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This thesis, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the Graduate Committee of The University of New Mexico in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Philosophy

Ethical Themes in African Thought

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ETHICAL THEMES IN AFRICAN THOUGHT

BY
ELWOOD JOSEPH MCDOWELL

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Philosophy
in the Graduate School of
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May, 1973

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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Having long believed that my own African cultural heritage was worthless, it is especially problematical to me to establish that African peoples have much to offer philosophically. The central problem posed in this thesis is to bring to light African thinking as regards certain ethical questions such as the "individual vs. the community," "the highest good," and "the overall moral progress of mankind."

Because of the newness of this subject matter, my resources were limited. I hope, nonetheless, that through examining the works of some few authors who have drawn their conclusions from innumerable proverbs and the structure of various languages that my evidence will be sufficient.

In order to support my thesis, I have first tried to establish some general conclusions about African metaphysics, namely that African peoples are monotheistic, that they believe in an after-life, that time and space are closely related, and that their God is seen both as creator and as being providential in his relationship to man. From this ontological framework I have drawn out my conclusions about African ethics and the most ultimate conclusion is that the highest good for the African person is happiness which results from union with God.

In view of my own political and social situation as an Afro-American, I was particularly interested in the historical implications of the rediscovery of the value of African culture and thinking. The real stress on the community and sharing among African peoples in both thought and action is something badly needed in the United States. I further conclude that since Afro-American people simply cannot be employed en masse in America today because of automation and an oversaturated job market, they will have to band together and pool their resources in their local communities and so reestablish their closeness. Though Blacks may make the same mistakes as man has made throughout history in setting up small scale cooperative industries of their own, I hope that we will build a much more humane, community-oriented kind of society which would be an example to the rest of the United States on how to work together rather than to compete.

Hopefully, I have at least made a start at shedding some light on the subject of African thinking and its possible implications for all of us today in a world of so much turmoil.

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Now that centuries of indifference and outright lies about the continent of Africa are being wiped away by the rise of a new nationalistic spirit, there follows a revival of interest in the culture of that continent. Innumerable books about the literature, history, music, art, and philosophy of Africa are beginning to find themselves on the shelves of the libraries of the European colonizers. Being a person of African heritage, I felt it my duty to study the philosophical thought of the peoples of Africa and to help spread an appreciation for the African contribution to world religious thought. It would indeed take a lifetime to systematically present a study of all or perhaps even one of the religions of the continent and so I have decided to treat one aspect of African philosophical thought from a synthetic point of view. In other words, what I will really be doing is discussing a few of the African solutions to certain philosophical problems. It should become clear to the reader from further analysis that there are enough similarities between various African religions to make such generalities. Hence, my theme will be that African thought contains much of value in the area of ethics and ethical themes such as the "good," "individuality vs. the community" are well worked out by African peoples.

Before we begin so lengthy a task, however, it would be good for the reader to understand certain things about our sources for this paper and perhaps a clearer understanding of exactly what our goals are.

First of all, be it known that we are dealing here with Africa beown the Sahara and more specifically with the Akan peoples on the West Coast and the Bantu peoples of Eastern and South Central Africa. It is, of course, a fact that the colonizers brought literacy to these peoples but it should be obvious that illiteracy does not necessarily mean that there is a lack of wisdom. By colonizers we mean both the Europeans and the Arabs. Most of what has been written comes from the writings of European anthropologists who were not interested in the philosophy implied in African proverbs and folk tales which they recorded. With the rise of nationalism in the late '40's, the '50's and '60's, however, native intellectuals began to reimmerge themselves into the culture from which they came so we have several profound works which attempt to systemetize African thought in such a way that any Western thinker could understand it.

Our most important source is a work by J. B. Danquah called The Akan Doctrine of God. As far as we can determine, this is one

of the most well worked out books dealing with the subject of African religion. Another excellent work to which we shall be referring is one called African Religions and Philosophy by J. S. Mbiti who is an East African person of one of the Bantu tribes. There are certain criticisms of both of these authors with which we must deal. Danquah is criticized by the author of the introduction to the latest edition of his book:

Danquah's desire, therefore, is to expound Akan thought in such a way as to make it comprehensible to western thinkers and to demonstrate that it is comparable to their system|.... Likewise, though Danquah was learned in the ways and thought of the Akan, yet it is impossible not to reject his presentation at some points for the very reason that he falls a victim to his desire for speculation much of which is, as far as the available evidence goes, groundless.¹

And Okot p'Bitek in his African Religions in Western Scholarship:

But instead of carrying out systematic studies of the beliefs of their peoples, and presenting them as African peoples actually know them, the African scholars, smarting under the insults from the West, claimed that African peoples knew the Christian God long before the missionaries told them about it. African deities were selected and robed with hellenic garments by Jomo Kenyatta, J. B. Danquah, K. A. Busia, W. Abraham, E. B. Idowu and others.²

¹Kwesi A. Dickson, (Introduction) The Akan Doctrine of God (London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd., 1968), p. viii.

²Okot p'Bitek, African Religions in Western Scholarship (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1970), p. 47.

p'Bitek also criticizes J. S. Mbiti for the same crime and he is also one of our primary sources.

Now while there is undoubtedly some truth in what Dickson and p'Bitek are saying, the reader ought to understand my own purpose in this paper. While I am interested in discovering what is most originally African in the traditional sense, I still would not like to reject much of what Danquah and Mbiti both say simply because it is interpreted in a "hellenic" way. My question is: "What have they said that is of real philosophical value?" Even though any educated African is influenced by Western thinking, does he cease to be African? In spite of this difficulty, it seems to me that much of what they do say is clearly supported by evidence given through language analysis and interpretation of proverbs and stories. I really do not see how some of these things could be interpreted in any other way, bias or no bias. In order to feel more sure about all of this, I have talked about this difficulty with some of the West and East African brothers at the University of New Mexico and they seem to have come to the same conclusion as I have. These are the most reliable sources we have. The writers are themselves native Africans and their confreres who have criticized them have not presented any alternatives. There is not one jot of

what p'Bitek feels is the correct approach in his entire book.

All he does is criticize the works of others.

The reader might be wondering why this, a philosophy paper, would be dealing with religion. Suffice it to say that it is impossible to look at African ethics or metaphysics outside of their religion. As Adesanya Adebayo says:

God might be banished from Greek thought without any harm being done to the logical architecture of it but this cannot be done in the case of the Yoruba. In medieval thought science could be dismissed at pleasure, but this is impossible in the case of Yoruba thought, since faith and reason are mutually dependent.³

And this applies equally well to other African peoples:

The unity of which Adesanya is speaking here holds not only for Yoruba thought, but presumably also for the whole of traditional thinking in Africa, for African philosophy as such.⁴

And thus a discussion of the religious metaphysics of African peoples becomes necessary if we are to understand their ethics. Our metaphysical discussion will be rather sketchy nonetheless as this is not our primary interest in this paper. It would take much more space than we would like to give here to give a more

³J. Jahn, Muntu (New York: Grove Press, 1961) quoting Yoruba Metaphysical Thinking, p. 97.

⁴Ibid.

profound exposition of African metaphysical thinking. But we shall try as best we can to abstract out of a myriad of systems what is necessary for an understanding of our thesis.

CHAPTER I
A BRIEF SKETCH OF THE MOST IMPORTANT AFRICAN
METAPHYSICAL SYSTEMS

We begin our discussion with one of the folk tales of the Mende people:

Ngewo, before He was called ngewo, was once a very big spirit who lived in a cave. He was so powerful that all He said would be done, took place. One day He said, I have all this power, why don't I use it? I have lived alone for a long time with no one to talk to and no one to play with. Then He went to the entrance of the cave and said, I want all kinds of animals to live with Me in this cave. So the animals came in pairs. Then He shut the door. After a while, He called them all together and gave them the laws (rules) of the cave. He said, 'I will give you anything you want, food, and everything else, but you must not touch my own food.' Then the spirit looked round about and said, 'This cave is too small.' So He turned Himself around and the cave became very very big. The animals were now very happy, because they had plenty of room to find food. All they had to do was eat. The Spirit too, was happy. He had neighbours to talk to and play with. The Spirit was so big that all the animals could not move even one of His legs. But the Spirit was very strict about the due observance of His law (rules). One day one of the animals came to greet the Spirit. As it approached, it smelled some sweet-smelling food and took some and ate it. Immediately it found itself in front of the Spirit. The Spirit said, 'What brought you here, you have violated my law.' The Spirit then threw the animal out of the cave and said, 'You! From now on your name is cow.' Later, another animal ate the food and again the Spirit threw it out of the cave, saying, 'You! From now on your name is monkey.' At last all the animals were thrown out of the cave. Some of the animals the Spirit called 'man.' That is how animals got their names. All the animals and men are still wandering around in the world looking for this

'sweet-smelling food.' The Spirit is now called ngewo. He has now gone up far above men, where he is sitting, watching to see who will eat His food. Men and animals are now removed from ngewo. The removal presumable means the loss of immortality which is His attribute.⁵

Need we mention the similarity between this creation myth and the Adam and Eve myth from Genesis. Irrespective of whether African people have taken this story seriously or not, we can perhaps easily assume from it that they believe Ngewo, their Supreme God, to be the Creator. We could also draw interesting conclusions from the idea of the animals and men being separated from God and thus losing immortality but we shall save some such speculation for later.

From the Akan we have a Trinity of three supreme Gods -- Onyame, Onyankopon, and Odomankoma. Nevertheless, as we shall see later, these three are but the manifestations of the one God so that they can correctly be called monotheists. Since we have the best resource material on the Akan, we shall take them as our prime example of the possibility and actuality of real depth in some African thought.

First of all, let us attempt to derive the true meaning of the word Nyame or Onyame. From the evidence presented by J. G. Christaller,

⁵W. T. Harris and H. Sawyer, The Springs of Mende Conduct and Belief (Freetown: Sierra Leone University Press, 1968), pp. 8-9.

Danquah concludes that: "...the nature of Nyame is that he is the Shing Power."⁶ He further derives Nyame's functions from his appellations or strong names: "He is called Amowia, the Giver of Light or Sun, Amosu, the Giver of Rain, and Amaomee, the Giver of Repletion, that is to say, Sufficiency of Good."⁷ While these would appear to be typical polytheistic functions, it should be noted that Christianity, one of the so-called greater monotheistic religions, maintains that God has power over all nature and all of these appellations refer to the one -- Nyame. Maxim 2855 from Christaller's book on Maxims of the Twi says: "The order Onyame has settled, living man cannot subvert."⁸ The age-old arguments regarding the logical necessity for positing the existence of a Creative Intelligence in the universe seem to be implied here by this maxim. Even though African people have seldom, if ever, wished to rationalize their religion in the manner of the Greeks or Aquinas, one can still infer that their assumption that there needs to be an explanation for the order in the universe is certainly not illogical in the Aristotelian sense. But more importantly, we realize that for the Akan people,

⁶J. B. Danquah, The Akan Doctrine of God (London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd., 1968), p. 40.

⁷Ibid., p. 41.

⁸Ibid., p. 40.

proving the existence of God by reason alone is not even a consideration. I refer the reader back to our earlier discussion of the impossibility of separating faith and reason in African thinking.

There is a ditty, which is originally Akan which describes the similarity between the Greek Logos (Word) of St. John's Gospel and Onyame:

Who gave word,
 Who gave word,
 Who gave word?
 Who gave word to Hearing,
 For Hearing to have told Ananse
 For Ananse to have told Odomankoma,
 For Odomankoma
 To have made the Thing?⁹

Ananse is another name used for Nyankopon in Akan mythology.¹⁰

And if we refer to St. John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was the beginning with God; all things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made." (John I, 1-3)

Referring again to the Akan ditty we ask which one of the three Akan divine persons first thought of creation? According to Danquah, Ote or "hearing" refers to Onyame and Ananse to Nyankopon. Hence the similarity of the two concepts seems to be that both

⁹Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁰Ibid.

"God the Son" or Christ and Onyame refer to the "Word" or the person in the godhead who represents thought and indeed the very concept of the nature of all that is created.

Linguistically, the correct derivation of the name Nyankopon, the second person of the Akan Trinity, seems to be from Nyame and koro, from biako, one; and from -pon, great, so that the entire name means: "The Only Great Nyame," or "He who alone is of the Greatest Brightness." We can better understand the functions of Nyankopon by analyzing the maxims which refer to him:

- 2545: Let living man empty your goblet of wine,
Nyankopon would refill it.
- 2546: Unless you die of Nyankopon, let living man
kill you, and you will not perish.
- 2547: If the plucky sparrow got nothing else from
Nyankopon, it got dash.
- 2656: If you would tell Nyankopon, tell the wind.
- 2825: If you would serve Nyankopon, be thorough,
attaching no conditions.¹¹

We conclude then that Nyankopon is the providential personality of the Akan Trinity rather than abstraction. He is the one who guides lovingly and is to be trusted. It follows then that He is appropriately the one who is worshipped in Akan religious ceremonies.¹²

¹¹Ibid., p. 56.

¹²Ibid., pp. 46-47.

Odomankoma is the final person of the Akan Trinity to be dealt with. Danquah contrasts Odomankoma with Nyame and Nyankopon by distinguishing between Borebore, a name often used referring only to Him, and Boadee, the name used referring to Nyame and Nyankopon. Borebore means Carver, or Excavator, or Hearer whereas Boadee simply means Creator. It is such a beautiful concept of the Creator, it seems to me, because the particle -re is an expression of continuous action.¹³ Christian thinking has led many to conceive of creation as having happened in the "beginning" but apparently the Akan have maintained an insight into the continuous creativity that is happening in the universe. Upon further philological analysis of the name Odomankoma, we derive that:

...the best and unquestionable derivation of doma is to take it to mean abundance (of anything), whether it be love or cruelty or a medley of things, as in the phrase mmoa-doma, "the world of animals," the entire animal kingdom.¹⁴

Then Odomankoma means essentially something like the manifold, the infinite. And an even clearer conception:

If, in that sense, there is really an absolute, namely, the total content and container of reality or the thing in its absolute sense, the Odomankoma is such an Absolute.¹⁵

¹³Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 60-61.

¹⁵Ibid.

There are a couple of other aspects of Odomankoma which we shall treat in order to get a clearer picture of the relationship between the persons of the Godhead of the Akan and the depth of their conception of God. The Akan guide said to Christaller: "Odomankoma is many (oye bebre) and wherever you go, you see him (woko baabiara a wuhu no)..."¹⁶ It would seem quite logical to infer from this statement that the so-called "primitive" Akan person had what many religions call cosmic consciousness. It is a conclusion that is difficult to escape when one compares their religious concepts with those of the so-called higher religions. There can be no doubt that the man who lives in much closer contact with nature, and indeed, in greater harmony with it, would much likely have experienced something of a feeling of oneness with it. While all Africans are of course not highly developed mystics, I am really convinced that many have had true mystical experiences. Interestingly enough, the whole Black Christian Church in the United States, and especially the Pentecostals, is built upon the real experience of the "Spirit". The innumerable stories that I have heard from many people regarding special healings and the experience of the presence of God within and the true wisdom of many of these people who have not been educated makes me certain that many of them have had genuine

¹⁶Ibid., p. 62.

transcendental experiences. But this would be very difficult to prove and it is not our intention in this paper to do so.

Another important aspect of Odomankoma is contained in this appellation -- "Onyankopon Odomankoma -- the Greater Nyame is Odomankoma."¹⁷

The latter is not of a final nature which could not find its justification in the former, but since God is not three persons or three ideas, but suggests to the Akan mind a threefold idea or notion, it follows that Odomankoma must have personality if he is to include the personal God Nyankopon. And mind is in that personality, ensuring a unity which is many, manifold, plentiful, abundant, copious.¹⁸

In other words, since God is one but threefold, one of the three must have personality if its other manifestations are personal. If this idea of the one and the many is difficult for the reader to swallow, the reader should only reflect for a moment on the nature of the universe and he will easily see that all of creation is in a sense at its bottom-most level, one basic stuff or energy, and yet there are innumerable manifestations of this oneness. The problem of the one and the many is continually to be reckoned with in the history of human thought. It is the overemphasis on either of these aspects that has caused all problems -- both moral and

¹⁷Ibid., p. 63.

¹⁸Ibid.

intellectual throughout the ages of man's existence. We shall return to a discussion of this when we begin to analyze our central thesis.

The final point to be mentioned in our treatise of the Akan God is that God (Onyankopon) is (onye) the Infinite God's (Odomankoma's) personality (Sunsum).¹⁹ This contradicts in a sense what Danquah had said before regarding Odomankoma's personality but nonetheless is the most important aspect of the Godhead for our discussion of ethics. As we shall later see, the Akan conceive of the sunsum, in man as well as God, as the personality which in some sense covers the relation of the "Body" to the "Soul". (Okara) Since Nyankopon has already been referred to as the providential one, we get a notion of Him as the will and consequently the seat of love in the Godhead. It is the will which is the essence of individuality and personality and Nyankopon is just that -- the personality of Odomankoma who is, on this level, the soul. This notion of the person will be very important for our later argumentation.

The Akan have one other concept called Honhom which we must understand for our present study. When the experience of the Sunsum (personality) is integrated with the ideality of Okara, we get Honhom, the pure etherial spirit which links man with the Ideal Spirit. This Honhom is not another person in the Akan Trinity but the very

¹⁹Ibid., p. 66.

"soul" or being of the "Thing" itself. This is comparable to the Divine Abyss beyond the Trinity which some Christian mystics such as Ruysboeck and Eckhart speak of and the void of which the Buddhists speak.

Like the Akan, most other peoples in Africa are monotheistic:

Donnons comme exemple la doctrine des Kambas a son sujet. Il a formé les etres vivants, comme, avec la hache, on tire d'un morceau de bois un escabeau ou toute autre chose.²⁰

(We give as an example the doctrine of the Kamba on this subject. He formed living beings as, with an ax, one makes a stool or any other thing out of a piece of wood. (My translation)

And among the Shona:

Mwari as Creator is furthermore qualified in relation to His creation by some other interesting appellations: Matangakugara (You, who settled first) and Mawanikwa (You who were found to exist) which makes Him the eternal and original Being, who existed before anything else.²¹

Daneel adds further evidence showing that the Shona also conceive of God as immanent, as do the Akan:

²⁰E. Dammans, Les Religions de L'Afrique (Paris: Payot, 1964), p. 34.

²¹M. L. Daneel, Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1971), p. 82

The popular Shona saying: 'God is Spirit (Mweya); He is everywhere (pose-pose), even in the wind that rustles the leaves,' testifies to His involvement in the total community of things and living beings. It should be stressed, however, that the concept of an immanent deity coincides with the Shona's intuitive awareness of His presence rather than a rational projection of the nature of His being.²²

From J. S. Mbiti and J. Jahn we can gather an insight into what might be called a complete African Weltanschauung or world view. We can apply these schema which they present to practically all groups of African people. Mbiti says the following:

Africans have their own ontology, but it is a religious ontology, and to understand their religions we must penetrate that ontology. I propose to divide it up into five categories, but it is an extremely anthropocentric ontology in the sense that everything is seen in terms of its relations to man. These categories are:

1. God as the ultimate explanation of the genesis and sustenance of both man and all things.
2. Spirits being made up of superhuman beings and the spirits of men who died a long time ago.
3. Man including human beings who are alive and those about to be born.
4. Animals and plants, or the remainder of biological life.

²²Ibid., p. 83.

5. Phenomena and objects without biological life.²³

While there is some linguistic evidence for using the above schema, I think there is a better way to divide up reality which is much more consistent with traditional African thinking. The Bantu peoples make up the largest grouping of tribes in Africa and their languages have a basic structure which clearly reveals their ontological schema. Janheinz Jahn presents this structure as originally borrowed from Kagame's La philosophie bantu-rwandaise de l'Etre:

I Muntu = "human being" (plural: Bantu)

II Kintu = "thing" (Plural: Bintu)

III Hantu = "place and time"

IV Kuntu = "modality"

Muntu, Kintu, Hantu, and Kuntu are the four categories of African philosophy. All being, all essence, in whatever form it is conceived, can be subsumed under one of these categories: Nothing can be conceived outside of them.²⁴

Jahn's analysis which follows after the positing of these categories is what makes his theory the best. Removing the prefix to the above words we are left with the stem -ntu which symbolizes the universal cosmic force. "Ntu is being itself."²⁵ Contrary

²³Mbiti, op. cit., p. 15.

²⁴J. Jahn, op. cit., p. 100.

²⁵Ibid., p. 101.

to medieval thinking, all things, all beings, are seen as forces rather than as static entities.

An understanding of the problem of time, as the African understands it, is a necessary consideration in our study of African ethics. Time, for the African, is "...a composition of events which have occurred, those which are taking place now and those which are immediately to occur. What has not taken place or what has no likelihood of an immediate occurrence falls in the category of 'No-time.' What is certain to occur, or what falls within the rhythm of natural phenomena, is in the category of inevitable or potential time."²⁶ In other words, time is a real ontological process which is experienced rather than a mathematical construct. In Swahili, for instance, in order to tell time as Westerners do, one must call six o'clock A.M., "saa moja" or "the first hour". In other words, the first hour is at sunrise. Everything is seen in terms of events.

And so anything which might happen in the far distant future outside of the natural rhythm of things is not even considered. Those things which have happened in the past are very real and almost as real as the present.²⁷ Hence being, i.e. both the being of the

²⁶Ibid., p. 17.

²⁷Ibid.

"Thing" and that of man, as it is actualized in the present, is the sum total of past experiences. To symbolize these two regions of time, we shall use two Swahili words: sasa -- now, and zamani -- ancient times. The West has not forgotten the importance of zamani either because every good European scholar knows that the present is much better understood by one who has studied man's history.

"Each African people has its own history. This history moves 'backward' from the Sasa period to the Zamani, from the moment of intense experience to the period beyond which nothing can go."²⁸ Applying this to the life of the individual, we realize that after man dies, he eventually passes out of the memory of his offspring into the region of Zamani for a complete ontological union with the Honhom.

One final point of view from the African world view to be discussed is the fact that African thinking is man-centered or homo-centric. There is a difference of opinion between our two most important sources, Mbiti and Danquah. Mbiti is of the opinion that the principle concern of the African person is the life here on earth and this is so even though they believe in an afterlife. Man's earthly concerns, that is, community life and physical concerns rather than say mysticism, are of central importance.²⁹

²⁸Ibid., p. 23.

²⁹Ibid., pp. 4-5.

On the other hand, it should be obvious to the reader that from all that we have quoted from Danquah that he is of the opinion that the Akan are quite concerned about the transcendent.

I have to side with Danquah myself on the grounds that his work deals with only one tribal group while Mbiti tries to cover the whole of Africa within a single book. Not only that, but there seems to be some confusion between what ought to be the principle concern of any religion in the first place. It seems to me that in every religion, the majority of the members are quite concerned about their life here and now. Christians, however, have been rather schizoid in that they have been quite concerned about their daily lives such that only those who have really made some effective change in history have been recognized. Yet, there has been an extreme concern about the afterlife so that so many Christians see no connection between morality and the present life. While it must be admitted that this kind of thinking is not truly Christian in that it does not conform to the New Testament nor to great Christian thinkers, it has been nonetheless the attitude of many "so-called" Christians. If this is what Mbiti means about the afterlife, then I would agree that Africans are not really that concerned about life after death. Morality is seen very much in terms of the individual living in harmony with his community and with the rest of nature. The question

is whether ethics can ever be taken out of that context! This homocentricity means that in order for the individual to be happy, he must live in harmony with his surroundings.

CHAPTER II
ETHICAL THEMES DERIVING FROM THE AFRICAN
METAPHYSICAL CONSTRUCT

We move now into the very heart of our discussion which flows directly from all prior considerations. From the outset we have stated that we wish to show that traditional ethical questions are dealt with in African thought. Our task could not be easier to demonstrate.

I refer the reader back to the story of Ngewo among the Mende people and how man lost immortality and paradise by being separated from Him. Mbiti provides other myths from various peoples showing that many had similar concepts:

According to the Ashanti, the first man enjoyed a position of great privilege. God made other things for his use and protection, including the spirits.... In one of the Bambuti myths, it is told that God provided the first people with food, shelter, immortality and the gift of rejuvenating when they grew old. They lived happily and lacked nothing. Similarly, the Tswana say that the primeval state was one of happiness, peace and blessedness and man neither ate nor drank, nor died.... The Hottentots, Meru, Akamba, Zulu and many others, say that the first men had the gift of either immortality or rising again after dying; though in some stories this gift never actually reached the first men, for various reasons.³⁰

³⁰Mbiti, op. cit., pp. 95-96.

Mbiti also concludes from other stories the following:

It was not, however, only material provision that God gave to the original man. He Himself was close to man, and some societies picture Him as living among men or visiting them from time to time. It was like a family relationship in which God was the Parent and men were the children. He provided His presence among them, and all the other things derived from the relationship so long as it lasted. A number of myths speak of this as a state of happiness and blessedness, and some even say that the first men did not need to eat or drink, and therefore there was no necessity to labour for these items of existence.³¹

We cannot but conclude ourselves from all of this that many African peoples have a concept of a closer union with God, a union resulting in bliss and special gifts such as immortality or resurrection. Is this not analogous to the mystical concepts of other Western and Eastern religions? For the whole idea of the Christian redemption refers to the regaining of a closer relationship with God which was lost by Adam and Eve (symbolically) in the garden of Eden. Hence the summum bonum of some African traditional religions can be none other than happiness, a happiness achieved through union with God. Man still seeks the sweet-smelling food of Ngewo of which the Mende speak. For a deeper philosophical approach to this question, we turn to Danquah:

At the particular point of time where life begins for the individual, the only responsibility appears to

³¹Ibid., p. 96.

bear is the nkrabea (destiny, fate, decree of life) with its corresponding hyebea (manner of life as ordained by nature of God) which he has to realize in the course of his growth. The realization or actualization may take a whole lifetime, or several lifetimes, yet the process is not a salvaging of wreckage, but a building up or developing of powers and capacities which the sunsum (personality) sees in the okara (soul) to be available for his own growth. Every effort of the sunsum to make an entry of the okara possible constitutes an advance in the path of progress to make the nkrabea actual...³²

Certain philosophical problems result from the positing of some kind of human nature to be fulfilled if man is to be happy. We must wrestle with the meaning of free will and whether or not there is such a thing. It would appear most correct to define freedom first of all as absolutely autonomy of the will in the sense of being free from all exterior restraint. But we must ask ourselves if the individual can truly be happy having no bounds or limits whatsoever. On the other hand, in the final analysis, neither can one be happy following rules without question as man's decisions must derive from within himself. The unhappiness of one who breaks the rules always will result from him being constantly punished and separated from the rest of society. The question is, is it possible for man to live harmoniously with others and yet remain autonomous?

³²Danquah, op. cit., p. 83.

There is only one way to bridge the gap, one real way for man to fulfill his nkrabea and that is to love. Love, we shall define as the giving of one to another without regards to receiving something in return. It is a gift freely given, for no one can understand what love means if he is constantly concerned about what he will receive back from those whom he loves.

At this point the reader may be curious about the further development of African ethical thinking, having tasted some of the depth of their ethics in the last quote above. Danquah derives several canons from the religion of the Akan, and we shall examine them for further insight into the African way.

The first canon is as follows:

EVERY EFFORT IN GOODNESS IS CONSERVED AS A MERIT IN THE OKARA (SOUL) AND FACILITATES THE PROGRESSIVE FULFILLMENT BY THE INDIVIDUAL OF HIS OKARA'S HYEBEA (DESTINY).³³

We have here a clear example of the influence of the African concept of time as a succession of events with the past being as important as the present. While we need not further discuss the meaning of this canon, as it ought to be obvious, we might wish to disagree in part with it. It seems to me that it cannot be denied that all of the good that one does for himself and others in fulfilling himself

³³Ibid., p. 84.

makes it easier as one progresses even more. But at the same time, as one becomes more able to stand above the crowd in a certain sense, the temptation becomes ever greater to look down on the masses and to wish to make oneself a god. I have seen people who are very creative and dynamic who have allowed themselves to become ruthless in their dealings with others. They feel it their duty to make decisions for "their own good" and will kill an individual who disagrees without hesitating.

Before we move to the second canon, let us attempt to answer the question, "Whence comes evil?" The answer to the apparent existence of both moral and physical evil in the world given by many is that the good attained through suffering is greater than the other as the beauty of dawn by one who had experienced darkness.³⁴ But the Akan solution with which I wholeheartedly agree is as follows:

The being of Nyankopon in the ideal pursuit of which man hopes to be good, is revealed in its greatest perfection where all evil is progressively mastered.³⁵

And further:

With man's dominance of nature - reduction and gradual conquest of the resistant medium called physical evil - comes an enlarged

³⁴Ibid., p. 87.

³⁵Ibid., p. 89.

opportunity for a greater achievement of good.³⁶

In other words, man, by loving, in effect, brings the universe into greater harmony with God and with itself. Man does not continually suffer evil for all eternity but tries to conquer it gradually. Again, we shall have to discuss this optimistic point of view in our final discussion.

The second canon flows directly from our discussion of the problem of evil:

MORAL PROGRESS IS CONSTANT AND CONTINUOUS IN PROPORTION AS INDIVIDUAL GAINS OR MERITS OF THE PAST ARE HANDED ON AS TRADITION TO FORM THE BASIS OF RACIAL EXPERIENCE.³⁷

This canon is also at least partially true. Every bit of insight gained by the individual is passed on in liberating love from one to another and so the community grows as the individual grows. Whether man will triumph in the end is a question which presently cannot be answered, however. While great masses of youth seem to be aware of the root of evil in the world today, whether they will even attempt to triumph over it in any lasting way, has yet to be seen. The reason for this is that every man seems to idealize evil as existing outside of himself.

³⁶Ibid., p. 90.

³⁷Ibid., p. 92.

The third canon completes the circle regarding moral progress:

RACIAL PROGRESS FACILITATES THE DEVELOPMENT OF INNATE CHARACTERISTICS IN OUTSTANDING INDIVIDUALS WHO CONSCIOUSLY LIBERATE SUCH CHARACTERISTICS TO STRENGTHEN THE INHERITED TRADITION.³⁸

Thus community moral progress makes it easier for the individual to progress.

The fourth canon is a more explicit statement of the nature of love:

THE CONSCIOUS LIBERATION OF OUTSTANDING CHARACTERISTICS WHICH DEMAND CORRESPONDING FIELDS FOR EXPANSION LEADS TO THE COMPREHENSION OF GREATER SOCIAL WHOLE AND THE LOGICAL RECOGNITION OF HUMANITY AS THE ALL-EMBRACING IDEAL FOR FULFILLING AND DEVELOPING RACIAL EXPERIENCE.³⁹

Before concluding with his final canon, Danquah idealizes a bit by discussing what he terms as the super community:

...a single family in a race of one blood linked and held together in one contemporary ancestor -- one anointed head, nay, one Pope-philosopher-King -- a Nana. Mankind will then regain its status among the animal-kind and the angelic-kind, a race in status revealed as one, and because sharing that revelation in one Nana (ancestor), will exist together in him, and be immortal in him who links their kind to the eternal-kind.⁴⁰

³⁸Ibid., p. 94.

³⁹Ibid., p. 96.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 101.

This follows from Danquah's theory of the "superman" who is a person who has developed himself far beyond most men in the sense of being more authentic and creative. But there is something quite illogical about all of this and that is that there is no need for a "Pope-Philosopher-King" in a world where all mankind will have progressed to the stage of which he talks about. Whether there will ever be such progress is of course doubtful but if it did happen, Danquah's theory here would frankly be a lot of nonsense.

One might wonder about what some of the particular "taboos" in various tribes might be which are considered as wrong. Interestingly enough, they are, generally speaking, quite similar to our own moral codes. We turn to E. B. Idowu for some commentary on the Yoruba which, according to Mbiti, applies to most tribes:

Good character shows itself in the following ways: chastity before marriage and faithfulness during marriage; hospitality; generosity, the opposite of selfishness; kindness; justice; truth and rectitude as essential virtues; avoiding stealing; keeping covenant and avoiding falsehood; protecting the poor and weak, especially women; giving honour and respect to older people, and avoiding hypocrisy.⁴¹

Now of course there are rules which in many tribes are not as fundamental as these which are quite unnecessary. But it is

⁴¹J. S. Mbiti, op.cit., pp. 212-213, quoting Olodumare, God in Yoruba Belief, pp. 144-168.

fascinating to see that these moral codes are so similar to those of other great religions of the East and West. While one may argue endlessly about the necessity of some of the above principles, one cannot but admit that if motivated by love, a society which followed such admonitions would be a well-ordered, peaceful group composed of very happy individuals. I refer the reader back to the discussion on love.

I personally wish to conclude from all my studies of African thought and history that there is much for modern man to learn from the morality of the small village in Africa. While the primeval innocence of these villages is not by any means perfect, the man in the bush in Africa unquestionably lives in greater harmony with himself, with nature, and with his community. The Swahili language for example, has no verb which means to possess in the sense of which we mean it in the West. The verb for "to have," *kuwana*, really means "to be with". This results from a truly beautiful concept of sharing which is not just an ideal but which is a reality in the small villages of Africa. I know this to also be a reality among many of the older Blacks in the South who are poor. Many of them will give the shirt off their backs. And rather than the individual being weak in such a strong community, quite the contrary, he is much stronger because

there is no need for people to play games with each other. Mbiti refers to the solidarity of the African community as: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am."⁴²

⁴²Mbiti, op. cit., p. 224.

APPENDIX I
THE EFFECTS OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION UPON
THE AFRICAN WORLD

Now that I have analyzed some of the African philosophical positions, it becomes necessary to give some historical context for our theories. What good is the study of the past if it cannot help us move forward in a troubled world? We must first understand the impact of colonialism upon African life on the continent and, in addition, the impact of the diaspora in America of Blacks from the South to the North. The reader will understand later why we include Blacks in America as a part of our study.

First of all, there must be some understanding of what causes underly the entrance of Africa into what we shall term as a "world revolution". We are borrowing here from Mbiti:

Africa is caught up in a world revolution which is so dynamic that it has almost got out of human control. It is a revolution of man as a whole, and therefore no people or country can remain unaffected by this new rhythm of human history. In Europe and North America, this revolution goes back three to five generations. But in Africa, we are nearly all in the first generation of the change which took only a few decades to be paved. Without warning and without physical or psychological preparation, Africa has been invaded by a world

revolution. Now a new and rapid rhythm is beating from the drums of science and technology, modern communications and mass media, schools and universities, cities and towns.⁴³

There are enough good books written about the alienation that science and technology have caused in Western man, who actually was better prepared for it than the man of Africa. So it is easy to picture the chaos caused by all of this in Africa. But while it may seem to many that it is the very complexity of modern life and the boring nature of work in a factory that has tended to dehumanize people, it occurs to me that the ultimate reason is a moral one. The most apparently boring task in the world becomes the most enjoyable if the person is properly motivated out of love. Who will not admit that he would do almost anything for one whom he loves? Need we mention that rugged individualism might have worked well in frontier America but it can hardly work in a modern, non-agrarian world where people are much more interdependent. The average person views his work as simply a means towards the end -- a paycheck. And of course we have the so-called communistic and socialistic societies which pretend to have molded themselves into cooperative societies when in fact the people of say, the Soviet

⁴³Ibid., p. 216.

Union are clearly not motivated out of genuine concern for the common good. Why the necessity for a super-structure of a government which sees itself as the "vanguard" which must make all decisions for the masses? The communist part of Russia uses just as many unreal tricks to motivate people as any capitalist country and the end result will be masses of alienated people if efforts are not made to reach the inner man. It would take a lifetime to discuss the nature of human authenticity and I really do not wish to spend much time on that in this paper.

We should analyze more about the causes of the world revolution in Africa though, in order to be better able to reach some conclusions. The colonialist has almost seen his last day on the continent of Africa as so many states have become "free". But the damage he has done will take years to repair. While the Western missionary felt his purpose was to convert the "heathen" his real purpose was to bring them "up" to develop "civilization" in Africa. Europe and the United States are technologically very advanced but have lost touch with the inner person. It would not have been so bad if Africans who were educated would have been truly "transplanted" into a more humanizing kind of culture, but they were uprooted from strong and often very worthwhile traditions and given very little, if anything to replace them. While European music, art, and

literature are great, the kinds of values that people are given in modern European education are worthless. The only reason for getting a higher education for an American and for many Europeans is simply to make more money. Getting back to Africa though, these kinds of values have had a devastating effect:

Within one family or household may be found two totally different worlds coexisting: the children may be attending university studies, while the parents are illiterate and concerned mainly with cultivating their fields with wooden sticks.⁴⁴

With the rise of nationalism in the fifties and sixties came a new spirit of pride in the African cultural heritage. Innumerable books have been written by native scholars bursting with this new pride in the traditions of Africa. Hopefully, the fires ignited by the oppression of the colonialists will never burn out. While nationalism has gone to extremes in man's history, I really do not believe that there is too much danger of that happening to Africa. Even if all of Africa should unite and develop a power technology, I do not believe that anyone would be so foolish as to start a real atomic war.

Concomittant with this development in Africa has been the rise of a similar situation for African people in America. The South of the United States is unquestionably the seat of the development of strong traditions among Blacks in this country. What has been

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 218.

forged out of the experience of these suffering people is what might be termed as a true pan-African culture. All the particularities of various tribes were wiped away in a kind of melting pot. The efforts of the slave masters to wipe out all traces of African culture were thwarted by their very insistence on complete separation between whites and Blacks. While our culture may be termed in some sense hybrid, it is a triumph in a very great sense. The essence of African culture -- strong communalism and rhythmic expression have taken on new forms but are still basically the same. The Black Christian Church is the root of the development of our so-called "soul". The dances that Blacks do today go back to our heritage on the mother continent. Communalism finds expression in many ways. There is the call-response pattern prevalent in Black Gospel singing and in the sermons. When the Black minister says something to the congregation, they continually participate in his sermon by spontaneously replying such sayings as "Amen," "Yes Jesus," and so on. This still goes on in Africa today in traditional community gatherings. And the style of singing, with strong rhythmic patterns is also originally African. Anyone who listens to a recording of original African music will recognize the similarity.

But many destructive things have happened to the Black communal psyche in America as a result of the diaspora of Blacks from the

South to the large urban areas of the North, East, and West. The morality and strong communal bonds between Blacks in the South, who visit each other in numbers when ill and who share much of what they have as a community, is being lost in the rat-race life of the city. Who in today's city in America can afford to be open and trusting to his neighbor? As a result, the Black man in the city is now faced with the almost insurmountable problem of creating a sense of unity against almost impossible odds. While he recognizes this necessity for unity from a political standpoint, it has yet to become a historical and moral reality. The rediscovery of nationalistic pride in one's roots was only a first step in the right direction. If not held in check, this nationalism might have resulted in civil war in America. There are many beautiful experiments where this nationalism is becoming a reality in the good sense. There are cooperative economic projects springing up in the ghettos all around the country and in the rural areas of the South. There are independent educational institutions fostering not only wholesome values like self pride and love for one's people but phenomenal creative development. Kids five and six years old are able to use slide rules! The first national Black political convention was held in 1972. This was a first step in attempting to help Blacks realize that on a national level, they have political goals in common.

If eventually the majority of Blacks can vote in a bloc, they can wield a considerable amount of power. On the local level, Blacks can run the cities as they are increasingly in a majority in the inner-city areas. Now that every immigrant group from Europe has progressively risen to power in this country, it is our turn to do so. Perhaps, if we do not make the same mistakes, we can help to do the impossible -- bring humanity to the United States. If humanitarianism would triumph in a country with so much technology, I have no doubts that it would thereafter triumph all over the world.

APPENDIX II
SOME SPECULATIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE OF
MAN RESULTING FROM THE REAL
DEVELOPMENT OF THE AFRICAN
ETHIC

While much is happening among Blacks in the United States, the same sort of development seems to be happening in Africa. While all mankind recognizes communalism as a high ethical value, Africans and other third world nations, have made this ethic more of a reality in their lives. Efforts are now being made on a large scale to develop what is called "African Socialism" rooted in the traditional communalism of the small village. In Tanzania this is called Ujamaa which is Swahili for family economics. The idea is to have people freely choose socialism which is already rooted in their culture. A similar effort is being made right here in New Mexico with the formation of a corporation in the Black community of Albuquerque called Ujamaa. I was quite happy to see this kind of thing started.

While we have tended to be very optimistic in our analysis of history, we should certainly realize that there are any number of

possible outcomes, some of them negative, to the present state of things. Let us not make the same mistake that so many Marxists have made in speculating about the future. The determinist presupposition that history follows absolute laws irrespective of any sort of human freedom is untenable. All of the speculations that I have made about the future are quite possible, but not absolutely probable. Actually if the industrial nations are not more careful, we will all die from pollution. A man need not respond in a loving way to the love of another. There are countless examples in history to prove that. But all of the effort to foster the spirit of true giving is certainly worth trying. If that spirit does not triumph eventually in the world, there can be nothing but impending doom.

We conclude our thoughts then, hoping that some little ray of light has been spread on some very complex problems. There are countless details to be worked out in formulating some sort of overall African philosophy of religion. May the spirit of Honhom become a reality!

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