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MORALITY AND RELIGION IN AFRICAN THOUGHT

ABSTRACT

The article deals critically with current discourses on morality in African thought. These discourses reflect the ambivalence between those scholars seeking to define African morality within the parameters of a conventionalised, Western, religious episteme, and those pursuing an “Africanist” (Afrocentric) explanation which embraces an authentic mode of African knowledge construction within indigenous communities. The assumption that faith or religion is the foundation of African morality can only be partially endorsed when one grants space for hybrid moral constructions between Christianity and indigenous religion. However, African morality is not necessarily based on religion or faith, but on the beneficiary values of collective family and community well-being, without dissolving the individual’s character. In African thought, the “best” rational justification of the moral imperative is less of an issue than in current moral discourse.

1. INTRODUCTION AND CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

It is evident from the title that this article attempts to clarify the concept of morality in African thought and to ascertain whether there is any intrinsic connection between it and religion. Apart from the confusion in scholarly debate regarding the exact meaning of the concepts “morality”, “ethics”, and “religion”, there is also a more far-reaching inadequacy of the terminology used. In common scholarly discourse, knowledge is embraced in conceptual treatises by way of representational modes of knowledge, which implies that the concepts used represent knowledge of the world. Therefore, such concepts form the constituents of that knowledge. It may easily be assumed that the way in which all people know is similar and that they arrive at knowledge by means of correlating concepts or inferring in the same manner. It is therefore important to investigate how people may know differently — how they acquire knowledge in terms of the way they know. The way in which indigenous people know what is morally right may not correlate with the way in which Western religious people know what is right. In the latter traditions, the individual is informed or instructed by being introduced to concepts that explain moral codes and expected ethical behaviour. The acquisition of this knowledge is based on cognition and most probably complemented by societal threats of repulsion or societal

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promises of reward. But this may not necessarily be the modes of acquisition of moral knowledge in indigenous societies with less emphasis on instruction in verbal (linguistic) modes. One should be aware that acquisition and construction of moral knowledge may be based on performance. The observation and experiencing of doing and performing may be the process for knowing what moral knowledge is. This knowledge is habituated and embedded in the action of community members and institutions of the group, and not necessarily taught (cf. Marchand 2003:46-47).

Our inquiry, however difficult, should bear in mind that the way in which local, indigenous African communities know what is morally right, in other words their perception of morality, may be informed in ways different from societies in which moral and ethical codes are taught by means of instruction. Such instruction entails the appropriation of concepts in order to generate the way in which such societies think about morality; to clarify the way they know.

One should further be aware of Mudimbe's criticism that the *gnosis* (the seeking to know and the systems of knowing) of the people of Africa should not be determined by the non-African locus of Western epistemology (Mudimbe 1988:x). Part of the basic building bricks of the Western episteme is the missionary's discourse where categories of religious and Biblical thinking entered the logic of civilisation, and henceforth promoted the idea that faith gives sense to ethics and not vice versa (Mudimbe 1988:51). Indigenous ethics was thus considered irrelevant if not discarded because of its non-faith propensity.

There is an imminent danger in trying to portray morality in African thought in a homogeneous manner, thus continuing the colonial fixing of concepts of the indigenous. One is painfully aware of the shortcomings of one's endeavour to isolate a socio-cultural phenomenon of the African reality. The African post-colony is a complex, multi-layered, and multivalent reality (cf. Mbembe 2001). Paradoxically, any aspect of this reality is at nearly every historical moment both a containment *and* a denial of its meaning or essence. What may seem to hold true for a specific country or context may be deconstructed in another encounter. The post-colony is not only hybrid in the sense of an irrational mix of colonial ideas and truly African expressions of belief and thought, but this hybridity, in the sense used by Bhabha (1994), has become a productive space that critically challenges reigning ideas and generates meaning. One cannot, for example, only regard the fusion of borders between Christianity and indigenous religion as "syncretism", given the connotative meaning of this term. The hybrid interface between the two has rather become a productive and explorative space for the construction of new religious meaning, as may clearly be witnessed in the indigenous Apostolic Faith Churches. The ritual performances and spiritual retreat at the sacred sites of Badimong Valley (near Ficksburg) and Mothuleng (near Clarens) in the Eastern Free State exhibit hybrid

forms of cultural and religious expressions which render the question of origin or influence almost pointless.

The above is only a preliminary reflection of current views and is not based on empirical data. The concept “African thought” (instead of “African philosophy” to circumvent engagement with the diverse positions regarding a truly African philosophy) is in itself a complex concept which may suggest that there is a generic system of African thought. This would align with the idea of Asante that there are generic features of the African reality. However complex the issue is, it is possible to construe an Afrocentric approach, meaning a deliberate effort to seek authentic African expressions or views of reality.

Another complex term is “morality”. In terms of the Oxford Dictionary, this refers to the moral principles pertaining to a distinction between right and wrong or good and evil. Morality is the sense and view of what is right and wrong and that which constitutes an absolute reference for character and behaviour. It is an authoritative code of conduct in matters of right and wrong. It is usually seen in a broader sense than “ethics”, although the margins are diffused. Even in this sense, however, varied traditions occur, for example the “Catholic” tradition of moral philosophy includes what other people would call ethics.

“Ethics” refers to the acts of human behaviour informed by moral principles of good and evil (right and wrong). However, ethical principles of conduct relate to absolute values that condition human behaviour, and in this sense it may correlate with moral assumptions of good and evil. If “ethos” denotes the categories and system of recommendable conduct, “ethos” and “morality” are interchangeable. In philosophical discourse, “ethics” is often included as a category of reflection on the fundamental nature of morality and moral values. It is therefore obvious that in parochial discourse, the interchangeable use will be noticeable when speaking of moral or ethical conduct. For the purposes of this article, “morality” refers to the moral system, and “ethics” to the actions relating to morals. Hence, reflection on African morality will concentrate on the absolute (normative) system informing the assumption and judgment of the nature and character of actions. Such a moral system may not necessarily be a philosophical or apprehensive system as text, but a system inductively construable from assumptions and actions of communities and individuals.

2. WESTERN TEXTUALISATION OF AFRICAN RELIGION

The pre-colonial and colonial encounters with Africa have either discarded expressions of religion as barbarism and paganism or sought to relate recognisable expressions of religion to possible European religious influences. In general terms, the indigenous inhabitants are denied any form of authentic religious expression (Chidester 1996). It was a language of derision in terms of which

pagan gods were ridiculed. According to Eboussi-Boulaga (Mudimbe 1988:51), the “language of derision” was complemented with a “language of refutation” which entailed a systematic reduction of so-called pagan religion as the opposite of the good, i.e. evil or Satan. The languages of derision and refutation were further supplemented by a “language of demonstration” in terms of which the Biblical religious categories were regarded as divine preference and command, thus forming part of the logic of civilisation. In other words, the cultural model of the Bible was viewed as part of its message and, therefore, this was to replace so-called pagan cultural ideas and institutions.

With the Christianisation of the continent, the missionaries also started a Western textualisation of African religion. Although they still continued a form of religious denial, the missionaries began to characterise indigenous religious expressions in terms of the language and metaphors familiar to their religious categorisation. The authentic modes of indigenous conceptualisation and indigenous modes of putting their religion into language were never the starting-point. For example, the aspects of healing in ritual practice were interpreted in terms of concepts of salvation, and concepts of sin were linked to what they regarded as reproachable conduct. Western religion thus provided the concepts as well as a frame of reference for interpreting the expression of African religion without an in-depth interrogation of the intertwined nature of aspects which the West regarded as religion, culture, and ritual. The physical and socio-cultural landscapes of the African person were altered to create the desired and convenient frame of religious analysis or interpretation.

Twentieth-century textbooks on African religion still seek alignment with the categorical script of the Western science of religion. A critical examination of Mbiti's (1977) treatise of African religion reveals the frame of reference of the Western science of religion as well as an effort to “naturalise” indigenous religion to what is assumed to be the generic categorisation of religion. Mudimbe (1988) and others consider these issues in a serious light. Mudimbe claims that the Western (missionary-influenced) systematisation and familiarisation of African indigenous religion do not take cognisance of (what he calls) the African *gnosis*: the way in which Africans view the world, their history, and how they know it. Serious interrogation of Western and Eurocentric religious discourses is required in order to place the African worldview in the centre. Western religious discourse as well as continental religious voices require unmasking in order to arrive at a more authentic reflection on African religion. Leeuw (2004:20-36) goes further and states that African religion is a misnomer, because the ideas behind actions of ritual and rite relate to African thought and not to religion — a concept not even accommodated originally in African languages.

The problem addressed by Leeuw is not new, for in the majority of undifferentiated societies, one would find it difficult to determine the boundaries between

religion and thought. Depending on one's definition of religion, one may require, for the purpose of description, to list those aspects and expressions dealing with the ultimate meaning of life under the rubric of religion. This would not imply that there is no overlap between aspects of religion and culture; in fact there has never been an absolute distinction between the two, even in differentiated cultures.

There exists no normative African religion, only localised expressions and society-specific dimensions of sub-Sahara indigenous religion. It is indeed possible to determine generic aspects of this religion, but localised expressions differ. Ancestor belief has often been singled out as the most distinctive feature of African religion, and not without merit. However, the manner in which ancestor belief is concretised in a specific cultural or ethnic group differs. The approach of the ancestors in divination rituals differs, for example within the Sotho and Xhosa groups. In Sotho divination rituals, the ancestors are approached via prayer and ritual, and the diviner-healer will throw bones; in terms of the fall of bones, the ancestors' advice or instructions will be revealed. In the Xhosa tradition, ritual preparation to approach the ancestors is also required, but the ancestors do not "speak" through bones. In a much more intuitive manner, the body of the diviner-healer "senses" the message of the ancestors.

The very notion of the ancestors also differs. The ancestors are generally not perceived to be ghosts or spirits, but living dead, and they are portrayed as departed family member(s) and thus identifiable family members. It is, however, also true that only specific members of the living dead, and not all deceased, occupy the position of ancestors. The traditions also differ regarding the patron ancestor responsible, for example, for the calling of becoming a diviner-healer. One should also consider the fact that, in an urbanised society, the concept of the ancestors is rapidly evolving into a more generalised concept, and that the specific tribal association is lost due to a dislocation from the patrilineal or matrilineal bonds.

Ancestor belief is, however, also integrated in what would generally be termed cultural practices, such as birth, name giving, marriage, etc. A system of belief does not exist distinctively from the cultural practices; it is a more holistic understanding of the dimensions of life. The spiritual is part and parcel of this holistic understanding of reality. Religion is culture and vice versa. Governing both is not a doctrine or universalistic script for practice, but a thought structure and performance repertoire typical of the continent. Although this thought structure may vary between groups and societies, recognisable universal traits are noticeable. One may call these universal patterns of thought an African indigenous cosmology. The most common feature of this cosmology is the integration of three distinguishable aspects, namely environment, society, and the spiritual. All activities are informed by this holistic understanding so that they singularly or collectively maintain or transform the socio-cultural and spiritual

landscape. An act is never separated from its environmental, societal, or spiritual impact. The cosmology becomes visible in that indigenous knowledge informs acts of technology, agriculture, animal keeping, music, song, dance, ritual, family care and parenting, tribal administration, the handling of conflict, etc. It is a system of thought embedded in action. One may even go so far as to state that this thought structure is embodied, because in many instances indigenous people react in immediate ways and in direct touch with their feelings. Intuitively they know how to act and what is required (cf. De Quincey 2005: 34-37).

With the above reflection on the intricate relationship between culture, religion, and thought structure or cosmology, it should be obvious that the idea of an “African philosophy” (cf. the collections of essays in Presbey 2002 and Eze 1998) may also cause confusion if philosophy is understood only in terms of the Western convention. I deliberately avoided the concept “philosophy” in the title for this reason. The debate concerning an authentic African philosophy has taken many turns (to mention but a few): from denying it (Hountondji 1983), to qualifying it as “primitive philosophy” (Levy-Bruhl 1963), Bantu Philosophy (Tempels 1969), consciencism (Nkruma), Negritude (Senghor 1996), Pan-Africanism (Nkrumah) and sagacity or sage philosophy (Odera Oruka 1991) to deliberate efforts towards engaging with mainstream Western philosophy as self-critical reflection (Wiredu 1980). I find Mudimbe’s position acceptable when he relates African philosophy to the authentic dimensions of African thought and cosmology. In other words, to escape the trap of classifying all myth, story, and sage wisdom as philosophy, one should rather seek the authentic expressions of African philosophy in the African body of knowledge intrinsically related to what we may call “cosmology” and distinctive African modes of arriving at such knowledge. This knowledge is not a systematised collected body of knowledge expressed in text, but rather an informing system “behind” all action and reflection. The “body” of knowledge is never value-free nor does it end in its rational application. In fact, it relates to action and behaviour and has the wellness and healing of the individual and community at heart. The command of knowledge is not realised in seeking power and the promotion of its value in terms of its rationality, but in the value it adds to the well-being of people and communities.

3. THE CONCEPT OF MORALITY

Mbiti’s (1977) obvious Christian orientation is evident in his treatment of the perception of a creator god responsible for the establishment of a religious and moral order. African indigenous religion (if the generalisation here may be excused) confirms the existence of a creator god, but it does not appear to be diffusing all aspects of religion in pregnant ways. A more apparent manifestation of African religion is the relatively meagre representation of creation

myths. Neither can it be confirmed that the indigenous African believes in a creator god by observing the universe, as Mbiti (1977:40) claims. Accordingly, it is also questionable whether the belief in a creator god dominates all other beliefs, as claimed by Mbiti.

Mbiti further claims that there exists a religious order of the universe and that the creator god is considered responsible for this. Similarly he claims that “God gave the moral order to people so that they might live happily and in harmony with one another” (Mbiti 1977:36). According to Mbiti, one should view morality as an authoritative code of conduct directly sanctioned by god. The moral code is therefore not autonomous, but its autonomy is derived from the creator god. Any breach of the moral code would accordingly be an offence against god and his instruction. This view of Mbiti (1977:38-39, 175) does not concur with his views regarding man’s position at the centre of the universe, also reflected in creation myths. Mbiti does not relate the keeping of the moral code to any form of a concept regarding divine reward as one would expect from a divinely sanctioned code of conduct. When he elaborates on specific morals, the value is measured in terms of what governs individual and social acceptable conduct to the benefit of the well-being and to avoid taboos. When he further claims that these morals are embedded in people’s practices, customs, and rituals and are transmitted through the generations, it appears that the morals are related to socially inscribed modes of actions derived from experiences of what is in the interest and well-being of the community (Mbiti 1977:175-181). His assumption that god gives people their moral conduct and that he is the moral guardian is an unsubstantiated *a priori*. In this respect, Mbiti’s exposition confirms Mudimbe’s criticism (1988:51) of a Christianisation of the discourse about indigenous African religion. It is obvious in this instance that Mbiti is still promoting the idea that faith in a creator god gives sense to morality and not the contrary. This controversy defines the two major critical positions regarding an African conceptualisation of morality: One (e.g., Mbiti) claims that religion is the source and foundation of morality, and the other promotes the idea that the moral imperative is logically independent from religion.

4. VIEWS OF AFRICAN MORALITY

For the purposes of our explorative approach, the views of prominent scholars on African morality will be briefly examined, and an attempt will be made to conceptualise these with reference to moral autonomy.

Setiloane, one of the pertinent voices on African religion in South Africa, takes his cue from the genesis myth regarding the origin of people from a hole in the ground, a widespread myth among southern and central African peoples. In terms of *The hole in the ground myth* (Setiloane 1998a:66-67), the first people came out of the ground together with their immediate kin and animals

under the direction of Modimo (God). They were a community of people and animals, and did not appear as individuals. The animal and human world were one and were sustained by mother earth and exposed to the same natural elements. Modimo was the driving force in all phenomena of this world, including the inanimate. Accordingly, Setiloane (1998b:79) states:

[T]he term community is inclusive of all life (*bios*): animals, the habitat (the land), flora, and even the elements. The success of life is found in the ability to maintain a healthy relationship with *all*.

The moral imperative and contract is to be in harmony with the community and to ensure its continuance. The cycle of ritual life is to restore this wholeness of the community of human beings, nature, and the elements (Setiloane 1988b:79). An act of violence is viewed as an act disturbing the equilibrium or balance of the community. An indecent act, which destroys community life and which is directed against the principle of *Botho-Ubuntu*, will not be left unpunished in this world; retribution is not retained for the hereafter only. The moral imperative is co-habitual in the sense that it is part of the entire concept of being part of a comprehensive community, divinely destined by Modimo. The moral code is not directly linked to the instruction of Modimo, but to the responsibility of maintaining the wellness of the community created by Modimo. In this sense, the morality is linked to the societal imperative as an essential element for self-preservation. It is obvious that Setiloane adjusts the absolute societal motivation slightly in terms of the view of Modimo as the *fons et origo* of the community.

Other African scholars (cf. the discussion of Gladegesin 1998:130-141) have taken this further in order to advance the notion that if God is the origin of the community and made man, he is the source of man's conscience, including his sense of right and wrong. This position may be understood to be a confirmation that religion is the source of morality. It is, however, more nuanced in the sense that the recognition of the deity does not easily translate into religion in its common understanding.

In *Bantu Philosophy* (1959) the ethnophilosopher Placid Temples expresses the opinion that African cultural beliefs and practices exhibit an ontological or metaphysical principle, which is the invisible cause of life and death as well as of all actions. This "vital force" is a cardinal value in African thought upon which all things, animate and inanimate, are founded and which is the creative force behind all human and non-human action. It is an "interpenetrating and permeating" (Setiloane 1998b:80) power in the universe. The moral imperative relates to the presence of this vital force and has nothing to do with a fear related to so-called animism. Although the vital force may be associated with the divine in the universe, it is not experienced as divine intervention, and therefore the moral imperative is a direct outcome of this force without linking it to specific instruction of the deity. Thus one cannot state that religion precedes

the concept of morality. Although morality is part of religious belief (or of ontology, as Tempels would say), the moral imperative is to achieve right relationships between the individual, the community, and the environment and is in a way “self-evidently right” (Hammand-Tookey 1998:8). Accordingly, communities instinctively understand good and evil. The moral is almost a product of a common sense regard for the vital force. There should be no action against this vital force, and the moral character of man can be said to correlate with how people recognise and treat this vital force in living beings and things.

Benezet Bujo (2003) deals comprehensively with the idea of African morality and how it differs from Western morality or moral philosophy. Although his argumentation differs considerably from Mbiti's, he nevertheless emphasises that African morality is not exclusively concerned with human persons or community which excludes a perspective of a monotheistic God. To substantiate his view, Bujo rejects the individualist idea which would suggest that the individual has obtained the ability to act responsibly merely by virtue of assenting to rational principles. In terms of Kant's idea, the maximal realisation of the rational will inevitably be reflected in the moral imperative. Bujo would query this form of individualism as well as the rational as the foundation of the ethical imperative. The rational may be linked to the justification of morally correct behaviour, but it is not necessarily the basis of morality (cf. also in this regard Agrawal 1998:146-149). African rationality is much more inclusive and deals with an embedded and even embodied sense of responsibility towards the community. This notion cannot be regarded as illogical or irrational. In terms of the Western idea of logic, it may be pre-logical.

As parody on the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*, Bujo (2003:22) formulates: *cognatus sum, ergo sumus* (“I am related, therefore we are”) in order to emphasise the difference in African anthropology and to highlight a morality that relates directly to communal embeddedness and societal bearing. This idea correlates with the widely known notion of *ubuntu*: I am because we are. One becomes a human being only in a fellowship with the life of others. He also resists the notion of Tempels' vital force, for the simple reason that it might have too many individualistic overtones, and that vital force is a consequence and goal of moral conduct and not its basis. On the other hand, he is also aware of the imperative not to embrace a form of communitarianism as a principle for African morality. The dictum “I am related, therefore we are” protects the individual from being dominated by a group moral without being part of the construction of that moral. The community itself is also understood as more than the visible community and includes the ancestors as well as those not yet born (Bujo 2003:23-24). One should also be careful not to emphasise communality as the absolute principle, for in Igbo, cosmology postulates the idea that the individual is both a unique creation and the work of a unique creator — an idea underscoring individualism (cf. Achebe 1998:70). The idea is, however, not

developed into a form of absolute individualism, for the will of the community is upheld and no single person will win judgment against the people.

Bujo underscores the significance of the community, including the ancestors as the living dead, for an understanding of African morality. He warns, however, that the emphasis on the community should not lead to an ethnocentric ghetto morality which would condone all customary practices as good. He continues to show that the African community and its values should be considered in cases of ethical justification of actions and customs. Adultery, for example, can only be judged in terms of the kind of marriage involved, and may wrongly be perceived as intrinsically abominable if an abstract concept of sexual morality is the point of departure. Adultery in a monogamous marriage clearly differs from what outsiders may hold regarding polygamous marriages (Bujo 2003:34-35).

African morality does not subscribe to a natural law (*ius naturale*) in the sense that the observance of the natural laws of nature would indicate the moral path and what is regarded as a violation of the natural law. Even Thomas Aquinas postulated a divine origin of these laws which cannot be retrieved rationally in an absolute sense. This is not to say that African morality calls into question the possibility of universal moral codes, but these relate to the experiences and values of the community as well as to the historical narrative tradition informing the essence and values of the community. African morality also has a dialogical narrative dimension, reflected in story, myth, ritual, custom, and proverb (cf. Bujo 2003:48-50). This *textualisation* (my concept) concerns the transmission of not only the virtues, but also the vices which are to be avoided (p. 48). It is surely not a recursive-reflexive justification of morality in the sense used by Habermas, whereby societal discourse at particular junctures defines the moral value or virtue. Community in the African context is the basis for morality in that it guarantees the well-being of both the individual and the community. The judgment as well as the justification of good and bad (evil) is not in terms of reason only, but this does not necessarily mean that it is irrational. The collective input of practice, custom, ritual, and accompanying narrative textualisation makes the moral imperative and its justification nearly self-evident. Bujo (p. 56) would call this the "morality of *memoria*" within an all-embracing fellowship. The metaphysical assumption that the living dead are also an informing agency of morality does not render the justification irrational. Often in ritual and through the metaphoric meaning of the masks, the invisible is made present and the mighty deeds of the ancestor are narrated with a strong moral bearing on the audience (Bujo 2003:63-65). It is a rationality related to another worldview and to metaphysical presences that cannot be portrayed derogatively as irrational because it differs from the so-called Western worldview.

One appreciates the nuance of Bujo's reflection as well as his emphasis on the community and its *memoria* script for moral actions. The fact that he is a Christian

theologian makes for the obvious assumption that the deity should be maintained as authority behind the moral imperative notwithstanding the emphasis on the community as foundation of morality; this confirms a duality in his position. This duality is also evident when he maintains that if morality is the Christian practice of faith, the grammar of moral performance of African peoples is also considered to be part of faith and religious expression. A legitimate reading of the African culture and its morality could therefore be a bridge for the incarnation of Christianity in Africa (Bujo 2003:202-203). Such a Christian reflection may be granted, but it may also be questioned in terms of a legitimate exploration of African morality without a Christianising reference. It should and must be possible to describe African morality within its own context of performance, reflection and putting into language without the bias of the Christian episteme.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

To portray more views would not advance the substance of the current discussion from which authentic empirical research was excluded. However, numerous important issues have surfaced.

It has become evident that the concept of religion and faith, coined in Western, Christian traditions and transposed onto what is perceived to be African indigenous religion, mitigates against efforts from the continent itself to put into language the phenomena we call religion and morality. This impasse correlates directly to the difficulty of trying to define the conceptualisation of morality in African thought. The inference from beyond the continent as well as from Christian-oriented thinkers on the continent has been too easily drawn: If African cosmology indicates a divinely-destined creation, that deity should also be the absolute norm for the moral imperative. This is why many scholars believe that in African thought, religion is the foundation of morality and that the moral imperative is derived from the deity; thus that faith gives sense to morality.

This position has been challenged by many "Afrocentric" (if I may use this concept of Asante) thinkers who stress the collective responsibility towards the community, including nature and the animal world. The collective responsibility is also informed by a rich collective memory and narrative textualisation, which ameliorate the justification of the moral imperative. This is not necessarily conducted in conscious rational terms but in a self-evident manner. In this sense, I am of the opinion that the moral imperative in African thought differs from what is usually understood by this concept in moral discourse. Apart from orthodox religious claims to ultimate values, moral discourse is mainly concerned with "a kind of justification for an actual or proposed act of an individual, a group of persons or, indirectly, of an institution" (Agrawal 1998:146). Moral argument in a particular case is thus to find the "best" justification for some actual or proposed act. But this sense of moral justification does not apply to

the African reality. The conduct of the members of African indigenous communities is not judged by fellow members by means of reasoning. There is no moral reasoning for the purposes of moral justification (Agrawal 1998:148). Moral appraisals are rather made by reference to sets of values and standards prescribed by tradition, custom, practice, as well as social and family codes. These moral codes are not fixed in an absolute sense as universals, but may change with the transformation of society. Although the ancestors' presence and advice are part of the moral frame of reference, and guidance may ritually be sought, they are viewed as an extension of the community and not as part of the instruction of the deity. The fact is that morality in African thought does not necessarily involve a justification with reference to a deity. This is not to say that African cosmology is unaware of a creator deity. This deity is, however, not perceived as the custodian or guardian of the moral code. The sanction of the moral code relates to the intrinsic orientation towards the well-being of the community and its members. Through tradition, practice, custom, and memory, the community has arrived at these moral codes. The moral code is value-embedded. It is not a result of natural laws, but it is also not to be denied that natural observation may have influenced the moral code. One is therefore tempted to conclude that one can admit to an autonomous morality, if it is not erroneously understood to be intrinsically denying the existence of a deity. The construction of moral knowledge in African indigenous communities relates to their mode of understanding reality and within this reality, the well-being of the community is the central concern.

If this preliminary inquiry has but one contribution to make, it is to stress the dire need for empirical evidence of how indigenous African people put their perceptions of what they consider moral codes and ethical conduct into language. This can only be done in conjunction with a critical interrogation of the Western religious episteme as frame of reference in descriptions of African thought and religion. The post-colonial reality provides a space to engage with the complexity of these phenomena in ways which allow the indigenous people to speak for themselves, but also to allow for the multi-valence and multi-layered dimensions of these concepts in African thought.

For theological reflection and the practice of religious discourse on the continent, a departure from the homogenous assumptions based on a Western epistemology is paramount when seeking to gain conceptual clarity of concepts relating to indigenous religious expression.

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