

REVIEW ESSAY

Elechi, Amadi (1982). Ethics in Nigerian Culture. Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd., Ibadan: 1982, pp. viii + 118.

HOW NOT TO WRITE ABOUT ETHICS IN NIGERIAN CULTURE

by

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In a country like Nigeria in which the ravages of endemic poverty, ignorance, and disease combine with the curse of a lootocratic ruling class to ensure a state of quasi-permanent underdevelopment, the study of ethics and moral theory remains perennially relevant. One, therefore, cannot but welcome the publication of a book on the subject written by a Nigerian whose literary accomplishments are not mean. This is the case with Elechi Amadi's Ethics in Nigerian Culture.

While one may not belittle Amadi's importance as a writer I am afraid that I cannot say the same thing for his competence as a writer on the subject of ethics. For, as I intend to show in the following paragraphs, Amadi has, this time around, written one hell of a bad book. I do not spend my time on the dilettantish nature of its philosophical speculations. I wholly agree with the author that his "is a layman's rendering of a very intricate subject." (p. viii) Having said that, I want to argue that the book is a combination of pedestrian observations, unexamined ethical reflections and speculations and, all too often, outright reactionary conclusions and recommendations.

I would not have bothered to review the book were it not that there are enough unwary knowledge-seekers and not infrequently malicious foreigners (especially Western anthropologists) -- readers who may take what Amadi says for an adequate description of ethics in Nigerian culture. But why may it not be so taken? I answer the question in what follows. First some methodological objections are dealt with.

The author claims that "although I have not hesitated to offer opinions here and there, this book is mainly descriptive and so is not concerned with definitions and ethical theories." (p. vi) Yet the book is replete with specific recommendations of ethical positions, active advocacy of concrete ethical practices and, at several places, unabashed consecration of some of the most odious aspects of our cultural life.

Furthermore, the title of the book and general tenor of

its arguments suggest that there is a Nigerian culture, which is the subject-matter of the book. But as the author himself knows (pp. vii-viii), there are diverse ethics among the several ethnic groups that make up modern Nigeria. It would have been very helpful had the author made clear in his Introduction what licences him to speak of Nigerian culture (as he seems to do) and not merely of the sum of the individual cultures that cohere in the country (as he does not). In the rest of this essay, culture is meant in the second sense.

Finally, and this is not unimportant, the author ought to have shown more sensitivity to the fact that quite a good number, if not all, of Nigeria's national and ethno-national groups have developed beyond the level of "tribes." His insistence on using the word 'tribes' although the book seems to me a blunt refusal to disown the relics of colonial anthropology and historiography or ignorance of all recent attempts by historians, writers, etc. in our country to break free from the restrictions of the colonial world-view. Perhaps the author could not help himself since he depended so much on "published anthropological and historical accounts, especially those by colonial administrative officers and explorers . . ." (p. vi).

In the first chapter on Religion, the author argues that ". . . religion has always been a very powerful factor in human life." (p. 2) Like every powerful weapon, religion can and has been used for good and ill. With specific relevance to ethics, the author maintains that "the overall effect of (religion) is to enforce a moral standard acceptable to a particular society . . . It would appear, then, that while man formulates the moral code, he enlists the influence of religion for its enforcement. In other words, in ethics man proposes, god enforces." (p. 6) It has been claimed time and again that the existence of god or the possibility of damnation in the hereafter is the best reason people have for conforming to the dictates of morality.

However, one must question Amadi's standpoint when he argues that traditional religions were very efficient means of moral enforcement (p. 5-6): that the imported religions "do not have the same powerful hold on the people as the traditional religions, so their use as ethical instruments is not as effective." (p. 6) His solution is more religion; specifically "a fairly respectable and appealing hybrid religion . . ." (p. 7) which will combine the efficacious content of traditional religions with the forms of the imported religions. And for Amadi, the movement towards such a hybrid religion is underway. "There is a religious revolution going on now in Nigeria, manifested by the rise of the spiritual churches . . . Members of spiritual churches are drawn from all sections of society . . .

A study of these churches reveals that they seek to incorporate elements of indigenous religion into the formal Christian religion. Their mode of worship is very Nigerian." (p. 6-7)

It is not clear whether or not Amadi means that a religious revolution of the kind described by him is the precursor of a cultural revolution in Nigeria. But even if it is, I believe it is a revolution for the worse and whatever kind of ethics it seeks to enforce will likely not conduce to the orderly, peaceful and accelerated development of the material and spiritual culture of the peoples of Nigeria. We have seen what levels of mystification and regress such hybridized religions he calls for are capable of once they are let loose on the people: witness the Maitatsine phenomenon, the infanticide that goes on in some of the cults he calls the "spiritual churches," the vintage Dark Ages culture they, in their different ways, will want to throw us back into. In addition, Amadi fails to see the roots in material poverty and increasing marginalization of the people of Nigeria which make them fall easy prey to whatever promises the quickest deliverance from their situation. An uncritical appraisal, such as Amadi's, of the role of these institutions in our society cannot be a positive contribution to a much-needed ethical culture in Nigeria.

In chapter 2, there is an attempt to relate the contributions of secret societies to the development of ethics in specific Nigerian cultures. Among other functions that they perform, secret societies prescribe and enforce laws, especially moral laws which, whatever their nature, ". . . affect (sometimes to a considerable extent) moral behaviour in society . . ." (p. 9) Examples of secret societies discussed in the book include the Ogboni society among the Yoruba, the Ekpe society in the Cross River State, the Okonko, Eku Meku, Mmanwu secret societies of the Igbo, and the Dodo society among the Kagoma (formed to terrorize women into becoming pawns of their husbands). As with the chapter on religion, and most of the work, Amadi here offers apologies for the worst aspects of our cultural world. To take an example: Secret societies undertake elaborate burials for their members. Even a cursory look at any of our daily newspapers suffices to acquaint one with what obscene levels these societies (and their latter-day incarnations -- "social clubs") can go to give their members 'fitting' elaborate and expensive burials. Ordinarily one would think that this grotesque ostentation deserves the condemnation of anyone genuinely interested in an appropriate ethics for Nigeria. But not so for Amadi.

According to him, "Nigerians are very religious. Burials form part of the terminal religious rituals for the dead. And in highly emotional matters such as religion it is futile to think in terms of material value . . ." (p. 10) In addition,

newspapers, radio and television derive substantial parts of their income from obituary notices. Thus, he concludes, "expensive burials are, in the final analysis, taxes paid by the rich under emotional and religious pressure. Also, whole populations are fed during burials and in these days of inflation most people are not averse to free meals and drinks." (p. 10) Amadi seems to be advocating, in clear conscience, to the profligacy that expensive burials represent even while most Nigerians wallow in degrading poverty and misery. Is there a moot suggestion of Amadi's ethical preference in this passage?

How does one explain this startling conclusion: "Secret societies are only as evil as the rest of the society from which their members are drawn . . . It may be wiser, therefore, to regard secret societies as part of the religio-cultural aspect of the life of the people and to leave them alone as long as they do no discernible harm. Hounding them may serve only to reinforce them and perhaps to disrupt society unnecessarily. The Establishment should heed this Hausa proverb: Leave the hen in its feathers." (p. 14)

Chapter 3 titled Murder, Theft and Adultery is a discussion of the concept of abomination or tabu as another vehicle of moral enforcement. Chapter 4 examines Supernatural Crimes with the focus turned on the phenomenon of witchcraft as it occurs and is treated in various Nigerian cultures. Chapter 5 considers the ethics of Warfare among various Nigerian peoples. Slavery in traditional societies is considered in Chapter 6.

Chapter 7 is devoted to Concepts of Goodness. Here we are informed that "Nigerian ethical philosophy emphasizes positive virtue . . ." (p. 50) Through a selection of proverbs and adages from some of our national groups, Amadi distills a number of virtues embodied in "Nigerian ethical philosophy": respect for elders, contentment, and the culture of sharing incarnated in the extended-family system. Of all these, the extended-family system is lengthily discussed. An attempt is made to meet some of the criticisms often levelled at the institution. It is said that it encourages nepotism, often imposes an almost intolerable burden on the individual, and makes an individual virtually a slave to his or her kinsmen. (pp. 58-9) Amadi is of the opinion that if the system were to be applied with more enlightenment, "more education, more wisdom, honesty and an awareness of other cherished moral principles like justice and fairness" (p. 60), we can get rid of its evil side-effects.

The same reasoning which informs his defense of secret societies and religion could not but constrain him to treat lightly of the problems posed by the extended-family system. These problems are structural. They arise from the fact that

the extended-family system now operates in a new social and geopolitical reality in which the surplus to be distributed is no longer produced by the family unit -- no matter how large -- but by modern corporations and institutions which necessarily are cosmopolitan in nature. Nor did it ever occur to Amadi to question how much of the ethos of the extended-family system has survived the cruel and devastating onslaught of capitalist individualism. It is not enough to long for the fleshpots of a transcended and irretrievable past.

On the contrary, our goal should be to take the present in hand and prepare for a future in which the culture of sharing will not and can not even mirror the extended-family system. The material foundations that made possible the social relations of the extended-family system have become either extinct or endangered species. Capitalism is busy taking care of that. What our situation calls for is renewed determination to meet the challenges of this future by creating appropriate political, ethical and ideological props. Needless to say we must take what we can and seems appropriate from the past. This Amadi fails to do in this book.

Chapter 8 deals with social discrimination at both the personal and institutional levels. Discrimination gives rise to inequality. However, consistent with his earlier position in chapter 2, Amadi asserts that it is difficult to assess how far the kindness members of, say, secret societies, show to one another "puts non-members at a disadvantage, which is an indication that discrimination based on secret societies is minimal in modern Nigeria." (p. 69) Anyone who has even a passing familiarity with the Nigerian scene will need more than Amadi's bare assertion to be convinced of the truth of his statement. If they do so little damage, why did the framers of our 1979 Constitution and the then military administration see fit to proscribe them? And why is the belief widely shared in Nigeria that secret societies are bulwarks against fair play and social justice?

In the same vein, the following flies in the face of facts that are too well-known in Nigeria: ". . . discrimination based on social status has also been minimal because class consciousness has never been strong in Nigeria. Even now that an educated middle class has emerged, the extended-family system ties the rich man securely to his poor relations, some of whom may have contributed towards his education. He is unable to look down on the poor because he is very closely associated with them. Moreover, the chances are that at one time he himself wallowed in that same grinding poverty." (p. 69) It may not be said that there are no rich persons in Nigeria who fit Amadi's description. Albeit I query that they constitute the rule rather than the exception.

It is fairly well-known that most rich persons sever the cord that ties them to their poor relations no sooner than they climb to a different station. Of course they maintain some ties -- when they use their kid-cousins, nephews, and nieces, etc., as househelp, gardeners, errand-boys, etc. What Amadi refuses to acknowledge is the passage into antiquity of our age-old corporatism built on kinship ties and the emergence of a new attempt by the ruling class to build a new one solidly anchored on their class domination of the peoples of Nigeria. Amadi's verbal perambulations can not hide this ugly fact.

The only redeeming feature of the book comes in Chapter 9 where the author discusses Sexual Discrimination. By the standards of Nigerian sexism and male chauvinism, he is mildly progressive. He points out how women are not allowed to develop by being kept out of the power structures of society. He calls for equal treatment of men and women (within certain limits he mentions). Even then there still are sexist leftovers in the chapter represented in locutions like the following: "The problems of women arise from two factors. The first is their relative muscular weakness." (p. 71) "The second . . . has to do with their most vital function, childbirth." (p. 72) "Nigeria is a man's country . . ." (p. 73)

Chapter 10 is an examination of what the author calls Awuf which he defines as "bribery, corruption or any gain obtained through trickery, dishonesty or sharp practice." (p. 82) He takes us through the career of awuf in pre-colonial societies to the present day. He calls for its elimination from our national life and he places the responsibility for ridding the nation of awuf on intellectuals, thinkers, philosophers and administrators.

It is interesting that Amadi endorses the orgy of mystification going on in the country in the name of "a religious revolution," and calls for secret societies to be let alone. Yet he does not see any inconsistency in advocating that corruption be eliminated from our national life. But then it is hardly argued these days that these religious cults and secret societies are the primary 'infantrymen' of the army of corruption. His recommendation that the same elites that led us into the present morass should lead us out of it is amusing. Why and how did they lead us there in the first place if they had enough lights to lead us right?

Chapter 11 delves into the question of leadership while Chapter 12 gives a conclusion which ties up the diverse themes treated in the text.

On the whole, the book suffers from three major defects in addition to those I have highlighted above. First, the

author does not bring a historical perspective to bear on his work. This is not just a matter of methodological preference. For while most of the problems treated are perennial questions of philosophy, the concepts in which they are expressed are never frozen. We need to know whether many of the ethical practices of various peoples in Nigeria still remain today as they were in precolonial times. We want to know why they had this particular ethics and not some others. We want to know how much of their ethics owes to the way they sustain and reproduce their lives and how adequate such materially and socially-bound ethical systems are or may be relevant in changed and changing circumstances.

The ahistorical procedure of the author inexorably leads him to the second major defect of the book: its crass empiricism. There is no attempt to get behind the facts and find out what animates them. The result is that, in the manner of old, discredited colonially-inspired history and anthropology we are served a fare of disjointed facts and observations which are not tied together in any thematic or conceptual framework. This failure to go beyond the commonplaces of everyday existence makes the author, perhaps unwittingly, to embrace and apologize for the worst aspects of contemporary life in Nigeria.

Finally, when in the conclusion the author recommends that moral instruction should be reintroduced into education and be made a compulsory subject in schools and universities respectively, he gives the impression that morality is a monolith, a given that we can take hold of and inculcate in the minds of the young and old alike. Nothing is farther from the truth. In a class-divided society like Nigeria any attempt to teach 'morality' without confronting the issue of whose morality should be taught could end up as an apologia for the status quo. I take it that Amadi grants that the present order in Nigeria is far from what ought to be. Therefore his call for moral instruction without a critical look at what such will look like in the present social structure in Nigeria is a consecration of the extant decadence abroad in the country. On the whole I strongly recommend that Amadi's book be read by all those who want to know how not to talk or write about ethics in Nigerian, nay all, culture.

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