Omoluabi: An African Conception of moral values

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Abstract

The moral experience is a reality in every social and cultural life, with variations being in the interpretations given to experience. A people's value system defines their identity. Consequently, this paper interrogates an example of an African theory of moral value against a moral developmental model, using the philosophical, expositional, analytical and comparative methods. The reflections in this paper focus on the Yoruba cultural context in Nigeria. The paper posits a relationship between a moral value system and development. It argues that the inability of the Nigerian state to attain enviable developmental status can be attributed to moral decadence, apart from inept leadership, ethnicity, antagonism, endless vendetta, political jingoism and cultural sub-nationalism. Since the goal of morality is peaceful co-existence, harmonious interaction, social cohesion and character development, the paper argues that *Omoluabi* traits can be appropriated to tackle moral problems and questions in contemporary Nigerian society. It concludes that the cultural heritage of *Omoluabi* can serve as a corpus of raw material for contemporary moral life, and contribute to tackling existential, moral and developmental challenges.

Keywords

Introduction: *Omoluabi* as a Conceptual Framework

The Yoruba word *Omoluabi* literally means a well behaved person. It is a psycho-cultural underpinning of value and guiding principle in all human struggles and conditions. It is a Yoruba moral / ethical conceptualization of thought or consciousness. It is a value system anchored firmly on the nature of human existence and character. *Omoluabi* is exhibited in a person with good character and of good parental upbringing. A person exhibiting *Omoluabi* compares favourably with Socrates' "Virtuous man", Plato's "just man", Aristotle's "Great Soul" and Nietzsche's "nobleman".

Omoluabi, as a value system, allows for preferences and choices, but abhors and condemns excesses: it favours the "golden mean". *Omoluabi* has come to mean high regard for honour and integrity. It has meaning in relation to a person's wholesome interaction with others rather than with self. It is a moral value system built on the foundation of honour and integrity. This is precisely why an Omoluabi is expected to act at all times with honour and integrity, even at the risk of disadvantaging the self.

The moral import of *Omoluabi* is in the spirit of its brotherhood, truth, cooperation, sharing, well-beingness, solidarity, compassion, service, sacrifice, fellowship, truth, sympathy and empathy. It also entails the values of humility, integrity, courage, modesty, moderation and understanding that are necessary for peaceful co-existence and collective well-being. *Omoluabi* also entails the moral value of family accountability, because those that are found wanting in moral values or with questionable character are always asked the question: "Whose child are you?" This is in order to place a moral premium - to value or devalue, that is, to ascertain whether or not the person in question has pedigree deriving from his or her forebears, family, or from the personality of the individual. *Omoluabi* is therefore an evaluation of a person in critical and social relations.

The reality of our time is that these traditional moral values have degenerated in modern time, with diversity and inclusion in a globalizing world, where we now

speak of notions such as equal rights, egalitarianism, freedom and power. Strangely and regrettably, these values have now formed the basis of inter-personal relations in modern time. *Omoluabi's* dispositional character trait of assumed innocence and demonstration of exemplary life have been overtaken, to a significant extent, by westernization, which has foisted academic prowess and certification, wealth and position over moral character development and excellence. Concern for moral conduct and character is now being progressively de-emphasized. The result is that today, the society is populated by moral Lilliputians and academic giants.

In articulating the concept of *Omoluabi*, my task here is three fold:

(i)   To sketch, in broad outline, the concept of Omoluabi within the Yoruba cultural paradigm in order to illustrate that it is the cornerstone or springboard of an African value system;

(ii)   To compare the concept of Omoluabi to similar and dominant positions in western philosophy;

(iii)   To attempt an evaluation of the concept of *Omoluabi* as an African theory of moral value.

Concepts usually find their usage and root in a people's world-view and cultural paradigm. Consequently, I shall be situating Omoluabi within the Socio-cultural context of the Yoruba in southern and western Nigeria, in the neighbouring Benin Republic, Togo and Ghana, and the Diaspora. The Yoruba constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa. They are said to be descendants of Oduduwa, with Sub-ethnic groups such as Oyo, Awori, Eko, Egba, Egbado, Ijebu, Ijesha, Ekiti, Ondo, Ife, Akoko and Owo (Ikimi 2006, 281), with millions of them living in various states of Nigeria.

This paper examines the nature and role of moral values and reasoning in an African moral system. It begins by identifying the distinctive features of the term 'Value', and then explores the nature of African value systems, addressing the challenges posed by cultural pluralism to the conceptualization and application of such moral values to the globalized world.

The Concept and Nature of Moral Values

The term 'moral', etymologically, means custom, habit or ways of life. The English term 'Morality' relates to values and beliefs about right and wrong, good and evil, just and unjust. Morals are products of culture, and culture influences philosophy. The environment in which a philosopher lives influences his or her thought. Since the circumstances differ, culture also differs, hence various philosophical perceptions, schools of thought, theories and methodologies. The experience of moral denigration, intransigence of ethnic nationalism, spiritual bereavement and bareness, religious bigotry and endless vendetta all serve as propelling forces for us to search for the meaning of moral value and human existence. It is against this background that I examine the nature of moral values, absence or denial of which has, to a certain degree, contributed to the tension in the world today.

Ends that are desired for their own sake are referred to as values - preferences that serve as the basis for choices and decisions. Values are therefore a set of institutional ideals cherished either by an individual or by a group of people (Sogolo 1993, 119). Our choices are determined by our values, while our values are determined by our own wants, society, family life, upbringing, religion, culture and experience. Our values determine our behavior. This is precisely why we do not all value the same things. Since values are derivatives of human experience and culture, and since experience and culture differ from place to place and from society to society, there will also be differences in values (Anyanwu 1985, 272). Values are attitudes of mind: they represent judgments as to the manner in which the best adjustment may be made to certain conditions (Mantagu 1961). All peoples obviously must have values. In fact, all differences, whether ideological, cultural, religious, moral, educational or political, are nothing but differences in values. This is not to say, however, that there are no ethical or moral rules that are of common concern to all societies (that is, trans-cultural values). Nevertheless, there are significant diversities of values.

Our concern is with the moral aspect of value systems, with a specific focus on the African (Yoruba) value system. The aim of moral values is to promote harmony and regulate human behavior in the society. Moral values have the following distinguishing features:

- They command allegiance; that is, they are binding on all imperatively.
- They demand impartiality; that is, they are not meant to advance self - interest.
- They are largely self-enforcing; that is, voluntary, unlike law which is enforced by governmental agencies. In fact, moral values have been said to be in the domain that has been described as "obedience to the unforeseeable" (Amstutz 2005, 8).

The sources of moral values are:

1. Rational Reflection.
2. Common good and justice.
3. Conventions and shared norms.

The primary or basic principles of moral values, such as truth, justice, human dignity and freedom are universal, and are therefore the bases of international law and morality, while the secondary norms are cultural and social - they regulate the primary values. Examples of secondary norms are power and taboos. It is precisely because of the universal values that enables human beings all over the world, no matter their societies, to "acknowledge each other's different ways, respond to each other's cries for help, learn from each other and march (sometimes) in each other's parades" (Amstutz 2005, 15).

The Concept and Nature of African Moral Values

What makes a given value system *African,* thereby distinguishing it from other value systems? By an African value system, we mean "a set of institutionalized ideals which guide and direct the patterns of life of Africans" (Sogolo 1993, 119). The value system tends towards the well-being and happiness of the individual and society, hence an African moral value system is communalistic and humanistic- it derives from human interest and welfare.

There is the religious characterization of the African moral value system by some scholars[1], which must be contextualized and put in perspective. It has been pointed out that the African moral beliefs and ideals are independent of any religious revelation or basis. The religious sanctions in the African moral system are designed for a community already in possession of moral beliefs or ideals. Another argument against the religious basis of an African moral system is derived from the attitude of devotees to the deities. For example, much evidence indicates that in the event of a deity failing to fulfil a promise, that deity would be censored and abandoned by the people. The point is that the gods are treated with respect if they deliver the goods and with contempt if they fail. So the fact that the behavior of a supernatural Being or deity is being subject to human censorship implies that the criteria of moral right and wrong for an African must be located elsewhere other than in the supernatural or religious realm. The Gods or deities are only *agents* of moral sanctions rather than *sources* of morality. They are simply the last court of appeal when other avenues have failed. They also assist human beings as they seek compensation and or reconciliation in cases where extra-human forces are thought to be estranged.

Thus, the role of religion in Yoruba and Esan moral value systems is to enhance them. The Gods only bring to limelight what was done in secret. Where all human reason has failed, the Gods take over. The relegation of the final judgment of moral action to the Gods is an acknowledgement of man's limitation to produce an objective, adequate and reliable system of arriving at moral judgments. Africans seem to acknowledge that no matter how much they try, they are limited by their natural ability, and this makes it impossible for them to have a conclusive, objective knowledge of the intensions of a moral agent. The history of morality shows that the other possible alternative to the religious assumptions are neither more philosophically convincing nor emotionally more satisfying. If, for example, we push justice to humankind, we discover that we cannot expect a reliable system of justice; and we should not be tempted to accept the principle of

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[1] Examples are works by Bolaji Idowu, J.O Sodipo, John Mbiti, etc. They all give the impression that African moral values are religious and are embedded in religion.

Protagoras that "man is the measure of all things" because here, we discover the shortcoming of making human beings the final arbiters of justice (Oluwole 1984, 21).

Furthermore, the Protagorian dictum is based on emotional repulsiveness which is not philosophically satisfying because it is simply an arrogant conclusion. Humankind cannot predict with certainty that whatever one sows one will reap. They cannot know that their plans will succeed, no matter how much care they take. We are very much aware that there is a limit to human knowledge - we are limited by our natural abilities as humankind, our intellectual and spiritual prowess notwithstanding. On the other hand, if we decide to push moral justice to the wind, what we will have is anarchy. The best we could do, perhaps, is to leave everything to a spiritual entity that has the power to know all facts to pass the final judgments after all human efforts have failed (Oluwole 1984, 22). Man is only the penultimate measure of all things; absolute and divine justice rests with the Gods, Spiritual beings and deities.

Another reason why an African moral system is not based on religion is because social cohesion will elude an African society if it identifies the authority of morality with the Gods. This is because an African society grants religious freedom (Oluwole 1984, 22). Hence, moral values are *backed by,* not *based on,* the force of religious sanctions in *African traditional communities*. Moral values are communalistic - the outlooks of the norms of moral values "are defined in terms of the adjustment of the interests of the individual to the interests of the society rather than in terms of the adjustment of the interests of the society to those of the individual" (Wiredu 1995, 400). So, the religious dimension of African moral values is meant for the purpose of efficacy, reformation, interdependence, desert, retributive justice and deterrence (Oluwole 1984, 23).

An African Conception of Good and Evil

It was Kwasi Wiredu who correctly observed:

> Contemporary African experience is marked by a certain intellectual anomaly. The African today, as a rule, lives in a cultural flux characterized by a confused interplay between an indigenous cultural

> heritage and a foreign cultural legacy of a colonial origin. Implicated at the deepest reaches of this cultural amalgam is the super imposition of western conceptions of good on African thought and conduct (Wiredu 1995, 390).

The African is therefore no longer at ease!

An indigenous African moral value system tends towards the well-being and happiness of the individual and the community, hence its humanistic and communalistic foundations: A harm done to one is a harm done to all, because if a finger touches oil, it quickly spills over to the others. Consequently, an action is regarded as good if it does not negate the spirit of solidarity and peaceful co-existence. This communalism has given vent to the extended family system characterized by mutual help, inter-dependence and solidarity. So in an African moral system, what makes an action good is because the society cherishes it. An African moral value system derives from human interest - what brings benefits such as dignity, contentment, prosperity and joy, among others. What is morally bad or objectionable is what brings misery, misfortune, disgrace and is therefore hateful to both the spiritual and ancestral beings: it weakens the ontological equilibrium, fellowship and human well-being. In fact, an African conception of good and bad revolves round the principle of retributive justice - sowing and reaping, that is, the law of cause and effect known in Asian religions as *karma*. The concept of good and evil is relative and cultural - what is universal is the desire for general good. The question of good and evil is in relation to the individual and the society, instrumental or intrinsic - one is a *means* and the other an *end*. This is precisely why there cannot be a final answer to the question of good and evil.

Generally, an action is said to be right if it produces desirable rather than undesirable results, that is, we can measure good only by the outcome of our actions on others. For example, if I give a pregnant woman a lift and the car hits road bumps resulting in her bleeding and miscarrying, my action seems to be good but its end result is bad. It is from this premise that the hedonistic utilitarians argue that actions that tend to cause pleasure are good, while those that cause pain are bad. What, then, of child birth, which gives pain to the mother but the outcome (the baby) brings pleasure or joy? So pain and pleasure really co-exist - they are

not in watertight compartments. Another example is the taking of a bitter pill whose ultimate outcome, which is cure, is pleasurable.

In an African moral experience, human fellowship/communion is the most important of the human needs. Hence, communalism and inter-dependence, rather than individualism and independence are cherished values (Azenabor 2010, 126). Individuals must adjust to the interests of the community. For any wrong-doing, there is the retributive spirit and the tendency to seek compensation or reconciliation, or in cases where extra-human forces are thought to be estranged, like in taboo (*Eewoh*), we seek *purification,* not necessarily *punishment* or sanction. According to Yoruba thought, punishment can be now or in the hereafter (that is, reincarnation). Thus, an African moral value system leans heavily on the collective as against the individual: the individual must find meaning in the community as a being-in-relation-to-others.

Furthermore, an African metaphysical theory of holistic ontology which presents an admixture of constant interplay and interaction of forces, of mind and matter, spirit and body, visible and invisible, concrete and abstract, nonetheless gives primacy to the spiritual over the material. An African moral value system is also existential, so anti-social or immoral behavior leads to distrust and tension in inter-personal relations, thereby inhibiting peaceful co-existence.

Besides, an African moral value system places a high premium on co-existence with nature rather than conquest of it. This is in sharp contrast to the emphasis on the domination and exploitation of nature in the Western cultural outlook, and the high premium placed on the obligation to God rather than to the self and to others in Christian ethics.

The correct use of language also determines a good person - *Omoluabi*. By our words, thought and deeds we are adjudged as good or bad. A good moral character is also based on patience, because a patient person is a good listener.

Barry Hallen, in *The Good, The Bad and the beautiful* (2002, 85-86), outlines some features that indicate what the good person in the Yoruba cultural context is:

- A good listener.
- A positive person in thought, words and deeds.
- A patient and calm person.
- A person with self-control.
- A good moral judge.
- Non-quarrel some and non-combative.

The Place of Character in Moral Valuation

With the purview of an African moral consequentialism, good is understood in terms of social cohesion, and evil is understood as that which disrupts the social order. For example, to the Hausa, a man's intrinsic goodness lies in his character (*hali*). Character is not a physical attribute, but is rather an inner worth: "Character, is like a line drawn on a rock", states a Hausa proverb (Kirk-Greene 2000, 246). Character is the result of social intercourse guided by truth and virtue. Goodness also lies in one's capacity for friendliness and trustworthiness, as well as open-handedness.

An African labels a thing as 'good' or 'evil' depending on whether or not it falls within the order of the communal values. Anything inimical to peaceful co-existence and mutual intercourse is bad, and anything in conformity with the community's norms is good. As such, to say that a thing is bad is to assert that it has violated an objective moral order and destroyed a particular value. Good is positive, joyful and enhances love, harmony, fellowship and solidarity. Good and evil in an African moral system are necessary opposites and connectives – they co-exist for balance, meaning, stability and equilibrium. They are essentially acts of the will and desire, just as truth and falsehood pertain to the reason (Geddles and Grosset 2004, 369). Goodness is humanistic. An African humanistic orientation centres on brotherhood, family hood, togetherness, fellowship, not on the individualistic, capitalistic and exploitative orientation of classical western cultures. An African moral world intersperses, rather than separates. However, both African and Western systems link character and beauty to the good and affirm that character is an aspect of beauty. To say that one is beautiful but lacks good character is an indictment.

In an African moral value system, there are some values that define and guide social relations in terms of the common good. These include sharing resources and burdens, mutual help, caring and understanding, interdependence, solidarity, reciprocity and harmony. In short, these values emphasise mutual trust and participation as opposed to extreme freedom, autonomy and the self-assertion of the individual in classical Western philosophy. The basis of this African moral orientation is found in the African proverbs such as "if you want to go far, go with others". Hence, social values that are interpersonal, relational and societal and that have to do with *rules* take precedence over individual values that have to do with *principles.*

Among the Yoruba, *Ori* (Inner head) is a guardian spirit, a guarantor of one's destiny, a purveyor of luck, fortune, success or failure in life. *Ori* is the ruler, controller and guide of a person's life and activities. It is one's personal God, working in concert with *Ayanmo* (destiny). This matrix of ideas must be understood as catalysts to the concept of good and evil, especially because it is possible for one to aspire to have a good character, only for it to turn out to be impossible for one to realize, because one had been destined not to have a good character. It is therefore possible to use destiny as an excuse for moral bankruptcy; but then this gives the impression that destiny *(Ayanmo)* or *Ori* is deterministic. We need to add that in the Yoruba worldview, destiny can be altered through the right sacrifices to the appropriate God(s) and through the worship of *Ori*: this is precisely where freedom comes into play. *Ori* only provides the framework within which the challenges of human experience can be met. The import of this position is that fatalistic or deterministic theories that render personal responsibility vacuous among the Yoruba should be discountenanced. It must therefore be noted that each time 'Ori' is worshipped, we pursue an art of compromise to keep pace both with the flexibility required of free agents and the deterministic monitoring offered by *Ori*. The point is that character can make or unmake one's destiny - one's character is a product of destiny, but destiny can be altered, at least according to the Yoruba worldview.

The fact that character can be developed implies the possibility of change of character and the attendant possibility of moral reform. It is for this reason that people are held responsible for their action or inaction. This brings us to the question of freedom and determinism in an African moral system.

Freedom, Determinism and the Dilemma of Moral Choices and Responsibility

By freedom, I mean the ability to do otherwise, the absence of compulsion and availability of alternatives. This idea of freedom is accommodated in an African cultural belief system. Yet the same system also accommodates the idea of human destiny, which is determinism. Determinism is the view that given certain sets of conditions, nothing else could have happened apart from what happened. Put differently, determinism says that everything has antecedent causes, and effects are determined by their causes. This means that given certain antecedents or variables, a situation could not have been otherwise. According to determinism, every human behavior has its antecedents that render it unavoidable.

Nevertheless, both freedom and determinism are compatible and achievable within an African cultural experience. For example, as pointed out earlier, human destiny could be voluntarily altered through right sacrifices and worship of appropriate God(s). To this extent, the human person is said to be free. Another exercise of freedom in the face of determinism is through our behavioural patterns or character: human beings can alter or make or unmake their destinies through their actions, making the idea of freedom and determinism causally compatible. Furthermore, both freedom and determinism are compatible with the idea of causality because actions in both are caused: in the case of freedom, they are caused by oneself, and in the case of determinism by factors external to oneself.

Moral causality has to do with one's conduct or character, and is a derivative of the principle of retribution. The underlying conception here is that effects follow causes as reward or punishment follows good or evil action. A person's past actions determine his or her present actions and predicaments.

Invariably, actions have to do with choices, choices entail freedom, and freedom goes hand in hand with responsibility. Since a person is free, he or she is responsible for his or her actions - for better or worse, making responsibility inseparable from freedom. Underlying the humanistic, communalistic and existential nature of an African value system is the concept of *Omoluabi*. The characteristics of *Omoluabi* are summed up as follows:

- *God will* (*Inu rere*): this entails the spirit of giving, benevolence, hospitality and love.

- *Respect and Humility* (*Owo, Irele* and *Iteriba*): this enables *Omoluabi* to be magnanimous, whether in victory or in defeat. *Owo* can be translated into greetings and comportments.

- *Good Character* (*Iwa rere*): this is an indispensable hallmark of *Omoluabi*. *Iwa* has many other attributes such as truth (*Otito*) which translates to integrity and reliability (Abiodun 1990, 81). There are the Yoruba maxims *iwa le ewa* ("character is beauty"), iwa le sin ("character is religion"), and *obirin soriwa nu oni oun olori oko* ("a woman lost out in good character and complains that she has no luck for a husband"). In fact *Iwa* plays a significant role in the appreciation of beauty (*Ewa*) and womanhood. *Iwa* (good character) is widely acknowledged as a virtue a woman should cultivate if she is to retain her status as a married woman. The point is that a great premium is placed on the value of inward beauty (*Ewa*): to be beautiful is to be virtuous, and to be virtuous is to have a good character, and to have a good character is to be beautiful. A person is evaluated for better or for worse according to his or her character. To exist or to be, to an indigenous African, is to be well-behaved. It is character that amplifies the ontological balance, harmonious and peaceful co-existence; it is the engine of culture, the hall mark and epitome of integrity and trust. *Ewa* without *Iwa* is ephemeral, transient and illusory; *Iwa* is more enduring: it is the being, essence, and inner quality of a person. The intrinsic goodness of a person rests in his or her character - *Iwa*. In spite of its intrinsic property, *Iwa* is also subjective. This is a limitation that must be acknowledged.

- Patience or endurance (*Suuru*) and taking things easy or calmly (*ifarabale*) are requisites for developing a good character.

- Pleasant /Positive words (*Oro rere*). With the right words one can accomplish the *impossible* or get desired results. *Oro rere* also sets an ethical tone for both *Iwa* and Ewa. This translates to the fact that things such as money, houses, clothes and children are not valuable without good character (*iwa*) and pleasant words (*oro rere*) to embellish them. *Oro rere* is the attraction of humanity. *Oro rere* compliments *Iwa* and makes all things good and beautiful. One is expected to use the right words, at the right time and in the right place, politely, pleasantly, amicably and amiably in relating to fellow human beings.

- Shame (*Itiju*): one who lacks shame lacks a vital character quality requisite for respect, reverence and regard for others. The Yoruba say: "*Mo tiju yin ni o* (I am ashamed in your presence, or I hold you in high esteem"). Shame here is not the same as embarrassment or disgrace arising from immodesty. Rather, it is modesty - the *positive* aspect of shame. Hence, *Itiju* has the positive and negative aspects: in the positive sense, *Itiju* is a moral virtue - an expression of the golden mean (Ajikobi 1990, 28). Clearly, excess and deficiency are not virtues: it is the mean that is virtuous. The negative sense of *Itiju* connotes a vice - disgrace and shamelessness (*Alanitiju*) or (*Alaseju*), entailing lack of moderation. It has no mean: it is in itself bad (Ajikobi 1990, 28) . It is the positive aspect of *Itiju* that has moral significance. In a sense, *itiju* touches on conscience - the highest level of moral development. The knowledge of good and evil has its seat in the conscience of a moral agent (Omoregbe 1996, 56). The fear of being put to shame or being disgraced is the basis of all moral principles in the Yoruba value system.

The above listed moral characteristics of *Omoluabi* are the bases of evaluation or judgment of moral conduct, and they are qualities that help to promote healthy social relations. This is precisely why *Omoluabi* has been described as *Olu-Iwa* ("king or master of character"), a paragon of excellence in character, a dignified person, a well behaved and cultured person. These values, when juxtaposed with life-threatening behavior arising from egoistic tendencies in modern complex plural societies (as manifested in the activities of Boko Haram, insurgencies,

kidnappings, clashes between Herdsmen and farmers in Nigeria) clearly emerge as a sound moral compass. More than its religious, ontological and aesthetic foundations, the moral value of Omoluabi is also humanistic. It is meant "to organize human institutions and conduct, to strengthen the wellbeing of individual, family, community and society" (Ajikobi 1990, 29), because to be is to be with others.

The Humanism of Omoluabi

Omoluabi is also a Yoruba humanistic moral conception. As a humanism, it serves as a paradigm for evaluating the social desirability of a person. It is a humanism that sustains the *Molebi* ("relations") and *Ebi* ("community"). In an African conception, goodness has a humanistic origin. This is because the criterion for moral valuation has to do with the well-being of the community. In fact, the concern for human welfare constitutes the core of an African morality. Consequently, something is considered good or bad depending on its effects on humanity. Behavior that has the attributes of *Omoluabi* is good.

A critic may want to point out that there is also concern for humanism in Western ethical thought, especially in Existentialist ethics. Nevertheless, there are fundamental points of difference. *First*, whereas a Western humanistic culture is anti-super naturalist, the African version maintains a supernaturalist metaphysics. *Second*, Existentialist humanism limits human experience to this earthly existence with the hope of building a good society. It is the assumption of Existentialist humanism that unless our minds are rid of fears and hopes of immortality, we cannot focus on human interest in this world. However, African humanism focuses more on a world of reincarnating processes - of sowing and reaping. *Third*, to the Yoruba, it is perfectly possible to maintain belief in the existence of supernatural entities without necessarily allowing this belief to distract them from the pursuit of human welfare in this world. This is because there is a desire in an African humanistic culture to utilize the power of such entities for the promotion of human welfare and happiness.

Since the Yoruba moral value system focuses on the concern for human well-being, it is unsurprisingly a social morality. This is in line with the holistic-ontological tradition in African philosophy, where there is no watertight distinction between the subject and object of reality - it is one thing with two qualities. This perception of reality dovetails to social obligations for everyone to work, own property and family, within the communal set-up. On the other hand, the Cartesian tradition in Western philosophy results in dualism. To the Hindu, the material world is an illusion to be fled from, with reality, being spiritual, to be known through ascetic discipline and mediation.

CONCLUSION

The Yoruba conception of moral value enables us to understand human successes and failures alongside destiny, potentiality, family, community and religion, among others. It urges us to appreciate that beyond the physical component of a human being, we must recognize his or her metaphysical essence. All components must work in a synchronised manner. One more point to note: whatever the different ethnic groups have in common is more important than their differences. Whatever the differences, there is still mutual dialogue in terms of the structure of African reality (Azenabor 2005, 82).

A critic may retort: can the above analytic framework find meaning in a plural and modern society, with a multi-lingual and multi-cultural background? Why not? After all, every sophisticated society or multi-lingual culture still has its roots and lineage, especially if it is African. The point must be conceded, however, that the presence of urbanization with its attendant industrialization and westernization has largely eroded the African value system. Consequently, the African system of caring and solidarity is no longer supported: the sense of social responsibility has been overtaken by mere human sympathy. One of the greatest problems now facing an African is how to become modern without becoming westernized. There are no absolute values that apply to all, especially because this is a plural and changing world of cultural expressions and values. Reality cannot be spoken of independently of humankind, and the nature of reality has been perpetually

modified by culture and human endeavors. The study of reality has to start from human experience.

In Western philosophy, causality was never thought of as operating in the moral sphere. However, the concept of reincarnation in the African conception of morality accommodates causality. The apparent prosperity of the wicked and the sufferings of the virtuous in the present world, according to reincarnation, could be traced back to deeds and misdeeds in the past lives. Thus, reincarnation is both a judgment and an opportunity - a basis for both despair and hope.

A critic may also argue that a truly moral value system must be universalizable, and since an indigenous African value system discriminates between insiders and outsiders, it restricts applicability. Consequently, African values are not moral, since what is moral must be universalizable (Sogolo 1993, 120). Richard Mervyn Hare and Immanuel Kant would argue along this line of thought. However, the universalizability criterion has limited applicability, especially because of the constraints of biological and socio-cultural determinants, as well as the human predicament (such as limited resources, selfishness and irrationality). These are precisely why value systems are societal, cultural and experiential.

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