

Chewa Cultural Ideals and System of Thought as determined from proverbs: A Preliminary analysis

by D.N. Kaphagawani and H.F. Chidammodzi

Introduction

Malawian philosophies like those of any other country or nation in Africa, are still largely integrated within the culture. Western philosophy is basically a history of individual philosophers whose ideas have been written and preserved on paper. Malawian philosophies have no such comparable written sources; they are mostly dependent on orally transmitted ideas. A study of the cultures, particularly the 'cultural ideals', brings to light what may be considered the main indices of the traditional systems of thought. In other words, culture reflects the people's attitude towards life and the world they live in; it determines what the people consider as promotive of their sense of the meaning of human existence. "Life is the starting point of philosophy".¹ People organise their material and social world in line with their ethics and epistemology which are determined by their cultural ideals. That is, the people's system of thought is reflected in their culture just as Hegel advocates that a particular form of philosophy is contemporaneous with a particular constitution of the people among whom it makes its appearance. Jean-Paul Sartre in an article titled "Marxism and Existentialism" further advocated that philosophy does not exist but philosophies do.² He argued that a philosophy serves as a cultural milieu for its contemporaries so long as it exists, and that, born from the movement of society, it is itself a movement and acts upon the future; a philosophical crisis is an expression of a social crisis and hence a cultural crisis.

The ethics and epistemology of a people is part and parcel of their system of thought which is indicative of their cultural shaping. Man is always in the process of becoming, he is therefore all that he has done and what he is doing. Culture thus defines man in his own environment, and ethical plus epistemological ideals are reflections of a cultural perspective.

Culture as a concept is not only ambiguous and vague, but also complex and general. However, attempts have been made to define it, but they have mostly been either non-starters or too general to foster fruitful discussion of issues entwined in culture. We do not claim to have provided an adequate definition, rather we have adopted an existing definition which, we feel, serves the purpose in this paper. Culture is defined as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society."³ This is adequate as it says, in effect, that whatever culture is, it certainly has, as part of its content, the following essential ingredients: epistemology, ethics, aesthetics and language. If this is not true of all culture, it certainly holds for almost all African cultures one cares to mention.

This paper attempts to explore possibilities of the interplay and crossfertilisation between cultural ideals and traditional ways of thought and takes the Chewa, a Bantu tribe⁴ in Eastern Central Africa, as a point of departure. Reference to other cultures is made in contrast to or in comparison with that of the Chewa with the hope of making the paper less particular. The survival of an unwritten code of behaviour

among the Chewa throughout the centuries demonstrates the existence of coordinated mental or intellectual concepts, and, as Hegel argued, the philosophy of an age reflects the level at which man has reached in his understanding of man and his relationship to the world.

The general trend of the argument is that the Chewa have ideals classifiable into two broad categories, namely, epistemological and ethical. The distinction between these two is not to be taken as rigid, for they invariably shade into each other in many ways. Nevertheless it is argued that although these ideals feed on each other, the epistemological is prior and serves as the basis of the ethical so that a change in the epistemological outlook necessarily implies a change in the ethical perspective; it is what people know that affects their behaviour.

Looking at a cross-section of the Chewa, two cultural levels may be observed:

- i. that of the crude traditional form which may be identified with the purely Chewa traditional thought system. This is mostly evident in the rural or village settings where traditional orientations are still strong and the conceptual construct of the world still reflects 'primitive' mentality.
- ii. The neo-traditional culture most evident in urban settings although they are not a rare phenomenon in village settings. This section of the people attempts to mould a culture that is a synthesis of the traditional form and foreign cultural values. They know what to discard and what to preserve of the foreign as well as of the traditional (internal) cultural values. But this paper mainly focuses on the first category of the Chewa culture, namely, the traditional form.

Language is, of course, one of the determining factors of a culture. If in a particular tribe one language is spoken the odds are that there exists one culture. The Chewa speak one language, namely Chichewa; it is through it that their ideas and conceptions of man and the world are formulated and expressed.

Method of Investigation

An analysis of examination of the ideals and thought system(s) of the Chewa involves certain problems; the first concerns the method of approach to the study of an African way of thought, the second is concerned with dilemmas in translation. For the first problem three possible approaches have been proposed; these are

- i. interviews with genuinely "wise men",
- ii. an examination of cultural patterns of thought and life, and
- iii. linguistic analysis.

Approaches (ii) and (iii) are presumably what Kwasi Wiredu⁵ regards as second order philosophising, for they are systematic scrutinies of a people's behaviour, conduct and conceptual systems. But due to the problem of determining who are 'genuinely wise men', approach (i) has not been employed in this paper. So that leaves us with the second and the third. There has been an implicit application of the second approach with more explicit use of the third one.

However, linguistic analysis has its problems as well, the problem of translation, in this case from Chichewa into English. This problem relates to W.V.O. Quine's Indeterminacy thesis.⁶ For example, in Chichewa the infinitive verb "to know" may be translated as "kudziwa". So far so good, as far as D. Donaldson's solution of the Indeterminacy issue is concerned.⁷ Nonetheless, whereas the English noun 'knowledge' is derived from the verb 'to know', no noun is derivable from the Chichewa verb 'kudziwa'. Instead there is a totally different word, namely 'nzeru' which seems to serve two purposes, and it could be translated as 'wisdom' in English. The question which Nzeru raises is whether or not the Chichewa language has a knowledge/ wisdom distinction as the English language has, which we attempt to answer when considering the Chewa epistemological ideal. This distinction sheds some light on the Chewa concept of knowledge as well as their concept of ontology.

Furthermore, what is to be analysed in the language is another problem. An analysis and interpretation of proverbs is a starting point, although such an approach has been criticised by philosophers on three grounds:

- i. that they are banal
- ii. that they are contradictory, and
- iii. that they have uncertain interpretations.

On these issues O'Donohue writes:

There may be here and there a "philosophical" element in myths and proverbs, but it would be unrealistic to treat every traditional fable and every proverb as if it were a storehouse of wisdom. Fables may be no more than entertainments, not intended to teach anyone anything---. As for proverbs, they are notoriously contradictory, and often consist of no more than cynical advice on how to cheat. Could we construct a "philosophy" from banal instructions about hastening slowly and wasting not that we may not want?⁸

Most philosophers oppose linguistic analyses wholly based on proverbs but that is not to say that analysis of proverbs is misleading, for some proverbs are useful. As O'Donohue says, not every proverb is a storehouse of wisdom, but some proverbs are storehouses. Some proverbs in Chichewa have moral and/or epistemological messages, and as such they can be good servants in the search for a people's conception of the world. In this paper, therefore, we will employ some proverbs in our analysis, in the hope of presenting a picture as representative of the Chewa ethical and epistemological perspectives as possible.

Chichewa proverbs carry fairly definite messages which have been compiled in several books, for example Nzeru Zakale.⁹ Our analysis is based on the interpretations given in these books.

Proverbs are in most cases metaphorically expressed and that adds to the problem of translation; for metaphors are meaningful within a particular language and environment (or situation). Presumably what is lost when a proverb is translated from one language into another is the flavour and not the message. The approach in this paper is first, to give the literal English translation and secondly, to explain the message of the particular proverb.

Epistemological Ideals

Chichewa, the language spoken by the Chewa, is littered with certain proverbs, the messages of which are indicative of the Chewa conception of knowledge. The first and foremost is 'Akuluakulu ndi m'dambo mozimila moto,' which is, literally, 'The elders are rivers where fire is extinguished'. The message of this proverb is: the elders have most, if not all, solutions to any kind of problems; they are, live encyclopaedias to which reference can be made. At this stage, however, the concept of knowledge does not surface unless a further question is posed as to why the elders are held in such high esteem. The answer is not far to seek. It is this: the elders have had more experience than most of the people; they have lived through famine, war, peace and so on. From these, it is assumed, they have learnt both from their own mistakes and successes as well as those of others; they know that some things are the case; they also know how to do what, what to do when and when to do what and how.

Now the concept of knowledge starts to come to light; it is something along the lines of 'maximum cumulative experience', not for its own sake, but, rather, for practical purposes. Ideally, if this interpretation is not wrong, a Chewa would love to be in possession of as much experience as possible to gain authority and respect from people prepared to construct and shape their world outlooks and habits on what is asserted.

An examination of more proverbs suggests a further division of experience; 'temporal' experience on the one hand, 'spatial' experience on the other. The foregoing proverb emphasises the former type of experience; similarly, 'Galu wamkota sakandira pachabe' which is, literally, 'A mother-dog never scratches/digs in an empty hole,' and several others too. This proverb compares and contrasts old with young hunting dogs and puts across the idea that whereas young dogs would scratch/dig in a hole in which there are no mice, old dogs would not; they would always sniff, and attempt to dig, in a hole which contains at least one mouse. (Note that the Chewa are a mice-eating society). 'Temporal' experience is what determines the correct action in such cases; for it must have taken a lot of time for the mother-dog to distinguish rewarding from non-rewarding holes.

But the following proverb suggests a different kind of experience, namely, spatial experience: 'Mlendo ndiye adza n'kalumo kakuthwa' which means, literally, 'A visitor is the bringer of sharp razor blades'. The message this proverb puts across is that, as Professor Kuhn will be glad to note, more often than not, visitors or those new to a society are carriers and introducers of new and novel ideas, ideas which may either be solutions to some vexing problems or phenomena or may contribute, very positively, towards the search for solutions. What is particularly interesting about this kind of experience is that it is not restricted to the elders; the young may also have access to it. And this feature inevitably leads one into thinking that the two types of experiences are in some way separable and possibly independent of each other. But that is not ruling out the possibility of the two occurring at the same time in a particular person.

Other proverbs may apparently destroy the epistemology so far constructed. 'Mwala wogubuduziko-gubuduzika siumela ndele,' is one such proverb which means, 'A rolling stone gathers no moss.' It could be argued that the proverb completely discourages 'spatial' experience; but such argument does not hold because it mistakes the literal meaning for the actual message the proverb has in store for us. Although it makes reference to 'rolling', that does not necessarily imply change of place; it may very well mean change of occupation or profession, for example, from a basketmaker to a carver or medicineman; and it is conceivable that one could change professions without

actually effecting a change in place. That aside, this particular proverb still stresses the importance of experience as knowledge. And again even if one were to take the proverb literally, it could still be pointed out that although the stone gathers no moss, it collects tremendous amounts of rolling experience. Such experience would be both temporal and spatial. But of course that is stretching the argument too far.

Now if 'cumulative experience' is what the Chewa aspire to, then one cannot resist the temptation of pointing out that such a conception of knowledge totally neglects creativity and imagination as other possible sources of knowledge, hence is shallow and restrictive. In such a case the epistemological picture so far constructed would have to undergo revision.

To the extent that experience is considered or construed as knowledge among the Chewa, such criticisms are justified, but an examination of some aspects of the Chewa culture, namely the aesthetic, indicate the presence of creativity and imagination. Although experience is the overriding factor in the determination of the status of a carver, potter or basketmaker, creativity and imagination are also cherished. For example, in some initiation rituals, a variety of masks are made, masks the construction of which demands creativity and imagination, and to that extent Chewa epistemology takes account of non-experiential aspects, namely, creativity, imagination and so forth, but tends to lay a lot of emphasis on experience. This claim is further testified by such proverbs as 'M'chiuno mwamwana simufa nkuku.' and 'Nkhwangwa siyithwela pachipala.' Respectively, these two literally mean 'The loins of a child are not worth a chicken' and 'No axe gets sharp in a blacksmith's workshop.' The former refers to dancing and claims that no matter how well an amateur may dance, a chicken, given in appreciation of the excellent performance, goes to the one who taught the young person how to dance. Similarly the latter uses the analogy of an axe which, while at the blacksmith's workshop or blast furnace, is in general blunt, but gets sharp the more trees it fells. Clearly these two proverbs have one message, namely that experience and authority determine who is to get all the praise and who is to be held in high esteem.

So far the Chewa could be construed as holders of the view that man accumulates wisdom (knowledge) through experience; accumulates it not for its own sake as done by the Greeks, but for certain ends and also for the adoption of certain means to some well defined ends.

'Do the Chewa have a concept of knowledge or of wisdom or of both?' is the question which looms large at this point. An examination of certain words in Chichewa, namely 'kudziwa' and 'nzeru' as discussed above, seems to suggest an absence of the knowledge/wisdom distinction. But let us for the moment withhold from asserting the absence too hastily; there may be other ways round this.

The claim that knowledge is distinguishable from wisdom presupposes prior acquaintance with what wisdom is as opposed to knowledge. Wisdom is defined as

sound and serene judgements regarding the conduct of life. It may be accompanied by a broad range of knowledge, by intellectual acuteness, and by speculative depth, but it is not to be identified with any of these and may appear in their absence. It involves intellectual grasp or insight, but is concerned not so much with the ascertainment of fact or the elaboration of theories as with the means and ends of life.¹⁰

Wisdom has two elements, namely reflection and judgement. Reflection is the tendency to analyse or examine events in terms of their grounds and implications. And it is after all these have been apprehended and considered that a judgement is passed.

An interesting feature of wisdom is that it is always credited with authority. No rational argument can gainsay a wise man's judgement; it is always assumed that a wise man's judgement is more correct than anybody else's. In actual fact,

The decisions of a wise judge may be freighted with experience and reflection. Experience, even when forgotten beyond recall, leaves its deposits, and where this is the deposit of long trial and error, of much reflection and of wise exposure in fact or imagination of the human lot, the judgement based on it may be more significant than any or all the judge could adduce for it. This is why age is credited with wisdom; years supply a means to it whether or not the means is consciously used.¹¹

Now since age is credited with wisdom and wisdom with authority and respect, then it follows that age is credited with authority and respect. There is a distinction, in the Chewa culture, between knowledge and wisdom despite a claim to the contrary which the analysis of kudziwa (to know) and 'Nzeru' (Wisdom) has suggested. Knowledge is cumulative experience, but wisdom is a product of experience making wisdom a second order activity and knowledge a first order one. The 'kudziwa' 'Nzeru' analysis is not indicative of the absence of the knowledge/wisdom distinction; it demonstrates, inter alia, the semantical and grammatical differences between English and Chichewa. Although there is no noun in Chichewa for knowledge, it is possible to say of some person that he knows how to do certain things but deny him wisdom. People do make such assertions and that indicates the existence of the knowledge/wisdom distinction in the Chewa language.

In conclusion, we could say that all elders in the Chewa culture have most knowledge because they have more experience than anybody else; but not all are wise, some are. The elders do have an aura of respect and authority mainly because of the knowledge, not the wisdom; for if the latter were the determinant for respect, some elders would not be respected, but they all are.

Ethical Ideals

It has been argued earlier on that a people's ethics and epistemology are rooted in their culture; 'people do what is good for them'¹², and what they 'know' greatly determines what they do. This is true of the Chewa. They do not just have vague beliefs about casual relationships but they 'know' about the relationships with exactly the same subjective certainty that is attached to the word 'know' in a western culture. The Chewa normative behaviour is based on what they know to be the case about the world and their culture reflects their world view.

This section briefly attempts to demonstrate how Chewa culture breeds Chewa ethical ideals, and it uses the Chichewa language for that purpose. It aims at showing that an analysis of the Chewa language reveals, inter alia, the ethical perspective of the Chewa. The proverbial aspect of the language is perhaps the most elaborate dimension.

Among other things, the Chewa proverbs are prescriptive of a right action; they give us a picture of what the people regard as the proper mode of behaviour. So, apart from serving as 'storehouses' of wisdom they also serve as storehouse of the code of morality among the Chewa. They turn to the grainstore to use it as guiding tool in their everyday life and activity; knowledge is worthless if it cannot serve for the interests or needs of the people. Like ethical terms, the Chewa proverbs are designed to express feelings about certain objects or actions (and not simply making assertions about them), to arouse certain feelings and to stimulate certain actions.

The fact that not all Chewa proverbs carry or convey the same messages and that they cannot serve the same purpose needs no further emphasis. But it could be pointed out that the Chewa have a great sense of censorship and that whatever proverb is uttered in a particular social context is supposed to convey a 'right' message fitting the situation. For instance, after realising that the uttered statement or proverb is generally unacceptable by Chewa moral standards one may try to withdraw it, but the usual response by the audience would be in a form of a proverb such as: 'Kalawa mkhutu kalowa', translated literally as 'What has gone in through the ear has gone right in'. This implies that it is almost impossible to erase what has been orally transmitted to the audience and the public moral judgement will be based on what one actually has stated, i.e. goes on to prove that the Chewa expect individual members to have a sense of personal language censorship. This fact is further testified by the proverb: 'kalulu adanya mau oyamba' translated as, 'The hare stuck to the words uttered right at the beginning'. This proverb serves, in a way, as a preventive mechanism against unreasonable excuses for withdrawing a statement on second thoughts. (Note that the denied statement does not necessarily have to be uttered at the beginning of one's speech). An 'obscene' proverb would not be used out of context or without any relevance of message; the speaker would be subjected to public censure. In short, therefore, one would say that Chewa proverbs carry right messages in the right situation.

Nonetheless one can safely say that all Chewa proverbs that are epistemologically significant are ethically significant too. This is because all those proverbs carrying a 'sense of knowledge' are by their very nature prescriptive of action, and further the epistemological outlook affects their ethically conceptual world-view. Like moral judgements the Chewa proverbs exert or create an influence, that is, the meaning or essence of the proverbs is their disposition to cause or effect certain feelings or actions. To state the Chewa proverb X is to state that one must ipso facto acquire a tendency to do or not to do what X states. The speaking of Chichewa language is itself an experience of Chewa life for the language is about objects, abstract or physical, experience, concepts vital to Chewa social and material life et cetera. Their social structure is woven into their moral or ethical order; and their proverbs serve as frames of reference for their public moral standards. Such allegations can be elaborated by analysing and/or interpreting some of such proverbs.

The proverb: 'Akuluakulu ndi m'dambo mozimila moto' (literally translated in the above section) implies that the elders among the Chewa are to be respected and cared for, because they are a source of knowledge of some of the problems faced in this world. This proverb essentially states that it is right to respect elderly people and wrong not to; you ought to respect your elders or the elders ought to be respected. As shown in the previous section, the elders are generally held in high esteem because of their comparatively large amount of experiential knowledge. Knowledge through experience is the most reliable form of knowledge among the Chewa. The longer one lives the more experienced and therefore the more knowledgeable one becomes.

The proverbs are based on empirically verifiable assertions. Through experience, the Chewa have learnt how, when and what to do, and why. Such an attitude is evident in the way the Chewa youth is brought up; they are constantly being reminded that they ought to obey and respect the elders of the society. Related to the foregoing proverb is the following which emphasises the reliability of the advice from the elders: 'Mau akulu akoma akjagonera' literally translated as, 'The words of the elders become sweet some day'. Essentially the proverb teaches obedience to advice from elderly people because experience will prove them right. One may be reluctant to succumb to the advice or warnings of these elders at the time, but there is surely going to be a situation that will make one refer to the very advice one had ignored. Hence taken in the prescriptive sense, 'you ought to obey your elders or take heed of their advice'.

'Linda madzi apite ndipo udziti ndadala', translated as, 'It is only when the flood is gone that you can claim to be lucky' is another proverb that supports the primacy of cumulative experiential knowledge. More observation or experience will adequately prove the truth of a statement. It is not right therefore to make hasty statements or decisions before one has gathered more or enough experiential evidence. Prescriptively, then, 'you ought to take your time or be reasonably sure before making or taking any decisive steps'. It is normally older people who have had more 'existential' time and therefore the elderly are bound to be more knowledgeable about things.

'Wakwata kwa mphezi saopa kung 'anima' - The person-in-law of the lightning does not fear thunder'. This proverb advises that it is right to proceed with a project or commitment up to the very end and not to be put off by concomitant problems. It is one of encouragement and teaches consistency. 'Once you make up your mind, stick to it'. This proverb could be used to encourage an army; once you are a soldier, you ought to fight or act like a soldier. In a broad sense, the proverb teaches members of the tribe to act in accordance with the expectations of the community at large - 'be moral'.

'Chaona mnzako chapita mawa chili paiwe.' - 'Your neighbour's misfortune today may be yours tomorrow'. The Chewa emphasise helping one another in times of need or trouble. This proverb is similar to the English, namely, 'A friend in need is a friend indeed'. The moral message is that it is right to help those who are in need of our help. It could be shortened to such religious ethics as 'Love or help thy neighbour', or 'Do unto others what you want them to do unto you', and so on. A whole catalogue of similar proverbs could be analysed to show how Chewa moral principles are entwined in them. However, what one ought to bear in mind is that the Chewa epistemological basis concretises the ethical basis and that their proverbs, among other things, serve not only as 'storehouses' of wisdom, but also of ethics.

When investigating Chewa ethical ideals by analysing the Chichewa language one should bear in mind that there is no human community in which everyone clearly agrees with every one else; naturally there are going to be divergencies of ethical convictions at the individual level. The Chewa are not strictly a consensus community, but the tendency has been to subordinate personal ethics to public morality. The Chewa must have had philosophers, mystics and eccentrics trying out new ideas, but orally transmitted information is mostly capable of unveiling the publicly accepted social principles. Ethical radicalism never got public respect let alone the blessing of (oral) transmission from generation to generation. Public morality is stronger than personal ethics in the Chewa culture.

Footnotes

1. Dilthey W., Selected Writings edited with an introduction by H.P. Rickman C.U.P., 1976, p.139.
2. Sartre J.P., Existentialism and Humanism, translated with an introduction by Philip Mairet, Methuen, London, 1948.
3. Tylor, E.B., Dictionary of Sociology edited by G.D. Mitchell, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1968, p.47.

4. The use of the phrase 'Bantu tribe', though not yet extinct in the literature, seems to be on the wane among African scholars these days. Use is made of this phrase in this paper simply for lack of a better phrase. The word 'tribe' is not intended to mean 'natives' nor 'primitives' as it has ever since been understood, it is rather intended to mean 'community'.
5. Wiredu Kwasi, 'On Defining African Philosophy' in Into the '80s: Proceedings of the 11th Annual Conference of the Canadian Association of African Studies, I. Ray, P. Shinnie and D. Williams (eds.) Vancouver, Tantalus Research Ltd, 1981.
6. Quine W.V.O., 'On the Reasons for the Indeterminacy of Translation', Journal of Philosophy, Vol. LXIV, 1967, pp 179-83.
7. Donaldson D., 'Radical Interpretation', Dialectica Vol. XXVII, pp. 313-217.
8. O'Donohue J., 'African Philosophy: the Problem of Definition', a paper presented at the Nigerian Philosophical Association Conference (N.P.A.C.) 20-23 March, 1975, Univ. of Ife, Nigeria, p.11.
9. Kumakanga L., Nzeru Zakale, Dziko Publishing Co., Blantyre (Malawi), 1975 and several others.
10. Blanshard B., 'Wisdom' in Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Vol.7, (ed.) P. Edwards, Macmillan, London, 1967, p.322.
11. Ibid., p.324.
12. Plato, The Republic, translated with an introduction by H.P. Wee, Penguin, 1955.