
African Ethical Aesthetics and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological and Moral Similitude

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ABSTRACT

Ethics form the foundational identity of every society, shaping its internal cohesion and external perception. In traditional African societies, ethical life is not individualistic but communal, marked by values such as solidarity, mutual care, and collective responsibility. These values are expressed not only as moral obligations but also as aesthetic ideals—harmonious living that reflects the beauty of ordered community life. This paper examines how African ethical aesthetics, particularly the communal ethos, can serve as a constructive framework for reimagining Christian moral life in contemporary contexts. Drawing on theological reflection and ethical theory, the study argues that African communal ethics align closely with biblical teachings on love, unity, and mutual edification within the body of Christ. In light of increasing individualism, rivalry, and power struggles within modern Christian communities, the paper suggests that retrieving and integrating African communal ethics can revitalize the lived expression of Christian faith. By positioning African ethics not merely as cultural heritage but as a theological resource, the study calls for a renewed emphasis on brotherhood, shared responsibility, and spiritual solidarity in the Church. Ultimately, it concludes that the aesthetic vision of African ethics provides a compelling similitude for the Christian life—where moral beauty is found in community, not competition.

Introduction

A society's ethics are ingrained in its members' ideas and beliefs about what is good or bad, right or wrong, as well as in their conceptions of acceptable social relationships and attitudes. It is also ingrained in the forms or patterns of behaviour that the members of the society believe promote social harmony, cooperative living, justice, and fairness. The society's moral philosophers express, evaluate, and interpret the concepts and convictions on moral behaviour.

Unquestionably, ethical systems, ideals, principles, and regulations have developed in African nations as well-organised and functional human communities with the goal of directing moral and social behaviour. However, just like African philosophy, African society's concepts and beliefs that influence moral behaviour have not been well examined or clarified, and as a result, they require a thorough and in-depth analysis and interpretation. Contemporary African philosophers have attempted to give African moral concepts consistent, thoughtful consideration during the past thirty years or so. The goal of this entry is to contribute in some way to the knowledge of African ethical thought.

The aesthetics of the African ethics is a representation of humane living devoid of selfish ambitions and self-centeredness as attested by Idang (2015). This trait appears to be a biblical principle but lagging in practical reality among contemporary

Christian communities due to existing civilization which is on the increase (Florovsky, 1974); the Christian community in modern day are dominated with various unhealthy contests, enmity and selfish ambitions which is against the biblical position and teachings; factors that calls for keen attention. Unequivocally, the African language of morality provides insight into the moral thinking or concepts of the community, the entry makes the African moral language its starting point, a trait that should be engrained in the Christian communism. The African moral language serves as the inspiration for the centrality of the concepts of character and moral personhood. The entry emphasises the social nature of African ethics and its related concepts of the common good and the ethics of obligation (rather than rights).

This study, poised at examination of aesthetics of African ethics- exploring her position about various communal relationships and as such, make deductions that should be inculcated among Christian communities of the 21st century and to rectify the anomalies that are dominant among contemporary Christians.

African Ethics

In broad terms, ethics is seen as a field of study which addresses human morality in her actions or norms of human behaviour as opined by Kanu (2016). Ethics is understood to be used interchangeably with morality, and it implies the subject of conduct. Situations in life where people are faced with confusion or uncertainty about what is right or the best path of action, where conflicting wants aim for opposing goods, or where seemingly incompatible ways of conduct appear to be justified, are the seeds of ethics. Such conflict circumstances necessitate introspection into the factors that influence the determination of what is truly right (Gonsalves, 1972).

Coming to the discourse on African ethics, it is expedient to stress the broad overview of love and communality in African ethics. Kanu (2016) expressed that, a world of coordinated forces is revealed by the impact and hierarchy of forces that regulate the African cosmos, which is guided by the spirit of harmony. The human being, who is at the core of the African universe, interacts with all aspects of this world, and the material and spiritual realms coexist in harmony.

According to Kanu (2012) and (2014), the African community is composed of seven traits: a shared origin, a shared worldview, a shared language, a shared culture, a shared race, colour, and customs, a shared historical experience, and a shared destiny. In further establishing the practicality of the shared heritage of the people, an African Proverbs from the Igbo ethnic group explains that “if a lizard stays off from the foot of a tree, it would be caught by man” and this was explained by Ezenweke (2014) to mean that the presence of family and community to which one belongs cannot be disputable in the advancement of an individual, this idea dates far back into eras before civilization of the world evolved.

Furthering the discourse as observed from the perception of Mbiti (1969), the African ethics is reflective in the African religion, and this is a determinant factor in the day-to-day lifestyle of Africans. Africans live their lifestyle to be in tandem with their religious practices in the farm, in the home, at other places of work and various engagements as such, their religion is grafted into their ethical conception, and it informs the mental structure and perception of Africans. This heritage is an age long practice which has been transferred from one generation to the other in the history of the Africans and this varies from one typical ethnic group to others. Also, the perception of Tutu (1999) and Menkiti (1984) on the typical African setting and definition of morality is seen in the identification of a person through other persons. They propounded the idea of “I am because we are” to indicate the idea of ethical impetus in the African society. Africans are therefore seen to uphold sound morality, justice, respect and sanctity of life among other humane practices.

These practices are aesthetically perceived to present a sane society devoid of slandering, nepotism, and maiming one another’s image. This practices therefore becomes an essential trait that should be imbibed into Christian lifestyle which is stressed and aided by biblical principles to encourage communality and defense for one another.

Anomalies within the Current Christian Community

The Christian community in modern day has advanced in their worship lifestyle especially with the advancement in technology. But in the face of the attractive segments of the practice of Christianity, the Christian community today is also characterised by various anomalies which have eaten deep into the fabric of the 21st century church. These anomalies are against the biblical principles provided for the Church and as exemplified by the early Church. Some of these current realities are contained below:

Power tussle: A significant factor that stands out in the current realities of Christian community is the struggle for power; it is understood from the popular saying that “power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely” (Awojobi, 2013). In further exploring the discourse about power significance and which has crept into the church, Matshobane and Masango (2018) asseverates that power struggles occur in a variety of hierarchical structures, including those in government, industry, and religion. Power tussles are therefore not limited to only the secular settings but have also crept into the organisational setting of the church, and to the extent that this phenomenon impacts all church denominations. This current reality found in the church is broadly different from the biblical position of Christ in providing leadership for his disciples, and apparently, to the church as contained in Matthew 20:20-28. The tussle for power as seen in contemporary times are not built on sincere willingness to offer service but built on selfish ambition and self-aggrandisement, with emphasis on amassing selfish gains and fame. The tussle for power has led to unhealthy contest among Christians and leading to loss of Christian values among members of the community of Christian faiths. A misplacement of the primary responsibilities as Christians have led to the state of struggling to earn positions of leadership. This approach has caused more harm than good to the Christian community as many emerging leaders today lack virtues to be emulated since they attained such positions using the wrong approach.

Factionalism and nepotism: Another challenge that is discovered in the modern-day church is the challenge of factionalism and nepotism. The church today lacks the virtue of justice in their choice of leadership, distribution of valuables among others. It appears thus that the Christian community today tends to be focused on the mission of supporting and advancing their immediate family members and those related without being fair in their sense of judgment. The prioritising of familiarity above competency have led to detriments for the development and growth of the church in the contemporary Christian community (Amao, 2021).

Challenge of Unity: As opinionated by Adeleye (2025), when unity is lacking in a society or among a given force, growth is hampered, the integrity of the people is questioned, there is haltered freedom and of significant concern is the fact that there is lack of patriotic effort towards communal goal. In discussing similar topic but based on the unity of a country, Ambali (2019) opinionated that, A society that is united in purpose and a sense of oneness, regardless of differences in political beliefs, religious practices, tribal affiliations, cultural norms, or any other trait that makes people different from one another, is the foundation of any meaningful progress a nation can make. By providing people a sense of purpose, emphasising common values and objectives helps improve national cohesiveness. The trait of emphasising the uniting factor which is in the personality of Christ is lacking in the modern church but everyone tends to capitalise on denominational and factional values without pursuing the communal good of the Christian society and this appears to be of broad discrepancy from what the early church portrayed. Church ecumenism should be upheld especially through the umbrella’s parachurch ministries like CAN, PFN among others. Heretical Advancements: The modern-day Christian communities have experienced wrong approach to biblical interpretations. Various handlers of the scripture tend to make the Bible speak what they want rather than what is embedded in a text Obiorah (2018) expressed in assessing the twist of the matter that, so many preachers in modern day have opted for advancing the gospel of prosperity for their selfish interest rather than the biblical gospel which is sacrificial and purposeful at mutual growth, this is as a result of subjective interpretation of the sacred scripture which is being read out of their contexts. Evangelical churches are found to be highly critical of heretical teaching and as such, they uphold proper hermeneutical approach to the bible. The church was originally meant to hold sound hermeneutical positions which is derived from consistent fellowshiping and communion together, but this is lagging today as various church leaders

live large on the ignorance of the members and many members no longer cherish and appreciate the expected communal lifestyle which is being encouraged by the biblical teaching and as practiced by the early Church. The church is to be intentional about returning to a bibliocentric practice of Christianity which encapsulates communalism, mutual sharing of scriptural understanding and abstinence from heretical teachings. The fate of the church lies largely on returning to the early practice of Christianity as it informs the continuity being established from the institution of the church as an entity.

Humanistic Foundation and Features of African Ethics

The African ethics is characterised by various humanistic perception which portrays the aesthetic view of the practice. This perception of the African ethics is enviable and could be traced to ancient times in the African practices. Some of the humanistic and advancement of communalism discovered in African ethics are discussed below:

Humanity and Brotherhood: These terms are two ideas that are central to African social and moral philosophy and practice. These are some of the moral or human values that make up the fundamental, possibly the most important standards, that both encourage and defend human behaviour that has an impact on other people. Regarding the relationships among members of the human species as seen in the typical African setting, the term "humanity" is not only an anthropological concept but also a moral one in her ethical stance. The word "brotherhood" now describes a group of men and/or women who share similar goals and passions. However, as brotherhood is about the relationships between individuals that serve their own interests and well-being, it is fundamentally a moral concept. In African ethical concepts, brotherhood and humanity are keenly related; in view of this, it could be inferred that, if one is a human, it is understood that such fellow in a broad contest is a brother, in the most inclusive sense of the word. This infers that every human should be treated with respect and each life be accorded sanctity rather than abasement. Although, this ethical practice among Africans is not absolutely without fault as some individuals have abused and taken the leniency and sincerity of others for granted.

Communality: This is another significant ethical 'flavour' of the African context where adaptation with fellow humans becomes the order of the day. In this understanding, everyone is seen as having a strong connection as long as they stay in the same locality and area. Gyekye (2010) asserts that, there is actually no term for "race" in practically any of the autochthonous African languages (excluding languages like Hausa and Swahili that have a lot of Arabic vocabulary taken from them). This position is a pointer to the fact that, typical African ethnic groups do not capitalise on raciality there are instead the word from those ethnic groups representing person, human beings and people among others. When others will refer to the blacks as "black race" a literal translation from the African ethnicity will be "black people". Typically, Africans are not known for the common erection of fence as they have freedom of access to each other's facilities, this is opposite of contemporary times where close neighbours erect mighty fence that hampers flow of discourse between residence of same neighbourhood.

Hospitality and Generosity: Another essential trait found in the African ethical values is the involvement of Africans in hospitality. These traits are established in various idiomatic expressions one of which is the Yoruba adage that reads *Oju alejo la nje gbese, eyin re la n san* (this literally implies that, a host can go to the extent of providing hospitality on loan to settle the bill after the guest has gone). Social and moral traits like hospitality, charity, concern for others, and a sense of community are the results of putting the concept of brotherhood into practice. Numerous authors have discussed these virtues as they are applied in African social and moral life, including European visitors to Africa in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Having lived in Central Africa in the latter part of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Campbell (1922) assessed that, hospitality is one of the most cherished and ancient customs of Bantuland, and is seen everywhere. Without considering that he is doing anything out of the norm, a native will offer a guest his finest home and evening meal.

Common Good: it is expedient to also discuss that, African ethics clearly incorporates the idea of the common good. An artwork depicting a "Siamese" crocodile with two heads and a single (i.e., common) stomach best embodies the idea of Akan moral philosophy. This analogy of the Siamese crocodile possesses a single stomach, the two crocodiles' shared stomach

suggests that everyone in the community shares the same fundamental interests. As a result, it can be seen as representing the common good, or the welfare of every member of a society. The total of the different individual goods is not the same as the common good. It is neither made up of nor derived from the commodities and desires of specific people. It encompasses the necessities for each person's satisfaction and fulfilment of life and is fundamentally beneficial to humans as a whole. The common good would only be conditionally, not fundamentally, common if it were the sum of the individual goods; hence, it would not be accomplished in a way that would benefit every member of a society (Gyekye, 2010).

Social rather than Individualist Ethics: Naturally, a humanistic morality that prioritises the well-being and interests of every individual within the community would be a social morality that is mandated by social life itself, which is the picture of African morality. Every human person is born within an existing human society, therefore social life or sociality comes naturally to them. Gyekye (2010) narrated the thought of an Akan thinker about a saying which asserts that, "when a human being is made to come down from heaven (as in birth), he or she descends into a human town". The main idea from the maxim is that people are sociable creatures by nature. Aristotle's famous statement that "The human being is by nature a social animal", that is, that a person is a member of a human community further attest to this perception of the thinker. Africans therefore have the basic perception that the wellbeing of a man depends on the well-being of his fellow man and as such, men are interrelating and pursue a joint humanist goal.

Ethics of Duty rather than Rights: Human wellbeing is given a lot of weight in African ethics, which are humanitarian ethics. One could argue that the African axiological wheel's centre is the concern for human welfare. Unquestionably, the humanistic perspective that defines traditional African life and philosophy is the source of this orientation of African ethics. A morality of duty is one in which everyone must show consideration for the needs of others. Among the tenets of communitarian morality are the ethical values of compassion, solidarity, reciprocity, cooperation, interdependence, and social well-being. These values essentially impose obligations on the individual with regard to the community and its members.

Deductive of African Ethics for Christian Community

The African ethics is discovered to possess rich heritage and could be imbibed for a progressive community and as such, the few African ethics which are advanced for communal stability and progressiveness could be replicated as biblical injunctions on communality. The African ethical practices are not holistically transferable to the Christian faith because of some anti-Christian values that are being upheld like idolatry but the positive ideology which had been emphasised above could be inculcated. As such, the church community can interact with this valuable ethics and to follow suit in the modern-day practice of Christianity.

It is essential for the Church in contemporary time to advance their lifestyle and to work towards building a life of communalism. As expressed by Shumba (2009) that, human relationship in a specific community should go beyond the surface appearance of residing in same community but it should rather be advanced into being interdependent (Obiorah, 2018). This perception when directly deduced from the African ethics and inferred from the Biblical position, Christians are to live a life of interdependency in a way that, everyone in the Church are seen as very important and everyone have one impart of the other to make to the church.

Also, as established in the discourse above, hospitality as one of the essential tools that distinguishes the African ethics is a trait that should be portrayed by the Christian community. Various sessions of the scripture admonishes Christians to be hospitable and to provide hospitality to one another. Characters of the Bible like Abraham (Genesis 18), Shunammite woman (2 Kings 4:8-17) among others. This aligns with Campbell (1922) position on importance of providing hospitality to people that are stranded. The provision of hospitality is also taught by Jesus Christ at various teaching sessions including Matthew 25:35-36, Luke 10:25-37 among other texts that affirms the encouragement of Christ for providing hospitality to strangers and members of the community of faith.

Significantly among the African ethics which aligns with the biblical teachings and practices of the early church is the advancement of Gyekye (2010) about working towards a common good in a given African society. The Church is referred to in biblical term as “a body” which implies that the Church should cohabit in progressiveness and advancement of one another. Working towards one another’s good becomes an essential trait that should be inculcated into the modern Church. This is essential because, the early church lived practically in pursuing common good and common goal set together as displayed vividly in Acts 4:32-37. Therefore, establishing this understanding of African ethics as a practical expression of Biblical teaching for modern day Christians can lead to a Christian community, rich in unity of purpose and formidably combat the unified enemy of the church. In view of this, the church can advance ecumenism where emphasis is based on the universal Church rather than the local Churches that are numerous.

Conclusion

Many contemporary Christian communities and their practice of Christianity is alarming when compared to the early Christian community and as detailed in the scripture. The projection of tribalism, nepotism, individualism is on the rise on daily living, and this is not in tandem with the ethos of the original Christian community as detailed, but a deviation from the expected expression of Christian practices as such, the need for re-examination of the Christian community becomes inevitable. The anomalies do not imply a lack of advancement as there are also positive developments in the practice of Christianity like inculcation of technological advancement, establishment of educational institutions and various contributions to the economy among other values to the economic and social terrain of Nigeria, but the dominance of the anomalies serve as a deficiency to the expectation for Christians and their practice of Christianity.

Some selected African ethos’s are seen as a replica of the actual expectation of what the Christian community should look like. A moral responsibility and a supererogatory duty, one that goes beyond the call of duty and is therefore exempt from performance, are not distinguished in African morality, which is humanitarian, social, and duty-oriented as opposed to rights-oriented. Limiting the human moral obligations or responsibilities would be inappropriate and it would diminish the expected humanity to be shared and portrayed by the people (Ezenweke, 2014).

Humanism, the theory that views human goals and wellbeing as fundamental to human cognition and behaviour, is the foundation of African morality. The communitarian ethos of African society is a product of this idea as it is interpreted in African moral philosophy. Because it is difficult to guarantee the interests and well-being of every individual in a society outside of a communitarian one. This African trait is explicitly displayed in the early church especially as detailed in Acts of Apostles.

The Christian community is therefore to restore her biblical principle and imbibe the derivatives as replicated in the African values discussed above as insights to the right pattern of Christianity. The church and Christian community should be a promoter of communality, love, mutual pursuit of growth, hospitality to one another and to strangers altogether. These traits are what the church should be known for instead of the negative attributes attached to the identity of the many modern church practices.

Recommendations

The quest of the study is aimed at rectifying some anomalies discovered in some contemporary Christian community and to promote practical communality, as such, the study recommends the following:

1. The Church and Christian leaders are to avoid unhealthy rivalry, power tussle and emphasis the return to Christian basics as exemplified in Acts 6:2-3 about the process for leaders to emerge as a result of divine arrangements such as healthy election process, emergence based on character virtue among other expected Christian traits. Churches are to acknowledge various leaders who emerge on the proper platform free of manipulations.

2. Sensitisation should be made to members of the Christian community to recognise the practical reality of the metaphor of “body” which is used to represent the church, and which implies communal and mutual buildup and growth for each other. the Christian community should be guided by the perception derived from Acts 4:32-35 about communalism, which is also found in the typical African ethos.
3. The church in contemporary time is also to prioritise the role of discipleship, mentorship and servant leadership, which will play a huge role in bring the situation to order within the church setting.
4. Finally, Christians are to inculcate the habit of honestly defending one another in the move towards mutual buildup. This should be done in love where others are not just condemned but encouraged to embark on right steps from time to time.

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