

The understanding of the concept of evil in African moral thought: A philosophical examination

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to examine what evil is from a Traditional African point of view and how they tried to combat it. The reality of evil in our world is questionable. The whole reality of evil has constituted to a large extent lots of discomfort, havoc and other related problems in human life. From a critical point of view, in our present world, the appalling depth and extent of human suffering is evident as experience reveals to us. From a wider perspective, there are many occurrences in nature, for instance, tsunami, volcanic eruptions, floods, earthquakes just to mention but a few; which cause harm and misery/suffering to humanity. Humanity also suffers from sickness, injuries due to all sorts of carnages, terrorist acts as witnessed recently in the Dusit 2 Complex attack here in Nairobi. Across our African continent there are wars (As seen in the Congo, Somalia, South Sudan among other countries) that cause a lot suffering to human life. These painful experiences arouse a number of questions in any sensible person. The prevalent questions one can ask are: Why should this happen to humanity? What is the genesis of these evil acts? How can it be negated? With these questions in mind then, this paper will attempt to unmask through a rigorous and critical examination of the concept of evil from the African standpoint.

Keywords: Evil, Africa, African, Community, Morality, Philosophy

Introduction

In this paper we will try to unfold how the traditional African society understood evil. From that particular worldview we will see what is really understood to be evil. We will as well see some philosophical reflections on the concept of evil by African philosophers; the consequences of evil and finally mention measures put in place to annihilate evil from the society. Therefore, the main thrust of this paper is to explain as

lucidly as possible what the traditional African call evil.

1.1 Morality in African Thought System

Like in any society, the African society as a whole condemned evil and upbraided the good. I begin by asserting that morality was highly upheld in African cultures. African culture is embedded in strong moral considerations. It has a system of various beliefs and customs which every individual ought to keep in order to live long and to

avoid bringing curses on them and others. Adultery, stealing and other forms of immoral behaviour are strongly discouraged and whenever a suspected offender denies a charge brought against him, he would be taken to a soothsayer or made to take an oath for proof of innocence.

Nevertheless, African proverbs and wise sayings have a rich repository of wisdom. The proverbs warn the African against evil conduct and, accordingly J. S. Mbiti opines that they are “therefore a major source of African wisdom and a valuable part of African heritage” (Mbiti, 1969) African culture has a moral code that forbids doing harm to a relative, a kinsman, an in-law, a foreigner and a stranger, except when such a person is involved in an immoral act; and if that is the case, it is advisable to stay away from such an individual and even at death, their corpses would not be dignified with a noble burial in a coffin and grave. Mothers of twins were not welcome and were regarded as the harbinger of evil, hence unacceptable. (Mbiti, 1969)

1.2. Evil in African Worldview

The worldview of a people is a very important aspect of their life-style for it reveals the totality of their belief and thought system. The question that comes to mind readily is: What is evil to the African? This question becomes relevant because our understanding of what Africans see as evil will facilitate the efforts put in place to combat evil in the society. In addition, our understanding of goodness in African thought will make this task much easier.

In a broad sense, Africans, in our traditional ethics place some level of emphasis on goodness of character. Goodness of character consist of virtues such as kindness, generosity, hospitality, justice, respect for elders while the elders ensures that they stay off anything that is capable of bringing disrespect; others are obedience to legitimate authorities and humility. (Bujo,

2000) Borrowing from Kwasi Wiredu, he refers to evil for the Africans as vices like killing, stealing, adultery, and disrespect for elders, telling lies, incest, and cruelty or doing harm in any way to other people. (Wiredu, 1983)The essence of evil in African traditional thought consists in doing harm to others. To this extent, morality is essentially interpersonal and social in contest, anchored on the well-being of human beings. Traditionally, the African is his brother’s keeper and is concerned about his well-being. (Wiredu, 1983)

However, a distinction between customary behaviour, taboo and morality, each with its own rule of conduct, is a necessity at this point. Among the Akan people of Ghana for example, as explained by Wiredu, there are some actions that are regarded as customary. Customary actions are justified on the basis that it is the custom of the people to perform such action. (Wiredu, 1983) To this end, the fact that an action is customary and they have been done from time immemorial is enough reason for continuing to do them. Some actions are referred to as taboo. (Wiredu, 1983) The justification of taboos is always in terms of the adverse consequences that would follow if they were done. If any forbidden act by taboo is performed, adverse consequences are believed to follow with certainty. (Wiredu, 1983)

Moreover, Placid Tempels observes that in Bantu society, “objective morality is entirely ontological, immanent and intrinsic. (Tempels, 1959) In addition, Bantu moral standards depend on things ontologically understood. In other words, Tempels means that the Bantu people see doing virtuous or evil acts, not as an arbitrary creation of the gods or anybody, but rather as something demanded by the very nature of things. (Tempels, 1959) Flowing from the understanding of ‘ontology’ it clearly implied that for the Bantu people, the performance of evil act or its avoidance is

chiefly derived not from the world beyond or from gods.

Consequently, in the Bantu idea of evil or good, it does not rely on a power over and above man. Rather, it is based on reasoning and not on religion. Morality in the words of Oluwole is always seen in the social context. (Oluwole, 2000) This is why any violation of the moral order has a social aspect, which attracts serious social consequences. The society as a whole, is affected, for every evil act is an anti-social act which has adverse effects on the community at large. (Oluwole, 2000)

Inferring from the above, it is the case that evil, no matter who is involved, is frowned at by every virtuous and conscious African. Not necessarily because of the fear of the gods and the probable consequences, but for the harmonious co-existence of the people. The traditional African way of life, which is basically communal, can be seen today in the extended family system. In essence, mutual help and interdependence characterize this.

1.2.1. The Concept of Evil: Origins and Nature

From the onset we affirmed that African peoples are much aware of evil in the world, and in various ways they endeavour to fight it. Several views exist concerning the origin of evil. Many societies say categorically that God did not create what is evil, nor does He do them any evil whatsoever. Mbiti examines various African myths which highlight the fact that when God originally created man, there was harmony and family relationships between the two and the first people enjoyed only what was good. Where then did evil emanate from? (Mbiti, 1969)

Even so, some societies see evil as originating from, or associated with, spiritual beings other than God. Part of this concept is the personification of evil itself. For example, the Bukusu say that there is an evil divinity which God created good, but

later on turned against Him and began to do evil. (Mbiti, 1969) This evil divinity is assisted by evil spirits, and all evil now comes from that lot. Thus, a kind of duel exists, between good and evil forces in the world. There are other peoples who regard death, epidemics, locusts and other major calamities, as divinities in themselves, or as caused by divinities in themselves, or as caused by divinities. Among the Iteso, for example, *Edeke* is a god or spirit who brings death, epidemics and other calamities. The same word is used for the calamities themselves. *Edeke* is then the embodiment of evil itself. (Mbiti, 1969)

Furthermore, in nearly all African societies, it is thought that the spirits are either the origin of evil, or agents of evil. (Mbiti, 1969) In some societies there is a belief that after four or five generations, the living-dead lose personal links with human families, and become 'its' and strangers. When they become detached from human contact, people experience or fear them as 'evil' or 'harmful'. (Mbiti, 1969) Some are believed to possess individuals and to cause various maladies like epilepsy and madness. If the dead are not properly buried, or have a grudge, are neglected or not obeyed when they give instructions, it is thought that they take revenge or punish the offenders. In this case, it is human beings who provoke the spirits of the dead to act in "evil" ways. (Mbiti, 1969)

Also, in our African context, there are people in every community who are suspected of working maliciously against their relatives and neighbours through the use of magic, sorcery and witchcraft. This is the centre of evil as people experience it. Mystical power is neither good nor evil in itself: but when used maliciously by some individuals it is experienced as evil. (Mbiti, 1969) This view makes evil an independent and external object which, however, cannot act on its own but must be employed by human or spiritual agents. People here

become incarnations of evil power. (Mbiti, 1969) In fact, the Africans conceive that there are certain classes of people, age groups, clans, among others (For example, those with red eyes, squinted eyes, shifty people, very old single people, the greedy) who possess these potentially destructive powers. They can harm their victims by just uttering evil words or gazing at them or applying some witchcraft, magic or sorcery. (Mbiti, 1969)

1.2.2. A philosophical Reflection on the concept of evil by some African thinkers

In this section we will focus on some African thinkers who have attempted to shed some light on the notion of evil. I deem this best as it adds some fresh or rather content to the African worldview of the concept of evil. In this perspective then we will consider J. S. Mbiti and Kwame Gyekye.

i) J. S. Mbiti

Perhaps no other African theologian and philosopher has done more extensive research on African Tradition and Philosophy than John S. Mbiti. Mbiti's research reveals that several views exist concerning the origin and nature of evil. (Mbiti, 1969) Be that as it may be, these African views still contend categorically that God is neither the creator nor the author of evil. To be sure, many African societies hesitate to attribute to God any occurrences of evil, be it moral or natural. Evil is usually seen as having its origin, not from God, but from other beings that can and do exercise free will. (Mbiti, 1969) These lie in the category of spiritual beings and human beings. Referring to spiritual beings Mbiti says, "in nearly all African societies, it is thought that the spirits are either the origin of evil, or agents of evil." (Mbiti, 1969) He also writes,

There are people in every community who are suspected of working maliciously against their relatives and neighbours,

through the use of magic, sorcery and witchcraft ... this is the centre of evil, as people experience it. Mystical power is neither good nor evil in itself. But when used maliciously by some individuals, it experienced as evil. This view makes evil an independent and external object which, however, cannot act on its own but must be employed by human or spiritual agents.

What Mbiti seems to be saying here is that according to some African societies, beings with freewill function only as agents of evil without necessarily being the origins of evil. He also observes that this might not be the case with other African societies where evil is viewed as an independent external object. (Mbiti, 1969) In such an instance, it has to be employed by an agent for its effects to be seen. This, of course, leaves no room for natural evil as understood by Western thought. For, according to Mbiti's findings, (Mbiti, 1969) what is considered natural evil can ultimately be traced back to a freewill agent. He writes,

We have emphasized the corporate nature of African communities which are knit together by a web of kinship relationships and other social structures. Within this situation, almost every form of evil a person suffers, whether it is moral or natural evil, it is believed to be caused by members of his community. Similarly, any moral offense that he commits is directly or indirectly against members of his society.

Thus whereas in Western thought, natural evil may be viewed as occurring independently of agents, in an African perspective it is seen as occurring with the help of an agent. For example, a tornado would be considered, in the West, an occurrence independent of human or spiritual agency, whereas in Africa, the same would have human (or spiritual) agency as its origin. Whether or not the African view is an authentic representation of truth about evil is not the point here, I am only attempting to outline what a large

majority of Africans believe to be the origin of evil.

ii) Gyekye Kwame

In a chapter entitled, “*Destiny, Free Will and Responsibility*,” the African Philosopher, Kwame Gyekye, makes a thorough philosophical analysis of the Akan People’s concept of evil. (Gyekye, 1915) It would be impossible to understand this concept of evil in the Akan context unless we understand some of their basic assumptions only destiny, free will and responsibility. Thus, Gyekye begins this chapter by asserting that, “Akan thinkers hold that every human being has a destiny that was fixed beforehand. (Gyekye, 1915) He observes that this belief in destiny is not peculiar only to the Akan people, but is also probably found in all cultures.

How, then, does this affect Gyekye’s understanding of the problem of evil? First, he begins by asserting that the problem that evil poses is more complex in Akan thought than in Western philosophy. (Gyekye, 1915) According to him, in Western philosophy the problem centers around God. But in Akan thought the problem revolves around both God and the lesser spirits. By this he means that in Western thought the problem is brought about by the seeming conflicts between the attributes of God and the existence of evil. But in Akan thought, the problem of evil is conceived in terms of both the attributes of God and also of the lesser spirits. (Gyekye, 1915) All the same, Gyekye admits that when pushed to its logical extremes, the philosophical nature of the problem of evil is quite similar to that of Western philosophy and theology. (Gyekye, 1915)

He opines that God is conceived as omnipotent and wholly good. In spite of this conception, the Akan thinkers do not appear to find these attributes of God incompatible with the fact of the existence of moral evil. (Gyekye, 1915) According to Gyekye, Akan

though locates the source of the problem of evil elsewhere than in the relationships between the attributes of God and the fact of the existence of evil. This is so solely out of the contention by Akan thinkers that evil is not a creation of God. (Gyekye, 1915) According to them, the lesser spirits and humanity’s free will provide the sources for evil. Thus, although God created all these, they are considered in Akan theology and cosmology to have independent existence of some sort. (Gyekye, 1915)

However, one would immediately be tempted to ask, as Gyekye does, why a wholly good God would create a being that has the capacity to do evil. A possible answer he offers is that their capacity to do evil stems from the operations of the independent will of the beings themselves be they spiritual or human. (Gyekye, 1915) But this, according to him, is not altogether a satisfactory answer. For if God is omnipotent, does it not follow that he has the power to eliminate or control the evil wills and actions of the lesser spirits and human beings so as to eliminate evil from the world? (Gyekye, 1915)

Additionally, even if it were granted that he endowed the lesser spirits and human beings with independent wills, one would expect the wholly good God to be “willing to intervene when he sees them using their wills to choose to act wrongly and so to cause evil.” (Gyekye, 1915) Or, to push Gyekye’s question to a deeper level; given that God is omnipotent, he certainly could have made human beings in such a way that they always chose to do good, thereby avoiding evil. Besides, he could also intervene in the event of human freedom of the will leading to evil, and that he could thus control human will. (Gyekye, 1915)

To these questions Gyekye has an answer. He argues that if God were to do all these, humans could act in a wholly determined way without any choice at all. This, according to him, would contradict the

general nature of the concept of destiny and free will as understood by Akan thinkers. Also, it would have resulted in subverting human rationality...a factor that not only distinguishes human beings from beasts, but also enables them to make general judgments before acting. (Gyekye, 1915) Furthermore, when it is insisted that God should have made human beings such that they always chose the good implies, in effect, that God should have made non-rational creatures and less than humans, and therefore wholly without the ability to choose. Even if God were to create humans such that they always chose the good, they would still not be regarded as free inasmuch as the choice of the good would have been predetermined. (Gyekye, 1915)

Thus, Gyekye concludes by asserting that the problem of evil does indeed arise in Akan philosophy and theology. The Akan people maintain that although moral evil exists in the world, this fact is not inconsistent with the assertion that God is omnipotent and wholly good. According to them, evil is ultimately the result of the exercise by humans of their freedom of the will, an attribute endowed upon them by their Creator. (Gyekye, 1915) Thus we have, in summary, the basic contention of Akan philosophy of destiny, and how it influences their understanding of evil.

1.3. Consequences of Evil

Evil be it of any kind has consequences. These consequences are devastating. The various evils committed have got longstanding consequences. The existence of evil has left human beings with unanswered questions. Evil, be it moral or natural, in its different twists has left a lot of pain, havoc and suffering to human life. Wrongdoing can never be neutral. It always has consequences to the perpetrator and very often to the perpetrator's community. (Magesa, 1998)

According to Africans, although they have no established doctrine for the origin of evil comparable to that of the biblical concept, they all the same accept the effect of evil on the individual and the community. Consequences come in the form of calamities: blight, failure to kill game or acquire food, murderous anger and all kinds of anti-life phenomena be they personal, social, physical, psychological or natural. Magesa categorizes these calamities as affliction, usually perceived as illness or disease. There is disease if rains do not fall so there is no food in the land or if so much rain falls and crops are spoilt; or if cows do not give birth so there is shortage of milk. Any failure that befalls the individual or the community is interpreted as disease. Human illness, of course, forms the deepest core of this conception. (Magesa, 1998)

Nonetheless, religious, social and natural causes of affliction cannot be seen in Africa as entirely separated and unconnected. (Magesa, 1998) Rather, they all constitute stages in the psychological and spiritual awareness of an immoral situation. The order of conceptual awareness and any attempt at analysis and understanding of an affliction usually, though not necessarily always, begins with a natural explanation. Unless witchcraft, spirit, ancestral or divine causes are immediately suspected, a natural cause is first sought and then initially accepted as reason for a particular happening. In fact, natural causes are often very obvious, such as a tree falling on a person or hurting oneself while hunting. If the particular affliction does not grow in seriousness, the natural explanation will suffice. However, when afflictions grow worse, as often happens, the second and third causation is sought. (Magesa, 1998) For example, if a tree falls on the man cutting it and gets hurt, the person will certainly know that the falling tree hurt him. But at the back of his mind, he will be asking the question: Why me? Why did it

have to fall this way not that way? Why at this particular time? To answer these questions, one must resort to human or religious explanations. It is on this level that misfortune begins to make sense in the African moral perception of the world. (Magesa, 1998)

In the same line of thought, the reason here as described by Magesa goes back to the African world-view. The world ought to be harmonious, balanced and good. Accordingly, misfortune, which means imbalance and disharmony in the universe, does not just happen. If and when it does, it is because there is a malevolent cause, either human or superhuman. Morality demands that these causes of disruption and affliction in human life and their motivations must be identified. Even if the offender is the victim, it is still important that the fact be known and something be done about it. (Bjerke, 1981) In the religious category, the ancestors may cause illness and suffering. This is often diagnosed by religious specialists (diviners) to be the case. This happens when the living neglect their duty of remembering the ancestors such as pouring libation. The sick person must then realize his neglect of responsibility and correct the situation. (Magesa, 1998)

Moreover, ancestral spirits may cause affliction because they desire sacrifice and offerings. Non-ancestral human spirits and human spirits may also cause misfortune. Many are simply malevolent spirits who bring disorder for no good reason. They might be spirits of people who did not receive proper burial at death who are resentful and seek to avenge themselves and are never satisfied. Spirits of children who did not undergo initiation process also belong to this category. They are extremely dangerous in their potential to cause harm to the living. (Magesa, 1998)

Nature spirits sometimes also cause affliction because they have been harmed in the early elements they inhabit. It is known,

for example, that certain things and places are their dwelling places and reserved for their use. There are certain trees, caves, or forests, which should neither be put to human use nor trespassed. To do this invites their anger and brings calamity.

1.4. Combating evil in Traditional Africa

Dealing with evil depends on the nature of evil and may differ from community to community. African Religion recognizes various ways to deal with affliction and has different religious experts whose task is to discover the reasons for disharmony in the universe. These experts are generally expected not only to know the causes of calamities, but also to prescribe antidotes or cures for these problems. Here are the methods that were put in place to combat evil in Traditional African society.

1. Policing system
2. Naming-giving good names to children
3. Emphasis on good character
4. Swearing at the Oracle
5. Fining those found guilty/punishing offenders
6. Emphasis on brotherhood or family-hood
7. Communal Atonement/cleansing rituals
8. Pouring libations
9. Offering prayers
10. Use of a formal curse

Conclusion

We have been able to give an overview of the traditional African understanding of the concept of evil. This far we have attempted to establish that the essence of goodness in African traditional ethics consists in doing good to others, while the essence of evil consists in doing harm to others. Thus, morality in African traditional thought is essentially inter-personal and social, with a basis in human well-being. We have posited that there are rational or religious reasons for following the standard of living either seen as custom, taboo or ethics; and this is to ensure that there is peace, tranquility and

progress in the society. I make a clarion call on Africans both at home and in Diaspora to shun anything evil that will not only impede our destiny as a people. Evil cannot give birth to good. This realization is borne out of the negative things affecting us as a people. This is showcased in the incessant and endless civil wars that have ravaged most African nations. On the whole, evil is evil no matter who is involved. We must learn to say no to evil and embrace virtues; then Africa will be peaceful and progressive.

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