

Issues and Challenges of African Traditional Moral Education

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Abstract

The paper examines the methods of African traditional moral education. It is also an attempt to bring to light prohibitions and taboo that regulate the conduct of the individual members of the community. African traditional education took place almost entirely within the family and limited social grouping, such as peer age groups and the village gatherings. The paper points out that though, there were no systematized, formalized school – type methods of moral education, educators in traditional African society had at their disposal a variety of tools for effective moral education, for example, we have the method of emulation, repeat after me approach. We equally have other methods such as stories with fictitious character, proverbs, as well as caution and prohibition. Other factors that affect the moral training of children e.g. in Nigeria were customs, practices, and religious belief of parents. The paper concludes that since education is founded on human nature any education that is devoid of morality is incomplete and useless.

Keywords: Moral, Education, Proverbs, Taboos.

Introduction

This is an attempt to present a brief account of some of the issues and challenges of traditional moral education in pre – colonial African societies. The choice of Africa is obvious for an African author, in doing this we shall concentrate on specific areas such as rules of conduct, sexual morality, moral training of children, moral lessons: norms, proverbs and folklores. However in African traditional society some people claim that morality is relative, that is different cultures have different moral practices, what is morally right in one society may be morally wrong in another society, but the truth of the matter is that different peoples in different parts of the world have different moral practices, for example in black Africa polygamy is morally acceptable. But this is not accepted in Western Europe or America. In a similar vein the idea of kissing in the street, moving with guns, are morally accepted in Europe or America but morally wrong in Africa.

From the foregoing we can simply say that the European morality differs from African morality. In African traditional society we have different methods of teaching moral and different moral convictions for example Wiredu tells us that among the Akan people in Ghana morality is not founded on religion but on rational reflection (1983:7). Oluwole also argues that among the traditional Yoruba people in Nigeria the gods are agents of moral sanction rather than authorities whose moral prescriptions man must obey. (1995:71). One can simply say that morality is a function of man's rationality, it is an act of distinguishing between rights and wrong in human actions, the ability to do this is part of our rationality (Omoregbe, 1998:138). African traditional morality is not a religious morality but rather it incorporates a religious element, African in all ramifications is religious, this is why an African man leaves whatever is beyond his control in the hands of the gods.

Rules of Conduct

Rules of conduct are not societal laws established by the people for the smooth running of the community. In an attempt to trace the origin an elder in the community will say that was the way our forefathers practiced it. As a matter of fact, these rules are not limited to human beings alone they are also extended to animals. Let's take a look at some of these prohibitions:

- i. A cock crowing at an awkward time in the night, for example between the hours of 8p.m and 5a.m. which is supposed to be the business time of the spirit.
- ii. A baby delivered feet first rather than head first.
- iii. Stealing of yams either from the barn or from the farm.
- v. Suicide e.g. by hanging.
- vi. Homicide.
- vii. Incest.
- viii. Divulging the identity of masquerades e.g. by a woman.
- ix. A woman climbing a palm tree or kolanut tree (Okoye, 2004:71).

The traditional moral code emphasizes group morality rather than individual cultivation of goodness itself. However we have prohibitions against stealing, stealing of yam was considered a serious offence, prohibition against murder include both suicide and attempted murder, sexual activity was considered inappropriate during the period of mourning. It is an abomination to divulge the identity of a masquerade, for example to say that the masquerade is a human being when actually it is taken to be the spirit of the ancestors. Just to mention a few. In

some other parts of Africa there are different points of emphasis but the principle remains the same.

A closer look at Yoruba people in Nigeria reveals that, it is a taboo or common features among African societies that twins do not eat monkey. A particular member in Yoruba societies do not eat draw soup, while some do not eat chicken, in Nigeria there is a particular tribe that do not eat the flesh of the tortoise except at the funeral of a dead member. Eating of beans and drinking of palm wine is equally forbidding in some societies in Africa. These taboos are not moral laws; as a result they may not be applicable to all members of the societies. However taboo may be based as a result of the circumstances surrounding the birth of a child, it may be due to the prescription of the gods or dead ancestors. In traditional African societies sex was not a subject to be glibly discussed, this shall be our next concern.

Sexual Morality in Traditional African Society

In traditional African society parents have absolute control over their children (Unchendu, 2016:37). Sex was not to be indulged in for pleasure. The element for pleasure was considered incidental rather than central to the course of human mating. Bengu argues that sexual perversities were alien to Africa (2015:72). The penalty for a woman that commit adultery is even severe, we can put this clearer through folklore, this happens to be one of the traditional African methods of teaching morals. African story teller usually concludes his or her story by drawing out the moral lesson that it is meant to teach.

We shall take a look at the story of an *unreliable confidant*: there was a man that married two wives; it happens that the first wife is having a secret love affair with another man but the second wife remains faithful to the husband. The first wife confided in her mates that she was having a love affair. Early one morning the first wife left her small baby in the care of the second wife and went out to see her lover, before her arrival the second wife deliberately left the baby alone to cry. The baby cried so much that it became concerned to their husband. On interrogation by their husband the second wife revealed that the senior wife has gone to visit her lover and would soon be back with green vegetable and bush meat.

However, the adulterous first wife was hurrying home while she had collected some green vegetable and bush meat. Suddenly she had a strange bird chanting her name, when she paid attention to the bird she discovered that the bird was telling her to throw away green vegetable and the bush meat, and instead to pick up hoe and cutlasses. She was instructed by the bird to tell people at home that she had gone to pick the hoe and cutlasses she forgot to the farm the previous day, but she ignored the advice of the bird saying that her mate cannot betrayed her. The first wife disobeyed the bird and on her arrival she was surprised to see the whole villager already assembled.

The village executioner was ready with his dagger and sword, hence, the adulterous wife was executed. It would then appear that the lesson to be learned from this story is that it is not good to be promiscuous, and anyone indulging in promiscuous activities should stop it immediately. The crucial question to be asked from this reporting is whether it originates from one sense of responsibility to the societal interest or from malice and hatred? Or from an attempt to get rid of a rival? The Yoruba people of Nigeria however frown at the act of reporting an event that stems from an act of untrustworthiness or jealousy. Philosophically we cannot say that motive should provide basis for a moral condemnation.

Moral Training of Children

African traditional moral education were thought to be quite successful in maintaining discipline in children, but in the light of modern day sensitivities they are likely to be criticized. In traditional African moral education, children were required to show their parents and elders prompt obedience and respects and unquestionable submission to their will. However stealing and lying were considered negative character, these attract common form of punishment like thrashing, a child could be locked up in a dark room and temporarily denied access to his most cherished meal, belongings or playthings. This will enable the child to see the full impact of his or her conduct. Hake argues that it is the duty of the parent to curb the incipient evil tendencies in their children, and to use corporal and other punishment as they deem fit (1972:39). Some of the negative character that may attract punishment from children include among others: stealing, quarrelling, fighting, tardiness, rudeness, disrespect for elders. Breakage of family utensils is also a type of behavior that could attract disciplinary measures.

There is no special moral training of African child, rather the quick African child learned not only from his or her parents, but also by using eyes and ears and all faculties. A child behaves in the normal manner within their level of development. There are those things that should be avoided; these include the use of bad words, gestures and demeanors that may be considered to be in bad taste for any young person. It was common practice in traditional Africa that a child imitates, his or her parents, elder brothers and sister, especially in the area of behavior towards strangers, or seniors, or those of the opposite sex.

Another important method through which the African child received moral lesson was through tales; at the end of each story moral lessons will be drawn. African stories are a mixture of entertainment and moral lessons. African tales are very educative, they could be seen to be the natural forms of revealing life, and they equally

molds ideals and illuminate facts. We shall take a look at two distinct stories that illustrate the use of tales to draw moral lessons and to achieve other educational goals. The first story is the toothless teacher.

The Toothless Teacher

There was a society where it was morally demanded that the existence of a toothless person be reported so that he or she would be killed for rituals. It happened that a student discovered that one of his teachers was toothless. He brought this to the notice of the king and a date was fixed for the revelation. On hearing this, the toothless teacher became restless and spent most of his time roaming about the bush and moaning his impending death. On one of such roaming he met the spirit of his death father who told him to rub some herb in his mouth, after doing this, he was shocked to find himself to have one of the best set of teeth in his mouth. He kept this as a secret to himself until the D – day when nobody was found toothless by the King, the student that reported him to the King was labeled a liar and executed. In African traditional moral education, after telling a story, the participant will be allowed to give their reactions and share any lesson they could draw from the story. A broad variety of lessons could be drawn from the story:

1. It is not everything that our eyes see that our mouth should report
2. Heaven helps those who help themselves
3. Do not cry with horror over a bad situation, do something about it.
4. Better light one candle than curse the darkness.

Participants are also allowed to view the story in accordance with his or her own experience and situation and everybody will benefit at the end. The second story is about the brave son:

The Brave Son

A certain man had five children, four sons and a daughter, unfortunately after his demise, the only daughter disappeared. The mother called the sons together and pleads with them in finding their sister. However, the eldest son volunteered to go to the forest in search of his sister, the other 3 sons told their mother that they cannot risk their life going to the forest. The eldest son on getting to the forest he discovered his sister, 50 miles off in the clutches of a lion. Because he had the power of transforming himself through space unseen he was able to rescue his sister from the lion's claws. The girl was brought home alive and the mother was overjoyed.

The important issue from the two stories is not the verifiability because from the two stories we make use of fictitious characters and fictional circumstances, this may be true to life or unreal. But rather the applicability of the principles, behind the actions and the attitudes of the character depicted. However, stories are molders of ideals; they are designed to sharpen the moral sense of the little ones by drawing attention to the folly of one who would attempt the impossible or the inadvisable.

Proverbs

In traditional African society intimately related to folktales are proverbs and riddles. Proverbs are used to warn, to admonish, to reprove, to guide, to praise, and to encourage. (Ottenberg, 1960: 452). Proverbs reflect the deepest set of values of people, showing the drive that motivate behavior and the controls that regularize the relations of an individual to his or her fellows. The following proverbs bring out the uniqueness of the African (especially the Yoruba people of Nigeria) attitude to reporting:

- i. Let the eyes see, but keep the mouth shut.
- ii. The tale – bearer earns nothing but thanks.
- iii. The honest citizens are the wicked citizens. (Oluwole, 1995:57).

Proverbs flows freely in our (Africa) course of daily speech and conversation. We understand them by applying them in the context, as a matter of facts some of these proverbs are highly charged with meaning. Sometimes ironical. Cynical, and sometimes humorous. It takes the wise man to draw the lesson. There is always an important feature that renders proverbs effective to drive home the moral message, sometimes the feature may be attributed to an animal, or an inanimate object such as tortoise, or lizard, anything whose characteristics could demonstrate the point being made. Examples are:

- i. The lazy man eats little: This is used to chide one who is eating heartily, but who had earlier refused to work.
- ii. When you are told to keep it up: This means that your cook is being appreciated.
- iii. If the ears persistently refuse to hear, when the head is cut off, the ear goes with it. This is an admonition against obstinacy.
- iv. Taking out with one hand and replacing with the other keeps the store stocked for tomorrow: This is a thoughtful reminder for injudicious spending or use of things.
- v. Just one soiled finger and the entire hand will be rendered soiled: this is a warning against social implications of misconduct. Among the Yoruba of Nigeria one just does not address a person or group without first greeting them. Failure to observe this rule is regarded as a very serious lapse from good behavior. A Yoruba man living in Yoruba land is expected to observe for example the Yoruba rules of greeting. On the other hand the issue of truth

telling is an infeasible obligation irrespective of your race or culture, whether you are a Ghanaian, a Nigerian, an American, or a Chinese.

Problems and Tasks of Education in Contemporary Africa

A question suggests itself at this point, this is a question of why African should jettison her traditional methods of teaching morality and embrace the alien ones. Prominent among the factors which has brought this change is colonialism, industrialization; we also have the problem of post – colonial developments in different African communities, and this development has generated its own moral problems. African states are usually confronted with the problem of implementing an educational policy that will encourage economic and social development; there is equally the problem of maintaining political, economic and cultural ties with their old colonial masters. However, the function of philosophy everywhere is to examine the intellectual foundations of our life, using the best available modes of knowledge and reflection for human well-being. In doing this we need to ask ourselves the following crucial questions:

- i. Who am i?
- ii What am I like?
- iii. How must I behave?
- iv. What is the right thing for me to do?
- v. How am I doing? (Kay, 1975:44).

In order to provide answers to the above questions there is need for us (Africans) to carry out fundamental reforms in our educational systems, hence essential morality should be the underlying philosophy of the new educational system. This can be facilitated by the close collaboration between students and teachers, between students, between teachers and their parents, between teachers and parents, and between parents who form associations in the quest for excellence. Parents should show interest in what the children are taught, even though this can only be possible for the literate parents, because not only that the majority of the parents are illiterates, but we admit that they are not adequately equipped to evaluate the quality of educational programs.

The students on their part can create a reading clubs, the individual can as well draw a personal time – table in order to compliment collective efforts, though African teachers suffers from the dearth of books, they can assist themselves by lending their private materials to one another. Teachers on their parts should adopt the essential moral standards in order to facilitate the objective and sound academic reasoning. Teachers and parents should collaborate in order to ensure a proper supervision of the students and to encourage them to persevere in difficult situation. This reform should equally be made to ensure that children are rooted in their natural and social environment; this will reduce the verbatim reproduction of the school programs of the colonial master.

Conclusion

We can say, in conclusion that a feature of contemporary Africa, which is easily noted, is the fact that it is a society in transition; hence it is in the process of transition from a traditional to a modern society. Be that as it may, moral education must be part of formal education and must be given top priority. The pursuit of qualitative education by a nation is to raise a crop of people who will build great nation by applying their formal and informal knowledge. Morality is indispensable for social progress. In the Leviathan, Thomas Hobbes portrays a picture of the state of nature where everybody was concerned with his own self-interest without any sense of morality. In this type of society Hobbes tells us that there was no peace, no progress, and no development. The fact is that, it is the moral development of the citizens, that is, the human person that must precedes other aspects of development.

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