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An African Thought on the Ethics of Human Foetal Life

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Abstract

This paper presents an African thought on the ethics of human foetal life and this can be discussed against the backdrop of the African concept of life, person and community. In the process, it examines the fact of humanity and personhood of the human foetus and the role of the community in the determinant of humanity and personhood of the human foetus. It goes further to examine the veracity of the arguments for and against the toying with the early development of human beings.

Introduction and Overview of Research on Human Foetuses

The early developments of human beings have been subjected to diverse forms of researches and experimentations in recent times. And these have generated several debates on the humanity and personhood of human foetuses and the question

of morality of toying with the early development of human beings. More so, what are the contributions of the African philosophers to the on-going debate on the morality of experimentations with the early development of the human beings?

In the past few years, human embryos and fetuses have become the focus of scientific and pseudo-scientific attention. Human embryos and fetuses have been touched at various points of their development with little or no regards to them as human beings and persons. The use of contraceptives have always inhibited and terminated the early development of the human life and person. The use of abortifacients have always halted, terminated and even destroyed the early formation of human life. The break-through in assisted reproductive technologies which are meant to assist infertile couples to achieve pregnancy and successful birth which started with homologous gametes was opened to heterogonous gametes precipitating in diverse forms of manipulations, researches and experimentations of the early development of the human life. The practice of artificial insemination also degenerated to the extent of mixing of human and animal gametes and germ cells together precipitating humanized hybrid. Meanwhile, the development of in vitro-fertilization (IVF) and embryo transfer, and a host of other processes of assisted and artificial reproduction have remained at the experimental stages. And they have opened the early development of human embryos and foetusses to further research, experimentations and destruction all over the world, in Africa and Nigeria in particular.

The earliest development of human life from fertilization through their gestational periods, have been viewed differently by different scientists, biotechnologists, ethicists and religionists, precipitating diverse treatment on human embryos and fetuses. As a result, they are being turned into objects to be toyed with without the respect to them as authentic human persons possessing the normal human life. Some Scientists, Bio-Technologists, Medical Experts, and Ethicists, have consistently viewed human conceptus, embryos and even fetuses, as lumps of cells in the womb of women or in Petri dishes and argued that such lumps of cells could neither be human being possessing human life nor be respected as authentic human person; popular among such groups are the Eugenics. Some other Scientists, Ethicists and Religionists present human conceptus, embryos and fetuses, as human beings and human persons in their formative period, and have argued for their humanity and personhood to be recognized. Such groups are known as humanists. The Africans who have consistently viewed the early development of human life as authentic human beings and persons and have argued that such could not be used as an appendix to the lives of the sick and the wealthy members of the society seem to be left out of the discussion and policy formulations in this respect.

The Eugenics, according to Pamela Schaeffer (25) hold that human embryos and foetuses are not yet human beings and persons, and such could be used as avenues to learn and their genetic materials could also be used to assist others with debilitating problems. As a result, they have encouraged diverse treatments, such as researches and experimentations on human embryos and foetuses that are going on in several Teaching Hospitals, established National Hospitals, Federal Medical Centres, Pharmaceutical Companies, Biological and Agricultural Institutes, Cosmetic Industries and Non-Profit Co-operations, all over the world, in Africa and in Nigeria in particular. And their sources of acquisition of human embryos and foetuses are basically through the use of In Vitro Fertilization, induced abortion, Embryos and Foetal Cryo-Preservation, and Laboratory means of reproduction of human embryos and foetuses. Meanwhile, these human materials are acquired from the developing countries of which African countries are popularly known.

Meanwhile, there have been a corresponding thought and development in the ethical conduct in research and experimentation on human embryos and foetuses by several scholars, diverse ethical commissions and committees, institutes, religious organizations and respected bioethics in Europe and America and other countries in the western world, but Africa and Nigeria in particular, do not have the organized ethical commission and committee that would take care of such problems. As a result, they would not to take into cognizance the moral, religious and socio-political implications of such practices in their societies.

More so, it is quite morally difficult and complex to reconcile the practice of making Africa and Nigeria in particular, the new farm yard for breeding of human embryo and foetuses for research and experimentation. And the opening of a new business opportunity for the industrialized Europe and America without the corresponding thought of the respect for the life and humanity of these embryos and foetuses.

These technological processes of research and experimentations tend to show the level of human scientific and technological knowledge. It also shows their ability to contain and control human problems thereby making human lives worth living for the human family and community. But it does not show that the foetuses that are being extracted and used for the different types of experimentations have human life and at the same time, are the same types of foetuses that the Africans celebrate their conception. The African will also do all that is humanly possible to protect them in their mother's wombs and even celebrate their successful birth elaborately.

While some Scholars regard such a development as far-fetched, many Philosophers, Ethicists, Theologians, Opinion Moulders, Political Scientists and Lawyers, warn of the grave negative implications of such technologies for society and justice. It is also thought that if genetic therapies and enhancements become available

only to an economically privileged group its level of perversion and manipulation will be unimaginable. Given the potential consequences of these technological developments, many think it would be prudent to put breaks on research driving us to such a questionable future. And more importantly, to flash a yellow light to enable the society check the effects of these technological developments before they overwhelm the society.

Moreover, experts warn that social forces such as improvement in the quality of human lives, wellbeing and technologism, that are driving bio-technologies are deeply rooted in western culture and makes them to be virtually unstoppable. They also include a near-religious belief in progress and a compelling desire of parents to equip their children with every possible advantage over others. Today, for parents with economic resources, it may mean genetic manipulations to bring about a higher Intelligent Quotient, a few added inches of height, a special talent, a pleasing personality or face, sex selection of children, genetic testing and manipulations. The right genes will be available at a price making a marketable product out of the raw materials of human life. And what happens when such avenues are used to asses an apparently healthy persons' susceptibility to some future diseases?

African Thought on the Beginning of Human Life

Africans have always believed that human life begins at fertilization when the sperm from the father and the ovum from the mother unite in the fallopian tube. It is to be borne in mind that Africans thinks of conception as the beginning of human life even though the root of such life goes beyond the physical world. Our knowledge of conception to have taken place at fertilization of the male and the female sex cells is responsible for the use of fertilization as the starting point of human existence.

According to Magesa (84) conception is not seen as merely a result of man and woman coming together in the act of sexual intercourse. It is most basically understood as the result of the blessing from God and the ancestors. Without divine and ancestral blessings, conception may well not be possible. God, Ancestors, mother and father copulate to beget jointly and give birth, while God intercedes and intervenes to create and the ancestors assist in protecting the creation from the malevolent powers of destruction. Every individual is therefore the outcome of a human act, God's creation, and ancestral blessing. In the act of conception, vast kinship relationships are beginning to form between the visible and the invisible world. Ancestors, in this act of conception, are fathers and mothers and grandfathers and grandmothers. In addition to the immediate biological parents, all of them make the child possible and assist in bringing it into the world. All have power and authority over it, and at every stage of its life, even as an adult or old person, it owes them respect to the new person coming into the visible world, all of the ancestors are almost like gods requiring his or her allegiance. According to this kind of perception,

even God is referred to in such personal terms as a grandfather or father and his paramountcy implies his transcendent fatherhood over every person and over humanity at large.

Conception has been viewed as an occasion of joy and a good uncomplicated birth of a healthy child is much more joyful as it validates the joy of conception. It is seen as a sign of tranquillity in the universe, and a sign of defeat of bad people or malevolent spirits by the protection of the ancestors. A new born baby, according to Parrinder (95), is scrutinized for any similarities it might have to any of the dead or living older relatives. For a new born child is often thought to be a re-incarnation of some ancestor who is seeking to return to this life, or at least, part of his spiritual influence returns.

In this discussion about the beginning of life, it might seem odd to refer to a ritual among the Bahema of Zaire that apparently deals with the end of life. In this sense, it is fundamentally also a ritual of life's beginning, a ritual of conception and birth that illustrates the link between the visible and invisible vital forces. According to Benezet Bujo (78), the ritual is simple enough. At the death of the father of the household, each of his sons licks some grains of millet from his hand four times. Each one then jumps over the dead man's corpse equal number of times signifying the culmination of life's power.

The idea of conception and birth is thus, an integral part of the way African religion treats normal death, that is, death in mature old age. This kind of death, like conception and birth, is a life-giving reality, and is seen and experienced as such. As Bujo explains, the deceased who has become an ancestor would now wish to communicate his family his gentleness, peace, fertility, good health, success in life, prosperity in cattle and fields, etc. However, this cannot remain a passive desire on the part of the ancestor alone; it must be affected by the living.

The beginning of life already contains the end, and the end is in normal circumstances a splendid beginning. For this reason, expectant mother must be treated with extreme care and solicitude. Every one directly involved with her, particularly, the husband, must be extremely careful not to infringe on any ethical code during the duration of the pregnancy. Almost the same respect is given to a pregnant woman as that shown towards the corpse. Both are sacred in terms of their status and the life they carry.

Morality of Toying with the Early Development of Human Life

Africans have always believed that the moment of conception is the beginning of human life. According to Dzurgba (38) from the time that the ovum is fertilized, a life is begun which is neither that of the father nor of the mother; it is rather the life of a new human being with its own growth. While Menkiti (48) holds

that each of us has a unique beginning, the moment of conception. As soon as the twenty – three chromosomes carried by the sperm encounters the twenty – three chromosomes carried by the ovum, the whole information necessary and sufficient to spell out the characteristic of the new being is gathered. At this moment, a new human being is defined which has never occurred before and will never occur again.

Africans have always viewed the moment of conception as the time of great joy for husband and wife, the families of the husband, those of the wife and also for the whole clan. When the wife is noticeably pregnant, it becomes a thing of joy and excitement to the immediate family and the families of the both couples. According to Mbiti (1991, 87):

There is great joy when a wife finds out that she is expecting a baby. The arrival of a child in the family is one of the greatest blessings of life. African peoples greet this event with joy and satisfaction. The pregnant woman informs her husband, and before long, other people get to know about it. Immediately steps begin to be taken to ensure the safety of the baby and the mother during and after pregnancy.

While, Jude Mkhomeni (22) holds that people generally and Africans in particular, go into marriage and stay on in marriage if children are born. The entire life of the couple is futile and embarrassing when children are absent.

Conception indicates and assures that the universe is in good order and that the ancestors are happy. It is a very significant step not only for the validity of the marriage contract, but also for its consolidation. Children bring happiness and joy to the home of their parent, Mkhomeni holds that when children are born the fathers adorn them for they prove their manhood and the mothers worship them for they remove embarrassment of being regarded as young girls, looked upon with contempt and disrespected.

Mbiti (1982, 139) sees children to be the joy of marriage, of life and as the glory of marriage. Should a couple die without progeny, there will be no body to retain their names and keep them in immortality. The more progeny one has the more he has the strongest possible manifestations of immortality. He is reborn in the multiple of his descendants, and there will be many who will remember him after he has passed on into his personal immortality.

The processes of the early development of human life in African society involve giving birth to the child. Reason being that all the prayers, efforts and expectations of the family are the final birth of the child as such would culminate the joy of pregnancy. The pregnant woman is highly protected by the family and defended against all negative forces that tend to frustrate the continuous development of the human foetus and or the infant.

The process of giving birth according to Beller (15) is in two phases. They are: biological birth and community birth. The biological birth is linked to a joyful event of the little family, their parental families and their friends which still prolong in a certain way the role of the maternal womb. While the community birth which Beller called veritable birth, takes place when they child is given a name in front of the community. Accordingly:

When during a post-natal rite, when the family group gives a name to a baby born within it, it confers on him an identity, recognizes him as a member, giving itself as well a means of exercising control over him.

Bujo (49) believes that community is the place of true birth and that the Anthropological significance of giving a name goes beyond a simple designation of the child, or choosing a name from a list, or inventing one. Rather, it is a ritual of discovering, revealing or detecting the right name capable of defining the being of the child. In most nations of Africa, the names given to a child may indicate the season or time when the child is born. Theophoric names are given to the child signifying the relationship the child is called to have with God. At least, one of the names given to the child will be the one of a deceased relative. From this Ancestor he will get protective power and inherit something of his social personality, his individuality and identity and his place within the clan. On the other hand, re-actualizing the name of the ancestor, will allow him or her to integrate in the earthly existence of the living which is in fact the community of reference- and a good deal of time, there are indications of resemblance and exhibitions of the characters of the deceased ancestor of whom it is affirmed in one way or another that he has come back.

Finally, and most importantly, it is the beginning of the assurance of the parents of their possibility of living after death, that is, of becoming ancestors themselves. Thus, Magessa believes that the failure to conceive can have disastrous consequences both to the society and to the world environment in which the society lives. If the couple, most especially, the woman cannot give birth, she is always ridiculed and scorned in the society. She is made to believe that she is not good enough to be a wife and may be divorced or driven away from the husband's house.

Africans have always believed and treated the early development of human life as human being and person. It is difficult separating humanity and personhood in the African philosophical thought. It must be borne in mind that some African philosophers like Ifeanyi Menkiti, Kwesi Wiredu, and some others, have insisted on tailoring the African conception of human person to agree with the Western or "the Whiteman's" conception of the human personhood of the early development of human life.

Gyekye (1ff) would seem to have encapsulated the African view of personhood when he presents the Akan view of personhood. The Akan view of personhood has, like many other metaphysical and moral conceptions, far-reaching effects on social practices and institutions. Using facts about these practices and institutions to reconstruct a conception of personhood underscores another important general theme in African philosophy: the practical implications of philosophical principles on everyday life. Accordingly, the Akan judgments about personhood are not matter of merely academic interest, but play an important role in shaping and supporting their highly communal social structure. To the extent that the Akan notion accommodates a common humanity as an innate source of value, it supports moral equality. At the same time, its emphasis on the social bases of personhood helps firmly to embed trust, cooperation, and responsibility to the community in cultural practices. The Akan philosophy of persons thus represents an attempt to resolve questions of identity, freedom, and morality in favour of a communalistic way of life that has evolved as a rational adaptation to the exigencies of survival under harsh conditions.

In the light of Gyekye's thought, personhood in the African society, is not acquired by any human being but rather an innate aspect of humanity and forms the basic source of value in the African society. More so, it is used as the basis of moral equality of human being in the African society. He goes further to link African personhood with communal way of life of the Africans.

Iroegbu (107) would seem to agree with Gyekye when he argues that the human person is communally and self-embodied being that is in search of full transcendence. Accordingly, in spite of the fact that personhood is innate, the community has the responsibility of moulding the personality of this human being in such a way that he is not only socialized in his or her outlook and behaviour, but become part and parcel of into that same society.

In view of the above, the African conception of the human person is innate primarily as that is what he is by virtue of being human, and he or she needs the participation of the community in the course of his or her development towards becoming the socialized person that is needed to fulfil his or her innate personhood.

The Africans and Europeans show some forms of agreement on the fact of humanity of human embryos and fetuses but, the obvious one is that the Western conception of the human person does not agree with the African conception of human person on the grounds that they have consistently argued that a human person must be able to identify and define himself or herself in order to be accepted as a person while the Africans have always argued that a human being is a human person principally by virtue of being a human being.

AN AFRICAN THOUGHT ON THE ETHICS OF HUMAN FOETAL LIFE

The Western thought on human personhood is not unconnected with the existentialist philosophy which has consistently insisted on the authentic existence of human beings and the freedom to do whatever is humanly possible. It is concerned with the being of man since he is the only being in existence and all other things are there for the use of human being. Thus, Joseph Omoregbe (38) presents the thought of the existentialists thinkers as follows:

For the existentialists, human existence does not simply mean 'being there,' human existence is a drama in which every individual is an actor. To exist is to be personally involved in the drama of life as an actor rather than a passive spectator. To exist means to be personally committed to a freely chosen way of life; it means being conscious of the problems of human life with all the choices open to man and freely opting for a certain way of life while assuming full responsibility for it. To exist is to be at the helm of one's own affairs, personally directing its main course. It means really living one's own life the way one has freely chosen and assuming responsibility for it.

It is obvious from the statement above that it is only human beings that can carry out all these responsibilities that can be said to exist and it is such beings that qualify for personhood. Since the early development of human being cannot exhibit such qualities they cannot be human persons. In essence, it is not feasible to be a human person by mere fact of being human as the Africans would think, but rather to be able to participate actively in the drama of life so as to be accepted as a human person.

African ethics has always argued for the humanity of all human beings that are conceived and given birth to by the human family. In other words, all human beings conceived and given birth to by the human family are ipso-facto human persons that is, by mere fact of belonging to the human family. Some scholars have proceeded with the thought that even children that will be conceived by the human family are regarded as human beings and persons. According to Mbiti (1982, 107) African concept of the family includes the unborn members who are still in the loins of the living. They are the buds of hope and expectation, and each family makes sure that its existence is not extinguished. The family provides for its continuation, and prepares for those yet to be born. From the foregoing, African ethics consider even those yet to be conceived, those conceived and the infants, principally as human beings and essentially, as members of the human family, which makes them human persons.

Meanwhile, the Africans have always thought that a human being is a human person no matter the stage of his development and his or her condition of life. This viewpoint is enunciated in their proverbs and wise sayings. For example, the Igala proverb that says: "*ukwu ma kp'aban aba anya ny'oji chuu.*" (if *aba* (which is embryo form of palm fruit) does not die, it will develop and produce its own palm

fruit). It is simply a way of saying that even the babies that are still in the loins of their parents can be conceived, given birth to, develop into adult lives and have their children if all things are equal. Another proverb says that: "*Omanekpe kia koji iyekpe.*" That is: "a baby palm tree is the replacer of the aging palm tree." In other words, the human embryo develops and replaces their parents in the future. It can be inferred that the early development of human being are human persons and are therefore, sacred, respectful and ought to be protected from all sorts of harms.

At the heart of the African thought on ethics of human foetal life is the conviction that Africans have consistently defined the human person relationally that is by the relationship he or she has with God, other persons, their deceased members and their immediate family. Thus, there is the fundamental dignity which must always be respected in the African person in that the human person is an embodiment of diverse classes of people. According to Himes (23) the human person was made to find fulfilment in the community; the society is a community of various communities organically related to one another. Accordingly, it is participation within a variety of communities that lead to human flourishing. In view of the above, the early development of the human being is accepted as part and parcel, as a bonafide member of the society as such doing anything that may be harmful to him or her is considered prima facie as morally wrong and unacceptable by the Africans.

The African have consistently thought that whatever assistance that may be given to the African person that would warrant the sacrifice of his younger generation is morally wrong and unacceptable to him. The younger generation are expected to represent their parents, carry out the names and other activities of their families, bury their parents and carry out all the necessary rituals to enable their parents settle at the feet of their fore-fathers. According to Mbiti (1991, 104) it is believed in many African societies that from the very beginning of human life, God commanded or taught people to get married and bear children and anything that deliberately goes towards the destruction of human life is regarded as wicked and evil.

The "African Humanism" expressed in different political and philosophical movements like Pan-Africanism, Negritude, Authenticity and Ujamaa or African Socialism are put under strain as the African love and respect for the life of their members are not taken into cognizance. This African Humanism is the traditional African passion for life expressed in the Bantu philosophy under the term "Force Vitale," a passion which has always made African people able to survive under oppressions, to claim freedom and justice and to fight slavery, colonialism, racism and now dictatorship. And it is strongly believed that such thought would assist the Africans in their efforts towards the liberation of their younger generations.

AN AFRICAN THOUGHT ON THE ETHICS OF HUMAN FOETAL LIFE

The conjunction of all these factors defines the New Era of Africa, a new era which will surely be marked by the promotion of human rights. We use the expression of "New Era" also because the Africa of ethnocentrism and nationalism is developing a new way of life dominated by a "global vision" and "global interaction." In fact, even for an African who has never travelled abroad, it is clear today that the World has become a "global village." The world is revelling in wrong-doing, resulting in the degradation of the human person, sometimes to a level below that of the brute animal. One may ask why we intelligent and free human beings cannot discern what is wrong from what is right, reject the former and adopt the latter? Or rather, is what is wrong subject to the whims and caprices of the knowledge and ability of the individual person?

What is formally proclaimed on the level of rights we wish to confirm and deepen here from the perspective of an ethic: the full realization of the intrinsic dignity of the human person, of inalienable freedom, of the equality in principle of all humans, and the necessary solidarity of all humans with each other. Since the early development of human beings are looked upon as human beings, then, they have the intrinsic dignity which every human being enjoy by mere fact of being human and subjects of rights, and therefore, ought not to be treated anyhow.

The fundamental issue in the ethics of human foetal life lies in the question such as: what do children mean to the African man? Pauline Eboh (45) seems to have answered the question when she stated that among the Africans, child bearing is the epitome of conjugal love; a child is a prestige; a child is preferable to wealth, because he who has good health and children will also have wealth; a child is greater than money. What the modern man calls responsible parenthood could mean selfishness to the traditional Africans, for they believe in sharing whatever resources that are available. Since children mean so much to the African man, how could they think of aborting pregnancy just to enable the physician squeeze out various organs and stem cells of such a being just to keep the lives of the aged and others with various debilitating conditions alive.

Meanwhile, the ethical guidelines are deliberated upon and formulated mostly by the western scholars and bio-ethicists, with their belief in the dominance of atheism and liberation from dogmas, which has consistently affected the promotion of human rights and scientific progress in Africa. Meanwhile, African's scientific perspectives on ethics has been formed by culture, the value system of a given society, religion, the level of education, of development, of experience, and also contain an emotional and intuitive dimension. In view of the above, a good ethical guideline would be inclusive and accommodative in nature, involving the diverse cultural views.

Evaluation and Conclusion

The practice of acquisition of human embryos and fetuses from African and Asian countries looks like a subtle form of colonialism. Colonialism and neo-colonialism, that once operated and still operates in the gamut of the African continent, could still be seen in this new form that canvass for the elimination of their unborn children. And colonialism has left an indelible mark on the lives of the African people in various ramifications such as believe in western values and value systems as against the loss of African values such as communalism, humanness, respect for human life and dignity, and the crisis of identity. The practice of eliminating the future children of these continents could be the latest formula for colonialism and population reduction.

The contemporary situation of the elevation of science over the concrete human person has come to be in conflict with the African traditional attitude to life. George Ehusani (1ff) would be right when he observes that “the twentieth century has seen the emergence of the machine, and the disappearance of the human person.” The disappearance of the person today can be seen in the promotion of various thoughts that are totally foreign to the natural morality of the African man.

The various researches, experimentations, extractions of organs and the general use of the early development of human life for diverse technological processes will, no doubt leave the African man in moral quagmire. And it is expected because the African conceives human embryos, fetuses, infants and even those that are still in the loins of their parents, as human beings. The practice of buying and selling of pregnancies, various forms of acquisition of embryos, fetuses and infants that are going on in African countries will go a long way to degenerate the African traditional morality.

By way of conclusion, it may sound good to advance from the traditional thought to the modern way of life but be that as it may, there is need for blending of traditional and modern way of life so as to enhance a better life in the contemporary African society. In view of the above, there is need to use the available technologies to enhance the lives of the Africans but they should not be used to destroy the early development of human life in the society.

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