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**“African values threatened by changes”,**

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Abstract: The world is in perpetual changes. It is evident that these changes have positive and negative impact depending on how a particular community wishes to integrate the elements of changes with its own cultural values and beliefs. Therefore, in this paper, I will argue that in this changing world, Africans, as far as they are concerned, need to find and establish for what and who they are, what they believe in, and the values they hold and live for, for this is of a great importance if Africans are to orientate themselves in a world becoming more global with plurality of values. My arguments show that the contemporary African society has undergone and continues to undergo tremendous changes due to influence from other peoples and cultures. I develop and try to understand the concepts of cultural changes, values/African values referring mostly to some philosophical ideas. I recognize the contributions of other people and their cultures in their interaction with Africans and their values; but it is also my intention to point out the danger of “collectivism”. Definitely therefore, as a young African proud of his cultural/traditional values, I suggest the continuous or/and integrated teaching of African values in order to make them alive and helpful for the development of Africa and the world. Our schools, our universities, and local communities are the best places where African values (cultural/traditional) should be taught.

## **I. Introduction**

When I received the information that a conference was going to take place at Jordan University in Morogoro/Tanzania on the theme “Changes and Identity”, what immediately came to my mind as

a reflection to be presented was how to promote African (traditional/cultural) values in this contemporary world. Today, I do sometimes ask myself if most of Africans are really proud of who they are, what they believe in and believe for, brief if they are still proud of the traditional African heritage and ready to promote it for the new generation. It seems that most for of young Africans it is now difficult to live according to some traditional African values in a world where whatever comes from West is considered to be always good without any discernment. In a debate on African values when I was learning English at the Institute of Advanced Leadership in Kampala in 2015, I made a big mistake of arguing that African ladies should wear like respectful African women with long scats and dresses that give respect to their bodies; I shocked most of the ladies who were present. These were some of their reactions: “You think like somebody living in the village. Here we are in town and things have changed, we are town girls and we should wear in European and American styles either you may judge us half naked or not, that is your problem”. From that day, I understood that changes are impacting African values. Who do Africans become in this world in perpetual changes? How can they keep their identity without rejecting or collecting everything new? For indeed, as a friend of mine Rev. Dr. Gabriel Bazuswa said once while lecturing: “If you don’t change, the change will change you”. In other words the change will oblige you to change. Gabriel Idang writes: African cultural heritage has been maligned in many ways. Many overzealous Christians and Islamic enthusiasts have branded it as barbaric, primitive, unprogressive and unrevealed. Many modern men who are engrossed in the influence of science and technology believed that it is a dead and useless religion which should be discarded and thrown over-board(2015). Thanks be to God that I am still among those men and women who think that Africans have something to offer to the humanity in terms of values. I thank the conference organizer committee for allowing me to share my reflection. My gratitude goes to Dr. Konrad who has accepted with humility to present a paper on behalf of a student who I am. I acknowledge my limits as student and I am opened to be advised in order to improve. Understanding the concepts of culture, changes, and African values (traditional and cultural values) will be the main goal in the following paragraphs. I adopted the comprehensive method.

## **II. Changes/Cultural changes**

It is important to examine the notion of changes. “Change” is understood here as a significant alteration or marked departure from that which existed before. In that sense, invention, discovery

and diffusion are some of the ways by which a culture can change or grow. Ogburn (1922: 200), on this point, maintains that “the rate of invention within a society is a function of the size of the existing culture base”. To affirm that African values are threatened by changes means that changes are not to be taken always in a positive way. It is the role of each particular society to know what to incorporate when its cultural and traditional values encounter other cultural aspects of other people. In his book *Introduction to African Philosophy*, Dr. Maurice Makumba says: “For any society who wants to proceed meaningfully it is important to first of all take stocks of its own identity by discovering its values, which are the lifeblood of any human community. These values are normally expressed in a people’s beliefs, and thinking about man person, community, authority, the world, and God. It is only when these values are identified that supplementary (foreign) values can be incorporated”.(128). To identify its own values before integrating foreign values comes first. But it is important to look particularly on cultural changes for the interest of this paper.

### III. Culture

Culture is a concept that is acknowledged universally and whose phenomenal relevance varies from society to society. Thus what is acceptable in DR Congo may likely be an abomination in Poland. Culture encompasses every bit of man’s life and experience. The concept of culture has attracted various definitions from different scholars but which definitions often revolve similar meaning. For our purpose here, we tend towards Tylor (1958) and Malinowski (1931) understanding of culture . Tylor (1958) explicates culture as a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. From Malinowski’s perspective, culture is a functioning, active, efficient, well organized unity, which must be analyzed into component institutions in relations to one another, in relation to the needs of human organism, and in relation to the environment, man-made as well as natural (Malinowski,1931citedby Adegoke et.al.,). In order words culture embraces religious beliefs, languages, dresses, style of living, political organization and all other aspects of life. In the context of this paper in regard to African values, culture is used as the totality of the way of life of African people including their tangible, habits, customs, thoughts as well as the arts, technology, music, literature, theatre, health, drama and education. Besides, the following are the characteristics of the concept of culture under discussion. An African person inherits a cultural

heritage from the preceding generation which they use, add to and pass on to the succeeding ones (Adegboye and Olagunju, 1996:236-238).

#### **IV. value**

We consider two important meanings of the word value that will help us to examine the notion of African values. According to Longman Dictionary, the word value is defined, “as the degree of usefulness of something, quality in something which makes it helpful, useful or desirable, a standard or idea which most people have about the worth of good qualities” . “The value of a thing , be it an object or a belief, is normally defined as its worth. Just as an object is seen to be of a high value that is treasured, our beliefs about what is right or wrong that are worth being held are equally treasured. A value can be seen as some point of view or conviction which we can live with, live by, and can even die for”(Gabriel ). This meaning is very important for us because in the paragraphs that are going to follow we will question realities that are being copied by Africans as values and see if they do fit with African values. In other words, we shall question issues like abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia and others and see if Africans can or are ready to live with, to live by, and even die for. Indeed, though we might not be aware, the society we live in has ways of daily forcing its values on about what is good, right, and acceptable. And all our efforts seem to be trying to conform to acceptable ways of behavior and conduct.

#### **V. Some African values**

We want to look at some few African values and understand how they are threatened by changes. First of all, let us indicate that in our reflection, when we talk of African values, we understand cultural and traditional values. These are some of the traditional African values which we will later put in contrast with some new values.

**Humanity and Brotherhood:** Traditional African cultures recognize the dignity and integrity of the human being as a creature of God. Our common brotherhood is some how linked with our common humanity. There is only one universal family, to which all human beings belong. This family is fragmented, however, into a multiplicity of peoples and cultures. The recognition of all human beings as brothers in the light of our common membership is of great importance to the African people. G.J Wanjohi, in his book *Philosophy and Liberation of Africa*, says that there are traditional African values that need to be preserved. These are the values which have enabled the

African race to endure and survive through the ages. They are according to him basically only two, that is, respect of human life and the means to preserve, nurture and develop that life. And he adds: nobody in traditional Africa would have dreamed of terminating human life through abortion or euthanasia, these were unheard issues because it was based on the belief that only God gives life and only God can take it away. Related to that is also the same-sex marriages that were non-existent in traditional Africa. These would have been contrary to the sacredness of human life and its perpetuation.

**Communalism:** On Communalism and Individualism, Sunday Awoniyi states that “The value that traditional African societies place on communalism is expressed in the sharing of a common social life, commitment to the social or common good of the community, appreciation of mutual obligations, caring for others, interdependence, and solidarity”(2015). In the traditional Africa there was a strong sense of community life that was expressed in different ways and the social responsibility was one of them. There was a certain sense of caring about the life of others in the community. R.v. Fr. Cagnolo, an Italian priest who worked among the Agikuyu of the Mt. Kenya region wrote what follows: A Mugikuyu would not worry too much about household items, especially if he was scarce means, because he was well aware that in case of need he would easily be able to borrow a pestle, hoe, knife or any tool from a neighbor, who would never refuse.(2006:29). Wanjohi also illustrate with a kenyan example this sense of community interdependence in Gikuyu culture. He says that in the area of education quite often parents with a bright child are unable to send him or her for higher education. In that case they call upon their friends and well wishers to attend a harambee (pulling together) to raise the necessary funds. In this way the child is helped to go for higher education. Harambees are also held to help sick person receive required medical treatment(130). With the former Tanzanian president Nyerere, we understand more and better the or the community. He says :”In our traditional African society we were individual in the community. We took care of the community, and the community took care of us”(Nyerere, quoted by Makumba :167).

**Morality:** The morality espoused in both traditional and modern cultures, and societies of Africa is a social, nonindividualistic morality. This kind of morality is held as enjoined by social life itself. There is a preoccupation with human well-being in the African moral thought and practice. "The African moral system puts the ethic of responsibility above the ethic of individual right, even

though the latter are also given due recognition"(Gabriel). The importance of character as the engine of moral life in practice is stressed.

**The Family:** In traditional Africa, marriage is an important institution, for there would be no family without marriage, that is, the basic unit of social life. Recognizing the responsibility to share life with a wife or husband and children in the nuclear family and with members from an entire lineage in the extended family, recognizing the need to have and to care for children, respecting parents, taking care of our parents in their old age and so on are the values associated with the family. To discuss on the values which were used to cater for life in traditional Africa, Gerardl Wonjohi uses this passage of John's Gospel: "I have come that they may have life and have it in abundance(2017:129). Africans saw themselves as destined to have this abundant life. Hospitality, mutual responsibility and interdependence, and reconciliation are according to Wonjohi three values that are related to this abundant life that comes from the family.

**Economic values:** **Economic values of the traditional African society are marked by cooperation. The traditional economy, which is mainly based on farming and fishing, was co-operative in nature. In hembra land (DR CONGO, Kongolo district ), for instance, relatives and friends would come and assist in doing farm work not because they will be paid but so that if it happens that they did such assistance in the near future they are sure to get it.** The traditional African society is a welfare state, functioning on the ethic of fair distribution. Everyone has access to the resources and goods of the community or state. Dr. Christine Wanjiru, in her book *Ethics for Africa today. An introduction to Business Ethics*, writes "in Traditional Africa, wealth was visible and tangible. Family or clan possessions were seen as the good and pride of the community. The nature of wealth itself did not provide much chance for corrupt practices, because it was generated within the family"(2008:26). The spirit of sharing was a good practice in traditional Africa. "In the African worldview, resources were to satisfy human needs. There was an unspoken proviso that resources existed for community use, and were not to be accumulated for their own sake. That is why among the Bantu agricultural communities of Kenya, for instance, ownership was vested more in the clan or Nyumba(the extended family) rather than in an individual(Wanjiru, 27).

**Human Rights:** In the traditional African cultures we find important values in which human rights are rooted. We can mention personal responsibility, the dignity and integrity of every person, the

intrinsic values of every person, consideration of every persons as an end in himself or herself and worthy of respect and equity of the moral worth of all people. Other rights that are acknowledged and protected include: the right to the use of lineage land, right to food and protection from hunger, the right to a fair trial and the right to own private property. These rights are fundamental to the social structure, customs and ethic of the traditional African society.

**Knowledge and Wisdom:** In the traditional African culture, knowledge is highly valued especially practical or empirical knowledge. This type of knowledge is based on observation and experience. Practical wisdom is most relevant in the reconstruction of the African society and the promotion of human well-being. African traditional wisdom is mostly found in proverbs. As Mbiti says (1977: 8), proverbs are “therefore a major source of African wisdom and a valuable part of African heritage.”

Our intention is not to make here an exhaustive list of traditional African values. What is important here is to understand that African people have various moral and societal values meant to regulate interpersonal relationship and to perpetuate the entire community. Africans have certain standards or norms to be observed which are meant for social cohesion of the community. Their role is to prevent members of the community from becoming dangerous and thereby endanger the welfare of the society. We therefore discover that in African society, like in any other society, there are a set of values established to guide the behavior of all the members. Values such as hospitality, chastity before marriage, truth, and respect for old age, covenant keeping, hard work and good character are important for African people. Furthermore, in African community there are proverbs, maxims used to inculcate social and moral values in order to regulate their interpersonal relationships. These values are being threatened by changes today in the encounter of African values with other people and their cultures. It is important therefore to see how African values could completely be lost if we continue collecting and considering all new cultural changes without the spirit of discernment.

One note before we develop the following paragraphs: talking about African cultural values does not imply that by any means there are no cultural disvalues or negative features of the African cultures. There are, of course many. This is because some cultural beliefs, practices and institutions that are regarded as cultural values may be regarded as cultural disvalues by others. All societies do not have same beliefs and do not believe in the same values.

### **The contrast between some African values and western values**

Some of the points have already been indicated above. Let us start with this example given by Dr. Wonjohi when he shows the contrast between the aspect of the mutual responsibility and interdependence in Africa and the individualism in the West: In the department where I was teaching during the mid-1980s, a colleague died. So, as usual, we started going around collecting money towards the funeral expenses. Without thinking in terms of culture, I made the mistake of approaching an expatriate colleague for a contribution. He was shocked. He said that in his own country if one dies the family takes care of funeral expenses, without bothering the public.(Wanjohi, 2017:131). This example, and they can be given many, shows the difference between two cultures. The challenge for Africa is that today the value of solidarity is being replaced by the individualism caused by capitalism event. The sense of assistance, help, and attention to a brother or a sister in our modern African society is being lost. And yet, it seems to us that it is the African humanism that could have remained the only and unique chance for the entire world in front of the dehumanization that threaten the modern human being. And we know well the consequences behind this dehumanization of the person. When we look at the different African countries that are experiencing ethnical or national conflicts causing the death of uncountable persons, we understand up to which level individualism can bring us. The loss of that sense of solidarity, assistance, help, and the attention to our brothers and sisters opens the door to wars that are being experienced. The African has the duty to research that cultural value and not consider his traditional heritage as a primitive manifestation. Africans are becoming blind to their own cultural values by adopting new western cultural values without discernement.

The same-sex marriages is another reality which have been accepted already in some societies. This is to mean that those who have accepted them find that these marriages do fit with their values. We defined the value as some point of view or conviction which we can live with, live by, and can even die for. The challenge today is that what western people think they can live with and live by should also be lived by Africans. We might be wrong in what we are saying, but our conviction is that African people cannot live with homosexuality , it is not part of their values and they should not be forced to adopt it as some powerful countries are trying to impose it. The reactions of people on the issue of homosexuality in some African countries where the tendance is asking governments to protect those who choose the same sex-marriages show that it is a reality which they cannot

live with, it is contrary to their traditional values, it is contrary to nature. Life is created by a woman and a man and not by two men. If this value can work in other western cultures, it cannot fit in African context and it is not understandable to defend it so that it may become universal. For, to fight for the universality of the same-sex marriages is to accept the non-existence of human race and thus definitely the non existence of the same-sex marriage. The point here is not to judge, what is important to understand is that most African countries cannot live with this new reality which others find acceptable. In the same way that African people give right to those who have accepted it to practice it fully, Africans should also be given the right to reject it as it is seen as a disvalue. Africans have right to defend their values.

Abortion (deliberated abortion) is something new to Africans values. Since Africans knew that our life comes from God, it is was unknown that one may decide to abort as it is now being observed. The sacredness of human life which is an important value is being destroyed by foreign new ways of looking at life. Values are an integral part of culture and culture is what defines a people's identity, then the values that a people hold are what differentiate them from other people. If for other western countries abortion is a value and can be accepted , for Africans the value of the sacredness of life in which they believe is what differentiate them from other peoples. Cultures always try to maintain those values that are necessary for the survival of their people. The respect of human life is a necessary value for the survival of African people. More and more, it is being observed that young African people do consider abortion like something normal. Just as a catholic priest was addressing this message to young ladies in Bukavu town ,DR CONGO in these words:"Most you do go for confession and I often hear: Fr, forgive me for I have aborded. I tell you this, do not say you have aborded, but know and accept that you have killed a human being, you have decided to kill ". Yes, the African value of sacredness of life is treated.

Today as well, the sense of community is being lost and this is mentioned above. Gabriel Idang says: "The synergetic nature of the society that allows people to build houses and work on farms together is directly opposite to individualistic model of the West". When I was a small boy growing in our village called Sola in RD CONGO in Kongolo district, I often observed that to build a house, one could just prepare the materials needed and food, then he would just invite neighbours, friends and relatives to build and it would not take long. This practice can still be observed in some African villages. In those "good old days" as some would say it was usual to see a neighbour, friend or

relative correcting an erring child whose parents he knows. This was based on the true belief that the churning out of a well-behaved child would be to the benefit of not only the immediate parents, but also the society. In the same vein, it was believed that if the child turned out to be a failure, it is not only the immediate family that would bear the brunt: neighbours, friends and acquaintances could also fall victim of his nuisance. But today, we see people adopting more and more nuclear family patterns and the individualistic life style of the West”(Gabriel ). When we look at the way houses are built today in Africa, we can understand how the individualistic model is incorporated. The western culture whereby one should not mind the life of his neighbour has succeeded its incorporation in Africa. In traditional African culture, a friend or neighbour who tries to correct an erring child will in no time, to his embarrassment, be confronted with the question: “What is your business?” Kinship ties and love are what characterised the traditional African culture. The respect and protection of environment was a value in traditional African culture. It is part of the African world-view to treat the environment in which he finds himself with respect: the African cooperates with nature and does not try to conquer it. This system, whether it was founded on myth or not, had a way of preserving and conserving nature. Thus, whether consciously or unconsciously, the society was guaranteed an increase in agricultural productivity, which was the mainstay of the traditional economy. Today, with the violation of those customs and myths, we suffer low agricultural productivity and denuded farmlands because the traditional values that safeguarded the land, have been watered-down and we do not have the technological know-how to replace these beliefs that have been abandoned. In 2017 in Karamoja region in Uganda, the local government got investors and decided to allow the cutting of the trees of the only one forest of that region. When the local people, the Karimojong people heard that, they protested and demonstrated in Moroto town up to the district. But what is interesting to mention here was the reaction or the reason why those trees should have not be cut. Elders said what follows: These trees from our forest is the heritage from our ancestors, our children and our animals do get water from that forest. We cannot accept to destroy the gift that we received from our grandfathers because this forest is the symbol of life. And in fact, the trees were not cut because they were ready to die for their forest. The conclusion here is simply that those positive dimensions of our culture – our synergetic society, our conservation of nature and even our native arts, dances and games that offer us interesting sources of entertainment and happiness, should be encouraged given the fact that

culture ought to be knowledgeably innovative and instrumentally beneficial to people in such a way that the society can move from one level of development to another.

There are a certain number of African values that are threatened today by changes. What is important is not to mention all those values that are threatened. The most important point, may be, is to be aware of what I would call conflict between African values and changes, or, to use the words of Makumba: the tension at the heart of the African system of values. (194). Africans cannot refuse changes. However, change does not call for replacement of values. On this point, Idang addresses this message: "A change which calls for the replacement or total abandonment of pre-established and originally preferred modes of behaviour is less likely to be accepted than one that is preservative— that is one which either provides other alternatives and or extends the culture by merely adding new things to it (Idang)". Africans need directions. What do we suggest?

Conclusion and proposals.

Dr. G. Wanjohi gives two interrelated tasks of philosophy for Africa which we find of great importance since we encourage and recommend strongly here the continuous teaching of some traditional African values. We would like to make ours his ideas when he says: "preservation and development of Traditional African values and the Participation in contemporary development of Africa. As we tried to look at some African values above and see how they have been guiding the African behavior for the social cohesion of the community, we suggest that those traditional African values be reconsidered in our modern education, they should be taught to this new generation. Often lectures tell us that their role is not teaching us what to do or what is good and bad, what to adopt or reject. It seems that their role is to give us tools, to form our minds on critical thinking so as to make us able to think by ourselves. In that sense, we think that traditional African values should also be exposed to students by showing their positive and negative sides so as to orient the young generation in their lives. Teachers in primary and secondary schools should be trained on how to teach traditional African values to children. Not only in schools should those values be taught, but also in our local communities. On this former proposal, churches have a big role to play. We are not sure on how it works in other churches, but we know that in the catholic church there are different groups of women, men, ladies, young men children and others of various denominations where traditional African values can be discussed and promoted. Both the affirmation of African identity and integration in the world are important. The role that Makumba

gives to Philosophy or philosophies for Africa today when he says:to help establish the existence of of supreme values which should form the ideal aim of human life and education(Hountondji, quoted by Makumba:195) is for us of great importance.