

CULTURE AND CONTRADICTION

Dialectics of Wealth, Power, and Symbol

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**Morality and Ethical Values According
To the Iteso of Kenya**

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The concepts I examine are not the product of individual thinkers reflecting on life, but are instead the terms used by almost all Iteso in making sense of their experience of self, society, and nature. In this sense I am not examining what H. Odera-Orika calls "sagacity," the product of systematic reflection by individuals. Instead I am describing what Orika-Odera (1983) terms "cultural philosophy."

For Odera-Orika, cultural philosophy is the systematic set of beliefs characteristic of a society at a point in time and capable of explicit expression. Sages are usually conversant in cultural philosophy but often transcend it in their reflections. Hence their attitude is more critical of popular opinion than is found in the discourse Odera-Orika characterizes as cultural philosophy. One of his primary examples of cultural philosophy is the work, *Conversations with Ogotemmeli*, in which a blind elder was assigned the task of describing the world view of the Dogon of Mali to the French anthropologist, Marcel Griaule (1965).

This paper is based on research conducted among the Iteso for short periods between 1986 and 1988. I was assisted by Mr. Steven Omuse of Amukura. Mr. Omuse collaborated with me in all aspects of this work, and I have greatly benefited from his own extensive research and knowledge of Iteso culture. I also wish to thank Dr. D. Masolo and Dr. Corinne Kratz for their generous comments on an earlier draft.

Actually *Conversations with Ogotemmeli* is a problematic text, since it is unclear how much is conventionally known and how much is the product of systematic elaboration by ritual specialists. There is little evidence for Griaule's implicit claim that the material in the book is the world view of all the Dogon people. Still there is obviously much there that Dogon apply in practices such as ritual. I would argue that *Conversations* is actually a synthetic work, the sagacity of Ogotemmeli, and the speculative thinking of the anthropologist Griaule. This presents no problem in and of itself, but Griaule makes rather grander claims to have uncovered an authentically **Dogon** world. This work demonstrates the sorts of difficulties that arise in attempting to describe cultural philosophies.

Odera-Orika, unlike Griaule, actually constructs criteria for distinguishing between cultural philosophies and sagacity. For him the difference between the two emanates from the truth claims made by the two forms of discourse. Cultural philosophy is based on a *mythos*, an absolute set of values and ideas not subject to question. A sage who is an expert on that *mythos* and expounds it, such as Ogotemmeli, does not qualify as a producer of "philosophic sagacity." To do so the sage has to have the capacity to reflect on the claims inherent in a cultural philosophy, perhaps even to rebel against it. The sage produces a second-order thought that reflects on the first order of cultural philosophy.

Odera-Orika's formula has the merit of separating the products of the critical and reflective capacities of people from their everyday activities. I find the idea of different truth claims valuable but do not find so useful the notion that the truth claims of cultural philosophy are based on a *mythos*. The very idea of a *mythos* implies that attitudes to knowledge in cultural philosophies are defined by notions of what is eternal and sacred. Thus cultural philosophies are defined

as a form of religious thought. The problem with reducing cultural philosophies to religion is that much of the everyday categories of a people, such as moral and ethical concepts, may not be religious in motivation. Certainly ideas about wisdom, education, or even such culturally based skills as principles of mathematical calculation are omitted from consideration on an a priori basis.

What I want to argue is that the idea of a cultural philosophy is most useful when thought of as having two dimensions. The first I will call the "idioms of everyday life," in which people use concepts to interpret their experience, formulate future actions, and make judgments about themselves, other people, actions, and events. Idioms of everyday life are neither terribly systematic nor necessarily formulated in explicit terms either by ordinary people or specialists. They emerge in practice and are more directly related to conduct than the second aspect of cultural philosophies, which I call "consciously elaborated world views."

All societies possess idioms of everyday life and often have more than one set. An example of one such set are scientific theories as they are applied in laboratory settings. Recent work in the history and philosophy of science has shown that even the most innovative researchers are not conscious of the fundamental principles of basic science and are unable to articulate the underlying framework out of which their discoveries arise. There is an extensive literature on the relationship between "ordinary science," in which work relies on taken-for-granted assumptions and "revolutionary science," in which scientific theories are subject to explicit critical evaluation (Kuhn 1962). Appiah provides the best account of the literature on the parallels between scientific thinking and "traditional" African systems of thought (1987). Idioms of everyday life are not restricted to language but can be manifested in such spheres of conduct as ritual.

This was recognized by Austin when he included ritual actions in his account of how speech acts perform deeds (1962).

The second dimension of cultural philosophies is more the product of theoretical and contemplative activities of specialists, such as diviners, prophets, and other ritual practitioners. It is far more systematic and capable of being formulated in precise, propositional form. World views are related to idioms of everyday life through a process of exposition and elaboration. One example from East Africa is Roy Willis' examination of ideas about the causes of illness among the Fipa people of Tanzania (1972). Willis found that Fipa diviners had a theory of illness that related sickness to "paths" of social relations. Using this theory, diviners were able to discriminate among different Fipa medical conditions and social relations in a manner more complicated and complex than the ordinary Fipa who consulted diviners and healers. Still the elements of the thought of ordinary people could be found in the theories of Fipa medical practitioners.

This pattern is not uniquely African, but characteristic of many modes of thought in Africa and elsewhere. It is a commonplace of studies of American medical practice, for example, that in the United States, doctors' prescriptions and remedies are often not followed by patients because the physician has failed to explain the remedy in terms that will allow patients to monitor their own illness. What has not been investigated, however, is the relationship between idioms of everyday life and the systematic elaboration of them in world views. This may even involve historical studies that examine how and whether there are divergences between the two. The existing literature only hints at what we might discover. For example, in his classic studies of world religion, Max Weber distinguishes between two forms of religiosity, that of the masses and the more developed religiosity of the masses. He sees them as developing different

standards of ethical conduct and moral ideals over time (1956). Weber describes a situation in which different segments of the same society may embrace moral values that not only differ but are in complex and changing relationships.

I describe the two dimensions of cultural philosophies--idioms of everyday life and systematically elaborated world views--at some length for four reasons:

(1) In studies of modes of thought in African societies, there has been far too great a tendency to fail to distinguish whose belief system is being described (specialist or laity) or even how the expressions of one segment of society relate to the expressions and actions of another.

(2) Under conditions of rapid change, idioms of everyday life and world views can often move in different directions. I would think that it is a critical research problem to assess the range of concepts and practices found at one time and place.

(3) Idioms of everyday life emerge in action and are not so capable of being collected by interviewing selected knowledgeable persons. The best way to make accounts of these idioms is to collect instances in which they are used, such as cases of misfortune, and then to ask people to explain their usage after the fact. This is so because the implicit beliefs used in the production of action become explicit primarily in situations of conflict or where two competing beliefs call each other into question.

(4) Finally, idioms of everyday life are directly related to morality and ethics. They are the language of moral judgments, the terms through which people evaluate the actions of others. If we are to describe moral values as they are used on a daily basis then we have to begin with the idioms of everyday life.

Iteso idioms of everyday life

I turn now to examine some Iteso idioms of everyday life and consider how they imply underlying ideas about moral standards. The Iteso are a Nilotic speaking people living across the Kenya-Uganda border in Busia District, Kenya, and Bukedi District, Uganda. They are related to the Iteso of Teso district, Uganda, but in some ways their language is closer to other members of the "Teso speaking cluster" of peoples, such as the Turkana in Kenya. There is considerable intermarriage between Iteso and the surrounding Baluyia-speaking peoples, especially the Babukusu and Bakhayo. An important project on cultural exchange would be to assess the degree to which intermarriage and social intercourse have facilitated the exchange of custom and belief. An overview of Iteso culture and social change is given in Karp (1978). Articles that describe the Iteso beliefs, ritual, and symbolic structures include Karp 1979, 1980, 1986, 1987, and 1989.

One way in which cultural differences have been maintained between Iteso and Baluyia has been through the general refusal of the Iteso to adopt the custom of circumcision. This has some implications for their ideas about the moral qualities of the person, discussed below.

I wish to discuss some concepts relating to moral judgments among the Iteso, and then to assess what these judgments imply for moral judgment.

The first such set of concepts relate to Iteso ideas about the person. Concepts of personhood are the most significant in my opinion because they enable an observer to examine whether a set of ideas can be termed moral concepts or not. This is an issue that has been raised by the philosopher Kwasi Wiredu (1983). Wiredu argues, rightly I think, that a concept can properly be termed "moral" only if

it is neither customary (simply used because of tradition) nor religious (reinforced by mystical sanctions). For Wiredu morality must imply a "sense of virtue" such that actions are deemed to be moral in and for themselves rather than for some other reason. Yet Wiredu is too rigid in the way he draws his distinctions, since virtually any concept can be customary, religious, and moral at one and the same time. Moreover his idea of religion seems to me to be tainted by protestant fundamentalism. Even for Christianity it can be argued that many actions are viewed as good in and of themselves and not advocated because of divine retribution.

Still the person in Western philosophy and religious belief tends to be the isolated individual whose actions are judged in relationship primarily to himself or herself. Persons are good because they desire to do good or their actions show them to be good. Whether that good is defined in terms of social interaction is not determined by the Western "sense of virtue." Protecting the environment can be a virtuous act regardless of whether other people gain or lose by such actions. Not so for the Iteso. The good entailed by protecting the environment cannot be defined without reference to the effects of such an act on other people.

The Iteso have a rather different and far more collective sense of personhood. As a result, they believe that a good person directs his actions toward other persons because that is the very definition of what is good. One does not "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Instead one does unto others because doing so defines proper moral behavior.

Let me explain this in terms of Iteso concepts. A person is composed of two faculties, the head (*akou*) and the heart (*etau*). The head is the seat of accumulated knowledge and skill (*acoa*), and the heart is the source of emotions and energy. Persons are only

capable of exercising their full capacities when they possess adult physical strength and health (*agogong*).

The capacities of the head alter as the person grows. Ideally the adult person acquires skill and knowledge over time and acts in a "cool" fashion, guided by his or her head. The heart can also be hot or cold, and changes according to the person's feelings. These feelings, however, do not significantly alter as the person grows older. When a person is bad tempered and subject to jealous moods, for example, that person will feel the same way throughout his or her life. How these feelings are expressed can change over time. The reason for this is that the head has the task of managing the heart. In most people the capacity for managing emotional dispositions grows with age, as their head becomes "cooler." Some people, however, have such strong tendencies to act in certain ways that their heart overcomes their head. In some situations, anyone can be overcome by their emotions, but some people are simply unable to manage themselves, either because they have a weak head or a bad heart. The extreme cases of uncontrolled behavior such as drunkenness, madness, and possession by spirits of the dead are instructive. In these cases the head is overcome by an external agent, allowing the heart to act without guidance. Spirits of the dead are thought of as rather childlike, motivated by greed for meat and beer, revenge, and other such desires. More than one informant described them as "etau kijokis," all heart.

Young men are notoriously "hot" because their head is unable to control the "hot" emotions of the heart such as anger. (The Iteso phrase for anger is *Emwan' etau keng*, "His heart is hot." Elders have "cool" heads. These Iteso accounts of the personal characteristics of young and old have a superficial resemblance to conventional English idioms. But in English we speak of a man as "hot-headed," not

"hot hearted." The difference is that for the Iteso the heart is hot and not the head. The capacities represented by the image of the head, sound judgment, and skill at controlling the person, are simply insufficiently developed in young men. They cannot control their hot hearts. Older men, however, are able, by virtue of knowledge and skill, to strike an appropriate balance. Iteso say of persons who control themselves that *Isomae akou*, "the head works." How the head works is to achieve the balance that enables them to interact skillfully and morally with others. Women are not as often judged in this manner as they are believed to have innately weak heads. I have not questioned women about whether they share this sentiment. The care with which they guard other women in settings in which the head can be made weak, such as beer drinking, indicates that they do.

When adults achieve the ideal balance between heart and head, they are described as "happy" (*elakara*). The happy man is someone who is controlled in his actions but open and sharing with other persons. A major ideal of Iteso sociability is the sharing of food (Karp 1978, 1980). Obviously this has functional significance for a society subject to seasonal and yearly fluctuations in food supply. Still the Iteso go further than simply appreciating sharing. For them sharing is the sign of happiness. The happy man eats out of doors, frequently brews beer for his neighbors, and is willing to cooperate in working parties and share his resources. Another way of describing a person who is happy and a good person is *epaparone*, roughly "self possessed." This is someone who takes such care of himself or herself that he or she strives to help others.

Persons lacking these qualities are described as "selfish," (*ationus*) or "proud", (*epoq*). These are two of the worst insults among the Iteso. The proud and selfish man is very much one who lives alone, does not cooperate in neighborhood labor and beer

parties, and eats hidden in the rear of his hut, rather than outside where anyone who passes by can share his meal. To Iteso it is obvious that the man who eats alone also fears poisoning. This is not simply a casual observation. As many Iteso themselves note, the person who is concerned with witchcraft and poisoning is often the person who has much to fear from his fellow man. This recalls the anthropologist Godfrey Lienhardt's observation about the Dinka concept of witchcraft. "One can only accuse another of being a witch if one knows in one's heart how a witch feels" (1951).

The fear of witchcraft and poisoning is not uncommon among the Iteso. The beer party is the setting for poisoning to occur and everyone knows of instances where this has happened. Hence the return from open sociability is countered by its risks. The risks associated with interaction indicate why I think that Iteso ideas about the person display their "sense of virtue." I have never heard Iteso say that they are happy for the material possessions they have acquired. They express their happiness at positive interactions, seeing a person after a long time, receiving a gift, giving to someone else. This happiness is itself the product of the balance between heart and head, between knowing and feeling. The result is that virtue can only be manifested through actions with others and never by oneself. Even when the return is great, personal risks are involved.

A proud man cannot be virtuous, almost by definition. He does not exhibit actions toward others that are associated with virtue. No precise equivalent to the English sense of "virtue" exists in the Iteso language. A virtuous man is *ejokana*, "good." Ejokana is derived from the root, *jok*, referring originally to the happy nature spirits associated with divinity, called *ajokin*. This meaning has been corrupted through missionary influence, where *ajokin* have come to refer to the devil and evil. Among the Iteso, virtue manifests itself in

social interaction. It is located not in the isolated individual but in the person's interactions with others. It is based on, but not defined by, the achievement of personal balance. Iteso moral judgments are judgments of interactions, which themselves are a product of the capacities of the person. The Iteso, however, reverse the movement from individual capacity to social interaction in their specific judgments. They do not judge the capacities of persons but rather their actions. Then they infer individual capacities and intentions from interactions.

A person is not evil for being mad, but a mad person is evil if he does harm to others. These judgments themselves have a hierarchy. Of all the forms of harm that one person can do to another, the worst is called *akicud*. For an action to be defined as *akicud*, it must have two defining characteristics, done secretly with homicidal intent. Poisoning and other forms of sorcery are all described as *akicud*.

I can only briefly indicate a significant difference between the Iteso and the neighboring Bagisu, closely related to the Baluyia speaking peoples and living next to the Iteso in Uganda. Like the Iteso the Bagisu have an idiom of personhood that distinguishes between the capacities of the head and heart. One major difference, however, lies in attitudes toward emotional capacities. The Bagisu believe that circumcision is associated with the production of an emotional state called *lirima*, which is the capacity both for adult action and violence. This is an attribute of all circumcised men (Heald 1982). For the Iteso the closest thing to *lirima* is a "hot" heart, an individual difference rather than the attribute of a whole class. Furthermore, if the Iteso judge this emotion to be more than transient in a person, they define him as a morally bad person. For the Bagisu (and possibly the Babukusu), *lirima* is a necessary emotional condition for the assumption of adult status. Only an excess of *lirima*

makes a person morally bad. This contrast demonstrates differences between ideas about both the capacities of the person and the effects a person can have through his actions. An account of the effects that different capacities can have, of personal agency, is the second most important aspect of moral concepts among the Iteso.

A full account of Iteso ideas about agency, the effects persons bring about, would lead me into a discussion of Iteso ideas about evil, manifested in their concept of the witch. In what space I have left I can only begin this task. I will take an Iteso concept related to their idea of creation and show both that it is morally neutral in principle and that moral judgments are manifested not in what people do but in the purposes to which their actions are put. My argument is that morality is not innate in actions but are derived from the assessments made of the motives for actions.

The Iteso concept of *akisub* is translated in dictionaries as equivalent to the verb "to create." It is used in a number of ways that may guide us to its core meaning. The first translators of the New Testament translated the name of God, as *Nakasuban*, "the creator." But this term is equally applied to a potter fashioning her pot out of clay. In fact, any act that gives shape or form to matter is described by the verb *akisub*. This suggests that creativity is not the divine act implied by Christian ontology, creation out of nothing, but always action that fashions an already existing material world.

The moral content given to the verb *akisub* derives from its contrasting uses. *Akisub* is used to describe acts that are both good and evil. *Isuben*, acts of *akisub*, are usually translated as "blessings," but really mean actions that create a relationship between two entities. Thus the individual who calls out to the high god in a moment of crisis is said to be doing an *isuben*. Also rites directed at the *Ipara*, spirits of the dead, are referred to as *Isuben ipara*.

These rites are always done to remove a misfortune caused by a spirit by creating a new relationship with it. What is created is a new connection, a path or relationship that is fashioned through the actions of men.

Akisub can also refer to actions that are harmful. These range from the relatively harmless act of *anunuk* (tying up), by which a wife renders her husband impotent, through to homicidal acts of witchcraft that involve using a person's bodily waste to kill. What these actions all share with isuben is that they create a relationship between two separate entities. What makes these actions morally good or bad is what the relationship intends. In the case of isuben ipara the intention is to heal; in the case of some instances of akisub the intention is to kill. If the intention is to kill by means of creating a mystical relationship, then the act is defined as *akicud*, sorcery. Iteso are absolutely clear that what makes an attempt to harm by secret means such as poisoning or sorcery *akicud* is its secret, homicidal intention, as I stated previously.

Intentionality thus is a fundamental element in Iteso moral judgments. For them an action is morally neutral until colored by the intention to do good or to harm. Although they have no separate word for "evil" that is distinct from "bad," *erono*, the notion of *akicud* illustrates that the most evil action for them is made evil by its homicidal intention.

Intentionality must be coupled with action, and action must lead to a relationship. These three elements are all necessary for a moral judgment to be made. But intentionality is the basis for such judgments. This returns us once again to the sense of virtue manifested in Iteso ideas about the good person. The evil person is the good person inverted. Both types of persons create relationships. For the good person, relationships are motivated by a sense of virtue,

the pleasure derived from doing good with others. For an evil person, relationships are motivated by the absence of a sense of virtue. The envy and hatred of the witch are the motives for the relationship the person fashions. One acts for the good of self and others; the other acts only for himself. This observation finally brings us back to the other theme I found in Iteso notions of sociability. Ideas about good and evil elevate the ideal of the person acting with others over the image of the person acting alone and against others. Goodness and evil are not innate in the individual but a product of intention and practice. Hence questions of good and evil are profoundly social and not individual.

This final remark leads me to make two concluding observations about Iteso moral concepts. The first is that for the Iteso the domain of the moral is not defined by essences, but by actions. A person is not good because of some innate quality, but by virtue of how he or she acts to other persons. In this sense they are rather existentialist in their definition of the moral. The second observation is that Immanuel Kant might have approved of their moral concepts. For the Iteso the good consists of doing good in and for itself. This is the definition of the happy man. Their moral imperative is categorical, absolute, and unqualified. It most definitely is not what Kant termed "hypothetical," based on technical skills, or done for prudent reasons. The hypothetical element enters into the skilled attainment of balance between heart and head that is the achievement of adults. This is a necessary but not sufficient condition for Iteso moral acts.

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