

The Lifeboat Ethics and Traditional Akan Ethics: A Critical Comparative Study

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Abstract

The “Lifeboat ethics” as propounded by Garrett Hardin has gained currency in contemporary world. This is in view of some form of pragmatic truth and how Hardin theorises to explain the relationships that exist between the rich and the poor in society. One may probe to comprehend whether the principles of the lifeboat ethics have any bearing on Traditional Akan cultural values. This paper sets out to critique the theory. By so doing, some of its principles would be pointed out and explained and further compared with Traditional Akan ethical values. The paper asserts that the principles of the theory share some common grounds with Traditional Akan ethics. However, the paper concludes that the principles of the theory are not entirely the case as far as the latter is concerned.

Keywords: Traditional Akan, ethics, lifeboat.

1. Introduction

There is a gap between the rich and the poor in almost every society. Often, the poor feel as nonentities while the rich are lauded. These feelings on the part of both parties may probably either emanate from their contributions to their societies or how society perceives their status in life. This, in one way or the other has contributed towards widening the gap between the rich and the poor. The question is, in view of the “Lifeboat Theory” propounded by Garrett Hardin, is this ‘gap’ the case among the traditional Akan of Ghana?

2. The Lifeboat Ethics

The lifeboat ethics is rooted in the lifeboat theory that was propounded by Garrett Hardin (1974). To gain a profound appreciation of the lifeboat ethics, it is worthwhile to know the background of the mastermind of this ethics.

*Garrett Hardin’s Background*¹

Garrett Hardin was born in Dallas, Texas in the year 1915. His father was a freight sales representative with the Illinois Central Railroad. Although the family moved frequently because of his father’s job, they had secure roots in his grandfather’s farm in South-Western Missouri. Hardin’s high school and college days were spent in Chicago. He showed promise in writing from an early age. At the age of fifteen (15) he won a city-wide contest run by the *Chicago Daily News* with an essay on the importance of Thomas Edison. For this, he was awarded a trip, East to visit the aging inventor.

In the year 1932, Hardin won both a University of Chicago academic scholarship and a dramatic arts scholarship at the Chicago College of Music. A month’s attendance convinced him that he could not follow both paths simultaneously, and so he abandoned the dramatic scholarship. In the year 1936, Hardin graduated from the University of Chicago in zoology, studying under the ecologist W. C. Allee. Garrett Hardin then transferred to Stanford University, where he obtained his Ph.D. in microbial ecology in the year 1941. His most influential mentors were the microbiologist C. B. van Neil and the geneticist George W. Beadle, later to be awarded the Nobel Prize. Shortly after graduation, Hardin began to work at the Carnegie Institution of Washington’s Division of Plant Biology, which had a laboratory on the Stanford campus. For four years, he was part of a team investigating antibiotics produced by algae, as well as the future possibility of using cultured algae as animal food.

In the year 1946, Hardin resigned his research position at the Carnegie Institution to accept an associate professorship at the University of California’s campus in Santa Barbara. During the next two decades he devoted much of his time to developing an ecologically-oriented course in biology for the general citizen, which he adapted to closed-circuit television. He was appointed full professor of human ecology in the year 1963. Hardin’s work on population control and immigration reduction has been supported by grants from the Pioneer Fund from the year 1988 through 1992. He died on 14th September, 2003.

*The Lifeboat Theory*¹

¹ Hardin, G. (1974). *Lifeboat ethics: The case against helping the poor*. Retrieved on 31st May, 2013 from http://www.garretthardinsociety.org/articles/art_lifeboat_ethics_case_against_helping_poor.html

So here we sit, say fifty (50) people in our lifeboat. To be generous, let us assume it has room for ten (10) more, making a total capacity of sixty (60). Suppose the fifty (50) of us in the lifeboat see hundred (100) others swimming in the water outside, begging for admission to our boat or for handouts. We have several options: we may be tempted to try to live by the Christian ideal of being "our brother's keeper," or by the Marxist ideal of "to each according to his needs." Since the needs of all in the water are the same, and since they can all be seen as "our brothers," we could take them all into our boat, making a total of one hundred and fifty (150) in a boat designed for sixty (60). The boat swamps, everyone drowns. Complete justice, complete catastrophe.

Since the boat has an unused excess capacity of ten (10) more passengers, we could admit just ten (10) more into it. But which ten (10) do we let in? How do we choose? Do we pick the best ten (10), "first come, first served"? And what do we say to the ninety (90) we exclude? If we do let an extra ten (10) into our lifeboat, we will have lost our "safety factor," an engineering principle of critical importance. For example, if we do not leave room for excess capacity as a safety factor in our country's agriculture, a new plant disease or a bad change in the weather could have disastrous consequences. Suppose we decide to preserve our small safety factor and admit no more to the lifeboat. Our survival is then possible although we shall have to be constantly on guard against boarding parties.

While this last solution clearly offers the only means of our survival, it is morally abhorrent to many people. Some say they feel guilty about their good luck. My reply is simple: "Get out and yield your place to others."² This may solve the problem of the guilt-ridden person's conscience, but it does not change the ethics of the lifeboat. The needy person to whom the guilt-ridden person yields his place will not himself feel guilty about his good luck. If he did, he would not climb aboard. The net result of conscience-stricken people giving up their unjustly held seats is the elimination of that sort of conscience from the lifeboat.

3. Traditional Akan

By "traditional" Akan people, "we mean the Akan who in spite of the inroads of western civilization and religions such as Christianity and Islam, have still not abandoned the Indigenous Religion bequeathed to them by their forebears."³ The Akan form the largest ethnic group in Ghana⁴. According to the 2010 census, the Akan represent (47.5%) of the total population of Ghana.⁵ They are in Ashanti and Brong Ahafo regions; Greater parts of the Western and Eastern regions; the whole of Central region except the Efutu and Awutu around Winneba; and a small area in the Northern part of the Volta region. They include the Asante, Bono, Denkyira, Tufu, Assin, Wassaw, Sefwi, Akwamu, Akwapim, Akyem and Adansi. The main languages they speak are Twi and Fanti.⁶

4. Traditional Akan Ethics

There are several scholars who have written on the ethics of the Akan people of Ghana. Some of the scholars whose names are worthy of mentioning include Christian Abraham Ackah (1988), Peter Sarpong (1972: 41)⁷, Joseph Buakye Danquah (1944: 3)⁸ and others. It is believed among some scholars for example John S. Mbiti (1989), that "Africans are notoriously religious"⁹, Geoffrey Parrinder (1969: 28-9)¹⁰, Bolaji Idowu (1962: 146)¹¹ and others who opine that the ethics of the African, is religious based.

Ackah (1988) cites Danquah (1944) who writes that religion is not the sole determinant of the ethics of the Akan people however, it forms an important aspect of Akan ethics. For Danquah (1944), Tradition is the determinant of what is right and just, what is good and done. In this vein, Ackah (1988) posits that Danquah (1944) seemed to accept that social custom is also a very influential factor in the ethics of the Akan people of Ghana.¹²

¹ Hardin, G. (1974). *Lifeboat ethics: The case against helping the poor*. Retrieved on 31st May, 2013 from http://www.garretthardinsociety.org/articles/art_lifeboat_ethics_case_against_helping_poor.html

² Hardin, G. (1974). *Lifeboat ethics: The case against helping the poor*. Retrieved on 31st May, 2013 from http://www.garretthardinsociety.org/articles/art_lifeboat_ethics_case_against_helping_poor.html

³ Appiah-Sekyere, P. & Awuah-Nyamekye, S. (2012). Teenage pregnancy in the life and thought of the Akan: Moral perspectives. *Sociology Study*, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 129.

⁴ Appiah-Sekyere, P. (2011). Humanist ethics: Its relevance for Ghana today. *Integrative Humanism Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 9; See also Appiah-Sekyere, P. & Awuah-Nyamekye, S. (2012), p. 129.

⁵ The Akan. See http://www.indexmundi.com/ghana/demographics_profile.html, Retrieved on 31st May, 2013.

⁶ 2010 Population Census statistics. See <http://www.niica.on.ca/ghana/people.aspx>, Retrieved on 31st May, 2013.

⁷ Sarpong, P. K. (1972). "Aspects of Akan ethics," in *Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, 4 (3): 40-54.

⁸ Danquah, J. B. (1944). *The Akan doctrine of God: A fragment of Gold Coast ethics and religion*, London: Lutterworth Press, p. 3.

⁹ Mbiti, J. S. (1989). *African religions and philosophy*, (2nd rev. ed.). Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, p. 1.

¹⁰ Parrinder, E. G. (1969). *Religion in Africa*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

¹¹ Idowu, B. E. (1962). *Olodumare: God in Yoruba belief*. London: Longmans Group Ltd.

¹² Ackah, C. A. (1988). *Akan ethics. A study of the moral Ideas and the moral behaviour of the Akan tribes of Ghana*. Accra:

4.1 Some Traditional Akan Ethical Values

There are several ethical values among the Traditional Akan. The following paragraphs will discuss some of these Traditional Akan ethical values. Among the cherished ethical values are; hard work, communalism, hospitality, and respect for the elderly and authority. Some behaviours abhorred by Traditional Akan ethics are; individualism and mischief against fellow humans.

Hard work

The ethic of hard work is of prime importance among the Akan people of Ghana. This is because, hard work brings about success. Therefore, human beings should acquire the habit of working hard. It is evident in the proverbs, greetings as well as testimonies the Akan people share with others that for one to become successful in any endeavour there is the need for one to work hard. For example, the Akan expression: “*Adwuma, adwuma*” (Work, work) and its response “*adwuma ye*” (work is good) demonstrates that laziness is abhorred and rather hard work is exhorted in the society that one finds him/herself.¹ It must further be stressed that the ethic of hard work is not only found among the Akan but also among Africans as a whole. An example is a rhyme that the Yoruba children are taught right from cradle to inculcate in them the habit of working hard. The said rhyme is as follows:

Work is cure for poverty
Be hard-working my friend
For one can become great
Only through hard work.
When we have no supporter
We may appear lazy
But in such a situation
It only pays to
Keep on working hard.²

Communalism

Ackah (1988) asserts that “for life to be worth living, it must consist of members of a community helping each other especially in times of difficulties”.³ Gyekye (1995) defines the term communalism as “the doctrine that the group (that is, the society) constitutes the focus of the activities of the individual members of the society.” He adds that the doctrine places “emphasis on the activity and success of the wider society rather than, though not necessarily at the expense of, or to the detriment of, the individual”.⁴ Gyekye (1995) stresses that “communalism as conceived in Akan thought is not a negation of individualism; rather, it is the recognition of the limited character of the possibilities of the individual, which limited possibilities whittle away the individual’s self-sufficiency”.⁵ Adding to the above, Gyekye (1996) posits that “the African and the Akan society place a great deal of emphasis on communal values. For him, these values underpin and guide the type of social relations, attitudes and behaviour that ought to exist between individuals who live together in a community sharing social life and having a sense of common good”.⁶

Bujo (2001) affirms that “Africans of which the Akan are inclusive do not think in ‘either/or,’ but rather in ‘both/and’ categories”.⁷ Bujo adds that moral reasoning is a process in which an individual makes rational decisions concerning morality without forgetting that one is a member of a community. Individual morality affects the well-being (flourishing) of a community in an African ethic. It is in this line of thought that makes Bujo to state that “For Black Africa, it is not the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”) but an existential *cognatus sum, ergo sumus* (“I am related, therefore we are”) that is decisive”.⁸ This can also be

Ghana Universities Press, p. 7.

¹ Gyekye, K. (1996). *African cultural values: An introduction*. Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, pp. 101-102.

² Gyekye, K. (1996), p. 102.

³ Ackah, C. A. (1988), pp. 52-53.

⁴ Gyekye, K. (1995). *An essay on African philosophical thought: The Akan conceptual scheme*, (rev. ed.). Philadelphia: Temple University Press, p. 155.

⁵ Gyekye, K. (1995), p. 156.

⁶ Gyekye, K. (1996), p. 35.

⁷ Bujo, B. (2001). *Foundations of an African ethic: Beyond the universal claims of Western morality*, trans. Brian McNeil. New York: Crossroad Publishers, p. 1.

⁸ Bujo, B. (2001), p. 4. See also Bujo, B. (1999). *Utamadunisho na Kanisa La Mazingira* [Inculturation and basic Christian communities] Nairobi: Pauline Publications. Writing in Kiswahili language, Bujo states: “Africans very much emphasize people’s coming together in a meeting. There is the family meeting, elders meeting, relatives meeting, tribal meetings, etc. What does the word accomplish in a meeting? In a meeting everybody is allowed to express and explain oneself. A meeting is a time of seeing whether the word we ‘ate’ was chewed well so as to bring out fullness of life, uniting people”, p. 9 [own translation].

clarified in the following Akan maxims:

“*Ankonam ye mmɔbɔ*” which literally means,
Solitariness [literary, “walking alone”] is a pitiable condition.¹

“*Yensom yensom yene nipa*” which literally means,
A call for help/action implies a call for humans to lend a helping hand
“*obi yieye firi obi*” which literally means

The prosperity [or well-being] of a man (sic) depends on his fellow man²

From the above proverbs, it can be deduced that being alone without others is a pitiable condition. This is because solitariness impedes the opportunities to profit from the helpfulness and cooperation made available by a communal life. The proverbs also affirm that a person cannot be completely dependent on him/herself to chalk success or overcome a hurdle in life. In fact, one inevitably needs the succour and the relationships of other people to realise one’s success in life.

Hospitality

Several scholars have discussed the Akan value of hospitality which connotes generosity. One of such scholars is Sarpong (1974). For Sarpong (1974),

The abhorrence of disgrace may well be the underlying rationale for the Akan sense of generosity, especially to strangers. The Akan may not like a person originating from a particular ethnic group, but this will never prevent the Akan from treating with kindness a guest from that particular ethnic group. Some ethnic groups in Ghana have been described as warlike, troublesome, bloodthirsty, yet they are, as we see them, among the most hospitable people anywhere in the world. It must be emphasised that among the Akan and Ghanaians as a whole, if a stranger is polite enough to “greet” and is not suspected of foul intentions, that stranger is given all the assistance he requires, including free shelter, food and sometimes money. This sense of hospitality is considered a duty and one cannot ignore it without losing face badly.³

The value of hospitality is also reflective in what Gyekye (1996) refers to as the *idea of human brotherhood*. For Gyekye (1996), the practical translation of the idea of brotherhood leads to such social and moral virtues as hospitality, generosity and the like among the Akan people of Ghana and Ghanaians as a whole. He argues that the term brotherhood of which the word “brother” is fundamental does not limit its scope to only having blood ties with someone but also to persons between whom there are no blood ties at all. In this context, one can assert that human beings should consider themselves as each other’s keeper, belonging to the same species. Therefore, there is the need to be hospitable not only to one’s close ties but also to all humanity.⁴

The ethical value of hospitality is also reflected in Akan proverbs. For an example, the following proverb manifests the value of hospitality among traditional Akan people.

“*Dɔhɔɔ nna abɔnten so*” which literally means
The stranger does not sleep on the street.⁵

Respect for authority and the elderly

The Akan of Ghana as well as Ghanaians in general hold dear to their heart the value of respect. Among the Akan, it is expected that respect must be seen in all aspects of life. However, respect should not be limited to only one’s parents but also to other people’s parents, the elderly, chiefs, authorities and one’s subordinates. Talking about traditional education of the Ashanti (Akan) girl (and the boy is not excluded), Sarpong (1977), says: “From her mother the Ashanti girl learns how to be... submissive to her father, brothers and any older person, and respect everyone...”⁶ According to Ackah (1988), “respect for and the obedience to the elderly are “inculcated and observed in every Akan family.”⁷ He adds that this virtue is often affirmed by the proverb, “*Esen w’agya tsentsen a, nna nnye wo pen bi a*” which literally means “if you are taller than your father, it does not mean that he is your equal”.⁸ This proverb according to Ackah is used to point out that however well off a

¹ Gyekye, K. (1996), p. 38.

² Gyekye, K. (1995). *An essay on African philosophical thought: The Akan conceptual scheme*, (rev. ed.). Philadelphia: Temple University Press, p. 155.

³ Sarpong, P. (1974). *Ghana in retrospect: Some aspects of Ghanaian culture*, (reprint 2006). Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation, p. 66.

⁴ Gyekye, K. (1996), pp. 26-27.

⁵ Sarpong, P. (1974), p. 66.

⁶ Sarpong, P. (1977). *Girls’ nobility rites in Ashanti*. Accra-Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, p. 10.

⁷ Ackah, C. A. (1988), p. 52.

⁸ Ackah, C. A. (1988), p. 52.

person is in life, it is his duty to give respect to all those who are superior to him in age.¹ The idea of respect, most especially for the elderly (chiefs, old men and women, opinion leaders, family heads and their kind) among the Akan is seen in how the elderly is treated in society. For example, the elderly is the first to be given a seat in the midst of a gathering.

In a further perspective, Traditional Akan ethical values demand that the elderly person be helped when found carrying a heavy load, greeted without a hat on one's head, and be welcomed into the midst of a gathering with a standing ovation to mention just a few. Failure on one's part to show respect to the elderly constitutes disrespect and could incur punishment.

4.2 *Some Behaviours Abhorred by Traditional Akan Ethics*

Egoism

Generally, one cannot deny the fact that there are some traces of individualism among the Akan people of Ghana. However, it must be established that egoism is not endorsed. This is because, extreme individualism can breed greed and selfishness which are shining characteristics of egoism. It is in this vein that Gyekye (1996) argues that the "Akan community is a communalistic type but not individualistic".² There are proverbs that have been instituted by the Akan to register their displeasure with egoistic behavior and practices. A good example of such proverbs is the following:

"Esen me edzidzi a, esen me nsaman hunu" which literally means -

If you surpass me in eating, you surpass me in seeing ghosts.³

In explaining the above proverb, Ackah (1988) posits that "ghost seeing refers to the fact that over-eating (which is an aspect of egoism because there are some hungry human beings nearby) can cause a purging of the stomach and that obviously will necessitate going (out)⁴ to toilet several times in the night when ghosts are believed to be operating.⁵ In this context, one can deduce that it is an Akan ethical value to share food and life sustenance or resources with other humans so that when one finds one's self in a problem one can shamelessly solicit and receive help from others. In fact, for the traditional Akan ethics, human beings are interdependent and therefore egoism is abhorred.

Mischief against a neighbour

The idea of doing evil to one's neighbour is not endorsed by the traditional Akan. Traditional Akans believed that doing evil may bring greater suffering upon the agent than upon the his/her victim. In another perspective, it is believed among the traditional Akan that if one plots evil against another person's success, the evil plotter will also not chalk success in life. This belief is expressed in the following proverb.

"Se woto aduro bone a, ebi ka w'ano" which literally means,

If you employ bad 'juju' on a neighbor, the repercussions will invariably affect you.

A similar traditional Akan proverb also says

"Se amma wo nyenko anntwa akron a wonso renntwa du" which literally means, if you prevent a friend from achieving nine (9), you will never achieve ten (10).

For the traditional Akan, plotting/doing evil against a neighbour will not only bring consequences on the victim but also on the plotter himself/herself. Hence, such a behaviour is abhorred.

5. Comparing the Lifeboat Ethics and the Traditional Akan Ethics

The lifeboat ethics can justify itself by asserting that it is impossible to bring all the poor into the boat lest a fatal catastrophe. In this light, if and only if the rich would not totally abandon the poor to wallow in the quagmire of life-threatening diseases, malnutrition and the like, but would offer enough help to sustain the poor and equally maintain the equilibrium for the survival of both the rich and the poor then that seems to be a "lesser evil" (*minus malum*)⁶ as opposed to the greater evil which involves the total disaster that will result from bringing everyone into the boat.

There seems to be a common ground shared by both the lifeboat ethics and the traditional Akan ethics. Both types of ethics, promote hard work. The lifeboat ethics challenges one to work hard to join the rich in the boat. The traditional Akan ethics also demands hard work. That notwithstanding, whereas the fortunes of the hard-worker in the lifeboat ethics may be reserved for the individual with a possible expression of charitable help towards the poor and needy, the traditional Akan ethics, considers the fortunes of the hard-worker as a resource

¹ Ackah, C. A. (1988), p. 52.

² Gyekye, K. (1996), pp. 35-37.

³ Ackah, C. A. (1988), p. 58.

⁴ Note that traditional Akan in the past did not have access to the current water closet system in their residences but constructed public places of convenience some distance away from the domicile.

⁵ Ackah, C. A. (1988), p. 58.

⁶ For a further reading of the principle of lesser evil (*minus malum*), see Peschke, K. L. (1996). *Christian ethics. Moral theology in the light of Vatican II, Vol. I*. Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, pp. 280-281.

to be used for the common good (*bonum commune*) to benefit his/her family, clan, tribe or society. Actually, in the context of the lifeboat ethics, any help coming from the rich (in the lifeboat) to the poor (outside the boat) is considered a charitable deed that depends on the kind heartedness of the rich. The close-netted nature of the traditional Akan communalistic spirit treats helping the poor and needy as an obligation or duty. In fact, for the traditional Akan ethics, one is morally obliged to help a poor or needy neighbour since the latter's predicament can affect everyone in the entire family, clan, tribe or society.

Furthermore, the lifeboat ethics considers the wealth of the rich as their own fortune to be enjoyed and used for their own respective needs. The traditional Akan ethics, however, sees the rich as being endowed with the wealth to be utilised to benefit the entire community. In fact, the hard and fast 'demarcation' between the rich and poor in the lifeboat ethics is almost nonexistent during the celebration of funerals, durbars and festivals among traditional Akans.

In another perspective, whereas the lifeboat ethics can easily be employed to refuse a help that a neighbour needs, it is not possible to do that easily with the traditional Akan ethics. This is because the former seems to place emphasis on the wealthy few (inside the boat) but the latter's communal spirit places the emphasis on the wellbeing of the community including both the rich and poor.

The value of hard work espoused by the traditional Akan ethics has a lot of implications. One must work hard to obtain bountiful harvest to cater for the aged, weak and less fortunate members of the society. Even though the bountiful harvest that results from hard work obviously benefits the individual hard worker, the benefit is not limited to the individual alone. In fact, the fortune (bountiful harvest) of the individual benefits all the family, clan, tribe or society, just as the calamity of poor harvest also affects all.

6. Evaluation and Conclusion

There seems to be a common ground shared by both the lifeboat ethics and the traditional Akan ethics. Both types of ethics, promote hard work. The difference, however, can be discerned in how the hard worker must utilise the fruits harvested from his/her hard-work.

In another development, it is possible for some members in the traditional Akan society to be lazy or pretend to be less strong and depend on the strong ones for sustenance. Actually, if this happens and the strong and hard workers are few then a disaster of insufficient production to feed the mass of lazy population will emerge with attending consequences such as poverty and underdevelopment. To counteract this, one needs to note the antithesis to this situation that is provided by the traditional Akan cultural values such as the requirements for marriage. A lazy man or woman may not get a marriage partner. Hence, a young boy or girl is trained to work hard from childhood. This is because hard work is of great ethical value as Sarpong (1977) rightly affirms 'It often happens that a boy is so hard-working that his mother, sister, and sometimes even his father, come to be dependent upon him for their means of livelihood.'¹

From the above discussions, it can be deduced that the lifeboat ethics may be applicable in a socio-cultural milieu wherein the principle is 'each one for himself/herself, and God for us all'. The traditional Akan ethics, however, may be suitable in an environment wherein interdependency, coupled with inter-generational responsibility is the norm.

The concept of 'individualism' that the lifeboat ethics espouses is evident in the extract from the theory that asserts: "Some say they feel guilty about their good luck. My reply is simple: "Get out and yield your place to others"² The traditional Akan and in fact, African societies do maintain some modicum of individualism.³ However, traditional Akan ethical values are to a large extent communalistic.

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¹ Sarpong, P. (1977), p. 10.

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