

**AFRICAN TRADITIONAL ETHICS AND TRANSFORMATION: INNOVATION  
AND AMBIVALENCE INVOLVED, AND MODIFICATION NECESSARY FOR  
SOUND 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY AFRICAN INTELLECTUAL SCHOLARSHIP**

*BY*

**Dr. J.K. Ayantayo**

*Lecturer in Social Ethics and Sociology of Religion*

*Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts,*

*University of Ibadan, Ibadan.*

*E-mail: [kehindejacob@yahoo.com](mailto:kehindejacob@yahoo.com)*

One of the African Cultural Heritages that has yet to receive adequate attention in scholarship is African traditional ethics. (For example, African traditional ethics does not reflect as a theme in the canonical works in African Arts and Humanities as so advertised in call for papers; whereas African traditional ethics is an independent area of study worthy of examining). This notwithstanding, we have a few foundational works on it as evident in scholarly works done in the area of African traditional religions especially those of Mbiti and Idowu. The thesis of their argument (which makes reference point for all scholars both African and Western who work in the area of African ethics up till today) is that African traditional ethics is basically religious ethics. That is, African ethics is intrinsically dependent on religion. Now the focus of this paper is to answer the following fundamental questions? What is the basis of this thesis? Does this thesis hold sway for long? How does this thesis manifested in intellectual referencing work of those who popularize the argument so framed by pioneer works on African traditional ethics? Is the thesis faithfully represented in the reference work or not? If yes or otherwise, what are the factors enhancing such? What are the new innovations brought in the intellectual study of African traditional ethics? Are there misconceptions in the new corpus, if yes, to what extent and magnitude? How do we reconcile the old and new theses to shape a new focus on knowledge about African traditional ethics? What are the implications of such reconciliation in the light of global ethics? And how will the new focus make a viable option to solve moral questions associated with contemporary global society.

In the light of the above, our study shall highlight the thesis of the pioneers' scholars on African traditional ethics with emphasis on the basis for the argument as shall be fully discussed in the paper. For example, the popular view is that religion forms the keynote of African ways of life. It shall also highlight the new innovations introduced into the study of African traditional ethics by recent scholars the likes of Kwasi Wiredu, Sophie Oluwole, Claude Summer and Placid Tempels. For example, these scholars contrary to Mbiti and Idowu, are of the opinion that: African traditional ethics is based on natural light of reason with conscience playing a central role; that African moral standards derive from the very nature of thing and that African traditional ethics is not founded on religion but on consideration for human welfare. In all, they all agree that African traditional ethics is essentially interpersonal and social, however, with religious belief, and practice having impact in its articulation and inculcation. As a matter of fact, African traditional ethical orientation is reflected in African objects and events such as

national currencies, pledges, anthems, oaths of office, and among others. While we notice the ambivalence involved in the new works on African ethics we do not lose sight that they partly agreed with pioneers work to which they constantly make reference as shall be fully demonstrated in the body of this work.

From this, however emerge a new school of thought which blend the two theses (with emphasis on identification of areas of convergence & divergence in the two theses) so that we now have what can be called African socio-religious ethics; this shall be discussed fully in the paper. This has positive implications in the sense that African social ethics or African ethics can be placed on equal footing with Western ethics. Such new ethics could be dubbed African social ethics or African Applied Ethics which when developed and structured as reflected in the curricula of a few African universities would make reference point. Not only this, it could be explored to unravel some of the contemporary socio-ethical issues such as terrorism, war and peace, conflict, sex, abortion, social injustice, pacifism, genderization, world polity, religious conflict, racism, ethnicity, genocide, cloning, bioethical issues among others. It is important to note that African ethics is all encompassing. Under such arrangement, it will be possible to preserve the pioneer scholarly works on African traditional ethics however without losing sight of the new trends which is also important for balance thesis on African traditional ethics. This will be a new direction for an African intellectual tradition which to our mind is a clear demonstration of the fact that African scholars as dynamic and not otherwise and thus, it could meet the challenges of the contemporary global society. For this view to be practically and fully demonstrated, there is need for inclusion of study on African social ethics in the curricula of tertiary institutions in African countries.