

2016

Mbiti and Current Issues in African Philosophy

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Recommended Citation

Okeja, Uchenna (2016) "Mbiti and Current Issues in African Philosophy," *The Journal of Traditions & Beliefs*: Vol. 2, Article 5.
Available at: <http://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/jtb/vol2/iss1/5>

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Most of the issues discussed in contemporary African philosophy have their origin in the seminal ideas of the pioneers in the field of African thought. John S. Mbiti is one such pioneer. His works have influenced the intellectual inquiry into African modes of life and experience, and his 1970 landmark publication of the book, *African Religions and Philosophy*,¹ was a trailblazer in the field. In this publication, Mbiti attempted to show his readers the nature of African religions and philosophy; that is, to account for the totality of the African worldview. This was very ambitious, and his contribution to these two fields of inquiry has earned him a place in the annals of history of African scholars.

To be sure, it would be too vague, if not implausible, to credit Mbiti with so much without recourse to concrete examples of his contributions. It is necessary, for reasons of clarity, to point out the major innovations Mbiti brought to the study of the African mode of life and experience through his *magnum opus* mentioned above. To arrive at such specifics, the scene of current issues in African philosophy will be an apt example. In this context, discussions of the African concept of morality best exemplify the import of Mbiti's book.

Contemporary African philosophers concern themselves in one way or the other with reflection on the meaning of life and how best to live it. In this reflection, the question of ethics, which is the question of how to live the best possible life, and metaphysics, which is the question of what lies beyond the physical and observable reality, become inevitable. In their articulation of the foundations of the African concept of morality, African philosophers have developed divergent opinions which, when put in perspective, reveal the deep impact of Mbiti's work. Some have suggested a religious foundation for the African concept of morality, while others deny such claims, insisting instead that the African concept of morality is based on considerations of human welfare and practical concerns of how to ensure harmony in the community. While the influence of Mbiti on the arguments of the first group (those who insist that African concept of morality is based on a religious foundation) is obvious, since it is Mbiti who postulated a religious universe for the Africans, the connection of the second group to Mbiti lies in their use of the thesis of the first group in their counter-argument.

Philosophers like Sophie Oluwole,² Kwasi Wiredu,³ and Kwame Gyekye⁴ have shown in their philosophical works that the foundation of the African concept of morality cannot be plausibly based on religion, while others like Akin Makinde have viewed the African concept of morality to be solely based on a religious foundation. Building his thoughts around the concept of the religious universe that Mbiti sees the African as living in, Makinde notes,

Mbiti's finding is quite tenable in the light of African traditions and cultures and my (his) own African experience . . . Taking the view of these researchers as a tenable hypothesis, some other hypotheses consistent with it can be derived as consequences. First, we can derive from it the view that religion plays a great role in the lives of African peoples. Perhaps a more general deduction from this is that since, according to Mbiti, the Africans live in a religious universe, then, all their [sic] activities must be influenced by one kind of religion or the other. From this it can be more specifically stated that an African system of morality, based on African cultural beliefs, must have a religious foundation. This claim is perfectly consistent with the idea of an African religious universe.⁵

¹ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1970).

² Sophie Oluwole, "The Rational Basis of Yoruba Ethical Thinking," *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy* 4-5, (1984-1985), 14-25.

³ Kwasi Wiredu, "Morality and Religion in Akan Thought," in *Philosophy and Cultures*, ed. Odera Oruka and Dismas Masolo (Nairobi: 1983), 6-14.

⁴ Kwame Gyekye, "Philosophical Ideas of the Akan," *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy* 10, nos. 1-2 (1981), 61-79.

⁵ Akin Moses Makinde, "African Culture and Moral Systems: A Philosophical Study," *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (1988), 2.

Kwasi Wiredu and some other philosophers have, on the other hand, come up with a different concept of the foundation of African morality. Wiredu not only questions the adequacy of applying the conceptual category *religion* to any aspect of African life and thought, but also insists that it has been suggested, even by some authors by whose reckoning of African life is full of religion, that there is no word in many African languages that translates the word “religion.” Elucidating further on this point, Wiredu noted that he does not know whether this is true of all African languages, but that it is certainly true of the Akans, at least in the traditional use of that language. There is, for Wiredu, neither a single word for religion in this context nor a periphrastic equivalent.⁶ This presents the consequence that the Akan conception of morality is neither logically nor even psychologically based on a belief in the Supreme Being. Being good in the highest, the Supreme Being disapproves of evil; but to the Akan mind, the reason why people should not do evil is not because He disapproves of it but rather because it is contrary to human well being, which is why He disapproves of it in the first place.⁷

From the foregoing opposing conceptualizations of the foundation of the African concept of morality, one readily sees the influence of the work of John S. Mbiti. This is so because his postulation of a religious universe serves as the seminal ground out of which the two perspectives articulated on the foundation of the African concept of morality grew. Although the concern here is not to attempt reconciliation of the two positions but rather to point them out, it is pertinent to highlight a few issues that are inevitable in this context. The claims of the view that the African concept of morality is based on a religious foundation, which is in accordance with Mbiti’s African religious universe, is far from being without problems. For, apart from the fact that the argument is invalidated very easily by pointing out a single instance of a group of Africans who do not base their conception of morality on religion, the argument seems to discount human experience (common sense) as a source of moral knowledge. It suffices to note here that the main problem with the postulation of a religious foundation for the African concept of morality is problematic and probably implausible, because the claim would mean that without religion, Africans are incapable of knowing and differentiating between good and bad. To see how implausible this claim is, one needs not look far. One only needs to call to mind the fact that experience is, if not the best teacher, a good source of all kinds of knowledge, moral knowledge included. If a person hits his or her head on a door lintel while entering the house today, he or she will be more careful tomorrow to avoid repeating the same scenario. This exemplifies the role of common sense and experience in the formulation of any system of morals.

⁶ Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1996), 45.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.