



African Indigenous Values and the Problem of Moral Standard

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Abstract

This paper examined African indigenous values and the problem of moral standards within the context of contemporary ethical discourse. The study is motivated by the growing tension between traditional African moral systems and modern, ethical structures. The study critically analysed the nature, relevance, and limitations of African indigenous values as moral standards, while also interrogating the challenges of moral relativism and cultural particularism. The paper is limited to philosophical reflections on African ethics, with an emphasis on key values such as communalism, respect for authority, and human dignity. This study's importance lies in its contribution to ongoing debates on the universality versus relativity of moral standards, particularly in African societies experiencing cultural transformation. The justification for this research stems from the need to reassess indigenous moral outlooks in light of contemporary ethical challenges, including human rights concerns and social change. The paper adopts analytic and critical approach, drawing on both traditional and contemporary African philosophical texts to evaluate the consistency and applicability of indigenous values. The paper argued that while African indigenous values offer a vigorous foundation for moral reasoning, they require critical reinterpretation and integration with universal ethical principles.

This study proposed a complementary moral basis that corresponds African indigenous ethics with global moral standards, thereby providing a more balanced and context-sensitive approach to ethical evaluation in modern African societies.

Keywords: Values, African, Indigenous Values, Morality, Moral Standard.

Introduction

African indigenous values constitute the moral foundation upon which traditional African societies have historically organized their social, political, and religious life. These values are deeply rooted in cultural practices, oral traditions, and communal relationships, shaping the ethical orientation of individuals and communities alike. Central to African moral thought are principles such as communalism, respect for elders, solidarity, hospitality, and the sanctity of human life. As John S. Mbiti famously asserts, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am," a statement that captures the communal ontology underlying African ethics (Mbiti, 1969). This communal outline emphasizes the interdependence of individuals and situates morality within the context of social harmony and collective well-being.

However, the question of whether these indigenous values can function as universally valid moral standards has become increasingly contentious in contemporary discourse. The encounter with colonialism, Westernization, and globalization has introduced competing moral structures that often challenge or undermine traditional African ethical systems. Scholars such as Kwasi Wiredu (1996) and Kwame Gyekye (1997) argue that while African moral systems possess internal coherence and practical relevance, they must be critically examined and reconstructed to address modern ethical dilemmas. This has given rise to a broader philosophical debate concerning the tension between cultural relativism and moral universalism.

The problem of moral standards in the African context is further complicated by the persistence of certain traditional practices that appear to conflict with contemporary human rights norms. For instance, issues related to gender inequality, early marriage, and certain ritual practices raise critical questions about the extent to which cultural values should be preserved or reformed. Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) contends that cultures are not static and must evolve through critical engagement with both internal and external moral perspectives. Similarly, Innocent Asouzu (2004) emphasizes the need for a complementary approach that avoids absolutism while fostering unity and mutual coexistence.

Moreover, African scholars have increasingly sought to articulate ethical backgrounds that both preserve indigenous values and respond to contemporary

realities. Ifeanyi A. Menkiti (1984) underscores the primacy of community in defining personhood, arguing that moral status is acquired through participation in communal life. In a similar vein, Bénézet Bujo posits that:

“The centrality of life and relationality in African ethics, proposing a moral vision that prioritizes the well-being of the community over individual autonomy. These perspectives demonstrate that African indigenous values are not merely relics of the past but remain dynamic resources for ethical reflection.” (2001).

Despite these rich contributions, the challenge remains: can African indigenous values provide a stable and objective basis for moral standards in a pluralistic and rapidly changing world? Or are they inevitably limited by their cultural specificity? This paper addresses these questions by critically examining the nature of African indigenous values and evaluating their capacity to serve as viable moral standards. It argues that while these values offer significant moral insights, their continued importance depends on critical reinterpretation, philosophical reconstruction, and constructive engagement with universal ethical principles. In doing so, the study contributes to the broader discourse on African ethics by proposing a balanced approach that recognizes the importance of cultural identity while also embracing the demands of global moral reasoning.

Conceptual Clarifications

African Indigenous Values

African indigenous values refer to the system of beliefs, norms, and moral principles that are rooted in the cultural traditions and lived experiences of African peoples. These values are transmitted across generations through oral traditions, customs, religion, and social practices, and they guide behaviour within the community. According to John S. Mbiti, African moral values are inseparable from the communal structure of society, where the individual exists in relation to others (Mbiti, 1969). This relational worldview underscores the idea that morality is not merely individualistic but socially embedded.

One of the defining features of African indigenous values is communalism, which emphasizes the interdependence of individuals within a community. Ifeanyi A. Menkiti (1984) argues that in African thought, personhood is not an inherent attribute but something achieved through active participation in communal life. Similarly, Kwame Gyekye (1997) acknowledges the centrality of the community but introduces a moderate communitarian perspective that allows for individual autonomy within the social structure. African indigenous values also include respect for elders, hospitality, solidarity, and reverence for life. Bénézet Bujo (2001) highlights that African ethics is fundamentally life-centered, aiming at the

preservation and flourishing of both the individual and the community. In addition, Innocent Asouzu (2004) develops the idea of complementary reflection, arguing that reality and by extension morality is constituted through the interdependence of all beings. This perspective reinforces the holistic and integrative nature of African value systems.

Furthermore, African indigenous values are often expressed through the concept of Ubuntu, a Southern African ethical philosophy that emphasizes humanness, compassion, and mutual care. Ubuntu is defined as the essence of being human, grounded in relationships and moral responsibility toward others (Ramose, 1999). Thus, African indigenous values are not abstract theories but practical guides for achieving social harmony and human well-being.

Moral Standards

According to Rachels & Rachels, moral standards refer to the principles or criteria by which human actions are judged as right or wrong, good or bad. They serve as benchmarks for ethical evaluation and guide behaviour within a society. Moral standards can be universal applicable across all cultures or relative, varying according to cultural and social contexts (2019). In African philosophy, moral standards are often derived from communal values and social expectations rather than codified laws or abstract principles. Kwasi Wiredu (1996) notes that African moral systems are largely human-centered and pragmatic, focusing on the consequences of actions for communal well-being. Right actions are those that promote harmony, while wrong actions disrupt social equilibrium. However, the question of whether these standards are objective or culturally relative remains a subject of debate. According to Kwame Anthony Appiah, he argues that moral standards must be open to critical scrutiny and intercultural dialogue, especially in a globalized world (2006). This position challenges the idea that any moral system, including African indigenous ethics, can remain isolated or immune to external evaluation.

From an indigenous perspective, moral standards are often enforced through social mechanisms such as customs, taboos, proverbs, and communal sanctions. Segun Gbadegesin emphasizes that morality in African societies is practical and action-oriented, aimed at sustaining the community rather than merely articulating abstract ideals, (1991).

Synthesis of Concepts

The relationship between African indigenous values and moral standards lies in the fact that the former provides the foundation upon which the latter is built. Indigenous values shape the moral expectations of society, while moral standards serve as tools for evaluating behaviour in line with those values. However, the

challenge arises when these culturally grounded standards encounter competing global norms, raising questions about their universality, adaptability, and relevance. Thus, understanding these concepts is essential for addressing the broader philosophical issue of whether African indigenous values can function as reliable and enduring moral standards in contemporary society.

The discourse on African indigenous values and the problem of moral standards has attracted significant scholarly attention within African philosophy and ethics. This section reviews relevant literature from both indigenous African scholars and broader philosophical contributions, highlighting key arguments, areas of convergence, and existing gaps. One of the foundational contributions to African moral philosophy is that of John S. Mbiti, who emphasizes the communal nature of African life and morality. Mbiti (1969) argues that African ethics is rooted in social relationships, where the individual's identity and moral obligations are defined by the community. His assertion that "I am because we are" emphasises the idea that moral standards in African societies are derived from collective well-being rather than individual autonomy. This perspective provides a basis for understanding morality as socially embedded but has been critiqued for underestimating the role of individual agency. Expanding on this communal framework, Ifeanyi A. Menkiti, posits that:

Personhood in African thought is not an inherent quality but something attained through moral and social participation. According to Menkiti, the community determines the moral worth of the individual, thereby reinforcing the primacy of communal values as moral standards, (1984).

However, this position has been challenged by scholars who argue that it risks subordinating individual rights to collective interests. In response to such concerns, Kwame Gyekye (1997) proposes a "moderate communitarianism," which seeks to balance communal values with individual autonomy. Gyekye acknowledges the importance of community in shaping moral norms but insists that individuals possess intrinsic worth and rights that must be respected. His work represents a significant attempt to reconcile African indigenous values with contemporary human rights discourse.

Similarly, Kwasi Wiredu advocates for a critical re-examination of African cultural values in light of modern challenges. Wiredu emphasizes the need for conceptual decolonization, arguing that African societies must rethink inherited traditions and adopt rational approaches to moral reasoning. He maintains that while indigenous values are valuable, they should not be immune to criticism, especially when they conflict with principles of justice and equality. The ethical agenda of Ubuntu has also gained prominence in African moral philosophy. This

perspective is further developed by Thaddeus Metz, who formulates Ubuntu as a normative ethical theory that prioritizes harmonious relationships. Metz argues that: "Actions are morally right insofar as they promote social harmony and wrong insofar as they undermine it. This relational approach offers a distinctive alternative to Western individualistic ethics." (2007).

From a theological and life-centered perspective, Bénézet Bujo, emphasizes the centrality of life and community in African ethics. Bujo argues that moral actions are those that sustain and enhance life within the community, thereby reinforcing the sacredness of existence, (2001). His work integrates traditional African values with Christian ethical thought, contributing to the development of African theological ethics.

Furthermore, Segun Gbadegesin (1991) explores the practical dimensions of African morality, highlighting the role of customs, taboos, and social sanctions in regulating behaviour. He argues that African moral systems are pragmatic and oriented toward maintaining social order. Likewise, Innocent Asouzu (2004) introduces the concept of complementary reflection, which emphasizes unity, mutual dependence, and the avoidance of absolutism in moral reasoning. Asouzu's approach is particularly relevant in addressing the tension between relativism and universalism. Beyond African scholars, Western philosophers have also contributed to the debate on moral standards. James Rachels and Stuart Rachels (2019) discuss cultural relativism and its implications, arguing that while moral practices vary across cultures, some universal moral principles such as the prohibition of unnecessary harm are necessary for any society to function. Similarly, Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) advocates for cosmopolitanism, which encourages dialogue between cultures and the development of shared moral standards.

Despite these extensive contributions, a gap remains in the literature regarding the systematic integration of African indigenous values with universal ethical structures in a way that preserves cultural identity while addressing contemporary moral challenges. While scholars like Gyekye and Wiredu have made significant strides in this direction, more work is needed to develop a coherent and applicable moral structure that responds to issues such as globalization, human rights, and social transformation in Africa.

Core Features of African Indigenous Moral Values

African indigenous moral values are grounded in the lived experiences, traditions, and worldviews of African societies. These values are not abstract or purely theoretical; rather, they are practical principles that regulate social conduct and promote harmony within the community.

Communalism

One of the most fundamental features of African indigenous morality is communalism. African societies traditionally emphasize the primacy of the community over the individual, with moral obligations defined in terms of one's relationship with others. John S. Mbiti captures this idea succinctly in his famous expression, "I am because we are," (1969), highlighting that individual identity and moral responsibility are rooted in communal existence. Similarly, Ifeanyi A. Menkiti argues that personhood is achieved through active participation in communal life. In this sense, moral behaviour is evaluated based on its contribution to the well-being of the community (1984). However, Kwame Gyekye (1997) offers an exact perspective by advocating for moderate communitarianism, which recognizes both communal values and individual rights.

Respect for Elders and Authority

Respect for elders and constituted authority is another central feature of African moral values. Elders are regarded as custodians of wisdom, tradition, and moral guidance. Obedience to elders is therefore considered a moral obligation necessary for maintaining social order. According to Segun Gbadegesin, respect for elders is deeply embedded in African cultural practices and is reinforced through proverbs, customs, and socialization processes, (1991). This respect is not merely hierarchical but is tied to the belief that elders possess experiential knowledge that contributes to the moral stability of society. Thus, moral standards are often preserved and transmitted through generational continuity.

Sanctity and Preservation of Life

African indigenous ethics places a high premium on the sanctity of life. Life is considered sacred and inviolable, and moral actions are those that protect and enhance life. Bénézet Bujo (2001) emphasizes that African morality is fundamentally life-centered, focusing on the promotion and preservation of life within the community. This principle extends beyond human life to include respect for nature and the environment, reflecting a holistic worldview. Actions that threaten life or disrupt the balance of existence are considered morally wrong.

Solidarity and Hospitality

Solidarity and hospitality are essential features of African moral systems. Individuals are expected to show generosity, compassion, and care for others, including strangers. This reflects a deep sense of shared humanity and interconnectedness. Mogobe Ramose (1999) explains this through the concept of Ubuntu, which emphasizes humaneness and mutual concern. Likewise, Thaddeus Metz (2007) argues that actions are morally right if they promote harmonious

relationships and social cohesion. Hospitality, therefore, is not optional but a moral duty that reinforces communal bonds.

These features collectively provide a robust ethical structure that prioritizes social harmony and human well-being. However, their application in contemporary society raises important questions about adaptability, universality, and relevance issues that are central to the broader problem of moral standards in Africa.

The Problem of Moral Standards in the African

The question of moral standards in the African context has become increasingly complex due to the interaction between indigenous value systems and external influences such as colonialism, globalization, religion, and modernity. While African indigenous values provide a rich moral framework grounded in communalism, harmony, and respect for life, the challenge lies in determining whether these values can function as objective, consistent, and universally applicable moral standards in contemporary society.

Cultural Relativism

One of the central problems is the tension between cultural relativism and moral universalism. Cultural relativism holds that moral standards are culture-specific and cannot be judged by external criteria. In this view, African indigenous values are valid within their cultural context but may not be universally binding. However, this position raises serious philosophical concerns. If all moral systems are equally valid, it becomes difficult to criticize harmful practices within a culture. Kwasi Wiredu, acknowledges the importance of cultural context in moral reasoning but insists that rational critique must be applied to all traditions. (1996). Similarly, Kwame Anthony, argues for cross-cultural dialogue as a means of evaluating moral norms, emphasizing that no culture is morally infallible, Appiah (2006).

Universal Human Rights

Another major problem is the apparent conflict between some African traditional practices and contemporary human rights standards. Practices such as gender inequality, early marriage, and certain harmful cultural rites have been criticized for violating fundamental human rights. Kwame Gyekye (1997) contends that while African traditions are valuable, they must be re-evaluated in light of modern ethical principles that uphold individual dignity and freedom. This creates a tension between preserving cultural identity and embracing universal moral standards. The challenge, therefore, is to distinguish between values that promote human well-being and those that hinder it.

Impact of Colonialism and Westernization

Colonialism significantly disrupted African moral systems by imposing foreign values and institutions that often conflicted with indigenous traditions. This led to a dual moral agenda in many African societies, where traditional and Western values coexist, sometimes uneasily. Kwasi Wiredu (1996) describes this situation as a form of conceptual colonization, where African societies adopt foreign categories of thought without critical examination. As a result, moral standards become split, leading to confusion and inconsistency in ethical judgment. The legacy of colonialism continues to shape moral discourse in Africa, complicating the search for coherent moral standards.

Moral Decline and Social Transformation

Rapid social change, urbanization, and globalization have weakened traditional value systems in many African societies. The erosion of communal structures has led to increased individualism, materialism, and moral uncertainty. Segun Gbadegesin (1991) notes that the decline of traditional mechanisms such as taboos and communal sanctions has reduced the effectiveness of moral regulation. Similarly, Ifeanyi A. Menkiti (1984) suggests that the weakening of communal bonds undermines the very foundation of African moral systems, which depend on social participation and shared values.

Lack of Codification

Unlike many Western ethical systems, African indigenous moral values are largely unwritten and transmitted orally through customs, proverbs, and traditions. While this allows for flexibility, it also creates ambiguity and inconsistency in moral interpretation. Bénézet Bujo (2001) acknowledges that the absence of formal codification can make it difficult to apply moral standards uniformly, especially in complex modern societies. This lack of systematic structure poses a challenge for integrating African ethics into formal institutions such as legal and educational systems.

Individual Rights and Communal Obligations

African indigenous ethics prioritizes communal well-being over individual autonomy, which can sometimes lead to the suppression of individual rights. While communalism fosters solidarity and cooperation, it may also justify practices that limit personal freedom. Kwame Gyekye (1997) attempts to resolve this tension by proposing a balance between communal responsibilities and individual rights. Likewise, Innocent Asouzu (2004) advocates for a complementary approach that recognizes both individual and collective dimensions of human existence. Nevertheless, achieving this balance remains a significant moral challenge.

Religious Pluralism and Moral Conflicts

The introduction of Christianity and Islam into African societies has further complicated the moral landscape. These religions often bring moral teachings that differ from or even contradict indigenous values, leading to ethical conflicts. According to J. S. Mbiti, he observes that African morality is deeply intertwined with religion, making it difficult to separate ethical norms from spiritual beliefs (1969). The coexistence of multiple religious' systems has resulted in competing moral authorities, thereby complicating the establishment of a unified moral standard.

The increasing tension between African indigenous moral values and contemporary global ethical standards calls for the development of a complementary moral structure capable of integrating the strengths of both systems. While African indigenous ethics emphasizes communal harmony, solidarity, and relationality, modern ethical systems often stress individual rights, justice, and universal human dignity. A complementary moral structure seeks to harmonize these perspectives in a manner that preserves African cultural identity while responding effectively to contemporary moral challenges. One of the foremost proponents of complementarity in African philosophy is Innocent Asouzu. Asouzu argues that human existence is fundamentally relational and that no reality exists in isolation (2004). His theory of complementary reflection maintains that individuals and communities are mutually dependent and must work together to achieve authentic human existence. Applied to morality, this means that ethical systems should not operate in opposition but should complement one another in promoting the common good. Thus, African indigenous values and universal moral principles should be viewed not as contradictory but as mutually enriching.

A complementary moral structure therefore requires a critical reconstruction of African indigenous values. Kwasi Wiredu, emphasizes the need for conceptual decolonization, whereby African societies critically evaluate both inherited traditions and imported Western values. According to him, traditions should not be accepted merely because they are ancient, nor should foreign values be adopted uncritically. Rather, moral principles should be assessed based on their capacity to promote human well-being, justice, and social harmony. Similarly, Kwame Gyekye advocates for moderate communitarianism, which seeks to balance communal obligations with individual rights. Gyekye argues that while community remains central in African moral thought, individuals possess intrinsic worth and autonomy that must be respected. This balanced approach is essential for constructing a moral framework that accommodates both collective responsibility and personal freedom.

The philosophy of Ubuntu also provides a foundation for a complementary moral structure. Ramose explains that Ubuntu emphasizes human interconnectedness and mutual care. In the same vein, Metz argues that morality should be grounded in the promotion of harmonious relationships. However, a

complementary moral structure must ensure that communal harmony does not become a justification for suppressing individual dignity or human rights. Instead, harmony should coexist with justice, equality, and respect for personal autonomy. More so, the integration of indigenous and universal ethical principles is necessary in addressing contemporary African social problems such as corruption, violence, ethnic conflicts, and gender inequality. African indigenous values provide moral resources such as solidarity, accountability, and respect for life, while universal ethical principles contribute standards of justice, equality, and human rights. Appiah supports this intercultural approach through his theory of cosmopolitanism, which encourages dialogue among cultures in the search for shared moral understanding.

Another important aspect of a complementary moral structure is moral education. Traditional African societies transmitted moral values through proverbs, folktales, taboos, and communal practices. However, modernization and globalization have weakened these mechanisms. Segun Gbadegesin notes that moral education remains essential for sustaining social order and ethical consciousness. Therefore, contemporary African societies must develop educational systems that combine indigenous moral teachings with critical reasoning and universal ethical awareness. Religious pluralism also necessitates complementarity in moral discourse. African societies today are characterized by the coexistence of indigenous religions, Christianity, and Islam. Rather than allowing these traditions to generate conflict, a complementary moral structure encourages dialogue and mutual respect among different belief systems. J. S. Mbiti, observes that religion permeates African life and morality, making interreligious understanding essential for ethical coexistence.

Moreover, a complementary moral structure promotes adaptability without abandoning cultural identity. African societies are continually evolving, and moral systems must respond to changing realities such as technological advancement, democratic governance, and globalization. However, adaptation should not imply the total rejection of indigenous values. Instead, African moral thought should preserve its core principles of humanity, communal responsibility, and respect for life while embracing ethical progress. In essence, a complementary moral structure offers a balanced and inclusive framework for moral reasoning in Africa. It avoids the extremes of rigid traditionalism and uncritical Westernization by encouraging dialogue, critical reflection, and mutual enrichment between cultures and ethical systems. Such a structure recognizes that no single moral tradition possesses absolute monopoly over truth and that ethical progress depends on cooperation, openness, and respect for human dignity.

Evaluation

African indigenous values have continued to attract scholarly attention because of their significant role in shaping moral consciousness and social behaviour within African societies. These values, rooted in communalism, solidarity, respect for life, and human dignity, provide an ethical basis that has sustained African communities for generations. However, the question remains whether these indigenous values can adequately function as moral standards in contemporary society. In evaluating African indigenous values as moral standards, it is evident that they possess significant strengths, particularly in promoting communal harmony, respect for life, and social responsibility. However, they also face important limitations, including cultural relativism, suppression of individual autonomy, harmful traditional practices, and lack of codification. Consequently, African indigenous values should neither be rejected outright nor accepted uncritically. Instead, they should be critically reconstructed and harmonized with universal ethical principles to ensure their relevance and applicability in contemporary society.

Conclusion

African indigenous values remain one of the most significant foundations of moral life African societies. Rooted in communalism, solidarity, respect for elders, sanctity of life, hospitality, and social responsibility, these values have historically guided human conduct and promoted social harmony within African communities. The study has shown that African morality is deeply relational, emphasizing the interconnectedness of persons and the importance of communal well-being over excessive individualism. Thinkers such as John S. Mbiti, Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Gyekye, and Innocent Asouzu have demonstrated that African ethical systems possess both philosophical depth and practical relevance. However, the work has equally revealed that the problem of moral standards in the Africa arises from several interconnected factors, including cultural relativism, colonial influence, modernization, religious pluralism, and the tension between communal obligations and individual rights. While African indigenous values provide a strong moral foundation, some traditional practices require critical evaluation in light of contemporary concerns such as human rights, justice, and equality. The absence of systematic codification and the impact of globalization have further complicated the application of these values in modern African societies.

The evaluation carried out in this study indicates that African indigenous values cannot be dismissed as obsolete or inferior to Western ethical systems. Rather, they continue to offer valuable moral insights capable of addressing contemporary social problems such as corruption, violence, moral decadence, and social disintegration. Their emphasis on human dignity, communal responsibility, and harmonious coexistence remains highly relevant in the search for ethical stability and

social development in Africa. Consequently, this work advocates for a complementary moral structure that integrates the strengths of African indigenous ethics with universal moral principles. Such an approach promotes critical reflection, intercultural dialogue, and moral reconstruction while preserving the positive elements of African cultural heritage. Through complementarity, African societies can develop a more balanced and inclusive ethical background that respects both communal values and individual rights.

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