

Ethics of African Culture and its Relation to the Bahá'í Faith

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Background for Research

The following limitation and assumptions were made to facilitate the better possibilities of accessing information and providing a paper that is not very lengthy:

- a) The African Region chosen for the Study: The Southern African region has been chosen for study and research. The countries that make up this region are: Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, South Africa, Namibia, Swaziland, Tanzania, Lesotho and Angola.
 - b) The period of time for the study: The years prior to the coming of Christianity have been chosen. The influence of Christianity has affected the culture and ethics of Africa; therefore, it was decided to concentrate on the African culture in its “original form”, which by many standards is the culture of this region before the coming of Christianity.
 - c) Areas of study in African ethics and culture: The following areas will be the focus of research:
 - Concept of Spirituality – Belief in God
 - Ancestors
 - Health and Healing
 - Family Life and Patterns of Behavior
1. **Methodology:** The methodology used in carrying out this research was referring to available books and interviews with relevant university professors, living historians and other key people with knowledge in this area. The findings of each category will be discussed first and the Bahá'í views and principles concerning the same issue will be introduced thereafter and discussed.
 2. **The Question:** The following question is the purpose of this study: “How do the African Culture and Ethics relate to the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith?” I will take this question and demonstrate how the understanding of African culture and ethics can facilitate the understanding of the teachings and enhance the deepening of the

Faith so as to achieve the goals of the Four Year Plan to bring entry by troops closer to reality.

The Ethics of the African Culture

To understand the topic we will first define the words Ethics and Culture. The Oxford dictionary defines Ethics as “a set of moral principles in human conduct or moral principles or code”. In the same book we find the following definition for culture: “refined understanding of the arts and other human intellectual achievements”.

The area of concentration for background information of this paper is “Cultural Relativism”.

According to Tylor, “culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. He emphasized that culture is learned, that is shared with other members of society and that it makes an interrelated whole. (Introduction to Culture, E. Schsky & T. Culbert)

Cultural Relativism was developed during the 19th century. The followers of this philosophy believe that culture and nature are unique. Society and culture are real entities whereas individuals are but shadows. Individuals are products of culture. Supreme moral values become cultural and live in accordance with rules/needs of the society. They say that the society is organic and not mechanic. There is mutual inter-relation between different parts. Motion of history and change are introduced into nature.

They believe that nature is good and society changes and evolves. What corresponds to change and evolution is good. There is unity within a particular culture and all cultures are living. Cultural relativists were against revolutionary tendencies, because they believed that natural processes must evolve gradually.

This doctrine went so far as to emphasize cultural unity to a degree that individual freedom was destroyed. It became anti-reason and anti-minority. Anything different had to be repressed. Cultural relativists believe that to be sane or insane are only characteristics of individuals and not of culture. Culture is an organic entity that lives and evolves. Any particular aspect should be understood within the confines of the whole culture. For example, in the southern African culture if you are white you cannot understand blacks and any outside idea is doomed to failure. Separatism was created since not much inter-cultural communication was possible. The cultural relativists could not have an objective basis for defining morality.

Culture can make anything right or wrong. What our conscience tells us depends solely upon our tribe or social group. Values are forged by childhood training and by pressures brought upon us to conform to the ways of the group. (Dewey, Meville – Herskovits)

According to Summer, “words philosophy, life policy, right, rights, and morality are all products of the folkways”. (Folkways, W. Summer, Boston, 1906)

Although many tribes believed it was acceptable for a man to have more than one wife, Summer discovered that in Tibet a woman was encouraged to have several husbands. He also described how some Eskimo tribes allowed deformed babies to die of exposure, and in the Figgie Islands, aged parents were killed.

He pointed out that these diversities lead to the conclusion that culture alone is the sole arbiter of moral values. Herskovits says that judgments are based on experience and each individual in terms of his own enculturation interprets experience.

According to him cultures are flexible and so we find that they change over time. Therefore the norm for acceptable conduct within a culture may change as the culture shifts its ethical base.

A given number may gradually come to hold that a man may no longer have more than one wife; if so, polygamy would be wrong within that group. But at the same time and in another culture, polygamy may become acceptable. Therefore whatever a society accepts or rejects at a certain point in time becomes the standard of morality.

The Inuit of northern Canada, who used to live in extremely isolated communities, practiced a form of polygamy that falls between the polygamous and polyandrous marriage. In this type of relationship wives were shared with male visitors as an act of hospitality and respect, with the result that both men and women had, over time, multiple sexual partners. This gave each isolated community access to the gene pool of the region. It was this aspect of the culture that minimized inbreeding, while the region remained out of contact with the rest of the world. At present this social interaction has emerged as a form of sexual abuse.

The question to ask from the Cultural Relativists is “whose standards are absolutely right and correct?” In the United States we find the most popular expression of cultural relativism demonstrated in the opinion poll. For example, many people assume that when fifty one percent of the public believes that abortion on demand is morally acceptable, then it becomes right. (The Necessity of Ethical Absolutes, Erwin Leitzer, Michigan, 1981)

By what step in reasoning is it possible to move from “what is” to “what ought to be”? Morals are rooted in human needs and human inclinations.

From the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith we understand that differences in people and cultures ought to be respected. But communities cannot be slaves to culture and become totally static and dead. Tradition should be alive and progressive. We also learn that the idea of unity in diversity and having different cultures live harmoniously together is only right if there are ethical absolutes. The Divine Manifestations of God provide us with these absolutes. Therefore even if the practice of polygamy or the killing of a child as a sacrifice to ancestors was accepted and appropriate according to a cultural norm, with the appearance of the Sun of Reality

and the Manifestation of God, and according to His set of laws, the culture has to be reviewed, and in the case of our example, totally put aside.

1. The Concept of Spirituality – Belief in God

There is an important question about the unity and structure of traditional African religions. Are (or were) African religions fundamentally monotheistic? Or do African religions consist rather in a kind of pantheism, based on an underlying notion of “force” or “power” which permeates and controls even the gods themselves?

There is an apparent contradiction between the supremacy of the high-god and his withdrawal from the concerns of the world. The attributes assigned to him heighten this effect of contradiction. He is said to be at the origin of things, often as a creator; he is all knowing and all-powerful, he introduces order into the chaos of the universe, he is the final arbiter of right and wrong. But in spite of these attributes the high-god is not usually directly worshipped. He has no priests and no shrines dedicated to him and people may make a token offering to him in every sacrifice but hardly do they ever offer a sacrifice exclusively to him.

One way of resolving this problem is to adopt a perspective which makes the supreme god the underlying core of the religious system. From this point of view it is possible to unify African religions around the concept of monotheism. (African Religions. B. C. Ray, Princeton University)

While supreme beings generally remain in the background as objects of ultimate concern, daily religious life is given over to more concrete forms of divinity. Unlike the supreme gods, these powers are highly dynamic and communal. And vociferous. They are immanent, not transcendent, and their relationship to man is fundamentally reciprocal and interdependent. Indeed, their very nature is essentially bound up with human experience. Hence, they require many temples, shrines, priests, cult groups, images, rituals, and offerings to organize the frequent transactions between them and mankind.

These gods are known through personal encounter as living agents directly affecting people's lives. But since we cannot personally experience the gods in this way, we can try to understand them as images or symbols to us. Such an approach is highly interpretive, but it may help us to understand the significance of the gods in relation to experiences of the self and society.

In most African societies, there are certain types of religious authorities, such as diviners, prophets, priests, and sacred kings, who perform specific ritual functions. Although these authorities operate in different contexts and in different ways, they serve a common religious purpose: the mediation between man and the sacred.

In the Southern African region there is a universal belief in a Supreme Being, called Mkhulumqande in Seswati. He fashioned the earth, placed upon it flora and fauna, and peopled it with human beings. His footprints may be seen in rocks upon which he trod before they were dry. He made the earth and then returned whence he came. Since then he has not returned to the earth and he remains aloof except when occasionally sending a Messenger, known in Seswati as Mlentengamunye.

The hierarchies remain after death. In this world an ordinary man cannot approach the king. He has to go to him through a messenger. This is the same in approaching God in the African culture. The laws and customs also originate from the Supreme Being and are enforced by the ancestors.

The Bahá'í Concept

The Bahá'í teachings tell us that God is an unknowable, unreachable essence and that we as men do not have the capacity or understanding to comprehend that essence.

“The door of the knowledge of the Ancient Being hath ever been, and will continue forever to be, closed in the face of men. No man’s understanding shall ever gain access unto His holy court. As a token of His mercy, however, and as a proof of His loving kindness, He hath manifested unto men the Day Stars of His divine guidance, the symbols of His divine unity, and hath ordained the knowledge of these sanctified Beings to be identical with the knowledge of His own self. Whoso recognizeth their call, hath hearkened to the Voice of God, and whoso testifieth to the truth of their Revelation, hath testified to the truth of God Himself.” (Gleanings of the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, P 49-50)

“... Immeasurably exalted is His Essence above the description of His creatures. He, alone, occupieth the Seat of transcendent majesty, of supreme and inaccessible glory. The birds of men’s hearts, however high they soar can never hope to attain the heights of His unknowable essence. It is He who hath called into being the whole of creation. Who hath caused every created thing to spring forth at His behest...” (Gleanings of the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, P 193)

Conclusion

The Bahá'í approach to spirituality and belief in God is in essence similar to the African belief. The fact that there is only one God, a supernatural force who created the whole world and is not knowable is shared between the two. Understanding that the knowledge of God is only possible through His Manifestations is also a shared belief. Therefore when teaching, reference should be made to these original beliefs, and the concept of progressive revelation will become clear and understandable. This is based on what was discussed earlier about the African religions. Since we cannot know or reach God, He sends us Messengers to guide us to the right path. These messengers come at different times in humanity’s growth and development and bring teachings which are suited to our needs at that specific time in our history.

Ancestors

The African view of man strikes a balance between his collective identity as a member of society and his personal identity as a unique individual. In general, African philosophy tends to define a person in terms of the social groups to which he belongs. Mbiti in his book, *African Religions*, has aptly said, “the individual is conscious of himself in terms of I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am”. Destiny and community always balance freedom and individuality, and these in turn are balanced by natural and supernatural powers. Every person is a combination of interacting elements of the self and of the world, which shape, and are shaped by, his behavior.

The relationship between the living and the dead in African culture is most interesting. This relationship is commonly though somewhat misleadingly called ‘ancestor worship’. It has powerful moral and psychological dimensions and plays a vital role in every day life in almost every African society.

What is important to understand is the way in which the dead continue to be involved in the affairs of the living. According to African belief the soul of man is immortal and after death it returns to its origin. Based on its social status and its moral achievements in this life it can be a powerful force, which will guide the living and protect them. This spirit will become a mediator between the living and God. Prayers are offered to God through the intercession of ancestors. In times of difficulty or misfortune, special ceremonies are held to invoke their assistance.

As mentioned above, in the African culture, God rarely intervenes in the moral life of men on earth. Although none of the scientists pronounce the Supreme Being unknowable and unreachable, this is the explanation we can find when we study about God or the Supreme Being. This One, who is the Creator, does not interfere with the day to day affairs of people but from time to time sends Messengers to guide the people and show them the right path.

It is the ancestors who act as the official guardians of the social and moral order. This is especially true of small scale, stateless societies whose sociopolitical rules are almost entirely governed by a descent system based on genealogical frameworks. In such societies, ancestors become the focus of religious activity. This is not because of a special ‘fear’ of the dead or because of an especially strong belief in ‘souls’, but rather because of the importance of the system in defining moral relations.

The ancestors are a society’s projection of its authority system onto the supernatural sphere. Through this system ancestor rites are seen to be a function of a society’s need to maintain itself, by ritualization of its rules concerning social relations.

The ancestors do not, however, govern the whole of the moral order. They govern the narrower sphere of moral obligation. They do not concern themselves with personal moral virtue or with the performance of good deeds but rather with adherence to public norms. In this sense, wicked persons may prosper, even in the eyes of the ancestors, as

long as they fulfill the social duties required of them. (African Religions, B. Ray, Princeton University)

The argument presented above is in contrast to the findings of Kuper who says. "Illness and other misfortunes are frequently attributed to the ancestors, but Swazis believe that the spirits do not inflict suffering through malice. They act as custodians of correct behavior and tribal ethics. Ancestors punish, they do not kill." (The Swazi, Hilda Kuper, Oxford)

There is a story told in some of the African tribes which may make the understanding of the ancestral beliefs easier. Long ago, a great and noble Bantu king was in the habit of climbing a twin-peaked mountain at daybreak, there to intercede with the Great One on behalf of his people. His son who succeeded him, was afraid to draw near to the Great God whom his father worshipped, so he called upon the spirit of his father to intercede for him and his people before the Creator of all. Gradually each head of a house adopted this method of approaching God until each family had its own ancestral spirits as mediators first, then merely as beings who brought good luck and who needed to be propitiated by sacrifice and constant flattery and attention. (The Swazi, Marwick)

Each family and clan has its own particular spirits who are its own male ancestors. The only other spirits that concern a family are those of the king's ancestors, who care for the whole country.

The traditional Swazi perception of the spirit world resembles the world of the living to such an extent that it constitutes an almost true projection of the world of the living. Hilda Kuper says that in that spirit world men and women, old and young, aristocrats and commoners, continue the patterns of superiority and inferiority established by earthly experiences.

The ancestors are praised, invoked, or rebuked on various occasions. Following is a summary of these occasions:

When a village is being moved they are informed and asked to go to the new site.

In healing, they are invoked so that those of the doctor and those of the patient will work together for the latter's recovery.

When the parents wish to have a child of a particular sex, they drink certain medicines and mentally beseech the husband's ancestors to send the child they desire.

When a girl goes off to be married, her people praise their ancestors, asking them to extend their help to the girl even at the village to which she is going. (The Swazi, Marwick)

Who Are the Ancestors?

The healers describe ‘ancestors’ as spirits, much like guardian angels. These are often one’s great grandparents, grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles. Ancestor can also refer to someone other than family, like a great teacher or an associate of your family. One of the healers in Swaziland has a white lady who comes to her as an ancestor. She herself did not know who this lady was and asked the elders about it. She found out that her grandfather used to work for this white woman and was very much loved and respected by her.

Bahá’í concept

We learn in the Bahá’í writings that the spirit of man is created at conception in the womb of the mother and will continue to live as long as God lives. It maintains its own identity throughout its travels in this world and the worlds of God beyond this world. The spirit of a true believer continues its journey and becomes part of the ‘Concourse on High’. We invoke the guidance and blessings from the Concourse on High. We beseech them in our prayers to assist us. We name our teaching and other projects after them to have their blessings and guidance to the success of our projects. We pray for the progress of their souls, as we are certain that they do the same for us. The writings teach us about the immortality of the soul and life after death, but in no way can this be called ‘ancestry worship’. We do not worship the soul that has passed on, we are only requesting its intercession. It is obvious that we worship God and pray to Him. This sentiment is very similar to the African beliefs and I feel that this concept alone can draw the spiritual and pure hearts of the Africans closer to the Faith. “And now concerning thy question regarding the soul of man and its survival after death. Know thou of a truth that the soul, after its separation from the body, will continue to progress until it attaineth the presence of God, in a state and condition which neither the revolution of ages and centuries, nor the changes and chances of this world, can alter. It will endure as long as the kingdom of God, His sovereignty, His dominion and power will endure. It will manifest the signs of God and His attributes, and will reveal his loving kindness and bounty. (Gleanings of the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, P 155-156)

“The nature of the soul after death can never be described, nor is it meet and permissible to reveal its whole character to the eyes of men. The Prophets and Messengers of God have been sent down for the sole purpose of guiding mankind to the straight path of truth. The purpose underlying their revelation hath been to educate all men, that they may, at the hour of death, ascend, in the utmost purity and sanctity and with absolute detachment, to the throne of the Most High. The light which these souls radiate is responsible for the progress of the worlds and the advancement of its peoples.” (Gleanings of the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, P 156-157)

“Every soul that walketh humbly with its God, in this day, and cleaveth unto Him, shall find itself invested with the honour and glory of all goodly names and stations. (Gleanings of the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, P 159)

“As to the influence of Holy Beings and the continuance of their grace to mankind after they have put away their human form, this is, to Bahá’ís an indisputable fact. (Selection from the writings of Abdu’l-Bahá, Page 65)

Conclusion

It is unfortunate that when the white people and missionaries came to Africa, they concluded that the Africans were worshippers of ancestors. So they discouraged them and taught them to accept the concept of the trinity as the only means of knowing God. However, what the Africans believe about the ancestors has not changed dramatically especially among the rural population. Therefore, this concept can be used in our teaching efforts.

Health and Healing

In most African traditions there is a belief that illness is caused by an imbalance in the physical and spiritual natures. The job of the healer in most case is, with the assistance of the ancestors, to cleanse the patient's body and soul and restore his natural balance. Sometimes the cause of the illness or misfortune may be disobedience to God. This is also diagnosed and remedied by healers.

Herbs and Treatment: The master healers use only natural ingredients in their medicines and treatments. The possessed healer in Southern Africa may use a single plant or combine it with roots, bark, leaves or other plants to prepare a treatment for their patients. The treatments include powdered plants that are added to a herbal tea. The patient often drinks the tea. Sometimes the powder is put into a mixture for steaming. The patient will then place a blanket or cloth over his head and breath deeply. This procedure helps the patient relax while the steam helps the herbs penetrate his skin. Sometimes the healer burns herbs and bark, and asks the patient to inhale the smoke while covered with a blanket. Sometimes the ash is rubbed into an incision.

Another treatment administered is wrapping the herb, then dipping it in water and squeezing the drops gently into the eyes or nose. Herbal drinks to induce vomiting are prescribed regularly, especially in a regimen to detoxify the patient's system. Other herbal teas are used in this type of cleansing procedure and act as a diuretic.

The traditional healers use herbal mixtures to treat endless numbers of disorders and diseases including diarrhea, bladder infections, ulcers, headaches, high blood pressure, chronic bronchitis, stomach ulcers and constipation, kidney problems, arthritis, rheumatism, alcoholism, drug addiction, and infertility – to name a few.

Here I would like to quote a true story from a book written by Susan Campbell (Called to Heal). My purpose in relating this story is to verify my earlier argument that illness and misfortunes are caused by a combination of causes. In most cases the traditional healer tries to understand the medical history of the patient, uses his common sense and prescribes herbal remedies which are in conformity with what the ancestors tell him to do. Here is the story as related by the writer:

“I met with a healer, whose specialty was “lucky charms”. I asked if this was a physical item that a person wore on their neck. The healer laughed then explained how one’s “luck” was changed.

A patient came to this healer at her traditional clinic. He said he was unhappy with his current job. He had been passed over repeatedly for promotions he thought he deserved. He was having a run of “bad luck”. The healer decided to take the patient but told him he must first return to his job in the city and secure a week’s leave, which he would spend at her clinic.

Returning to the clinic, the patient was given a special diet. For the first three days he consumed only herbal teas and juices. He tired easily and was allowed much rest and sleep. Slowly the healer added mashed vegetables and fruit to his diet and by the end of the week he was eating a diet of solid, nutritious food. During the eating regime, the healer asked the patient about his lifestyle and learned, to no great surprise, that he was overeating and consuming far too many fats and sweets. She also learned that his urban lifestyle included no physical exercise. After the third day of his new regime, he began to feel stronger and wanted to walk. She encouraged him to take as many walks as he liked. The rural area had many footpaths and was peaceful and quiet. Ready to return to work, the patient wondered when he might expect his “luck” to change at work. The healer asked him to continue with this simple diet and add some gentle walking when he returned to the city.

A month later he came back with an astonishing story. He had maintained his new, balanced diet and his exercise. He noticed he was not as easily upset at work and was far more relaxed at home with his family. As if that was not good enough, a new job opportunity had just presented itself to him. It was a promotion from his old job and the responsibilities better suited his strengths and interests. He reported to the healer that indeed his luck had changed and her medicine had been strong.

The healer explained “it was not my medicine but the patient himself. He needed desperately to clean out his system. The toxins were causing all kinds of disturbances for him. He was irritable, not sleeping well. He could not see opportunities in front of him until he cleared his thinking. My clinic gave him a place to rest and recover. This is a difficult thing for my patients to understand. They usually believe that it is my medicine or me that changes their luck. No, it is our own ancestors who are waiting for us to welcome them. They are waiting to guide us toward the right living. They are protecting us but the day we slow down, clean our bodies, that is a happy day for the ancestors...”

There are several types of healers. The most commonly used and known are traditional healers. These primarily work with “trees” (roots, bark, and leaves) and other natural substances, and enter the profession of their own accord. Other kinds of healers are called ‘diviners’. Diviners have communication with the ancestors and receive directions from them. The diviners diagnose the cause rather than direct the specific cure and some rely on spirit possession for their insight. Diviners are destined from birth or sanctioned by the powerful dead. Knowledge of rituals and medicine are retained in certain families as an

important part of the inheritance. The owner imparts them to a favorite son, a younger brother, or close kinsman who is 'pushed by the heart to learn', or, 'receives calling to heal'. The diviners also prescribe medicine that is mostly a combination of herbs and roots. The ingredients of a medicine are frequently chosen on the familiar principles of homeopathic cure.

The diviners are often people of outstanding intelligence. They are the most powerful and respected of specialists. In all situations requiring deep knowledge, people consult them and seek the blessings of their ancestors through them.

An increasing number of modern diviners 'throw bones', a technique associated with Sotho (Lesotho) and Tonga (Mozambique) influence. The 'bones' may be the astragali of goats, cowrie shells found off the East coast, or oddly shaped seeds. The diviner, pointing to the different pieces, interprets the combination of positions. Exceptional divinatory devices include the 'talking calabash', a rattle that shakes of its own accord, and a magic wand.

There is a third type of healer, or evildoer, who is known as a witch doctor. These are in constant opposition to the first two types of healers and include witches and sorcerers. They rely on poisons, conscious violence, and other techniques for the deliberate destruction of property or people. Witchcraft however is not part of the research of this paper. This short explanation is merely set out to avoid confusion between healing and sorcery.

Bahá'í Concept

Various health and healing practices in African society hold similar grounds with teachings of the Bahá'í Faith.

"Resort ye, in times of sickness, to competent physicians. We have not set aside the use of material means, rather have we confirmed it through this Pen, which God hath made to be the Dawning place of His shining and glorious Cause." (The Kitab-i- Aqdas, para 113)

"know that there are four kinds of curing and healing without medicine. Two are due to material causes, and two to spiritual causes..." (Some Answered Questions. P 293-298)

"... by remedies and treatments the equilibrium is re-established, the disease is banished..." (Some Answered Questions. P 297)

"It is therefore evident that it is possible to cure by foods, aliments, and fruits; but as today the science of medicine is imperfect, this fact is not yet fully grasped. When the science of medicine reaches perfection, treatment will be given by foods, fragrant fruits, and vegetables, and by various waters, hot and cold in temperature." (Some Answered Questions. P 298)

Conclusion

The harmony of science and religion (as it pertains to traditional beliefs and practices) must be emphasized with regard to health and healing. One should remember that although healing is possible only through divine blessings, one should also refer to a competent physician. This has been enjoined in the Most Holy Book.

There is still a great deal that the science of medicine will learn and much of it can be acquired from the ways and medicines of the traditional healers. Often it is only a combination of physical and spiritual remedies which will produce results, either one alone not being able to suffice. A greater understanding of herbal medicine and homeopathy can also enrich the physician's perspectives.

IV Family Life and Patterns of Behavior – Social Stages from Birth to Death

Social Stages from Birth to Death

According to Marwick (1940: 68-72) and Kuper (1963: 50-52), southern African people distinguish eight periods of individual growth. During the first three months a baby is not given a name and is described as a 'thing'. It may, in this period, not be touched by a man and is not publicly mourned if it dies. After three months the infant begins to develop as a person. After puberty a boy reaches the stage of a young man. In this stage he must prove his worth to society before being allowed to marry. As girls mature their main duty is to be of service within the family environment. After puberty they will marry.

Marriage brings about a significant change in status, with all the social, economic, political and ritual privileges of full tribal membership associated with it. Man and woman are highly respected and well cared for in old age. Many of the old are particularly active in educating their children and grandchildren in the observance of tribal traditions and ritual. Because of their knowledge and experience their opinions are often sought.

It is considered to be lucky to visit old people and to touch their forehead with one's own. They are so near to becoming *de facto* spirits, that association with them seems to be paving the way to good relations between the living and the dead. (Swazi Culture, J. S. Malam, University of North)

The basic social unit in the African culture is the nuclear family, which consists of a man, his wife and their children. As the building block of society it is the basis for the formation of the family group, the lineage and the clan. Because of the rule of clan exogamy the nuclear family is not an unilineal kin group. The father and children belong to the same clan, but the mother to another one. Various extensions of the nuclear family are encountered as a result of polygamous marriages and the institution of part-local residence.

Marriage

In the African culture, marriage is not regarded as a private affair between two individuals, but rather as the establishment of a bond between two families. Marriage

negotiations are conducted between the parents of the bride and the groom. This includes agreement on the number of cattle or the cash equivalent of the marriage goods (dowry).

‘Lobola’ (dowry) is loosely translated as ‘bride price’, but it is clear that a woman is not regarded as a commodity by the people involved. On the contrary, she is a valued member of the community, and her past status and future security are symbolized in the transaction. Through the act of lobola her children are made legitimate and become entitled to the benefits of the father’s lineage; by accepting lobola, her people are compensated for the loss of her services. The emotional ties and ritual obligations towards her do not cease, and should she be ill –treated or find herself and her children destitute, she may appeal to the recipients of the cattle, who will be legally, as well as morally, obliged to assist her. The husband does not acquire a beast, but a wife for himself and a mother for his children, and he and his kin owe her definite obligations of support and protection. (Kuper 1963: 23)

Basic Behavior Patterns

It is in the homestead that the familiar relationships (husband and wife, parent and children, grandparents and grandchildren, and, brothers and sisters) play out their roles in the domestic sphere. Family behavior is patterned by the mating and kinship system; these and not any psychological quality account for the differences in the behavior patterns prescribed for an African father or mother, and a father or mother in other societies.

“The African classify kin into a limited number of broad categories, embracing with a single term relatives who, in more specialized and isolating societies are kept distinct. Thus, the term ‘father’ is extended from one’s own father to his brothers, half brothers, and sons of his father’s brothers. Similarly ‘mother’ embraces his own mother, her sisters, her CO-wives, and wives of his father’s brothers. The children to these ‘fathers and ‘mothers’ are his ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’, and their children are grouped in the same category as his own grandchildren. The use of a common term does not mean that a particular key relationship is unimportant. Indeed, within the category there are usually accurate descriptions of degrees of closeness. “The fathers who bore me” is distinguished from “my big father” (my father’s older brother) or “my little father (father’s younger brother), but ones behavior towards all “fathers” is molded on a single pattern.” (Ibid: P25)

Bahá’í Concept

We find many similarities in the teachings of the Bahá’í Faith about marriage and family life with the African cultures and tradition. The fact that it is a necessary part of Bahá’í marriage to have the consent of all living parents is shared in both schools of thoughts. We learn in the Bahá’í writings that marriage should be the cause of unity not only between the couple but between their families. Like African cultures, the Faith, we also believe that the purpose of marriage is to bring forth children and train them to know and worship God and be of service to the world of humanity.

Respect and loving care of the elderly is emphasized in both cultures (African and Bahá'í). Caring for the old is regarded to such a degree that one of the edifices to be erected near the Bahá'í House of Worship must be a 'home for the elderly'. We are enjoined to care for our parents in their old age and pay them due respect. The Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, in response to a youth who wanted to go pioneering and had an old father to look after, said that as important as pioneering is, it was more important for the youth to remain home and serve his father. Indeed, Baha'u'llah has linked 'loving-kindness to one's parents' to 'recognition of the one true God'.

"As for the question regarding marriage under the Law of God; first thou must choose one who is pleasing to thee, and then the matter is subject to the consent of thy father and mother. Before thou makest thy choice, they have no right to interfere." (Selection from the writings of Abdu'l-Bahá. P. 118)

"However, as you no doubt know, Bahá'u'lláh has stated that the purpose of marriage is to promote unity, so you should bear this in mind when dealing with your non-Bahá'í relatives; they cannot be expected to feel the way we do on questions of racial amity, and we must not force our views on them, but rather lovingly and wisely seek to educate them. (Family Life: P 411, Shoghi Effendi)

Conclusion

Although there are similarities between African cultures and the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, there still remain much within African tradition that should be changed. Removal of polygamy, establishment of full equality between men and women, training and education of all children regardless of their sex or class, are but a few.

The African concept of regarding all clan as family and treating all relatives equally even if they are not bound to you by blood, is admirable and something that we could learn from. It is interesting that because of this system, until recently there were no places known as orphanages in this region. The reason simply was that there are no orphans. If a child's blood mother and father both die, responsibility for his or her care is assumed by 'other mothers and fathers'. I believe that the Bahá'í Faith can be adopted into African culture and that there is much which Baha'i society, as it develops, can acquire from the African Culture.