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REFLECTIONS ON EUTHANASIA: WESTERN AND AFRICAN NTOMBA PERSPECTIVES ON THE DEATH OF A CHIEF

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Declaration

I, Deogratias Biembe Bikopo, student number 0513798X, am registered for MSc Med Bioethics and Health Law in the year 2009.

I hereby declare the following:

- I am aware that plagiarism (the use of someone else's work without their permission and/or without acknowledging the original source) is wrong.
- I confirm that the work submitted for assessment for my research report is my own unaided work except where I have explicitly indicated otherwise.
- I have followed the required conventions in referencing the thoughts and ideas of others.
- I understand that the University of the Witwatersrand may take disciplinary action against me if there is a belief that this in not my own unaided work or that I have failed to acknowledge the source of the ideas or words in my writing.
- This work has not been submitted to any other institution or university for any degree or examination purpose.

Signature: Deogratias Biembe Bikopo Date: 2010/02/20

Dedication

To Laetitia and Annie, my dear daughter and wife respectively; to my parents, brothers and sisters; to all those who strive to keep the flame of African knowledge, practices and belief system enlightened; I dedicate this work, fruit of innumerable sacrifices and abnegations.

Abstract

Death and dying have preoccupied humanity since civilization began. While euthanasia is a multidimensional and multicultural ethical issue, the tendency has been for all countries to adopt Western definitions, terms and conditions which now include many legal prescriptions. My research report involves its practice by the Ntomba tribe in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In this practice, the hereditary Chief, upon installation, agrees to the belief that not only natural death takes chief's individual life but his *bwanga* (energy, vital force) from which the whole community's well-being including animal, vegetal and non-vegetal holds. Given importance of community over individual, he accepts to be euthanatized by his *batwa* (pygmies) when his energy has waned. I describe this as "autonomy" even if this may be considered "murder" by those who do not understand the cultural context. I will argue that in fact, it represents a different perspective and reflect on the possible commonalities concerning euthanasia in Ntomba traditional thought and Western philosophy.

Acknowledgements

It is not always true that human work once completed is for always. Even when thought to be so, works may always remains available to be improved upon. My scientific venture on African knowledge(s) and practice (s) should be seen from this perspective.

That is why I would like to thank all those who contributed in one way or another. I first think of the professorial body of the Steve Biko Centre for Bioethics for the knowledge which sharpened my passion for cross-cultural investigations into morality and values.

I owe a lot to Professor Louis -Jacques Jean Francoise van Bogeart and his dear wife Professor Donna Knapp van Bogeart, my article co-author and supervisor respectively. May they also herein find my sincere thankfulness for their indefatigable moral support and many kindnesses.

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Finally, I thank the Editor, staff and reviewers of the Journal Developing *World Bioethics* for accepting to publish the final chapter of this research in its special edition. I hope this is a first of a beginning of a scientific and academic companionship for the promotion of African world views to the world.

Introduction

In 2008, in the postgraduate unit *Introduction to Bioethics*, my class particularly enjoyed a guest lecture by Dr. Michael Cloete who presented on the topic "African Philosophy". As part of his presentation, he raised many issues e.g., whether there is such a thing as an "African" philosophy, the validity or not of oral tradition, the impact of colonialism on the African continent and misinterpretations of cultural practices by non-indigenous Africans. As a Bantu African, I was intrigued and following his lecture and research, I began to investigate and further reflect on some of the cultural practices of my tribe, the Ntomba living in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

My mother language is French and, although I am fluent in reading and comprehension of the English language, my written English is not as fluid as it should be. With the guidance of Professor L-J van Bogaert, I was successful in publishing an article in *Developing World Bioethics* titled Reflections on Euthanasia: Western and Ntomba Perspectives on the Death of a Chief. In what follows, I will set out the framework of my deliberation which resulted in the article.

African Genesis

Much of the history of Africa has been dominated by the occupation of colonialists from various Western countries. Largely, this resulted in the subjugation of the cultural, social and political life of Black indigenous Africans during this time. Although throughout human history other lands and peoples have been routinely subjugated by their conquerors,[1] the African experience was unique in that there was little assimilation[2] or acculturation[3] into the dominant ethno-cultural community. Most likely

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[1] One of the most common benefits of being a conqueror was the taking of slaves. Slavery was common practice in the Roman Empire and continued in Northern Europe during its Medieval era only being abolished in the 11th – 12th centuries, but it continued in Southern and Eastern Europe into the 'modern ' period (Carey 2009). A more stabilised economy and the development of the trade routes before the 1300s found African slaves in Spain, Italy, and Southern France. From about the 8th century onwards, an Arab-run slave trade also flourished. Much of this infamous slave-trade took place in West Africa, and inlands to East Africa downwards. Many African societies as well had forms of slavery, although, Carey (ibid) claims "these differed considerably, both from each other and from the European and Arabic forms". Interestingly, there are still reports on slavery being practiced in Africa (see for example: Harter 2004).

[2] *Assimilation* refers to a process in which members of an ethno-community (a minority in the population (e.g. immigrants) are "absorbed" into the community. In the majority of these cases, some characteristics of the absorbed group loose some characteristics such as language and customs.

[3] *Acculturation,* according to Kottak (2007: 63) occurs when there is an exchange of cultural features resulting from a continuous contact. The original cultural patterns of either or both communities may change, but the groups remain distinct.

this was due to "race" as well as the level of what was considered African "development" by the colonists. As was the general tenor of the times, ideas concerning race and difference were infused into a belief that Africans were of inferior intelligence. This, in the colonial mentality, was supported by the fact that Africa was largely in fact, colonized. A psychological trait also must be mentioned, for we tend to fear the most the things which we do not understand – such as the overt manifestations of differences between us e.g. colour, language, and rituals attached to belief systems. African "development" then was framed within such notions.

During this time, at least for the most part, African systems of knowledge were largely ignored. With a dominant non-African culture in place, this impacted on the ways in which Africans viewed themselves and their worlds – should they act "African", or behave like "an inverted mirror of Western Eurocentrism" (Higgs 2003: 6).

The insights of Zygmunt Bauman (1987: 132) may be useful here. He coins the term "state-administered social universal identity". By this he means that governmental interventions aim to order populations and communities and organise all aspects of their lives, including the

'language of politics and morality' (ibid: 137). Applied to the colonial system(s) in Africa, the 'social' has boundaries or is of an economic, biological, geographical, or political type which requires policing for societal order. When interventions are "required" (i.e. into traditions, practices which are not understood by the colonists) the imposed social order makes governmental interventions appear natural and rational.

When this type of social order is imposed there are three methods Bauman (1997: 42-44) suggests which are used to maintain power: assimilation, exclusion, and the physical destruction of people. It is generally acknowledged that the colonialists used, to greater or lesser degrees, all three during their occupation in various parts of Africa. At the same time, this organised system brought with it some benefits to many Africans in terms of education and medical care, but the overall alienation of the African *person as being* has had a lasting impact on what the African considers as his or her *self.*

Autonomy and the African Self

It is a common tendency to take folk ways of thinking and individual world-views and classify them only in the most general of terms. Following that, the general tendency is to wrongfully apply this generalization to many different ways of thinking. For example, in the case of African folk ways, world-views, and beliefs, those as diverse as those found within the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or Kenya, or the Sudan all are ascribed as "African". [4] From the onset, it should be noted that objections to views in support of a single all-encompassing world-view as "African" should be considered as non-issues. Only the most naïve would deny that there is an enormous amount of cultural diversity on the African continent.

For those outside the African continent, and even those within, differences between African cultures may well be perceived as incongruous. One reason may be that Africans have not been taught much about the different ways of life other Africans experience on the continent. This aside, a synoptic picture of communalities in African

[4] When speaking of things "African" in this paper, I speak of indigenous Black Africans.

cultures as demonstrated by Bantu scholars (and others) does identify a common thread which appears in African world-views and cultures (see for example: Wiredu 1980; Shutte 1993; Masolo 2003).

This is the golden thread of the African interrelatedness with others; *he or she as being with* [the other], as Heidegger (1996: 79) puts it. This interrelatedness in African settings is described by Mbiti (1970: 108) in the following way:

> *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".*

Within this framework, interrelatedness transcends the immediate anthropological space. A *muntu* (a human being) is essentially 'always already' in a dynamic interdependence with both seen and unseen animal and non-animal being with which he or she shares the same universe, including flora and fauna.

Tangwa (1996: 192) describes this relationship as being "Eco-bio-communitarianism". By this he means that a human is not like any other being in that he or she in known by both Western and non-Western cultures as having an awareness of self and the world. In this view, the

well-being of the human is paramount as it links to a humanistic worldview. The concept of one's well-being and how it is attained cannot be considered in isolation from their particular cultural context of the emergence of the self. While western cultures value individuality, the non-Western regards community as the key to the matrix of self-determination.

Perhaps there has been a tendency to minimise the ways in which culture feeds into the image of self. For example, Western philosophers generally have been inclined to minimize the contributions of culture and assume that the idea of autonomy (as self-rule, self-governance) is universal. However in at least in my view of the African self, it is not a single entity. As Taylor (1979: 49) indicates, to frame the world within an African's context of self requires an …

> *… adventure of the imagination whereby we abandon this image of man whose complex identity is incased within the shell of his physical being, and allow ourselves instead to visualize a centrifugal selfhood, equally complex interpermeating other selves, a relationship in which object and subject are no longer distinguishable .*

In this perspective, autonomy extends and overlaps with the selves of others and in a community environment there is not a great distinction between collective and 'individual' aims. In situations where a distinction may be necessary, personal goals are subjugated to the good of the collective. In the public self, actions are performed according to the expectations of kin, companions and community. The idea of such a collective or group-sharing of autonomy is commonly referred to as "Ubuntu". While there are many interpretations of Ubuntu, behaving with humanity is one of its most important components. As a process or action, Ubuntu requires the communality of purpose and direction recognising both the force of communal decisions as well as its fallibilities.

What is not often recognised by Western ethicists is that the concepts of self-rule and self-governance are not consistent throughout our lives. Because it cannot be so, we have particular rules for the application of this principle of autonomy e.g. children and the infirmed are not considered as capable of autonomous decision-taking.

If I may digress for a moment, a case of a dying patient requesting euthanasia[5] may be illustrative. It is argued that in many cases, the

[5] An article by Parker (2005: 523-536) provides the details: Euthanasia was legalised in The Netherlands in 2001. Australia's Northern Territory was the world's first jurisdiction to

decision to choose death is a result of conscious or unconscious motivations often deriving from stress, pain, family member despair, etc. In such cases, although such factors may in reality have no bearing on the patient's truly autonomous decision, it is still likely to be questioned e.g. How much did the pain, family despair, etc. weigh on the patients' decision to be euthanized? It appears to me that in this type of case, autonomy may be seen as a value, rather than a principle as presented in a Western ethical perspective. A principle is peremptorily respected while the value is not. Moreover, a decision resulting in death is always regarded as an interference with the common good when bounded by the Western goals of medicine.[6] The agreement to die arrived upon by an individual emanating from a community culture and consensus may be

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legalise euthanasia in 1996, and four people were assisted to die under this legislation before it was repealed by the Australian federal government in 1997. Euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide were legalized in Belgium in 2002. Oregon is the only state in the US to have legalised physician-assisted suicide, in 1997, despite attempts in other states in recent years (California, Washington and Michigan). Switzerland tolerates assisted suicide by non-physicians, although physician-assisted suicide (not active euthanasia) has recently received restricted approval by the Swiss Academy of Medical Sciences. Germany allows physician-assisted suicide, but not active euthanasia. Colombia legalised euthanasia in 1997, although the implementation of guidelines is incomplete, and Uruguay's criminal code allows mercy killing to go unpunished under certain conditions. Parliamentary bills have been presented to the legislatures of South Australia, New South Wales, Western Australia, Luxembourg and New Zealand. The UK House of Lords has recently considered a bill to allow euthanasia, which is likely to be reintroduced into the new parliament. Two of the UK's Royal Medical Colleges dropped their opposition to this bill while the British Medical Association has also just adopted a neutral stance.

[6] According to an article by the Hastings Center Project report (1996) The goals of medicine are: 1) the prevention of disease and injury and the promotion and maintenance of health, 2) the relief of pain and suffering caused by maladies, 3) the care and cure of those with a malady, and the care of those who cannot be cured, and, 4) the avoidance of premature death and the pursuit of a peaceful death.

considered a wrongful or bad death. However 'life' is not owned in many non-Western cultures. In this way, discussions concerning an individual's right to die have no application except for those in which compassion is the motivating factor. p'Bitek (1964: 32) claims

> *The White man has identified the mind with the brain and has imprisoned the self within the skull. The African has his own.*

An interpretation of p'Bitek may point us to the recognition that the Other is not just a form which is almost the-same-as-mine-but- not-quite. Rather, he calls for an unequivocal acceptance of the existence of difference in his or her own right.

Concluding remarks

"Tradition" and "traditional" are two of the most frequently used and misunderstood terms connected with the study of culture and society (Shils 1971: 123). They are typically referred to as descriptions or explanations in which they repeat in almost identifiable form as societal norms, structures of conduct, or patterns of beliefs over several generations of relationships over time.

In his book, Gyekye (1997) identifies that traditions are handed down from one generation to another to do with as that particular generation deems fit. For example, a generation my reject the tradition fully, keep some but not all of it, or continue with it as it is. After four generations of the same application, the practice becomes a part of the current culture- a tradition. This of course relates to the fact that all cultures change over time. Some cultures change faster than others, but change is a co-relevant of culture. Normally, the practice of a tradition occurs within a single genetically continuous population living in a demarcated geographical region. The groups involved are identifiable to the extent that they share other common traditions, or in demonstrable ways, a common culture. Since morality is a characteristic of human beings embedded in social relationships, all attempts to understand e. g. symbolic language and orality are rooted in assumptions about human actions and the nature of society even if the holders are unaware of their own beliefs (Tonkin 1986: 213). Unaware or not, no culture has the monopoly on ethical validity and end the end, what is required of all humans is mutual respect and recognition of difference.

The basic question put to all those reflecting on ethical behaviour are: Who is harmed; who is helped? I will leave the reader to decide as I now turn to my article.

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