethics, which unfortunately does not fit into many modern categories of the western philosophical paradigms, actions and thought patterns, are as follows:

- ***A broad understanding of culture*** which encompasses the entire way of life of a people. Thus, culture (Omenala) has the potential to assist and guide modernization processes in a sustainable manner, founded on cultural rationality (derived from the past) and projecting into the future. In the face of radical and fast changes worldwide, also in Africa, occasioned by globalization, migrations, technological advances, the danger of losing original sources including cultural integrity remains a threat. There is need to look into the primary sources of traditional cultural rationality to enable a significant yet sustainable development by promoting an intercultural dialogue that looks into Africa's past history in order to retain and reclaim elements with relevance and applicability in a modern economy.
- **Religion as an integral reality**, a non-dualistic relationship between the sacred and the secular in promoting an integral understanding of creation. Here, the presently living, the yet unborn and the living dead share in a cyclical bonding which determines the ones of all. This kind of religion determines the relationship between humanity and divinity, and formed the basis for the

reverence of creation governed by God and respect for the earth (Ala) which had its ethical implications; one of these ethical implications is respect for nature as an organic understanding of ecological sustainability.

- **Law as a service to harmony**, which regulates issues of justice and community by prescribing the rules which governed society. It was unique in building consensus, social harmony, reconciliation and equitable relationships. The essence of the law and of Justice in traditional society was not to blame this person or that person but to settle the matter for social harmony of the entire community to exist.
- **Economy where business is not separated from ethics** and nature is preserved (ecology); land being understood as not a “*good*” for “*absolute ownership*” but for “*use*” and is respected. In many cases, land in traditional society was not sold but allowed only for use, since the Earth was recognized as providing the sustenance for the agrarian economy of traditional society upon which all depended, to cover the needs of the past, the present and the future. Besides, an absolute sale of land was conditioned and practiced only as its Lease on a temporary basis to enable the transmission of this scarce good to future generations. This traditional cultural value translated today as a Business Ethical model is contrary to greed, where those who have wish to buy off all that is available because of their capital base. Wealth has significance when it is used responsibly to further community interests and not hoarded just for individual aggrandizement. One has reputation who adds value through wealth to the village community.
- **Win-Win Scenarios in Business:** The principles that find relevant application in this context include: Recognition and Promotion of Win-Win scenarios in the economy; Social Responsibility of Business; “We” and “I” consciousness in social relations; Property as a Social Mortgage and a Natural Right; Interconnectedness between Spiritual Realities and the Material World.