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# ***Indigenous African Ethics: A Reflection on Akan and Ewe Ethical values***

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## ***Abstract***

*There are no unethical people on earth, and indigenous Africans are no exception. Ethics is a people's way of life whether good or bad. In this paper, a reflection is done on the indigenous African ethical values with the Akan and Ewe as reference points. The paper then goes on to discuss the foundation for the two societies' ethical behaviours. The paper discusses the principles behind their ethical making process, the ethical making process itself and their ethical values. The paper concludes that the two societies, Akan and Ewe, have developed an ethical system that has helped to sustain their societies.*

**Key words and phrases:** Indigenous African, ethics, values, Akan, Ewe

## **Introduction**

There is no tribe or group of persons on earth who have no ethical or moral values. Indigenous African societies are no exception and with these Ethical values, help to judge the conduct of humans. Humans have a quality in them by which we can call the conduct good or bad. Gyekye (1996) describes moral values as a set of social rules and norms intended to guide the conduct of people in a society.

In indigenous African societies, these rules of conduct are preserved in customs, traditions, proverbs, myths, taboos, art and craft, and other symbols of the people. These rules of conduct are transmitted to the young ones by the older generation mainly through the word of mouth. In order to appreciate the indigenous ethical values, this paper will draw on examples from the Akan and Ewe people of southern Ghana to support the idea that there are no unethical people living on this earth.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Akan and Ewe Peoples of Ghana**

The Akan and Ewe occupy the southern belt of the country. The Akan are the largest ethnic group of the country. The Akan is made up of the Asante, Akwapim, Assin Bono, Ahafo, Wassa, Kwahu, Denkyira, Akyem, Agona, Ahanta, Akwamu and Fante. (Meyerowitz, 1958; Nkansa-Kyeremanteng, 2010). The Ewe people also are located at the southeastern

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has benefited from ideas I picked during my undergraduate African traditional ethics lectures. I am indebted to Dr. Ansah, my former ethics lecturer, for opening my eyes to African traditional ethics.

part of Ghana. They are made up of the areas covering the *Keta (Anlo)* and *Tongu* Districts (Nukunya, 1997). The Ewe are made up of the following traditional states, *Anlo, Some, Aflao, Afife, Wheta, Klikor, Fenyi, Dzodzie, Agave, Sokpoe, Tefle, Vume, Fieve, Bakpa, Mafi, Mepe, Battor, Volo, Duffor, Togome* and *Fodzoku* (Amenumey, 1997; Abotchie, 1997). I will turn to discuss the foundations of Akan and Ewe ethical values

### **Foundations of Akan and Ewe Indigenous Ethics**

Among the Akan and Ewe peoples, three principles underline their quest to making an ethical decision. These principles are: the doctrine of God, the idea of the Human person and the Cosmos.

#### **The Doctrine of God**

To the Akan and Ewe peoples, religion is a very strong factor in their lives and exerts most probably a great influence on their thinking and life (Gaba, 1973; Opoku 1978; Mbiti 1989; Idowu, 1973). The traditional Akan and Ewe peoples have not among them an agnostic. This belief is attested to by an Akan saying *obi nkyere akora nyame* (no one shows a child God). This saying seeks to imply that the knowledge of God is inherent in the child and is born with it. The Akan and Ewe doctrine of God is better understood in how they perceive God's nature.

#### **The Nature of God**

As far as the Akan and Ewe are concerned, their doctrine of God offers insight into the real nature of God. The essential nature of God is seen in the belief that God has two natures, female and male. To the Akan, God as a female is known as *Obatampa* – a good and kind nurturing mother and as a male is referred to as *Nyame* – that which satisfies when you get. God is thus called by the Akan with his dualistic name as *Obatampa-Nyame*.

The Ewe also has a similar idea about the nature of God. The Ewe refers to God as a female by the name *Mawu*, the principal of life and as a male by the name *Lisa*-the principal of power. The Ewe thus calls God *Mawu-Lisa*.<sup>2</sup> The two natures of God are considered as complementing each other and is gender balancing. Together the two natures, male and female, form one unity of God. The Akan and Ewe understanding of the nature of god helps us to appreciate their understanding of the nature of the human person.

#### **The Human Person**

The human person according to Akan and Ewe is immortal. This immortality of the human person is born out of the fact that the individual is

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Ansah for enabling me to understand the Ewe idea of God.

not only made up of material element but also spiritual. This belief in the immortality of the human person is found the creation myth of the people. The Ewe believes that God formed the human person out of clay, called *ame-mounded* clay. God then put into the mounded clay, *agbe* – life. The Ewe calls the human person *amegbeto*, owner of life. The Ewe believes that *Mawu Lisa* is the principal of life. The human person shares in the principle of life with God. This part of God in the human person is indestructible, after death, the individual soul goes back to the original home *Bome*.

The Akan also have a similar belief as far as the immortality of the human person is concerned. According to the Akan, the elements that make up the human are more than clay and soul. The human person has four elements making up his whole being. The human person derives the soul (*okra*) and the breath of life (*honhom*) from God. The personality trait (*sunsum*) is gotten from the father and blood (*mogya*) is derived from the mother (Opoku 1978). The four elements together make a child, that particular child. If one element is lacking, the child could become anything but a human being.

The soul is considered as a particle of God and that which make a being a human being. The breath of life is the principle of life and it goes with the soul. The two together makes a human being a living person. Death occurs when the breath of life (*honhom*) departs the person leaving the other three elements to break up. The soul goes back to God; the *sunsum* becomes a ghost or ancestor. The *mogya* which is part of the body is then buried in the ground and becomes the property of the termites.

### **The Doctrine of the World**

The Akan and Ewe believes that the world is composed of visible and invincible things, matter and spirits. These two elements unite to complete each other. From their union emerges one individual, one complete being. The indigenous Akan and Ewe sees the world as basically dualistic and so to them the world is formed on the note of unity in diversity and this is reducible to unity in duality.

This view of the world that it consists of one but is made up of two things has its source in the concept of God as a dual being who is unified. The Akan and Ewe also believe that such a world is not the work of chance but the creation of God. This belief is seen in two names the Akan gives to God, *Borebore* and *Oboadee*. These two names describe God as excavator, carver, hewer, originator, inventor and architect. The world though, is considered to be good because it was created by God, the Akan and Ewe also believe that the world brings calamities and untold hardship on human beings. The thoughts of the Akan and Ewe on God, human being and the world lie together as the foundations of the people's religion and form the

background of their ethical thinking which helps them in making ethical decisions.

### **Indigenous Principles of Ethical Decision Making**

People must make decisions in order to act. However, if people are to achieve any meaningful results, they must make intelligent decisions in order to act intelligently. This way of acting will require the person to have guidelines of some kind to their decisions and actions. Principles provide these guidelines and they are themselves the guidelines. Principles whatever they may be, truths, laws, teachings, doctrines etc have an organizing and guiding force of our lives. Principles indicate the road along which the person can travel to get a desired end. The Akan and Ewe people as with all other African peoples in their indigenous settings follow principles on the basis of which they arrive at ethical decisions. In Akan and Ewe societies, decision making on ethical matters involves reflective thinking that is carried out against a background of religious beliefs and convictions. The reflective thinking is done by a number of people together. These people usually come from the rank known as elders – *Nananom* (Akan) and *Ametsitsiwo* (Ewe). These people are principally counselors at the chief's palace. The practice of group reflection on ethical matters in indigenous Akan and Ewe societies is derived from two principles expressed in proverbial language. These are "one head does not take council". The other is "knowledge is like a baobab tree, one person cannot embrace it". These proverbs all attest to the fact no one person has all the knowledge therefore there is the need for ethical collaboration.

Apart from these two principles, the concept of the human person also helps in making good ethical decisions. Because the blood is believed to be derived from the mother and the spirit from the father, brothers and sisters are seen as having the same blood and spirit. The result of the blood relationship is that marriage between close relatives is prohibited. Incestuous relationship is abhorred by the indigenous Akan and Ewe people as with other African peoples. Children are also discouraged from showing gross disrespect to their parents. Unless a perpetrator of these acts accept his/her faults and appease the angered gods and the spirits of their parents, evil consequences will come upon the offenders.

### **Process of Ethical Decision Making**

The process of arriving at an acceptable decision in the chief's court is referred to as going to consult *Aberewa* or *Amegakpui*. In Akan and Ewe mythologies, *Aberewa* (old lady) and *Amegakpui* (old diminutive man) are regarded as full of wisdom because of the enormous amount of experience they have. In Ghanaian culture, old age is synonymous with wisdom. According to Nkansa-Kyeremanteng (2004) the concept of going to consult

*Aberewa* originated in the legend of two young men who were instructed to kill all the old women in a decree by their king. They defied the orders and hid their old lady. Not long after the decree was carried out, the king found himself in a difficulty which required mature advice. The two young men consulted their old lady and found the solution to the king's problem. Upon learning the source of the advice, the king regretted his action, resettled the old lady with a promotion to chief adviser.

The procedure at the chief's court is that, before the traditional jury, made up of the chief and his elders, gives a decision on a case, it withdraws to the jury chamber in order to deliberate jointly. This makes the decision the result of joint reflection it is considered to be fairer or sounder than that which has been arrived at by one person. A case that was heard in the court of the *Omanhene* of Assin Atandasu Traditional Area witnessed by the writer would be used to illustrate this joint ethical decision making procedure.

A woman from *Assin Atobiase*, (I will call Mansa) a community within the traditional area, was accused by another person of witchcraft and being responsible for the death of her rival. She lodged a complaint with *Omanhene's* court and a day was fixed for hearing. The two parties were invited together with their witnesses if any. The case was arbitrated with the *Ankobeahene* of the traditional area, Nana Ampah II presiding. The plaintiff was first called to give her story. Afterwards, she was cross-examined by the accused. The plaintiff called two witnesses, Yaa Kitiwa and Opanyin Acheampong (not their real names) they both corroborated the testimony of the plaintiff and were also cross-examined by the accused. The witnesses were paid a fee by the plaintiff. The accused then mounted the witness box and gave his evidence in-chief. He was also cross-examined by the plaintiff. He then called his wife as his witness. The wife testified and was cross-examined by the plaintiff. At the end of the testimonies, the elders went out to consult and deliberate among themselves on the verdict to give. The elders came back after fifteen minutes of deliberations to pronounce their verdict. The verdict was delivered by the senior linguist of the *Omanhene*. The defendant was found guilty of the charges preferred against him. He was fined GH¢100 and was asked to pay a compensation of GH¢20 and one fowl. The defendant was given two weeks to pay the fine. The point should be made clear that the example cited above is to show how collective and reflective thinking will lead to arriving at ethical decisions that will be considered fair. The fact that decision taken is a collective venture does not mean that the traditional Akan and Ewe does not make room for situations that demand immediate solution. At such situation, the Akan and Ewe were expected to rely on God's wisdom to guide them in making a sound decision single handedly.

## Ethical Values

The Akan and Ewe placed much premium on their ethical values. The processes of arriving at acceptable ethical values are no different from the process of arriving at an ethical decision. Ethical values are arrived at by reflecting on human experiences both present and past. In this endeavour the elders in the society are better placed to under this task of reflecting on the experiences of the people. These elders reflect on everything of life and draw our ethical teachings that the events convey.

These ethical teachings from the events are put in proverbial sayings. To the Akan and Ewe, life's experiences are believed to be full of ethical lesson. The Ewe, has a personal name that captures this notion clearly, *Agbefianu* which means life teaches a lesson. A person is expected to learn a lesson from his/her mistake otherwise the person lacks wisdom. The Ewe say in a proverb "only the fool falls down on the same mound twice". The Akan have a similar proverb which says "one does not step on the testicles of a fool twice. Because life is of great value to the two peoples, ethical values have been in place to ensure the sanctity and protection of life. These ethical values are drawn from life's experiences such as marriage, politics, economics, sexual relations etc. I will for the purpose of paper reflect on the sexual ethical values of the two peoples.

## Taboos

Taboos is a derivative word from the Polynesian *tabu* which means forbidden. Taboo is a sacred word for religious or cultic injunctions put in place by indigenous people to ensure the sanctity and protection of human morality, wellbeing and future of the community. Among the Akan, the term used for taboo may be *akyiwade* or *mmusuo*. The former is used more for those actions that are forbidden or prohibited while the latter is used for more serious deeds such as murder, incest, religious sacrilege, rape and suicide (Osei, n.d; Gyekye, 1995). Both Akan and Ewe take taboos serious since they are imposed by the indigenous authorities for their own safety and wellbeing. The seriousness attached to taboos is seen in the rituals that are performed to deal with the more serious ones referred to as *mmusuo* among the Akan. These could take the form of public humiliation, execution or even banishment from the community which was considered as the highest form of punishment among the indigenous Akan and Ewe peoples. If the perpetrators are not dealt with, the two peoples believe they will face the wrath of the gods and ancestors in the forms of droughts, epidemics, infertility etc. In this article my main concentration will be on the sexual taboos among the two peoples and how they deal with such infractions so as to stay off the wrath of the gods and ancestors.



## **Sexuality and Sexual Taboos**

Among the Akan and Ewe peoples, sexuality is considered sacred. This religious idea shapes the thinking of the people in respect of all aspects of sex. In their handling of the question of sex, the Akan and Ewe have taboos to regulate their sexual relationships. Taboos are not only avoidance rules that are observed but also served as a pedagogical tool aimed at inculcating desirable behaviours (Chemhuru & Masaka, 2010). Sexual taboos form a code that helps to keep the sanctity of marriages and ensure that sexual promiscuity is curbed or brought down. The sexual code dictates when, where and with whom one may or may not have sexual intercourse with. Sexual practices are attributed to the dictation of the religion and individual cultural norms. Anything that deviates from these reasons is evil and bad. Sexual relationships that are tabooed among the two peoples are incest, sex before undergoing puberty rites, adultery on the part of the woman.

### **Incest Taboo**

Among the Akan and Ewe, there is a prohibition of marriage and cohabitation between relatives of certain categories. Incest is the marriage or even sexual intercourse between a man and his mother, his sister (Nukunya, 1969). Incestuous relationships break the family's primary role of transmitting accumulated property. Vaknin (n.d) puts it succinctly:

The family is an efficient venue for the transmission of accumulated property as well as information - both horizontally (among family members) and vertically (down the generations). The process of socialization largely relies on these familial mechanisms, making the family the most important agent of socialization by far. The family is a mechanism for the allocation of genetic and material wealth. Worldly goods are passed on from one generation to the next through succession, inheritance and residence. Genetic material is handed down through the sexual act. It is the mandate of the family to increase both by accumulating property and by marrying outside the family (exogamy). Clearly, incest prevents both. It preserves a limited genetic pool and makes an increase of material possessions through intermarriage all but impossible.

Recently in Ghana two cases of incest came to light. The reaction of the general public was that of repulsion and repugnance. In the first case, a 27 year old man, was fined together with his 47 year old biological mother for engaging in incestuous relationship for six months. The act threw the town of Juaso in the Ashanti Region of Ghana into a state of shock. The traditional authority imposed a fine of GHc100, a bottle of gin and two

sheep on the culprits ([www.myjoyonline.com](http://www.myjoyonline.com)). The second case also involved the conviction of a middle aged woman for consenting to a conjugal relationship by her two biological children, Kofi Mensah, 22 years and Ama Essumanba, 19 years which has produced a baby, by a Cape Coast circuit court. The woman had earlier collected GHc40 from her son as *domufa*, a penalty paid by a man for impregnating a girl without performing the marriage rites. They were arrested by the police when the issue came to light and charged with incest according to section 105 of the Criminal Offences Acts, Acts 29, 1960. The woman was jailed for seven years after pleading guilty, while the trial of the son was adjourned after he pleaded not guilty ([www.peacefmonline.com](http://www.peacefmonline.com)). Incestuous relationship is detested by most societies. I will agree with Sarpong (1974:55) when he said that "incest threatens social order, and with it, the security and even survival of the members of society."

### **Pre-nubility Sexual Taboo**

Among the Akan, if a girl engages in sex before undergoing the puberty rites, she is deemed to have committed a taboo and was punished together with her accomplice either by death or expulsion in times not so very remote. Any girl, who becomes pregnant before, when her family has not previously observed this rite, becomes taboo, and some disaster may befall the family on account of this (Ackah, 1988; Sarpong 1977).

### **Adultery**

Among the Akan, and Ewe, adultery is an act that is abhorred by the society; adultery could be committed by both men and women. According to Akan custom, a man may be charged with adultery not only if he has had sexual intercourse with somebody's wife, but even if he puts his hand around her waist or embraces or fondles her in a questionable or suspicious manner (Ackah, 1988). Among the Ewe, in order to prevent an adulterous relationship developing, husband of such wife or wives are placed under chastity hexes. Husbands desiring to punish their adulterous wives do so by placing chastity hexes on them in secret (Abotchie, 1997). Abotchie describes how such chastity hex works:

The *fia te kli* chastity hex is the more dramatic of the various hexes. In this, the magical axe is disengaged from its handle and placed a few centimeter away with the hook directly opposite the notch from which it has been disengaged and left in that position. When the unfaithful wife meets her paramour and a process of love ... making ensues, the magical axe is automatically activated and it begins to move veritably towards the notch in its handle ... And should the love making ultimately ensue in sexual intercourse

(coition) the axe automatically lodges itself into its notch exactly upon the first penetrating thrust made by the man ... at that juncture, the man's penis becomes locked inside the woman's vagina ... in their locked position the adulterous wife and her paramour remain helplessly caught until their ignominious sin perpetrated in secret becomes public and attested by the lawful husband and a crowd of hooting onlookers (p. 83).

Human sexuality and its uses are respected by both the Akan and Ewe societies because they are held sacred. Sex taboos protect and strengthen the holiness and consequently develop and foster respect for the sanctity and holiness of sex.

### **Conclusion**

This paper sought to reflect on Akan and Ewe ethical values. The two societies have put in place a well thought through ethical values to make their societies a place worth living. As Gyekye puts it "the inculcation of moral virtues is the main goal of moral instructions in African societies because the possession of those virtues or Good character traits leads people to pursue the kinds of morally commendable actions and behaviour expected in the contexts of a social morality" (p. 67). In concluding I will agree with Gyekye that the Akan and Ewe "have put in place ethical value systems that have an overriding concern for harmonious and co-operative living ... and hence, a sense of duty to others."

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