

## **The Impetus of African Cultures on Bioethics: A Reflection on G. Tangwa and Other African Philosophical Responses to Bioethical Issues**



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**ABSTRACT:** Contemporary debates on bioethical issues have tended to remain generally inconclusive and this is due in part to the fact that these issues are differentially perceived and interpreted across different indigenous cultural and ethical worldviews. These issues are cross-culturally evaluated using culture specific normative parameters and therefore reflect values that are culturally relative and diverse. These debates often portray stark disagreements between views that advocate for divergent or contradictory positions on central bioethical issues. This article, while contemplating the present and projected advances in genetic and reproductive technologies that soar beyond the traditional medical goals of healing disease and relieving suffering - coupled with the many negative consequences therein contained, attempts to give an African touch to the debates by rethinking them through the parameters of African indigenous cultural norms and values.

This article employs the comparative approach to explain disagreements between western philosophical anthropologies and African philosophical anthropologies, differences that account for their divergent approaches to bioethical issues and their differential understandings of how human dignity can be respected and preserved. Western Moral Philosophy is driven by the attempt to sharply distinguish persons from the rest of the cosmos, and then to identify the ways in which they must be treated; on the contrary, the traditional African approach is different, a difference which stems from her very conception of the human person and how he or she relates with the environment. In an age in which we have become dangerously separated from our bodies - human nature itself lying on the operating table - ready for changes to be enacted upon , for eugenic and neuro-psyche enhancement in Africa, we argue for the African world's understanding of man which opens man to who he really is, man as a corporate being in the world, with social responsibility towards others and towards the world.

According to James Nelson, the job of bioethics is to assess in what respects prevailing or proposed health care policies, practices and institutions are morally defensible.<sup>1</sup> As such, health care, the major object of bioethics' study, requests that good moral reasoning should revolve around four main components namely, accurate empirical beliefs, defensible moral values, clarity about relevant concepts and finally, formally valid argumentation.<sup>2</sup> The consequences are obvious: a more controlled and dignifying way of handling human beings in the arena of experimentation and a stronger belief in the fact that the human being also transcends the categories of time and space and is not merely a thing that can be tampered with.

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

Bioethical perspectives of western provenance have largely dominated and shaped current discussions on moral issues at the heart of bioethics such as abortion, euthanasia and research on human embryos. In spite of this, the western contributions to the debates have not been homogenous and have been informed by contrasting ethical traditions such as between the Judaeo-Christian perspectives and western secular cum atheistic views. Indigenous non-western perspectives have been significantly absent from the debates. With the inability of divergent western perspectives to reach a unifying nexus, there is need to turn the searchlight on non-western ethical systems, particularly those of indigenous non-western communities in order to formulate bioethical assertions about human dignity that are inclusive, objective, and reflect more universal conceptions of man and that represent a fair philosophical assessment of issues that bioethics tackles. The endeavour to meet this need is the reason why this article explores the unique contribution of African indigenous cultures to certain contemporary bioethical debates as well as the grounding the cultural basis for such perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. J. L. Nelson, Moral Teachings from Unexpected Quarters, "Lessons for Bioethics from the Social Sciences and Managed Care" Hastings Report Center 2000, 12.,

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. *Ibid*, 13.

## **The Impetus of African Cultures on Bioethics: A Reflection on G. Tangwa and Other African Philosophical Responses to Bioethical Issues**

### **The Cultural Anthropological Challenge in Africa**

There abide many an African view of the world in relation to man, God and the environment. This chain circles God, the community and the individual. There is present in Africa, a hierarchical structure of beings, basically of two types, the spiritual and the corporeal beings. These beings exist in separate but, however, connected worlds.<sup>3</sup> Hence, man, as the focal point of anthropology is viewed in African thought as we shall see below.

According to Tangwa, contemporary African experience is marked by a certain intellectual strangeness. An African today lives in a community of continuous cultural change, characterized by a confused interplay between an indigenous cultural heritage and a foreign cultural legacy of colonial origin. At the deepest reaches of this cultural mixture, is the preference of Western conceptions of the good by Africans themselves, to their own thought patterns and conduct. The issues involved here are of the utmost urgency as they are very relevant today as it may well be that many of the instabilities of contemporary African society are traceable to this circumstance.

Anke Graness notes that the need for universal ethical principles, obligatory for the human society as a whole, has never been as urgent as in our time, marked by stark instability in our political and economic systems, created by the technological consequences of science. For this reason, it is not possible to set hard and fast rules on morality binding to all human beings, as every culture has its own peculiar approach to the basic principle of doing good and avoiding evil.

Léon Kass in like manner, observes that despite the changes in science and technology, the basic moral and political questions remain the same:

What does it mean to treat nascent human life as raw material to be exploited as a mere natural resource? What does it mean to blur the line between procreation and manufacture? What are the likely future technical possibilities and moral problems that our present decisions are willy-nilly creating? What moral boundaries should researchers observe, whether they work with federal or with private funds? What are the goals of, and what are the proper limits to, the project for the mastery of human nature? Can we control where this project is taking us, so as to reap the benefits without losing our humanity? If so, how?<sup>4</sup>

Kass' observation brings to light the implications of recent policy debates about biomedical technology, which neglect such larger questions. As such, mankind finds himself reacting piecemeal to the latest biotechnological possibility without seeing its meaning.

Man, he insists, largely ignores its contribution to the growing power for changing and controlling organs of human bodies and most especially, human minds. Moreover, he adds that man lacks a rich enough understanding of the human goods he wishes to preserve and defend. Kass, therefore, points to the fact that we need to realize that there is more at stake in the biological revolution than just saving life or avoiding death and suffering.

In addition to the above views, he notes that we must also strive to protect and preserve human dignity and the ideas and practices that keep us human.<sup>5</sup>Faced with the immanence of the plaques resulting from the controversies of bioethical thought, it is of utmost necessity to re-examine the African's world view and understanding of the human person in relation to the environment. This examination is in order to establish an African approach to the debates on bioethical issues, as well as to assess the impetus of African culture to bioethics.

These views that we have analysed above are all in a bid to see how Tangwa's contribution has led the African to better understand, accept and respect his body and that of the other. In the first part of this article, we will examine the anthropo-cultural foundations of African bioethical perspectives. This will include an examination of what Africans consider to be the meaning of life, the import of African communalism for self-other relationships, the African notion of immortality, and the sacredness of human life in African perspective. In the second part of the article we examine African cultural contributions to debates on bioethical issues. We do this by examining Tangwa's and other African philosophical responses to debates on bioethical issue informed by the African cultural worldview.

### **Anthropo-Cultural Foundations of African Bioethical Perspectives**

#### **The Meaning of Life to the African**

In the African society where everything is transmitted through the daily experience of life, the formulation of abstract concepts is not so important. What counts is the search and discovery of the meaning of life. Africans put the emphasis on the participation of 'each' member of the community in the collective experience of life.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the reflection of man within the context of an African collective experience of life leads to a direction of one's research to the meaning of life and the whole of reality for man. M. Nkafu notes that such a research already includes other existential questions, because the meaning of existence is an already

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<sup>3</sup> Cfr. J. OMOREGBE, *Knowing Philosophy*, 2003, 22-23.

<sup>4</sup>Cfr. L. KASS, *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*, Encounter Books, San Francisco 2002, 2.

<sup>5</sup>Cfr. L. Kass, *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*, Encounter Books, San Francisco 2002, 2.

<sup>6</sup>Cfr. M. NKAUFU, *African Vitality*, Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi 1999, 109.

## The Impetus of African Cultures on Bioethics: A Reflection on G. Tangwa and Other African Philosophical Responses to Bioethical Issues

given fact. He notes that “The African feels that he is ‘a living being.’ Within an African mentality, one should not ask: “Who is the living being?” But rather “Why?” “How?” “For what reason?” is he alive.”<sup>7</sup>

While the first question is followed by a definition, the second question points to the meaning of the question. Therefore, the question of man is etiological in nature and tries to justify the present state of his life. Why does man live rather than die? To an African, therefore, the question of man is a question on life.<sup>8</sup> It is therefore necessary to search for the place and means through which man finds the meaning of life, and this lies in the category of a relationship.

It therefore goes without saying that life to an African is regarded in high esteem and as such, should not be tampered with, as we shall soon realize in the unfolding analyses. J. S. Mbiti, in his *Introduction to African Traditional Religion*, insists that “I am because you are and since you are, therefore, I am.” All of this, to emphasize the power and value of relationships among people.

All that binds and fortifies these relationships is inscribed in our minds and hearts by God. He is the sole custodian of these moral principles. As such, he rewards those who behave accordingly and punishes those who act in outright contradiction to them. Hence, the elders of the community decide the fate of those who wantonly break these moral codes of conduct. And so the unfolding paragraphs shall unravel more on this issue.

### Communalism and the relationship between self and others

The foundation of this relationships and their impact in African life patterns is human conduct, good and right against wrong and evil. Every norm, rule and law, has its roots on this fertile soil. African morals have two dimensions, community and individual morals. The former are accorded more value than the latter as one, as an individual, survives on the strength of the community.<sup>9</sup>

Man is the most social being on earth because he is able to relate with others, with his own kind, with the surrounding world and with God, his creator. For this reason, man is always a member of a society, without which he loses his identity value and impact on others, as he cannot communicate his ideas. As a result of the multiplicity of the others, of the individuals, the meaning of life is hidden within the dialectic of the collective or the community.<sup>10</sup>

Relationships in Africa are viewed from two basic angles, the individual relating with the self and then with the community. The latter is valued more because the common good is threatened by the individualistic tendencies of the self. As such, Mbiti asserts that relationships, especially marriage, extend the web of kinship socially, as it creates new orders between the families involved.<sup>11</sup>

Commenting on the value of the community to an African, H. Mbuy also asserts that human life is best understood and lived within a community. He explains that every individual gains identity in Africa only as part of a community, within which the person’s individuality is exercised.<sup>12</sup>

Mbiti states emphatically that for the African, only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people. He maintains that whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual; the individual can only say, ‘I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am’. Hence, Mbiti considers that the individual finds meaning and identity only within his community, which itself needs a head.<sup>13</sup>

Nkafu notes that just as one cannot remove a fish from water to talk with it, in the same way it is not possible to remove an African from the life of the clan, tribe or family group, since he will no longer be an authentic African, having lost his deepest identity, his very being. He asserts that an African is always in relationship with the Other, he lives in the Other, so much so that whenever one speaks of man, this is always referred to the Other within the context of a community.<sup>14</sup>

Tavgua resumes the argument and notes that to the African, man is not subject to purely abstract discussions; whenever one speaks of man, one always has the Other in mind. Each person is truly a self, according to how he is able to consider himself as the other of the Other. The African considers that in the scale of values regarding the human species, no one is better than the Other, and no one is truly himself except when one is in full relationship with the Others.

Hence, the African considers that everyone is aware of the Other’s value to which human acts are devoted. Thus, all human acts are motivated out of love and solidarity with the Others. Without brotherly love, it is not possible to discover the meaning of

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<sup>7</sup>Cfr. M. Nkafu, *African Vitalogy*, Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi 1999, 110-111.,

<sup>8</sup>Cfr. *Ibid.* 111.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. J. S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, Heinemann, London 1970, 174.

<sup>10</sup>Cfr. M. Nkafu, *African Vitalogy*, Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi 1999, 109.

<sup>11</sup>Cfr. J. S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, East African Educational Publishers, Nairobi, 1991, 111.

<sup>12</sup>Cfr. T. MBUY, *The Faith of Our Fathers: New Perspectives in the Study and Understanding of African Traditional Religion*, Archdiocesan Information Service, Bamenda 2012, 61.

<sup>13</sup>Cfr. J. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann, London 1970, 108-109.

<sup>14</sup>Cfr. M. NKAUFU, *African Vitalogy*, 112.

## The Impetus of African Cultures on Bioethics: A Reflection on G. Tangwa and Other African Philosophical Responses to Bioethical Issues

life.<sup>15</sup> And it is when this order of activities based on love is broken, that evil comes into the social realm of life to introduce ways of living such as euthanasia, suicide, and abortion among the many.

When the above deviation occurs, death is inevitable and so we shall examine below, how an African looks at death and immortality. We note immediately that Africans do not view the subject under scrutiny as Christian faithful of whatever religion do. Hence, let us proceed with the analyses.

### The African Notion of Immortality

The African idea of immortality in the view of Tangwa, is based on the observation that when one dies, the body remains buried in the ground and it decomposes, but the relationship with the ancestors remains – a sign that in man, there exists a spiritual reality which does not die with the body. For this reason, those who are still living know that their departed ones are now living in an immortal state of being.<sup>16</sup>

For the African, he avers, the condition necessary to remain always alive and present in the memory of the living, though physically dead, is to lead a good and virtuous life. In this light, he accepts the view of Mbiti with regards to living morally upright lives especially in the domain of hospitality, moreover, to strangers.<sup>17</sup> The African considers procreation as the first attempt at conserving and perpetuating the human species.

Tangwa insists emphatically that for Africans, the soul is created by God. Africans believe in the goodness of God, that once he creates a being, it lives eternally in God himself. The creature is a “self,” a god in miniature, and God’s greatest desire is that man lives his life in eternity.<sup>18</sup> This gives us a feel of how important Africans regard life. It cannot be taken away by anyone, no matter the circumstances. This is the reason why acts such as suicide, especially, are termed taboos. This consideration of the African’s notion of immortality leads us to examine her inevitable companion, the sacredness of life.

### The Sacredness of Human Life

Africans, according to Tangwa, accept that the human being transcends the merely physical and material world, as he is an embodiment of spiritual powers too. To the African, human life is the highest form of created life on earth; it is sacred and there is a legendary horror associated with the spilling of human blood no matter the reason.<sup>19</sup> Hence, man, in the mind of Mbiti is notoriously religious, reason why he respects the *vital element*, life, so much. Even those with weird attitudes, such as thieves, are treated fairly.

H. Mbuy, in similar terms, notes that human life is meant to be ‘generated and protected’; the woman is the “vehicle” by which this procreation and generation are guaranteed. He also notes that life is seen as the greatest “good” and gift from God and as such it is celebrated. This is the reason why every developmental stage of life is a cause for celebration from birth to death, even a strange death, such as suicide. People will still come around the residence of the deceased to condole with the rest of the family. Thus, Africans love to see life lived and not acted like a movie.

Mbuy again remarks forcefully that Africans have an instinct for celebration; long life is seen as a blessing and so elders are respected, especially as they are soon to travel the journey beyond to join the ancestors and control life on earth.<sup>20</sup> He states emphatically that fragile life is to be protected and conserved to maturity, and hence notes that traditional Africans are pro-life.

He argues that any act which threatens life is forbidden, while those acts that are actually orchestrated to eliminate human life are considered cultural taboos.<sup>21</sup> All in all, life to an African as we have realised in the above examination, is a condition without which nothing else can be mentioned about a human being. Hence, man must exist before being respected or not.

Thus, existence precedes essence, a doctrine, strongly argued in the West and completely reversed, thereby leading the African mind to question what the Westerners consider life to be. This inevitably leads us to regard the impact created by African philosophy on the theories of Bioethics. We affirm with Mbiti that man, in African epistemological considerations, is a being who lives for the other because he sees himself in the other. Therefore, life is not to be sacrificed on the table of science for no other reason apart from therapeutic purposes. The foregoing paragraphs shall elaborate on this theme vis-à-vis bioethical theories.

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<sup>15</sup>Cfr. M. NKAFU, *African Vitalogy*, 113.

<sup>16</sup>Cfr. M. NKAFU, *African Vitalogy*, 119.

<sup>17</sup>Cfr. Mbiti, *Introduction to Religion*, 176.

<sup>18</sup>Cfr. *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>Cfr. T. MBUY, *The Faith of Our Fathers: New Perspectives in the Study and Understanding of African Traditional Religion*, 61.

<sup>20</sup>Cfr. T. MBUY, *The Faith of Our Fathers: New Perspectives in the Study and Understanding of African Traditional Religion*, 61.

<sup>21</sup>Cfr. *Ibid.*

## The Impetus of African Cultures on Bioethics: A Reflection on G. Tangwa and Other African Philosophical Responses to Bioethical Issues

### The Impetus of African Philosophy on Bioethics

Tangwa observes that while the Western outlook might be described as anthropocentric and individualistic, the pre-colonial traditional African metaphysical outlook can be described as eco-bio-communitarian, implying recognition and acceptance of interdependence and peaceful coexistence between earth, plants, animals and humans.

According to him, within the African traditional outlook, human beings tend to be more cosmically humble and therefore, not only more respectful of other people, but also more cautious in their attitude to plants, animals and inanimate things, and to the various invisible forces of the world.

In Tangwa's consideration, Africans are more disposed toward an attitude of 'live' and 'let live.'<sup>22</sup> This means that they love to see life lived and as such, they acknowledge this life too in the other areas and things in the universe, though in varying degrees. Thus, two main orders of life exist, the rational and sentient modes of life. With this affirmation we shall delve into African cultural contributions to debates on bioethical issues. To do this, we examine western cultural influences on the African mind, we compare the western and African bioethical perspectives on the notion on person, and we examine some African considerations on the culture of life and death. These will include African cultural perspectives on human reproduction, the African ethico-cultural stance on assisted conception, and African cultural views on the concepts of abortion and euthanasia.

### Africans at the Crossroads of Western Culture

From a historical perspective, Tangwa notes that the last quarter of the outgoing century witnessed a significant shift of emphasis in the theoretical concerns of the Western world (the home of the dominant culture of the last two centuries of the millennium) from overly speculative and abstract issues to more practical matters. This shift of emphasis, according to him, was fostered by an increasing realization of the most successful aspects of Western culture, namely, its science and technology. Practical or applied philosophy, eco-philosophy, environmentalism, developmentalism, medical ethics, bioethics – these are some of the fruits, among many others, of this intellectual shift of focus.

<sup>23</sup>Human technology in general and biotechnology in particular, have narrowed the gap between the natural and the artificial, between nature and humanity, between God's work and the work of human hands to the extent that some have proclaimed God dead. Human manipulation with nature, which probably began with the discovery of agriculture, has evolved, thanks to modern technology, into wholesome interventions in the processes of nature, exemplified by the engineering of artificial life-forms.

Such developments have gradually turned the long lasting moral principles with the physical environment and with medical practice, into moral disquiet and even moral alarm.<sup>24</sup> In the face of these developments, human ethical sensibilities and responsibilities are urgently called for. Such enunciations only add flesh to our view that Westerners regard life only from the standpoint of how productive one is in society. All deformed persons are regarded as useless. Hence we have to go back to those traditional principles of ethics and morality that safeguard all human life irrespective of state.

In his discussion of Democracy and Consensus in African Traditional Politics, K. Wiredu shows a way out of the crises of African societies that are confronted, not only with deep political and economic problems, but with moral crises. These crises are characterised by the loss of moral values, growing criminality and a mentality of dependency on financial assistance from the developed countries.

The reason for these moral crises is, according to Wiredu, that African states took over Western political systems and their values uncritically.<sup>25</sup> For example, Western systems embraced a classical notion of human dignity which Adam Schulman finds problematic because it lends itself to unfair distinctions between one human being and another. This therefore, clears the way for the manipulation of human embryos, abortions and artificial reproductive technologies involving abortion. Schulman observes that the classical notion of human dignity is not fully at home in democratic times, where it keeps uneasy company with the more characteristic democratic ideals of equality, freedom, easygoingness, and tolerance.<sup>26</sup>

K. Wiredu, Tangwa insists, maintains that Western systems and values are inadequate for the needs of the artificial erection of African nations and their multi-ethnic structures, as the abuse of the multi-party system, or the prospering corruption in most African nations show.<sup>27</sup> He criticises the Western multi-party system and the way of decision-making, by majority opinion, and shows their deficiencies. He notes that the above multi-party system practised in the West is a violation of a human right, namely, the right of substantive representation. This is evident in recent bills in the western world which on the one hand, permit a woman

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<sup>22</sup>Cfr. G. TANGWA, "Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics," 389.

<sup>23</sup>Cfr. G. Tangwa, "Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics," 387.

<sup>24</sup>Cfr. *Ibid*, 387-388. .

<sup>25</sup>Cfr. O. OLADIPO, *The Third Way in African Philosophy*, Hope Publications, Ibadan 2002, 252.

<sup>26</sup>Cfr. E. PELLEGRINO, *Human Dignity and Bioethics*, The President's Council on Bioethics, Washington, D. C. 2008, 7.

<sup>27</sup>Cfr. O. OLADIPO, *The Third Way in African Philosophy*, Hope Publications, Ibadan 2002, 253.



## The Impetus of African Cultures on Bioethics: A Reflection on G. Tangwa and Other African Philosophical Responses to Bioethical Issues

to take a decision to abort a baby in a community, and on the other hand, legally permits abortion, pre-implantation diagnosis and consequently the selective abortion of defective fetuses.

Wiredu observes that decision making by the majority, as used in this kind of system, oppresses the right of representation of the minority. He claims that each human being has a right to be represented not only in council, but also in counsel in any matter relevant to his or her interests or those of their groups. This is what he calls “substantive representation,”<sup>28</sup> which is inherent in most African cultures and sanctions an ethic in which, in the words of John Ayotunde:

One can boldly affirm that the wellspring of morality and ethics in African societies is the pursuit of a balance of individual, with communal, well-being. It is not unusual to get the impression that African cultures extol the virtues of community, that moral obligations are primarily social rather than individual, and that communal factors often take precedence over individual rights or interests.<sup>29</sup>

Ayotunde presents us with a Yoruba ethical norm that strikes a balance between the individual and the community – a typical African view which is in contrast to the Western View which Wiredu criticizes. This Yoruba ethic will not permit an individual woman to take a decision to abort her baby because the baby, as that the African considers belongs to the community.

Likewise a majority will not vote for the abortion of fetuses and consider it a legal rule, as is the case with the Western world, because, for Africans, the substantive representation of the community is sought and “Africans are more disposed toward an attitude of ‘live’ and ‘let live.’”<sup>30</sup> Hence, the African remains, even unconsciously, very original and pure in his method of philosophising, as basic principles that concern life, even that of wayward persons, are not compromised or under looked.

However, the saga continues as we proceed to examine the clash of views between the two factions vis-à-vis our subject matter. How does the African look at bioethics and how does the Westerner do it too?

### Western Outlook versus African Outlook

The Industrial Revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries occupies pride of place among the catalysts of change in the Western world. This revolution drew its impetus from the slogan that “knowledge is power” and from the belief it is convertible into commercial value. Joint to this were the assumptions that all knowledge colonization is unqualifiedly good, that nature is, in principle at least, completely knowable and controllable, and that the universe was something that ought to be explored, subdued, dominated and exploited.<sup>31</sup> This means that man is at the center of this trend of activities since a machine does not function without him being in charge of manipulation.

However, Tangwa notes that although these ideas and attitudes had their origins and foundation in Judeo-Christianity, they led to the secularization, of everything in the universe – which is the very antithesis of the Judeo-Christian ethic. The Industrial Revolution and the technologies resulting from it greatly assisted Western imperial nations in their voyages of exploration and discovery, and the subjugation, domination and exploitation of other peoples. involved

Consequently, Tangwa says that Western culture is the dominant culture of the world in the domain of science and technology and it is the acknowledged master at whose feet other cultures sit as apprentices. Nevertheless, he emphasizes that such analyses do not imply that others have to learn and accept all other things from Western culture.<sup>32</sup> According to him, the issues in Western biomedical research and practice that have been most discussed recently include, randomly, the following:

Experimentation on human subjects, cruelty to animals (including using them in experimentation and killing and eating them), animal liberation, animal rights, informed consent, euthanasia, assisted suicide, the artificial prolongation of life, brain death, the transplantation of human organs, sale of human organs, cadaveric harvest, banking and sale of human eggs and sperm, surrogate motherhood, artificial insemination, *in vitro* fertilization, abortion, acquisition and use of genetic information, creation and release of genetically modified organisms, animal cloning, human cloning, etc.<sup>33</sup>

Apart from the above issues that concern non-humans, the rest could roughly be categorized into three groups: those relating to the beginnings of human life, i.e. birth; those connected with the duration of human life, i.e. living; and those concerning the end of human life, i.e. death.

The main underlying ethical issues with regards to life here are connected with the mechanization of life and its natural processes. This mechanisation threatens to turn human reproduction into mere production. Africans uphold human life and dignity,

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<sup>28</sup>Cfr. O. OLADIPO, *The Third Way in African Philosophy*, Hope Publications, Ibadan 2002, 253-254.

<sup>29</sup>J. AYOTUNDE, “Ethics and Morality in Yoruba Culture,” in K. WIREDU (ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., Oxford 2004.

<sup>30</sup>Cfr. G. TANGWA, “Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics,” 389.

<sup>31</sup>Cfr. G. Tangwa, “Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics,” 390

<sup>32</sup>Cfr. *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>G. TANGWA, “Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics,” 390-391.

## The Impetus of African Cultures on Bioethics: A Reflection on G. Tangwa and Other African Philosophical Responses to Bioethical Issues

and regard human life as the highest form of created life on earth. Mbiti maintains that Africans consider man to be at the centre of the universe, and that being in that position, man sees the universe in terms of himself and endeavours to live in harmony with it.<sup>34</sup>

Although Africans, according to Mbuy, hold that human life is meant to be generated and protected, the woman, in particular is seen as the “vehicle” by which this procreation and generation are guaranteed.<sup>35</sup> This does not erase the fact that Africans respect and value all that fosters human life. Were a man to have twelve children with no food to feed them, they will still be individually respected. In Tangwa’s estimation, the mechanisation of life, characteristic of Western culture, threatens to convert and death into similar processes, depending largely on merely technical calculations involving the reading of graphs, charts, balance sheets, insurance policies, patents, costs and the turning on and off of machines. He holds that Western culture can be described as a technophile culture, while noting that there are some technophobes in it. Without being either technophilic or technophobic, African culture according to him, could perhaps show the way. This last view of Tangwa makes us understand that Western culture looks at man as operative and rather than an entitative being. Respect is given man only as he is able to be useful in the above mentioned fields of science and technology. Anyone who falls below the mark, such as the handicapped, is not considered human and so is treated with scorn or even abandoned to die quickly or the process is hastened as in euthanasia. However, let us consider the notion of person and the bioethical implications on him in Western trends of thought.

back to those natural human values that Western culture has sacrificed to the god of technology, industrialization and commerce, if, indeed, it ever had them.<sup>36</sup>

### The Concept of Person in Western Thought- Bioethical Implications

Western philosophy has a long lasting interest for the concept of a person, and with the criteria for personhood that would clearly segregate those entities worthy of moral consideration from those without or with less moral worth. Tangwa observes that there have been great debates, for instance, about the moral status of foetal material, fetuses, human infants, children, mentally defective people, brain-dead patients, animals and plants, with assumptions and implications about how they can and should be used or treated, and how their treatment differs from that of paradigmatic humans.<sup>37</sup>

Such an attempt at discrimination has greatly confused moral discussion on a wide range of issues in bioethics – abortion ‘on demand,’ for example, may thus be justified on the grounds that the foetus, unlike the pregnant woman, is not a person. Engelhardt maintains that persons are entities who are self-conscious, rational, free to choose, and in possession of a sense of moral concern. He regards human fetuses, infants, the profoundly mentally retarded as non-persons having no standing in the secular moral community and falling outside of the inner sanctum of secular morality.<sup>38</sup> Based on his perspective, these questions are inevitable: What criteria does he use to make such bold declarations? When does life begin according to him? What theory of life does he adhere to, Creationist or Evolutionist? With ideas as those above, we cannot go on without commenting that any conscious being with functional rational faculties cannot look at another in the manner in which Engelhardt does. Hence, life is worth, at all levels not only in terms of value.

“Western ethical theory has concentrated on the object of morality, the patient, to the neglect of the subject, the agent.” Nevertheless, the morality of an action or procedure is to be determined from the standpoint of the agent rather than that of the patient (the recipient of action). Therefore, a moral agent can do moral good or evil, irrespective of whether the patient of his or her action (or lack thereof) is a person, a nonhuman animal, a plant, or even an inanimate thing.

The Western concept of a person in the view of Tangwa, seems to reflect a further judgement about how it is to be applied that does not follow from its descriptive content. This value judgement, moreover, appears to be sanctioned by economic considerations and the need for scientific progress and technological refinement. As he observes, science, technology and commerce constitute the unholy trinity of engines behind the constant rethinking of moral categories in the Western world.

Until organ transplantation became a reality, Western thinkers and moralists were not preoccupied with defining death and did not seem to know the meaning of death, or were not sure of when a person had died until a presidential commission was set up in the United States in 1964. As such Western thinkers made value judgements rather than descriptive abstractions to which real content could be assigned.<sup>39</sup> Man was rather regarded alive, as aforementioned, from the services he could render to society and not how much society was feeding him with. Thus, these value judgments put the disabled in a casket never to be opened.

Nevertheless, the African has a completely different interpretation of a person that we shall see in the paragraphs below though both Africa and the West understand man the same.

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<sup>34</sup>Cfr. J. MBITI, *Introduction to African Religion*, East African Educational Publishers, Nairobi 1975, 44.

<sup>35</sup>Cfr. T. MBUY, *The Faith of Our Fathers: New Perspectives in the Study and Understanding of African Traditional Religion*, 61.

<sup>36</sup>G. TANGWA, “Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics, 391.

<sup>37</sup>Cfr. G. TANGWA, *The traditional African Perception of a Person: Some Implications for Bioethics*, 41.

<sup>38</sup>Cfr. T. ENGELHARDT, *The Foundations of Bioethics*, Oxford University Press, New York 1996, 139.

<sup>39</sup>Cfr. G. TANGWA, *The traditional African Perception of a Person: Some Implications for Bioethics*, 41-42.

## The Impetus of African Cultures on Bioethics: A Reflection on G. Tangwa and Other African Philosophical Responses to Bioethical Issues

### The African Perception of a Person

It could be said that the African concept of a person is not different from the Western concept, unless there is some linguistic problem of translation or interpretation. Africans and the Westerners understand a person to be a fully self-conscious, rational, free and self-determining being. If the African perception of a person differs from the Western perception, this is not because it does not recognize the various developmental stages of a human being or qualitative differences based on the degree of attainment of positive human attributes or capacities, but rather because it does not draw from these facts the same conclusions as are drawn in Western ethical theory.<sup>40</sup>

For example, the difference between, say, a mentally retarded individual or an infant, and a fully self-conscious, mature, rational and free individual does not entail, in the African perception, that such a being falls outside the inner circle of secular morality, and can or should thus, be treated with less moral consideration. The African concept of personhood applies to the human being in all its developmental stages and to all its possible conditions. For the African, being a person is at once a metaphysical, cultural anthropological and ethical realization. Metaphysics provides the innate dispositions for the realization of personhood while personhood itself is a result of socio-cultural constructions based on metaphysics since it is determined by the extent to which one demonstrates fulfilment of the cultural expectations (moral and social values) of one's ethnic group.

Tangwa notes that myths about, say, the superhuman psychic powers of physically or mentally handicapped persons or their liability to be used as disguises by God and other spirits arose in order to help people put prescription into practice. He therefore argues vehemently that the actual justification for how the African's perception of the person is applied has to do with the African world view. This view to him is eco-bio-communitarian. This implies that there are plastic walls between as well as interdependence among human beings, superhuman spirits, non-human animals, plants and inanimate objects and forces.<sup>41</sup> The deep sense of kinship with all its implications has been one of the strongest forces in traditional African life.

Kinship is reckoned through blood and betrothal (engagement and marriage). It is kinship which controls social relationships between people in a given community; it governs marital relations, it determines the behaviour of one individual towards another. This sense of kinship binds together the entire life of the 'tribe' and is even extended to cover animals, plants and non-living objects through the 'totemic' system. Kinship governs the behaviour, thinking and whole life of the individual African in the society of which he is a member.<sup>42</sup> Within this world view, transmigration, reincarnation, transformation, and transmutation, within and across species, are believed to be possible.<sup>43</sup> Such possibilities have consequences on how human beings regard other entities in the universe, especially other living species.

Prominently, the line separating human beings from other ontological entities that populate the world, in the African world view, is neither hard and fast nor straight and clear due to the above mentioned theories especially reincarnation. Since a human being can conceivably transform or be transformed (with or without knowledge or consent) into any of the other ontological entities, in this life or in the life after death, no human being can confidently claim to know that he or she is not the "brother/sister" of any other thing in existence. This engenders a cautious, reverential, respectful and almost ritualistic approach toward nature.<sup>44</sup>

It brings about a deep-seated attitude of live and let live, be and let be, which finds practical expression in such practices as the system of consensus as propagated by Wiredu, for resolving interpersonal and intercommunity disagreements and differences. The centrality of human beings in the order of the universe by no means implies human license. It does not mean that humanity is allowed to treat the non-visible sphere of the universe or other creatures in the visible sphere of the universe without reverence and respect. In fact, reverence for all creation is an essential part of the moral order of the universe and determines everything that happens to or befalls humanity.<sup>45</sup>

African thinking is primarily anthropocentric. Man is the centre of life because he is the only one, among the living beings, who is in search of knowledge, asks sensible questions and above all, is able to find the meaning of life and give a meaning to events and his surrounding environment. Thus it is in man that there is a global vision of all of creation. Man occupies the centre of the centre of the universe which includes both the material and immaterial aspects. He is at once in the material universe where he draws upon the vital forces in the material world to build and to sustain his vital force, but he also draws from the superhuman vital forces in the realm of immateriality through his connections with ancestors and divinities to strengthen his vital force.

The world, as perceived by Tangwa, is simply the arena of experience in which the span of the meaning of life takes place. In African tradition, the world is considered as the mother of all living beings, but man is always the highest form of these living

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<sup>40</sup>Cfr. *Ibid*, 41-42.

<sup>41</sup>Cfr. G. TANGWA, *The traditional African Perception of a Person: Some Implications for Bioethics*, 41-42.

<sup>42</sup>Cfr. J.MBITI, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 104.

<sup>43</sup>Cfr. G. TANGWA, "Genetic Information: Questions and Worries from an African Background," in A. THOMPSON\_R. CHADWICK(ed.), *Genetic Information*, Academic/Plenum Publishers, New York 1999, 277.

<sup>44</sup>Cfr. G. TANGWA, *The traditional African Perception of a Person: Some Implications for Bioethics*, 41-42.

<sup>45</sup>Cfr. L.MAGESA, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, Orbis Books, New York 2002, 72.



## The Impetus of African Cultures on Bioethics: A Reflection on G. Tangwa and Other African Philosophical Responses to Bioethical Issues

beings. All other creatures find their meaningful existence in the presence of man. At the same time, he continues to argue that man finds his meaningful existence in a spiritual dimension, through his relationship with others, the world and with God. The world has a purpose of being through the presence of man. Just as man is created in the image and likeness of God, the world is an image and likeness of man. Man is a world of his own in the world of contingent beings.<sup>46</sup> The idea of person in Western and African thought leads us look keenly at the African's consideration of the culture of life and death

### African Considerations on the Culture of Life and Death

The major principles of professional bioethics according to the profession's own self-declaration, are: beneficence (or at least "nonmaleficence", that is, "do no harm"); respect for persons and justice. As applied to particular cases, these principles translate mainly into concerns to avoid bodily harm and do bodily good, to respect patient autonomy and secure informed consent, and to promote equal access to health care and provide equal protection against biohazards. So long as no body is hurt, no one's will is violated, and no one is excluded or discriminated against, there is little to worry about.<sup>47</sup>

Among the recent Western bioethical debates, Tangwa cites embryonic stem cell research, where the question was argued almost entirely in terms of the goods of life and health. Those in favour insisted that regenerative medicine using stem cells will eventually save countless lives and eliminate crushing incapacity.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, in the meantime, lives would be sacrificed in the process – the lives of human embryos now stored in the freezers of *in vitro* fertilization clinics. This implies using the seeds of the next generation as a tool for saving the lives of the present one.

L. Kass notes that some people are worried not with the effects on the embryos but on our embryo-using society of coming to look upon new human life as a natural resource to be mined, exploited and co-modified. He observes that while the little embryos are destroyed, their users are desensitized and denatured by an unsmooth attitude of sensibility that comes to regard these practices as natural, ordinary and fully unproblematic.<sup>49</sup>

For Africans, Tangwa resumes the discourse, human life is meant to be generated and protected. Africans are conscious that life especially the fragile type, is meant to be protected and conserved to maturity. Hence, traditional Africans, in stark contrast to adulterated ones, are pro-life, and any act which threatens life is forbidden. Those acts that are actually orchestrated to eliminate human life are considered as cultural taboos. They include murder among the many that exist. Human life in Africa transcends the merely physical and material world. It is the highest form of created life on earth; it is sacred and there is a legendary horror associated with the spilling of human blood no matter the reason.<sup>50</sup>

To the African, Mbiti insists, human life has a rhythm of nature which nothing can destroy. On the level of the individual, this rhythm includes birth, puberty, initiation, marriage, procreation, old age, death, entry into the community of the departed and finally entry into the company of the spirits. It is an ontological rhythm, and these are key moments in the life of the individual.<sup>51</sup> All in all, Africans respect life as much as they do their rituals and festivals. Hence, their loyalty to the elders of the community especially towards their last days, and finally at their funeral celebrations when they eventually die, ensures their transition into the after-life and blessings from them upon those left behind. The reverse holds very aptly. Curses and suffering are the result of disrespect for life and death celebrations.

Having considered the above themes, let us examine how that life begins before ending up in death natural or artificial.

### Human Reproduction from an African Perspective

There is enormous interest in the Western world, in artificial reproductive technologies which, is curiously out of tune with the increasing lack of interest in natural reproduction and reproductive methods. In Africa, there would be an equally great interest in artificial methods of reproduction among those unable to procreate through normal natural methods.

This, according to Tangwa, is due to the high value placed by African cultures on procreation and children. Children are highly valued by Africans; so much that procreation is considered the main purpose of marriage. The Nso of Cameroon often say: *Wan dze wan, a dze lim nyuy* (a child is a child, the handiwork of God). As such, a child is always welcome, no matter how it was conceived (except- through a taboo, as incest), and no matter how it is.<sup>52</sup>

Within African cultures, a child is accepted and loved unconditionally. To support this moral imperative, African cultures bestow greater value on handicapped children. Within the Nso of Cameroon, for example, a handicapped child is considered a

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<sup>46</sup>Cfr. M. NKAUFU, *African Vitology*, 121.

<sup>47</sup>Cfr. L. KASS, *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*, Encounter Books, San Francisco 2002, 10.

<sup>48</sup>Cfr. *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>49</sup>Cfr. *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>50</sup>Cfr. T. MBUYI, *The Faith of Our Fathers: New Perspectives in the Study and Understanding of African Traditional Religion*, Archdiocesan Information Service, Bamenda 2012, 61.

<sup>51</sup>Cfr. J. MBITI, *African Religions & Philosophy*, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London 1969, 24

<sup>52</sup>Cfr. G. TANGWA, "Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics," 391.

## The Impetus of African Cultures on Bioethics: A Reflection on G. Tangwa and Other African Philosophical Responses to Bioethical Issues

special gift of God – *mbuhme*. Handicapped children are generally believed to possess psychic powers and extraordinary “depth.” They are often thought to be messengers of God or disguises of spirits, and consequently, they are treated with great care and respect. This does not, of course, imply that anybody would desire to have a handicapped child. But once one comes into a family, the Nso accept it with unconditional love for the above mentioned reason.<sup>53</sup>

While noting that within such an outlook, there would surely be great interest in any technologies likely to assist the birth of healthy babies, Tangwa observes that it would be quite unpleasant if such assistance were associated with trade and commerce or presented as a matter of seeking a child of a certain “quality.” He notes that in *Lamnso*, it would be quite impossible to convey the idea that a certain procedure would help a couple to get a child of a higher quality. The Nso saying that a child is a child, has a generalized version: a human being is a human being, because all human beings are equal, an assertion typical of Africans.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, for an African, quality talk in the domain of human reproduction is, perhaps a case of adopting inappropriate concepts and vocabulary from the domain of positive economics and marketing propaganda under the influence of a calculative moral approach, such as utilitarianism.

Although each human being has a host of individuating physical and non-physical characteristics (some are taller, others shorter, some fatter, others slimmer some rich, others poor), it makes no sense to claim that one human life is of better or higher quality than another. This not only implies that every human being must be treated as an end in him or herself (to adapt Kant’s expression), but also that he or she must accept his or her finitude and limitations, including accepting mortality with calm and dignity.

Within the Nso culture, timely death is accepted quite calmly, if not cheerfully.<sup>55</sup> Timely death is the type of death that comes to one who has lived an honourable life, and perhaps dies in his or her sleep, peacefully without undue suffering. To have attained a respectable age with a good reputation among the kin of one’s tribe and dying at this time is considered a timely death among the Nso especially. Hence, timely death is dying at a respectable age, perhaps 80 years and above, with a good reputation that will remain as a legacy among the living and facilitate entrance into the realm of the ancestors.

It would be an act of practical judgement to examine the role played, and the impact created by assisted conception in the context of our subject matter. The foregoing paragraphs shall elaborate on the said themes.

### Assisted Conception

Conception is not seen as merely a result of man and woman coming together in the act of sexual intercourse. It is most basically understood as the result of a blessing from God and the ancestors. Without divine and ancestral blessing, conception may well not be possible. God, ancestors, mother, and father must all cooperate for conception to take place. Mother and father “copulate to ‘beget’ jointly and ‘give birth,’ while God intervenes to ‘create’ and the ancestors assist in protecting the creation from the malevolent powers of destruction. Every individual is therefore, the outcome of a human act, God’s creation, and ancestral blessing.”<sup>56</sup> With these ideas, fornication and any form of sexual deviation find no room in the plan of God and the blessing of the ancestors. What about cases of abortion?

### The Concept of Abortion

One of the most fundamental issues in contemporary ethical discourse, in which philosophers have not been able to reach any considerable agreement, is the question of personhood. It is the question of what constitutes the humanness, dignity and personal identity of a human being.

Any answer given to this fundamental question has serious implications for one’s moral judgment on issues like euthanasia, human rights and abortion amongst others. For instance, in the discourse on abortion, the question of personhood takes the form of: When does personhood begin and can there be any justifiable grounds for consciously bringing to an abrupt end, the existence of such personhood by another individual?

In African societies, the birth of a child is a process which begins long before the child’s arrival in this world and continues long thereafter. Nature brings the child into the world, but society creates the child into a social being, a corporate person. Some schools of thought in the western world argue with remarkable scholarship that the early human embryo has no moral status, because it is incapable of feeling pain or pleasure. Peter Singer, for example, finds no ethical problem with freezing early embryos, discarding them, or using them for research purposes.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Cfr. *Ibid*, 392.

<sup>57</sup> Cfr. *Ibid*, 392.

<sup>55</sup>Cfr. G. TANGWA, “Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics,” 392.

<sup>56</sup>Cfr. L.MAGESA, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, Orbis Books, New York 2002, 83.

<sup>57</sup>Cfr. P. SINGER, *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1990, 124-125.

## The Impetus of African Cultures on Bioethics: A Reflection on G. Tangwa and Other African Philosophical Responses to Bioethical Issues

Africans differ with such an opinion, rather considering that life, especially the fragile type, is to be protected and conserved to maturity.<sup>58</sup> It is the community which must protect the child, feed it, bring it up, educate it and in many other ways incorporate it into the wider community. Children are the buds of society, and every birth is the arrival of 'spring' when life shoots out and the community thrives. The birth of a child is, therefore, the concern not only of the parents, but of many relatives including the living and the departed. Therefore, abortion cannot be the choice of the woman, as in the Western world.<sup>59</sup> This idea has no fertile soil on which to germinate in African cultures. However, things are not as they seem since this practice is carried out on a daily basis on African soil even among the Nso kinsfolk.

Mulango asserts that the fact of having been born in a particular family, clan or tribe places Africans into a specific vital current, 'incorporates' them into it, fashions them according to this community, and 'ontically' modifies their whole being, turning them in the direction of the community's way of life and behaviour.<sup>60</sup> He notes that every individual person is an intimate part of a larger entity that must be preserved: the family, clan or tribe is a whole, of which each member is only a part. The same blood, the same life which is shared by the clan, runs through the veins of all. Every effort must be directed to the preservation, maintenance, growth and perpetuation of this common treasure.

The pitiless elimination of everything which hinders this end (such as abortion and euthanasia), and the encouragement at all costs of everything which furthers it: this is the last word in [African] Bantu customs and institutions, wisdom and philosophy.

Such Bantu wisdom is in conformity with Mbuy's assertion that for Africans, fragile life (which includes the life of embryos and neonates) is to be protected and conserved to maturity.<sup>61</sup> This is equally observed by the Nso of Cameroon. Contrary to Western thinkers who advocate for the abortion of defective foetuses thereby preferring one human being to another, the Nso of Cameroon, as we have seen above, often say: *Wan dze wan, a dze lim nyuy* (a child is a child, the handiwork of God). The Nso consequently regard a handicapped child as a special gift of God – *mbuhme* and therefore offer a special treatment to the handicapped child, thereby promoting, encouraging, and maintaining the growth of the child.<sup>62</sup>

Having established the above arguments vis-à-vis the Nso, mind frame, let us cross the carpet and examine another culture, the Yoruba of Nigeria. How do the people consider abortion? What are its implications and impacts on them and their traditional moral customs and mannerisms? These shall constitute our focal point in the paragraphs below.

### The Yoruba Conception of Abortion

While the question of personhood and abortion has received spontaneous reactions, albeit controversies, from philosophers in the Western philosophical tradition, it has received apathy in African philosophical discourse. Although most people agree that deliberate killing of innocent people is wrong, that the foetus is a human being is a statement that has been questioned.

Pro-abortionists argue that the foetus is not actually a human being or person and as such, killing it is not wrong. They insist that abortion is not the deliberate killing of an innocent person because they consider that a foetus is not a person. This idea is absolutely ridiculous, as we already saw among the Nso. The question arises as such, with what criteria and audacity do these people judge when life begins and ends, who is to live and who is to die? They assume the place of God, thereby replacing infinity with mere finite minds.

The Yoruba conception of a person is tripartite. The three elements are *ara* (body), *emi* (vital principle) and *ori* (destiny). They believe that it is *ori* that rules, controls, and guides the life and activities of the person. The *ori*, as the essence of a person, derives from *Olodumare* (Supreme Being), and because this *ori* derives from *Olodumare*, man is bound to *Olodumare*, and without Him, the human being cannot have his being or existence. The *ara* is a collective term for all the material components of a person most important for the Yoruba of which are *Opolo* (the brain), *Okan* (the heart) and *Ifun* (the intestine)<sup>63</sup> Kwasi Wiredu identifies two approaches to the concept of man in Akan and even more in African traditional thought. One is descriptive and the other normative.<sup>64</sup> The descriptive African concept of a person reveals the ontological status of the individual while the normative reveals the social status of the individual. The normative concept of a person evolves from the way in which man is understood in a given community in terms of his relations to other living beings and his role among other men.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>58</sup>Cfr. T. MBUY, *The Faith of Our Fathers: New Perspectives in the Study and Understanding of African Traditional Religion*, 61.

<sup>59</sup>Cfr. J.MBITI, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 110.

<sup>60</sup>Cfr. L.MAGESA, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, Orbis Books, New York 2002, 62.

<sup>61</sup>Cfr. T. MBUY, *The Faith of Our Fathers: New Perspectives in the Study and Understanding of African Traditional Religion*, 61.

<sup>62</sup>Cfr. G. TANGWA, "Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics," 391.

<sup>63</sup>Cfr. E. IMAFIDON, "The Concept of Person in an African Culture and its Implication For Social Order" in *Lumina* 2 (2010), 5.

<sup>64</sup>Cfr. G. IGWEBUIKE, "The Universal and the Particular in Wiredu's Philosophy of Human Nature," in O. OLADIPO (ed), *The Third Way in African Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Kwasi Wiredu*, Hope Publications Ltd., Ibadon 2002, 74.

<sup>65</sup>Cfr. G. SOGOLO, *Foundations of African Philosophy: A Definitive Analysis of Conceptual Issues in African Thought*, Ibadan University Press, Ibadan 1993, 91.

## The Impetus of African Cultures on Bioethics: A Reflection on G. Tangwa and Other African Philosophical Responses to Bioethical Issues

The normative aspect of a human being in Yoruba society describes man, his behaviour, and relationship with others in the society. If one shows good human relations in the society he is considered as a good person because he shows in his life and personal relations with others the high qualities of a person. The opposite description is that he is not a person; he merely assumes the skin of a person, meaning that the individual is socially unworthy.

It is this social aspect of man that is linked with good character and it is that which distinguishes a person from a brute. So one can be *eniyan* (a person) and not be an *eniyan* (a person). In the first sense, he will be referred to as a member of the biological species, one who possess the structural components of man. And in the second sense, as one who possesses all of the above and does not have good human relations. These require a balanced attitude and relationship between the unseen attributes, which is a balanced relationship between *ero*, (thought) *laakaye* (intelligence), *imo* (knowledge), and *ogbon* (wisdom).<sup>66</sup>

From the Yoruba concept of a person, the foetus cannot qualify for the normative aspect of man. The foetus qualifies for the structural and religious aspect of man in that it possesses the structural and religious elements. Nevertheless, the foetus possesses the *ara*, *emi* and *ori* which are necessary to be able to achieve the normative as one goes on interacting within the society. *Ori* (human destiny) suggests that there is life and individuality before birth that needs to be actualized; hence the foetus has a right to live to actualize this destiny.<sup>67</sup>

Their concept of person on another hand supports the potentiality argument stipulated in Natural Theology. They have a saying: *eyinni di akuko* (it is the egg that becomes the egg). They believe strongly that there are many developmental stages in life: early, middle and late life. They argue that life has to begin somewhere, and that one cannot go from nothing to something. Hence, they consider that at the moment of conception, life begins, and it is at this moment that a human being is biologically under construction from early to middle to late and then birth.

When the baby is born, he or she also undergoes developmental stages of life too. The foetus is regarded as *atinuke* (one who is shown affection from the womb). However, if there is a conflict between the existence of the mother and the foetus, the mother's right takes precedence because they consider that a mother can always conceive and give birth to another baby.

The basis for this will then not be because they do not consider that the foetus has no right to life while the mother has. In this situation, they will say *omi lo danuagbe o fo* (it is the water that poured away and the calabash is not fractured). However the context in which this applied correctly is with miscarriages and not deliberate termination of pregnancies.

Deliberate termination of pregnancy is viewed by the Yoruba as an act of irresponsibility which they discourage.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, the Yoruba nay African cultures are pro-life and will not subscribe to abortion. These ideas make us understand the views of the Yoruba in relation to abortion. Let us examine another theme, euthanasia. Our case study is among the Shona of Zimbabwe. How do they consider this subject matter?

### The Shona Conception of Euthanasia

Euthanasia is the causing of an easy or painless death to a patient who is dying of a terminal illness. Two types are distinguished: active euthanasia (direct euthanasia or mercy killing), where death is brought about by a positive intervention, for instance, an overdose of sleeping pills or other medical intervention; and passive euthanasia (or indirect euthanasia) where there is omission of hopeless treatment, that is, not prolonging the dying process by life sustaining machines or medication.<sup>69</sup>

It is termed voluntary euthanasia, when death is induced by the patient himself without the knowledge and cooperation of any other persons, or when death is effected by others at the request, or with the consent of the patient. Involuntary euthanasia occurs when death is induced against the will or without the knowledge of the patient.<sup>70</sup>

Euthanasia is among the most popular titles of several academic debates on studying prevailing social norms concerning medical ethics, and thus, most of the literature focuses either on arguments for or against euthanasia. The Shona culture of Zimbabwe is one culture that abnegates euthanasia.<sup>71</sup> There is no consensus amongst those who labour themselves to reflect on the morality of euthanasia. As a result, the two schools of thought (active and passive euthanasia) have formed, making the morality of euthanasia even more complex, obscure and difficult to philosophically explain and understand.

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<sup>66</sup>Cfr. E. ODUWOLE, "Personhood and Abortion: An African Perspective" in *Lumina* 2 (2010), 5-6.

<sup>67</sup>Cfr. E. ODUWOLE, "Personhood and Abortion: An African Perspective" in *Lumina* 2 (2010), 5-6.

<sup>68</sup>Cfr. E. ODUWOLE, "Personhood and Abortion: An African Perspective" in *Lumina* 2 (2010), 6.

<sup>69</sup>Cfr. A. VARGA, *The Main Issues in Bioethics (Revised)*, Paulist Press, New York 1980, 267-268.

<sup>70</sup>Cfr. *Ibid.* 268.

<sup>71</sup>Cfr. M. MAWERE, "The Shona Conception of Euthanasia: A Quest to Depart from Zimbabwe Tradition" in *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 4 (2009), 101.



## The Impetus of African Cultures on Bioethics: A Reflection on G. Tangwa and Other African Philosophical Responses to Bioethical Issues

And this is possibly the reason why the issue deserves clear and transparent intellectual investigation, especially in an African context, when we know that both types of euthanasia are considered morally wrong in the Shona culture and most, if not all African traditional cultures.

The Shonas of Zimbabwe argue that euthanasia is morally wrong for the simple, yet important reason that everything naturally loves itself. They hold that because every part belongs to the whole, death injures the whole society.<sup>72</sup> This therefore implies that good propels the activities and life of the whole society as much as evil retards the smooth functioning of all these activities. Hence, the good ought to be fostered, while evil shunned.

M. Mawere observes that like Thomas Aquinas, who argues that everything naturally loves itself, and that every part as such belongs to the whole, the Shonas hold that every man is part of the community. As such, man belongs to the community. By having his life terminated, he injures himself and the community to which he belongs.<sup>73</sup>

The Shonas capture this view in the idiom, *Kufa izuva rimwe, kuora igore* (Death is one day, corruption is a year). This idiom warns people to beware of what may harm a person and have long-lasting consequences to oneself and society, like euthanasia. Thus, in Shona society choosing death in whatever circumstances, is considered harmful, destructive and a loss, not only to the bearer of life, but to family, friends and the community to which the one whose life is terminated is a member.

This view has gained wide acceptance and veneration through the ages, especially in the African cultures because of a respect for the sanctity of life and conformity to the biblical ethics of “Do not kill” (Deuteronomy 20) which is commonly taken as the foundation for ethical concern by the Shona culture and African cultures in general.<sup>74</sup>

For the Shona, anyone’s life is too special, important and precious in itself. This is confirmed by the Shona idiom, *Chembere ndeyembwa yomurume ndibaba vevana* (Respect should be accorded also to the aged because they are human beings and their life is equally important). The Shona thus, are traditionally against any form of euthanasia, even to the extremely aged and the ill. Thus, anyone who performs or assists one in performing euthanasia is considered individualistic or bewitched and when one is ill, friends or family members should run around to see that the patient receives treatment. This is because the Shona believe that *Munhu haarerwi nebonde* (A sick person is not nursed by means of a sleeping mat, treatment is needed as well).<sup>75</sup> Hence, nursing a sick person by means of a sleeping mat is applying passive euthanasia to the sick, which is discouraged and punishable in Shona society, although the Shona are not only against active euthanasia, but also passive euthanasia.

Among the protagonists for euthanasia, is Fredrick Stenn, who claims that euthanasia is morally right. He maintains that it is a fundamental right if anyone wishes to have his or her life terminated, and to deny one who wants his life terminated is inhumane and unjust. Stenn employs a principle of autonomy in reinforcing his argument. The general idea of autonomy is linked in philosophical literature to several allied concepts such as the freedom to choose, the creation of a personal moral position and accepting responsibility for one’s actions. The principle of autonomy thus contends that values and beliefs of the patient should be the primary moral consideration in determining what is to be done to the patient or in deciding the fate of the patient.<sup>76</sup>

In the light of this principle, Stenn further argues “man chooses how to live, let him choose how to die. Let man choose when to depart, where and under what circumstances the harsh winds that blow over the terminus of life must be subdued.”<sup>77</sup> Stenn’s argument springs from the assumption that all individuals, whether young or old, are in a position to ascertain their own interests either verbally or otherwise more competently than anyone else. This is to say that, for Stenn, euthanasia is a fundamental moral right of anyone who wishes to have his/her life terminated. Stenn’s argument is strong in that it respects the principle of autonomy which potentially promotes individual rights. In as much as individual rights are upheld by this principle, what role is played by our duty to care for those rights and respect each person’s autonomy and boundaries?

Nevertheless, Stenn seems to be unaware that the principle of autonomy is a *prima facie* obligation, not an absolute one, and so can sometimes be overridden when it conflicts with a stronger obligation. As a result, his argument is narrow, rigid and extreme. To those patients who request that euthanasia be applied on them (active euthanasia), the Shona traditionalists urge that *Usarasachirimumaokonokuombera* (Do not lose what is already in your hands by clapping; it is better to be contented with what you already have than losing it for that which you haven’t got hold of).

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<sup>72</sup>Cfr. M. MAWERE, “The Shona Conception of Euthanasia: A Quest to Depart from Zimbabwe Tradition” in *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 4 (2009), 105.

<sup>73</sup>Cfr. *Ibid* 105

<sup>74</sup>Cfr. M. MAWERE, “*The Shona Conception of Euthanasia: A Quest to Depart from Zimbabwe Tradition*”, 105.

<sup>75</sup>Cfr. *Ibid*. 106.

<sup>76</sup>Cfr. T. SHANNON, “*Thematic Ethical Issues*,” in T. SHANNON (ed.), *Bioethics*, Paulist Press, New Jersey 1976, 5.

<sup>77</sup>Cfr. F. STENN, “A Plea for Voluntary Euthanasia” in *New England Journal Medicine*, 9 (1980), 303.

## The Impetus of African Cultures on Bioethics: A Reflection on G. Tangwa and Other African Philosophical Responses to Bioethical Issues

Thus, for the Shona traditionalists, it is advisable for a patient to be contented with the life he has, for no one knows what the future holds. This is to say that euthanasia has consequential effects, both social and psychological, which are so difficult to contemplate.<sup>78</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The expansion of the West has promoted both the modernization and the westernization of non-Western societies. The political and intellectual leaders of these societies have responded to the western impact in one or more of three ways: rejecting both modernization and westernization (Rejectionism), which involves the hopeless task of isolating a society from the shrinking modern world; embracing both (Kemalism) which involves the difficult and traumatic task of destroying a culture that has existed for centuries and putting in its place a totally new culture imported from another civilization; and embracing modernization and rejecting westernization (reformism), which is an attempt to combine modernization with the preservation of the central values, practices and institutions of the society's indigenous culture.<sup>79</sup>

The third response would definitely be the ideal solution to non-Western societies especially the African society. Here, it would be ideal to combine the efficacy of Western science and technology with the moral sensibilities of traditional Africa. Western culture would empower African culture while African culture will humanize Western culture. For this to occur, Africans have to undergo mental decolonisation. This is a way by which Africans accept theories from the West uncritically and apply them to their particular conditions.

Hence, when all the Africans who have been incorporated into the Western system and train of thought, begin to realize the position of their home counterparts, they will understand how much the West has deprived them from being of great help to their home cultures. As such, all that we have established in this work can only be of value especially in context, if mental decolonisation occurs and speedily. We do not in any way, deny Western influence. We appreciate all that is good and shun all that does accord with traditional moral principles.

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<sup>78</sup>Cfr. M. MAWERE, "The Shona Conception of Euthanasia: A Quest to Depart from Zimbabwe Tradition" 106-107.

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## **The Impetus of African Cultures on Bioethics: A Reflection on G. Tangwa and Other African Philosophical Responses to Bioethical Issues**

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