

Political ethics

Religion



Political Ethics (Chapter 7 Summary) This chapter occurs in the middle section of a book which places a great deal of emphasis on African ethics. One big difference between the ethics of African societies, and that of Western Industrial nations, is there is less reliance on formal written laws, with all the structures of courts and prisons, and much more reliance on the ability of groups to regulate their own affairs on a case by case basis, involving the elders of a group talking things over and weighing up issues. This is a very important distinction, because it elevates certain individuals to a position of responsibility within the community, and requires them to hold in their memories all the values and traditions of the group. Elders, usually male and heads of households, have religious authority, as well as powers to decide on aspects of community life. In the case of chiefs and regional or national leaders, there is a mixing of political, religious and moral authority which makes them very powerful indeed, and able to influence the life of those underneath them for good or for evil.

Culture, laws and history are traditionally preserved through oral means, which entails a lot of reciting of material, and listening, as well as ritual performances of various kinds which serve to remind those present of essential underlying principles which are used to pass judgement on particular cases. Another major difference between Western and African ways is that societal groups in Africa are usually very much smaller scale, so people actually know those who are leaders, and have some sort of relationship through kinship with them. Hereditary social structures create bonds which last over generations, and ensure a certain stability in society. Ancestor worship is an extension of the strong ties that exists within and between clans and tribes in the present time. The whole system is

hierarchical, with each layer courting the approval of the one above, from the king or chief at the top right down to the family unit where the child is subordinate to the father.

The main values of African societies are “ good company, dignity, display, decency and wisdom,” (Magesa, 1997, p. 258) and these are embodied in the leaders in a system that the author calls “ relative gerontocracy” (Magesa, 1997, p. 265) Conflict resolution is done in a consultative way, with several people sitting in judgement, and an audience listening to complaints and defences. By making the preserving of human life the main point of moral behavior, Magesa argues that African societies emphasize making amends, with a view to reconciliation rather than punishment and any abstract sense of justice. The presence of wars and raids on the property of neighbouring groups can be justified in terms of the preservation of the wellbeing of the group who is carrying out the proposed activity, or criticized in terms of those who suffer loss. (Magesa, 1997, pp. 271-272) If someone behaves badly there is also an expectation that this will invite supernatural intervention, and that person will suffer for his or her wrongdoing at some later date, unless the wrong is corrected beforehand. The chapter illustrates how religion, politics and ethics are intertwined in African societies, and how this further affects attitudes to property, which can be owned or shared in a community, according to certain rules which maintain the preservation of the group as a whole as being more important than the needs of the individual person.

Reference

Magesa, Laurenti. “ Political Ethics” in African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997, pp. 245-285.

<https://assignbuster.com/political-ethics/>