

AFRICAN BIOETHICS IN A WORLD OF CHANGE

Prof. KANU Ikechukwu Anthony, O.S.A.
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Tansian University, Umunya
Anambra State
ikey_mario@yahoo.com

Abstract

A cursory glance at the developments in the area of applied ethics reveals a huge set of breakthroughs in bioethics. However, it is a breakthrough in which the Western worldview dominates in the discussion on bioethical issues like stem cell technology, cloning, organ transplantation, in vitro fertilization, gene therapy, abortion, euthanasia, suicide, etc., leaving the African as a spectator and yet it is a discourse that affects him and his future generation. The purpose of this study is to develop critical thinking in the field of bioethics within Africa, and to outline a descriptive analysis of ethical and moral values as rooted in authentic African traditions and cultures that can provide a helpful base or framework for ethical decision-making. This would involve discovering the peculiarities and common features that make African bioethics worth its name. This is very significant because being peculiar is necessary. Concepts such as 'African culture', 'African thought', 'African metaphysics', 'African philosophy' etc., heavily imply that there is something distinct about the culture and thought of Africa and presumably, African bioethics would fall into these broad categories. For the purpose of this research, the hermeneutic method of investigation would be patronized. This piece submits that, in our world of change, there is the need for an African bioethics that speaks to the African spirit.

Keywords: African, Bioethics, Ethics, Globalization, Regional, Characterization, World, Change.

Introduction

A lot of research has been carried out in the area of bioethics, however, with very few scholars and contributions in the area of African bioethics, like Andoh (2011), Tangwa (1996), Mbugua (2009), Metz (2010), Onuoha (2007), Ogundiran (2004), Murove (2005). This presupposes that there is need for a profound study of the African perspective on bioethics. In the first place, this research is agitated by the recent religio-political experiences in Africa, alongside the ethical crisis in the health profession which has demeaned the value of human life. It raised the question as to whether there is the possibility of an African perspective on bioethics, or is a universal discipline like mathematics or is it more akin to art and literature, where talks about African art and literature are engaged?

Contrary to the position of Fayemi and Akintunde (2012), that there is nothing like an African bioethics, this work is burdened by the fact of this argument as Western bioethics, Buddhist bioethics, Hindu Bioethics, Chinese bioethics, Asian bioethics exist alongside the non-existence of African bioethics; and also raises the question as to why there can't be an African bioethics? What does it take for a bioethics to be African? If it is peculiarity or certain features that are African, is Africa devoid of such features? If it is on the basis of it being common to the African, is it possible that Africans have no common feature? Is there no significance in regional characterization? Are Western bioethics, Buddhist bioethics, Hindu bioethics, Chinese bioethics, Asian bioethics not regional categorizations, and why can't Africa have a right to self-identity?

In our age of accelerated globalisation, where the Western nations impose on the Third World their personalities as the standard to follow, Africa must take a stand on issues, especially bioethics or risk being drowned in the Western category and thus, lose her identity and authenticity. The purpose of this study is, therefore, to stimulate critical thinking in the field of bioethics within Africa, which would outline a descriptive analysis of ethical and moral values as rooted in authentic African traditions and cultures that can provide a helpful base or framework for ethical decision making. This would involve discovering the peculiarities and common features that make African bioethics worth its name. Without peculiar features, there will be nothing to unify African bioethics. This is very significant because being peculiar is necessary. Concepts such as 'African culture', 'African thought', 'African metaphysics', 'African

philosophy', etc., heavily imply that there is something distinct about the culture and thought of Africa and presumably, African bioethics would fall into these broad categories.

African Bioethics as a Quest for Identity and Authenticity in a World of Change

Sakamoto (1995), while differentiating Asian bioethics from Western bioethics, emphasizes the need for the Asian bioethics to be based on the Asian culture, and, therefore, somewhat different from Euro-American ones. De Castro (1999) interprets Sakamoto's quest as a quest for identity.

The issue appears to be one of identity. The crucial values authenticity and identity. The unarticulated argument is that if we are to be authentic, we must be true to ourselves. Given a religion-oriented culture, this would mean having to be guided by mainly by religious thought on the various topics of bioethics. Where there is no dominant religious worldview, 'being true to ourselves' could mean being cognizant and respectful of one's traditions, history, and cultural heritage. (p. 230).

The foregoing spells out the responsibility of different cultural traditions to live their lives in accordance with the values that constitute our unique cultural perspective. Writing further, De Castro (1999) wrote,

People also need to retain their integrity as a group. They must uphold the shared values that unite them. They must seek recognition for their identity as a people. To be remiss in this responsibility is to participate in the annihilation of their identity. What seems to be at stake, then, is the survival of identity- in a way, the preservation of a cultural self. (p. 231).

Africans, like other peoples, have the responsibility to live their lives in accordance with the values that constitute their unique cultural perspective. African bioethics, therefore, recasts the understanding of bioethics from an African analytic perspective. It goes down to the root and substance of the African worldview to excavate knowledge for application to contemporary circumstances and situations. As debates within the parameters of bioethics have become global, African bioethics would attempt to discover the uniting factors in African cultural tradition, so as to help Africa find her way of solving the problems that continue to emerge in today's biotechnology and life sciences, and also to carry out debates and discursions as a partner in the global dialogue.

The Contexts for African Bioethics

A cursory glance at the developments in the area of applied ethics reveals a huge set of breakthroughs in bioethics. Shannon and Kockler (2009), in describing the manifestations of these achievements, observes that several newsmagazines, television shows, encyclopedias, journals, books of chapters, websites have devoted special editions to bioethical discourses. Presidential commissions and advisory boards have been set up to deal with bioethical issues, and this expresses the fundamental place it occupies in public life. Programs in universities are now run in the area of bioethics from Bsc level to PhD level; there are academic conferences organized on bioethics. All to say that bioethics have become a common place and in the contention of Andoh (2011), a burgeoning interdisciplinary field of scholarly investigation, which has in the past decades migrated from bedside consultations to public policy debates and wider cultural and social consultations that privilege all discourse about everyday life issues. In the midst of all these developments, four issues form the background to the researcher's devotion to the study of African bioethics.

1. Religio-Political Experiences in Africa

Several experiences in Africa in recent times, from the religious to the socio-cultural, have threatened the value of life. The timeline of the deadly attacks of the Boko Haram insurgents and other religious crises in Nigeria during the last six years is alarming. These deaths have led to the loss of property, and above all, a decline in the value of human life, since the corpses of human beings have become recurrent scenes on streets.

Navigating from the religious to the political scene reveals even more. The 1966-67 genocide orchestrated by military and political figures, in the contention of Nwobi (2008) emboldened the perpetrators to indulge in more war crimes in the prosecution of the Biafra-Nigeria War. The Asaba massacre, Onitsha Apostolic Church massacre, rapes etc., are evidences of how wanton crimes were committed against humanity in Biafra. Again, on November 20th 1999, Olusegun Obasanjo ordered the invasion and subsequent destruction of Odi community in Bayelsa State by the soldiers of the Nigerian Army. Fabiyi (2013) avers that it was an invasion that was genocidal, reckless, brutish and a gross violation of the rights of the victims, principally to life.

2. Ethical Crisis in the Health Profession

In the Nigerian health sector, the inability of hospitals to provide patients with medication, the failure of poorly serviced equipment, the abundance of fake drugs and the non-payment of service providers, maladministration, carelessness and incompetence that place countless patients at risk, numerous accounts of medical practitioners abusing state resources for personal gain at the expense of their patients, private health sector fraud and increasing numbers of professionals falling foul of the ethical standards point to an ethical crisis in the health profession. Coupled with this is the problem of human biomedical research in many African communities. This problem has become more complex because of the problem of underdevelopment, poverty, preventable communicable diseases, poor healthcare infrastructure etc, which has exposed Africa to exploitation by unethical researchers and unscrupulous sponsors. Many commercial research companies are migrating to African countries to avoid the tougher regulatory framework currently operating in developed countries. They are at home in Africa because many African participants are not adequately informed of their rights during biomedical research, rights such as, rights to full disclosure and compensation in case of injury.

3. The Emergence of Globalization

African bioethics has also become a fundamental discourse in our age of globalisation. Joy (2009) describes globalisation as the process of increasing interconnectedness between societies such that effects in one part of the globe have effects on societies far away on the other side. It points to the increasing integration of regimes and nations into the world market, the removal of borders, lowering of transaction costs and frontier barriers. Taking from its negative effects on developing countries, it has been described as Westernization, Neo-colonization, Europeanization, re-enslavement, modernization, etc. Umoh (2009) argues that in globalization, the Western nations- the superior powers impose on the Third World their universal myopic personalities and their unending series of upheavals characterized by unconscious emptiness. He described it as a globalizing dictatorship, an autocratic arrogance and a violation of the principle of inter-cultural relationship and dialogue. They export to us problems that our present stories of development are not ready for. Asiegbu (2009) further describes globalization in terms of the West imposing paradigms, strategies and development policies that benefit more the West than it does Africa. From the foregoing, it can be said that globalization is a system that drowns the particular in the universal, or

the part in the whole to the point that the individual or the particular stands the risk of losing his identity in the universal.

In a globalized world where the Western worldview dominates in the discussion of bioethical issues like stem cell technology, cloning, organ transplantation, *in vitro* fertilization, gene therapy, abortion, euthanasia, suicide etc, the African makes no significant contribution, and yet it is a discourse that affects him and his future generation. Callahan (1999) laments the dominance of the West on bioethical issues:

The more interesting story perhaps concerns the culture of bioethics itself. It is a discipline with some discernible biases, some unmistakable signs of heavily American origin, and some long-standing internal struggles I need to acknowledge its force and cultural bite. It has been accepted in great part because it is so compatible with American culture, at least that well-rooted liberal part of the culture that has looked to law to resolve, or dilute, deep moral disagreements, and which bends over backwards to allow citizens the widest range of legal choices and the greatest possible latitude in the living of a life. Bioethics is often too American, too culture-conforming, too prone to float along with the tide. (p. 68).

Agreeing with Callahan, Pellegrino (1992) argues that ethics, medical sciences and technology are currently Western in origin, and thus, have been deeply ingrained with three Western values: empirical science, principle-based ethics and democratic political philosophy. Such values are often alien to many non-Western cultures. This dominance in the contention of Tangua (2004) is a product of the West's over-confidence. He writes:

The obsession with certainty and the illusion that may be induced of having achieved it in many domains of human concern, is what has given the Western world its spirit of epistemological over-confidence, an *over-sabi* bordering on arrogance, its evangelical proselytizing impulse, its high sense of self-righteousness, that could easily result in heedless recklessness at the level of practice. (p. 1472).

However, what we find in world politics is that the conclusions of such discussions are imposed on the Third World, and sometimes they have no option than to follow. Their ability to choose for themselves their future is not determined by them but by their Western counterparts who have the

“yam and the knife”. Even when they try to reject them based on the fact that they are contrary to their worldview, they are subjected to sanctions that further cripple them. The African is thus, as a result of his dependency, exposed to numerous ideas that are sometimes helpful and at other times destructive. The question that should arise from the foregoing is: “should the African contribute to the construction of his destiny?” In a world that is dominated by a variety of bioethical issues that concerns him, must he remain silent even as a partner on the global conference table?

4. The Arguments against the Existence African Bioethics

In the midst of globalisation, Africa continues in her struggle towards cultural renaissance and the need to establish an identity for herself. This is not without difficulty as Western and African scholars have stood on the way. For instance, in the definition of African philosophy, scholars like Hountondji (1995), had argued that African philosophy is a myth, maintaining that Western principles must be the basis for the categorization of African philosophy. In the quest for an African Bioethics, such perspectives are not alien. Fayemi and Akintunde (2012) arguing contrary to the opinion of Gbadegesin (1998; 2009) on Yoruba bioethics, which is guided by the Yoruba mindset on the idea of personhood and social relationship shaped by the belief in communitarianism, attacked the basis of his Yoruba bioethics. Citing the works of Emmanuel (1991) and Callahan (1996), they argued that there is nothing unique about communitarianism in African (Yoruba) bioethics, as it is an element evident in Western bioethics.

They argued that his account of African bioethics is a misinformation to Africans and that he has fallen into the trap of overzealousness to produce an African bioethics, arguing further that there is nothing unique about African bioethics distinct from Western bioethics. They maintain that it is the lack of consensus that has led to the many examples of Western, African and Eastern dichotomy in bioethical discourse. They aver that Gbadegesin’s account of African bioethics has not presented a distinctive African bioethics, nor put forward any peculiar methodology for this discourse, nor is his claim about the defining of the communitarian character of African bioethics unique. These considerations, among others, raise questions about African bioethics.

Conclusion

This work attends to the everyday African, for the influencing of attitude and expanding of consciousness. Achebe (1986) raises a worry which suggests that studies in African realities should be made more environmental-sensitive by being located within the African culture. He writes:

Clinicians trained overseas (oftentimes in the western cultures) are well aware of the basic ethnocentrism that pervades much of the western assumptions not only about science in general but, more profoundly, about cultural factors. That this ethnocentrism which negates the values of other cultures is a serious hindrance to the practitioner, is well recognized because clinical work, by its very nature, demands considerable proximity to the cultural heritage (p. 1).

While this text has as its proximate audience, clinical psychologists and guidance counsellors, its remote audience are all those who seek a profound solution to any African problem. Although this work will go through normal academic methods, it will benefit everyday reader as bioethical issues are becoming more fundamental than before, and issues that require our everyday attention. Even as Nigeria is going through the terror and pain unleashed by terrorism, this work intends to open an aperture for appreciating the value of human life again.

This study is further a contribution to the on-going discourse on African bioethics in particular. It would be of great importance to all students of philosophy and African studies, especially for those who are interested in carrying out further research on African bioethics. It will open new vistas for students of religion, philosophy and African studies to search and expose further, the dimensions of African bioethics.

This work is also a contribution to the ongoing research in African cultural renaissance, focussing on the rebirth and reawakening of African culture. Chinua Achebe in his celebrated classic and epoch-making piece, *Things Fall Apart*, brought out the consequences of the encounter between the European and African cultures, and the need for an African cultural renaissance. He particularly looked at the Igbo society, specifically at the period when the West broke into it as some missionaries, traders and administrators.

Does the white man understand our custom about land?, asked

Okonkwo, 'How can he when he does not even speak our tongue?' responded Obierika, and then he continued, 'But he says our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers and our clan can no longer act as one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart'. (pp. 124-125).

Europeans in general and European missionaries in particular; with some few exceptions, admitted little if any culture of value in Africa, just as many had denied that Africa really has any religion other than fearful superstitions. They came with their culture (religious customs, morals and ways of praying and acting) which defines their identity and imposed it on African. In this way, they killed the culture of Africa and denied her of her true identity. According to Taylor (1992):

... it is reasonable to suppose that cultures that have provided the horizon of meaning for large numbers of human beings, of diverse characteristics and temperaments, over a long period of time – that have, in other words, articulated their sense of the good, the holy, the admirable – are almost certain to have something that deserves our admiration, even if it is accompanied by much that we have to abhor and respect. (p. 234).

This research on African bioethics would help African scholars understand the richness of African culture and extensive capacity of its applicability to various dimensions of life and fields of human endeavours.

References

- Andoh, C. (2011). Bioethics and the Challenges to Its Growth in Africa. *Scientific Research: Open Journal of Philosophy*. 1. 2. 67-75.
- Agbo, J. N. (2010). Is globalisation a process or a product? In A. B. C. Chiegboka, T. C. Utoh-Ezeajugh, and G. I. Udechukwu (Eds.). *The Humanities and Globalization in the Third Millennium* (pp. 26-39). Nigeria: Rex Charles and Patrick.
- Akinde, S. T., Gidado, T. O. and Olaopa, O. R. (2002). *Globalisation, its implications and consequences on Africa*. Retrieved 1/7/2012.

- http://globalisation.icaap.org/content/v2.1/01_akindele_et al.html
- Asouzu, I. I. (2007). *Ibanyidanda: New complementary ontology. Beyond world immanentism, ethnocentric reduction and impositions*. Munster: Lit Verlag.
- Biko, S. (2004). *I write what I like*. Johannesburg: Picador Africa.
- Crawford, S. C. (2001). Hindu Bioethics for the Twenty-First Century. *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*. 14. 9. 25-30.
- De Castro, L. D (1999). Is there an Asian bioethics? *Bioethics* 13. 3/4. 227-230.
- Fafowora, O. O. (1998). Management imperatives of globalisation. *Management in Nigeria: A Journal of Nigerian Institute of Management*. 34, 2-4. 5-9.
- Fan, R. (1997). Self-determination Vs Family determination: Two incommensurable principles of autonomy. *Bioethics*. 11. 309-322.
- Gbadegesin, S. (2009). Bioethics and culture. In Helga, K and Singer, P. eds. *A companion to bioethics* (pp. 45-60). Maiden: Blackwell.
- Gindro, S. (1995). Transcultural issues in ethics of health care. *EACME News*. 4. 6-8.
- Hongladorom, S. (2003). *Asian Bioethics: What is it? And is there such a thing?* A paper presented at a symposium organized by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology on Dialogue and Promotion of Bioethics in Asia. At Kyoto, Japan, September 22-23.
- Kanu, I. A. (2014). Globalisation, Globalism and African Philosophy. In C. Umezina (Ed.). *African Philosophy: A Pragmatic Approach to African Problems*. pp. 151-165. Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing.
- Kanu, A. I. (2016). *African bioethics: An indigenous humanistic perspective on for integrative global bioethical discourse*. Germany: Lambert Publications.
- Kanu, I. A. (2018). African Philosophy, Globalization and the Priority of 'Otherness'. *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development*. 1. 1. 40-57.
- Madunaga, E. (1999). Globalisation and its victims. *Guardian* July 26. 53.
- Mbũgua, K. (2009). Is there an African bioethics? *Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics*. 19. 4. 2-5.
- McEwan, A. (1990). *What is new about the new international economy?* Mimeo: University of Massachusetts.
- Ohiorhenuan, J. F. E. (1998). The South in an era of globalisation. *Cooperation South*, 2. 6-15.
- Omogbe, J. (2007). *Social-political philosophy and international relations*.

- Lagos: Joja educational Research and Publishers.
- Ryan, M. A. (2004). Beyond a Western bioethics. *Theological Studies*. 65. 158-177.
- Sakamota, H. (1995). New initiatives in East Asian bioethics. *Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics*. 5. 20-30.
- Tandon, Y. (1998). Globalisation and Africa's options. *AAPS NewsletterHarare*. 3. 1.
- Tangwa, G. (1999a). Globalization or westernization? Ethical concerns in the whole bio-business. *Bioethics*. 13. 10-16.
- Wasunna, A. (2005). The development of bioethics in Africa. In M. Patrao (Ed.). *Bioeticas na evolucao das sociedades* (pp. 331-334). Coimbra: Grafica de Coimbra.