ELEMENTS OF AFRICAN BIOETHICS IN A WESTERN FRAME

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It is interesting to see how philosophers of different cultures and backgrounds challenge the same problems in a different way. Professor Dr. Tangwa lives in Cameroon and finds himself in a country which fights against famine, AIDS, exploitation by western countries and companies, to mention but a few of the recurring themes in his everyday life. As a philosopher Dr. Tangwa challenges these problems, and specifically Cameroon’s, and while doing so he draws upon African culture - his own Nso heritage in particular - to find answers for many of these urgent questions.

**Question:** In many of your articles you start from problems that are directly related to Africa or Africa’s fate. You also draw on African (Nso) culture in your attempts to come up with solutions to these problems. Could you tell us a little about your own background and the culture you draw so much inspiration from?

*Tangwa:* I was born into an extended family in a large African compound called ‘Lum’, in the village of Ndzenshwai-Shisong, in the Fondom (Kingdom) of Nso’, in the Northwestern (Bamenda) highlands of Cameroon. My biological parents were among the Christian converts of the lineage, so I was baptised at birth and had the privilege in my early upbringing of both traditional (pagan, if you like) and Christian influences. The first Christian (Catholic) mission in the whole of the Bamenda region had been established in Shisong in 1912 by two German priests, Lennartz and Emontz, of the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, sent by their mother house, Sittard in Holland. Ndzenswhai was one of about six quarters or sub-villages of Shisong, being the most densely populated and the only one with
many traditional families. The other quarters of Shisong were inhabited mostly by Christian converts, many of whom had migrated from other villages of the Nso’ Fondom, to live close to the Church and sometimes to escape from the religious persecution of their ‘pagan’ kith and kin.

Ndzenswai is nicely separated from the rest of the other quarters of Shisong by the River Shwai. Around the early nineteen hundreds, when the Fon (King) of Nso’, Nga’-Bihfon I, gave Shisong to the Catholic missionaries for settlement, Nzdenswhai comprised about half a dozen family lineages (Kilam, Wang, Kigom, Lum, Mbiim and Lavkishwang); the last-mentioned of which is no longer in existence today, having completely relocated to another part of the Fondom, while all the others have suffered a diminution in population strength, physical appurtenances and general visibility, owing to rural-urban migration, erosion of the traditional fabric of life, general impoverishment and the devastating effects of modern epidemics.

I am basically a villager in my dispositions, attitudes and innate expectations/reactions and, in spite of having widely travelled the world, Ndzenshwai-Shisong remains the only place on planet Earth where I feel completely at home and at peace with myself. And yet, as of today (2006), Ndzenshwai has neither electricity nor a paved road, our collective efforts, entreaties and expectations, in this regard, having been consistently frustrated by the governmental people of Cameroon. We do, however, have a small pipe-borne water scheme which resulted from an initiative of one of my European friends, Sue Willdig, who helped us arrange initial funding for the project from the German NGO, Missereor.

The pioneer Catholic missionaries established two Western-style primary schools in Shisong, one for boys and the other for girls. I went to primary school at the age of 3 and, upon completion, decided to follow the path of the Catholic priesthood, following the encouragement particularly of many Reverend sisters (Shisong also had a convent) and also that of my parents. At the seminary, I suffered a crisis of conscience which convinced me that I was more of a pagan than a Christian in the depths of my heart, and (doctrinally) a potential heretic, as a future priest. In spite of being rated a brilliant student and exemplary candidate for the priesthood, I voluntarily decided to quit the path to the priesthood, to the disappointment, if not consternation, of many including my family,
and thereafter pursued secular studies.

Nso’ culture is a very communal culture, organized on the visual model of concentric circles, representing hierarchical centres of traditional authority. The smallest of these circles is the nuclear family in its western acceptation, which in the African context is properly called a ‘house-hold’, comprising a man, his wife or wives and their offspring. Next, comes the immediate lineage, headed by a lineage head (Taala’/ Fai or Sheey), usually designated by the Fon (King) whenever the position becomes vacant. The lineage head has very important responsibilities for the material, social and spiritual well being of each and every member of the lineage and for the growth and expansion of the lineage. He is usually a custodian, priest and healer in one. Next, comes the extended lineage, usually headed by a ‘Shuu-Fai’ (councillor to the King) to whom allied lineage heads pay homage and allegiance and from whom they draw inspiration, advice and mutual support. Lastly, comes the King, the chief high priest of Nso’, titular owner and chief custodian of all land in the kingdom, final judge and arbiter of all disputes.

*Q*: In the article: “The HIV/AIDS pandemic, African traditional values and the research for a vaccine in Africa’ you discuss the various disadvantages of a ‘Western approach’ and, inspired by the culture you just told us about, you emphasize the importance of African communitarian values. Could you elaborate or give us a good illustration of a more ‘African’ approach to the problem of HIV/AIDS?

**Tangwa**: A ‘more African’ approach to the problem of HIV/AIDS would first recognize it as an epidemic threatening the very survival of the entire community and therefore requiring the urgent mobilization of all of the community’s resources in fighting against it. HIV/AIDS is a global epidemic requiring the mobilization of global resources in fighting against it. This has not been the case, as the best resources of the developed industrialized communities of the world, who are less at risk and less affected, are lavished on enhancement medical care and other luxury medical researches, while medicines which can mitigate the effects of HIV and delay its lethal *terminus ad quem*, widely available in the developed world, are mostly inaccessible or unaffordable in the developing world. In the traditional African setting neither social nor economic status was a barrier to accessing
treatment if one was ill.

Q. Why do you think neither social nor economic status was ever a barrier to accessing treatment in traditional Africa?

Tangwa: Because money was not involved; the art of healing was not a commercial activity or occupation one could practice for the purpose of earning a living. Consultation of healers and access to treatment were quite free, except in so far as the patient might be asked, in certain cases, to provide some of the common ingredients necessary for preparing his/her medicine.

Q. What reason(s) do you think there is/are for the (relative) inaccessibility and stratification of (medical) treatment in Western societies?

Tangwa: The main reason, I believe, has to do with the marriage between medicine and the market, the evolution of medicine into a purely commercial and highly lucrative activity in which investments understandably yield enormous profits.

Q: You state that the Western economic idea and practice (the more desperately you need a product or service, the more you are required to pay for it under the so-called law of demand and supply) has unfortunately become globally accepted. Wouldn’t you say that this kind of calculating, distracted from local commitments and values, this ‘Western approach’, is inherent to globalisation?

Tangwa: Yes, in its economic dimension; and many people would argue that globalization is nothing more and nothing less than an economic process whereby the industrialized Western world has taken command of the world’s economy and is economically colonizing the entire globe. Personally, I also look optimistically on globalization as an opportunity for the dominant/domineering Western world to lend an attentive ear to the other cultures of the world, to appreciate and learn from their cultural values, to relinquish the initiative of their autonomy and self determination, so that the emerging global culture will be truly a culture that has benefited from the best values of all the cultures of the world; for no human culture
is perfect and none so poor that it has not discovered human values that have eluded the others. Globalization does have other dimensions, including a prescriptive dimension and, if the lessons of postmodernism are correctly learned, the industrialized Western world would not strive to impose its economic determinism and ‘might is right’ operational philosophy on all other societies; postmodernism should go hand in hand with postcolonialism. Globalization should not just mean Westernization, let alone Americanization, where world policy is set with strident declarations from the White House.

A globalized economy does not mean one which follows the dictates of some supposedly omniscient controllers in Washington, London, Paris, Bretton Woods etc., but rather one in which all the inter-dependent communities of the world freely exchange their produce in a common market, regulated by unmanipulated market forces. If globalization is to mean expanding and imposing the highly exploitative Western economic system to other parts of the world, then I am opposed to it.

Q. Wouldn’t you say that a kind of criticism of irresponsibility on a global level would be more effective to address the problems of a globalizing world than an appeal to local identities or values?

Tangwa: Criticism at a global level is important, but it needs to evolve from recognition of local identities and the fact that the dominant Western identity is also a local identity imposing itself globally.

Q: You call yourself a ‘cultural pluralist’ and a ‘moral universalist’. How do you reconcile those two positions?

Tangwa: Culture is the way of life of a group of people, underpinned by adaptation to a particular environment, a shared worldview, ideas, values, historical experiences, attitudes, expectations, practices, etc. As such, cultures are forms of life analogous to biological species. Cultures qua culture are a datum of the social nature of humans. Cultural pluralism is inescapable, because there is no reason to think, let alone propose, that any particular culture as a culture should not exist.
Morality, on the other hand, is concerned about right/wrong, good/bad in human actions/behaviour, including actions/behaviour that are cultural practices. What is right/wrong, good/bad in the moral sense could not differ from place to place or from time to time, at the moment of perception. Morality not only is necessarily prescriptive, it is necessarily universal in its ambitions, although, like all other things human, it is subject to human epistemological and other limitations.

Q. But wouldn’t you say that morality is concerned with a way of thinking about right or wrong and/or with moral feelings about the good and the bad in human actions/behaviour. And are these feelings not connected with a way of life of a group or people, their ideas, worldview, values, etc? How can we, in an epistemological sense, possibly make the distinction between what we experience as right/wrong or what we think is good/bad and what is right/wrong or is good/bad? And if not, is morality - connected in this way with the experience of what is right/wrong, so with the worldview, values and ideas of a group of people - not an expression of a people instead of all people?

Tangwa: It is an expression of a people in all their epistemological limitations, necessarily aimed or intended at having validity and applicability for all the people.

Q: You believe that ‘disinterested reflective deliberation’ can narrow (or close?) the gap(s) in moral diversity. How do you propose we come to a ‘disinterested reflective’ point of view through deliberation?

Tangwa: The main impediments to disinterested reflective deliberation, in my opinion, are egoism and the belief that might is right. Egocentrism is a psychological datum which need not issue in egoism. The impediments to disinterested reflective equilibrium can be subverted by an emphasis on the absolute moral equality of all humans, on the fact that truth is never like a hammer and on the disastrous historical errors of the mighty in all epochs of human history. It also needs emphasizing that self-interest on which some powerful cultures purport to found their moralities could not
possibly be the foundation of morality, inasmuch as morality comes in at all only where the self is side by side or up against other selves, implying the impossibility of proceeding like a solipsist, like an absolute egoist.

Q: What kind of practices and institutions do you think are compatible/useful with this ideal?

Tangwa: For practices, democracy and, for institutions, a United Nations Organization, of equal and permanent members, none with veto powers, not given only to manipulative power politics, but to deliberations culminating in consensus, with global well-being as its main preoccupation.

Q: Could this valuation of a disinterested reflective deliberation and a disinterested reflective point of view be an ideal or an expression of a certain moral engagement which is itself culturally dependent? Isn’t it possible, for instance, to proceed from a universally accepted plurality of (radically) different views?

Tangwa: It is possible to proceed from a universally accepted plurality of different views, provided the ineradicable limitations of each and every one of those views are first recognized and fanatical self-righteousness combated.

Q: You fight for a more cooperative and sympathetic world. You state for instance that ‘it is, first and foremost, the time to mobilize all available resources in the interest of those helplessly in need.’ What does this mean for the individual, practically speaking?

Tangwa: There is a moral imperative here, deducible from the very idea that we are human beings. From the point of view of the individual, there are two possible areas of action: individual philanthropy and collective action in cooperation with others aimed at influencing government policies and actions.

Q: What kind of role do you see for the ethicist? Do his or her
opinions have an influence?

**Tangwa:** Ethics is prescriptive, and the role of the ethicist is persuasive and exhortatory, aimed at achieving results by convincing through rational arguments. The ethicist may not achieve results as fast as those who use other methods, such as force or lobbying, but the results of the ethicist, when achieved, are more influential, firmer and longer lasting.