PHILOSOPHY INTERROGATES AN AFRICAN CULTURE: ECHOES FROM THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

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Abstract

The present paper reiterates the role philosophy plays in the critique of culture. This role, the paper asserts, is strongly re-echoed in the legacy of the Institute for Social Research, Frankfurt, Germany – a legacy now popularly referred to as Critical Theory. The critical social theory of the Frankfurt School remains famous today for its critique of traditions, cultures and ideologies. Beyond this, the Frankfurt School critical theory aims at diagnosing social ills, providing practical (not just theoretical) remedies for such social ills, and, perhaps, most importantly, to advance the emancipation of the individual from undue and unjustified domination in given societies. Hinging on the charge of authoritarianism in African traditions by scholars such as Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Anthony Appiah and Didier Kaphagawani, the paper asserts that these aims of Frankfurt School critical theory are precisely the role philosophy ought to play in its interrogation of culture. It therefore employs the axioms and canons of the Frankfurt School critical theory in the interrogation of moral aspect of the culture and tradition of the Esan people of Southern Nigeria.

Keywords: philosophy of culture, Frankfurt School critical theory, authoritarianism, Esan moral tradition, dynamic nature of culture, emancipation.

Introduction

Ideas rule the world, and philosophy, in H. S. Staniland's words, is «the criticism of the ideas we live by»[2]. From its manifest perspective, philosophy is a critical and analytical reflection on the subject matters of other disciplines and the beliefs, axioms, presuppositions, assumptions, ideals and already held ideas. This, perhaps, informs the focus of any «Philosophy of X» – where X denotes disciplines, belief systems, or thoughts – such as philosophy of science, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of law, philosophy of language, philosophy of religion, philosophy

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СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ КРИТИКА И КУЛЬТУРНАЯ АНАЛИТИКА

of development, and philosophy of culture. Our primary focus in this paper is on the philosophy of culture.

Culture is easily one of the most important concepts in any human activity. This is because it is concerned directly with every aspect of a people's way of life. One of the main interests of philosophy in culture is to bring before the 'Court of Reason' any dominative, authoritarian and tyrannical tendencies in a culture that could impede the dynamism and fluidity of cultures and override *unjustifiably* on the will of an individual within such a culture. True, a person is not only a product of culture, but culture, as well, is a product of human activities. To this extent, culture can only develop from the conscious and deliberate actions of the individual within it and an authoritarian culture that overrides on the will of individuals will end up becoming anachronistic. The present paper, therefore, asserts that the legacy of the Frankfurt School is important in this regard as critical theory remains one of the most conscious attempts to locate the sources of domination in the realm of cultures and ideologies that impede on the individual's will. Critical theory is, therefore, the critique of ideology to facilitate emancipation.

The paper then goes further to showcase such a critique of culture and its sources of domination in the charge of authoritarianism in African traditions with a particular reference to the nature of morality among the Esan people of Southern Nigeria. It attempts to interrogate the canons of morality in Esan tradition – canons generated from the precepts and assumptions of certain ideologies taken to be unquestionable in the tradition. Such ideologies, founded on a given metaphysics, are widely accepted, often without questioning, to be true within the tradition and they influence greatly the life of people. They aid in enforcing a moral standard acceptable to the community. This paper asserts that such ideologies are responsible for the anachronistic nature of certain moral values in Esan tradition. It is argued here that emancipation of the individual is essential in reviving such moral values.

The meaning and nature of culture

According to Donald P. Goodman,

> «Culture has played an enormous role in the development of peoples, nations, and societies throughout history. It has provided the primary impetus for war and for peace, for good deeds and bad… It provides a powerful bond for personal loyalties and loyalties between peoples; being of a given culture can make one welcome among strangers or a stranger in one's own home. It is a powerful influence upon all people in all times and all places»[3].

Culture is commonly defined as the totality of the way of people's life. According to Conrad Kottak, culture is the totality of learned, socially transmitted customs, knowledge, material objects, and behavior.

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[3]   Goodman III D.P. 2009. What is Culture? // *Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0* United States License. Retrieved June 20, 2011 from the World Wide Web: http://creativecommons.org/-license/by-sa/3.0/us/

It includes ideas, values, and artifacts of groups of people.[4] Patriotic attachment to the flag of the United States is an aspect of culture, as is a national passion for the tango in Argentina as well as the hospitality shown even to strangers in African communities. Sometimes people refer to a particular person as «very cultured» or to a city as having «lots of culture». That use of the term «culture» is different from our use in this paper. In sociological terms, *culture* does not refer solely to the fine arts and refined intellectual taste. It consists of *all* objects and ideas within a society, including ice cream cones, rock music, slang words, dances, festivals, taboos and a mode of dressing. This is in line with Taylor's classical definition of culture as «that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society»[5].

Culture is therefore a shared behavior and attitude towards living. Everything we know, think and value as persons becomes part of us in our participation in a culture. In fact, our potentials can only be realized within the structure of human culture. It is for this reason that culture is said to be more important than any formal education. This is not simply because of its effectiveness and its universal availability in imparting a given set of ideas effectively through the generations, but also because the so called formal education is an aspect of a culture. Clearly, culture is a vital influence upon individuals and societies and ought to be properly understood in order to comprehend their actions.

There are general characteristics that all cultures share in common. These are called cultural universals. All cultures are, for instance, made up of learned behaviors acquired through enculturation; all cultures also involve the use of language and symbols, sexual restrictions, sports, cooking and the like. Generally, these cultural universals evolve from the necessity to meet essential human needs that cuts through all cultures such as food, shelter and clothing. However, the manner, in which these cultural universals are expressed, varies from culture to culture and forms what we may call cultural relativism. Language, for instance, is a defining feature of every culture that varies from culture to culture. It is a critical element of culture that sets humans apart from other species. Members of a society generally share a common language which facilitates every other activity that takes place within the society. The localization of language to culture accounts for the reason why one must learn the language of another culture to understand it. Besides language, other features of cultures such as marriage, greetings, festivals, sexual restrictions, cooking, funeral ceremonies and clothing are localized from culture to culture. Thus, every culture has some elements the expression of which distinguishes it from another culture. Some major elements of cultures include language, norms, customs, symbolic habits, etiquette, sanctions, values and religion. An examination of some of these elements of culture makes it clearer that culture is a significant factor binding people together.

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[4]   Kottak C. *Cultural Anthropology*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2008. P. 56.
[5]   Taylor E.B. *Primitive Culture*. London: J. Murray, 1871. P. 1.

Every culture, for instance consists of symbolic habits. Symbolic habits, unlike normal habits such as the kind of food eaten by people in a culture, are habits which represent something beyond themselves. For symbols, as Geertz noted are «tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiment of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs»[6]. For instance, in most African cultures, using white coloured clothing to bury an elderly person symbolizes the joy that one more life has been lived in full and another ancestor has joined the ancestral cult. Symbols – e. g. language, arts, signs, to mention but a few – provide members of a culture with the opportunity to develop complex and comprehensive thoughts and to exchange those thoughts with others in quite simplified manners.

Another essential element of culture is the custom. Customs are those practices that are easily identified with a culture and that often distinguish it from another. They can be grouped into etiquette and customs proper. Etiquettes are those manners of behavior which bind the culture together by easing social interaction. They include eating customs, greetings, modes of dressing, social honorifics, and innumerable other examples of common practices which simply aim at giving others the respect which is due them. Generally, of course, these customs are intended to make members of the culture agreeable to each other. When an Italian, for example, gives his friend a kiss on the cheek, it may make him more agreeable and be an expression of his friendship; but other nationalities might object to the familiarity. This cultural incompatibility is fairly common. However, oftentimes, etiquette will make members of a culture agreeable also to members of other cultures. Nevertheless, these customs are particular to a given culture. Etiquette, of course, changes more rapidly than most other cultural practices, though even so it changes rather slowly. These customs may, however, if they last for a very long time and become particularly ingrained in cultural practice, become customs proper. For example, the mode of dressing especially by Arab women might have began as an etiquette meant to ease social interaction but is now a custom proper such that any woman who is not so dressed is seen as deviating from a core culture of the people.[7]

However, symbols and symbolic habits, customs, norms, values and other cultural elements would not be useful or meaningful to the people of a culture if culture itself is not learned. Learning is therefore an essential aspect of culture because people are not born with culture but born into a culture. They have to learn the dos and don'ts of the culture in which they find themselves. They have to learn the language, etiquettes, customs, norms, symbolic habits, values and sanctions of the culture. This process of enculturation is however a long process consisting of informal and formal training of the individual from infancy.

Another vital feature of culture is that it is, or, at least, ought to be, dynamic, fluid and adaptive. This is one major way in which culture is

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6   Geertz C. Religion as a Cultural System // *The Interpretations of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz.* New York: Basic Books Inc., 1973. P. 91.
7   Goodman, op. cit., p. 13–15.

beneficial to people. When our natural environment changes, when we encounter new knowledge about nature and reality, culture is expected to adapt and flow with changes and develop new ways of viewing and dealing with new problems. If it is unable to do this, it becomes anachronistic or outdated. This is why it is a static culture that is often kicked against and may become gradually irrelevant.

A controversial characteristic of culture is what has often been referred to as dominant ideology. Dominant ideology describes a set of cultural beliefs and practices that helps to shore up and maintain powerful social, economic and political interests mainly of an elite group within the culture.[8] Such beliefs and practices are often not subject to questioning. Hence, they are often static and beyond review and this is seen as necessary to perpetuate the interests of the culture. The dominant ideologies of a culture do not only ensure that the culture's most powerful and elite groups and institutions control wealth and property, but, even more important, that they control the means of producing beliefs about reality through religion, education, and the media. Feminists, for example, would also argue that if all society's most important institutions tell women that they should be subservient to men, this dominant ideology will help to control women and keep them in a subordinate position.[9] These dominant ideologies are one aspect of culture that inhibits its fluidity and dynamism because, to a large extent, it prohibits emancipation and rational evaluation of beliefs before acceptance. It is this aspect of culture and society that the members of the Frankfurt School sought to critique with their critical theory.

The aim of Frankfurt School critical theory

«Frankfurt School» is the term often used to represent members of the Institute for Social Research founded in 1923 at Frankfurt, Germany. Members of the group include Erich Fromm, Leo Löwenthal, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Johann Baptist Metz, and Jürgen Habermas. These members were drawn from different disciplines and backgrounds such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, and psychoanalysis. The term 'Critical Theory', on the other hand, represents the legacy of the Frankfurt School. The term did not appear until 1937 after the majority of the Institute's members had already exiled themselves or emigrated to the United States following the triumph of Hitler. The concept was initially a type of code which, while differentiating its adherents from prevailing forms of orthodoxy, also tended to veil their radical commitment that was hostile to anything remotely associated with Marxism.[10] Its commitment to Marxism is clearly noted by Robert J. Antonio when he says that:

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[8]   Kottak, op. cit., p. 68.
[9]   Ibid.
[10]   Brunner S.E., Kellner D.M. *Introduction to "Critical Theory and Society: A Reader"*. London: Routledge, 1989. P. 1.

«"Critical theory" was adopted as a code word for Marxism during the American exile of the Frankfurt School. In a recent interview, Leo Lowenthal, a member of the school's original inner circle, asserted that "critical theory" was nothing more than a "collective denominator" and joked that he had to rely on Martin Jay (a recent historian of the school) to enumerate "the main characteristics of the so-called critical theory". However, Lowenthal did mention a unifying attribute: the issues "critical theory" investigates are "determined by the given historical situation". Its goal is to criticize and refashion Marxian theory in light of "changed historical situations"»[11].

Critical theory was meant to express a view that was at variant with the wide-spread assumption at the time that the empirical approach of the natural sciences was the only valid one.[12] Max Horkheimer, the patrician director of the institute, called such an approach 'traditional theory' which included almost everything from mathematics and formal logic to natural science. He believed that there was a positivist illusion afflicting traditional theories like the natural sciences namely that the theory is just the correct mirroring of an independent realm of fact. This dualist picture of knowledge encouraged the belief that facts were fixed, given, unalterable and independent of the theory.[13] Fundamentally influenced by the dialectical traditions of Hegel and Marx, these scholars felt that a dialectical conception of knowledge was much more favourable because it holds that facts and our theories about them are part of an ongoing dynamic historical process in which the way we view the world (theoretically or otherwise), and the way the world is, reciprocally determines each other. This formed the basis on which the paradigm of critical theory of the institute was built specifically as developed by Horkheimer.

Critical theory is critical due to a number of goals that it had. First, the task of the theory is not just theoretical but also practical. This means that it should aim not just to bring about correct understanding, but to make social and political conditions more conducive to human flourishing than the present ones. Second, the theory has two different kinds of normative aims, diagnostic and remedial. This means that the goal of a theory is not just to determine what was wrong with contemporary society at present, but also to identify progressive aspects and tendencies within it to help transform society for the better. Finally, and most importantly, it must be emancipative; that is, it must guarantee individual freedom and autonomy as a necessary tool for rationally resolving the current social problems. It must liberate a person from undue and unjustified domination.[14] It is however important to note that such human freedom should be an inter-subjective constitution of autonomy in the sense that no one is free unless recognized by at least one other subject,

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[11]   Antonio R.J. The Origin, Development and Contemporary Status of Critical Theory // *The Sociological Quarterly*. 1983. Vol. 24, № 3. P. 328.
[12]   Brunner, Kellner, op. cit.
[13]   Finlayson G.J. *Habermas: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. P. 1–3.
[14]   Finlayson, op. cit., p. 3–4.

and also such freedom must recognize the self binding of the individual will to unconditionally valid norms, that is the unconditional character of the moral 'ought'. These are the essential principles of Kantian ethical theory.[15]

The Frankfurt School were optimistic that the age of enlightenment in which they lived would provide the conducive environment for such an emancipation due to the increase in knowledge about the world and the increase in the questioning of traditional authorities, ideologies and thoughts that were once thought to be unalterable. But, in no distance time this optimism turned to pessimism.[16]

This pessimism was clearly expressed by Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which was a product of their experience of the capitalist and the highly industrialist society of the United States of America. This capitalist society had the tendency to create and transform people's needs and desires to the extent that they actually desired the rubbish that was manufactured for them and they ceased to want to live fulfilling and worthwhile lives. Analysis of these phenomena furnished insights into the ways in which the consciousness of subject could be manipulated by advertising and other means to hinder freedom and autonomy and create what the Frankfurt School theorists thought of as *false state of reconciliation,* the belief that the social world was rational, conducive to human freedom and happiness, and unalterable when in fact it was deeply irrational, an obstacle to human freedom and happiness and alterable.[17]

Thus, the very process of enlightenment which was according to the 18th century Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau, Voltaire, and Kant, supposed to liberate a person from nature and lead to human freedom and flourishing rebounds upon him/her. Gradually, as industrialization and capitalism flourished in the 19th century, human beings were subjected to even more pervasive networks of administrative discipline and control, and to an increasingly powerful and untameable economic system; instead of liberating a person from nature, the process of enlightenment imprisoned a person; instead of economic plenty, there was misery and poverty; instead of moral progress, there was regression to barbarism, violence and intolerance. This is the paradox of enlightenment that informed the pessimism of Horkheimer and Adorno.

Jurgen Habermas is the best known member of the second generation of Frankfurt School. His aim has been to develop the critical theory of the school by responding to the pessimism expressed by early members and suggest ways in which the original aims of critical theory could be realized. According to him, one of the fundamental features of

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15 See: Hillar M. Jurgen Habermas: A Practical Sense Sociologist and a Kantian Moralist in a Nutshell // *Roots of Humanist Ethics: A Historical Perspective* (Centre for Philosophy and Socinian Studies Online), 2003. Retrieved February 12, 2011 from the World Wide Web: www.socinian.org/files/Habermas.pdf.

16 Finlayson, op. cit., p. 3–4.

17 Ibid. 3–4. See also: Horkheimer M., Adorno T.W. *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

a critical theory is that it aims not only to locate the regressive and ir-rational aspects of modern society, as Horkheimer and Adorno did, but also to identify the progressive, rational aspects of modern society and to differentiate them from the regressive, irrational ones, for there are certainly progressive and rational aspects of modern society that can be harnessed for the betterment of the society. Here, Habermas thought that the account of rationalization in the age of enlightenment by Hork-heimer and Adorno was too one-sided and pessimistic, and that their concept of the dialectic of enlightenment lacked both empirical and his-torical justification and conceptual coherence.

However, even with Habermas, one major aim of critical theory re-mained the critique of dominative tendencies in societies which they generally referred to as ideology. Ideology as used by the group generally refers to the

«… 'socially necessary illusion' or 'socially necessary false – consciousness' … Ideologies are in this respect the false ideas or beliefs about itself that society somehow systematically manages to induce people to hold. But ide-ologies are not ordinary false beliefs… Rather ideologies are false beliefs that are very widely assumed to be true, because virtually all members of society are somehow made to believe them. Moreover, ideologies are func-tional false beliefs, which, not least because they are so widespread, serve to shore up certain social institutions and the relations of domination they support. This is the sense in which ideologies are *socially necessary*»[18].

Critical theory was therefore meant to provide means for emancipa-tion from domination. Habermas has been in the forefront in achieving this in his theory of communicative rationality and action by which he implies the «inter-action of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relations (whether by verbal or by extra-verbal means). The actors seek to reach an understanding about the action situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement. The central concept of interpretation re-fers in the first instance to negotiating definitions of the situation which admit of consensus. As we shall see, language is given a prominent place in this model» (Habermas). We are however not concerned here with a detailed exposition of his theory. We shall limit our study to his concep-tion of what must constitute a critical theory.

Firstly, Habermas argues that any type of knowledge is inherently related to practice, that is, practice understood as human activities in everyday life or in a general sense, and these activities are always con-nected with human interests and aspirations. It is in this sense that we say that Habermas argues for inherent connections between practice and human knowledge. In his mind, every type of scientific theory has behind itself a type of human interest, either the subject's interest in technical control of the object, or the communication between subjects. These cognitive interests function not as the motives of researchers in

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[18] Finlayson, op. cit., p. 11.

the psychological sense, nor as the background of research in the sense of sociology of knowledge, nor as the genetic structure of a human being in the biological sense. «Rather, they result from the imperatives of a socio-cultural life-form dependent on labor and language». This kind of socio-cultural life-form is, of course, an empirical fact, but the cognitive interests produced thereby enjoy the position which Kant gives to his «a prior form of knowledge»: condition without which no experience is possible, or condition without which no objectivity is possible. By relating knowledge to human interests in such a close way, Habermas's critical theory moves towards pragmatism at the meta-theoretical level. According to him, just like to pragmatists, «knowledge for the sake of knowledge» is in principle impossible. In line with the aims of the Horkheimer and his criticism of traditional theories mentioned above, this position of Habermas can also be regarded as a result of the transition from «objective reason» to «subjective reason»[19].

Secondly, in Habermas's mind, critical theory, as a «theory of society conceived with a practical intention», is meant to address «practical questions» instead of «technical questions»: it is concerned with the communicative relation between subjects, but not the knowing and interfering relation between subject and object; the major way of its study of social relations and social agents is inter-subjective understanding but not the subject's observation of the object. Furthermore, critical theory is not only different from the natural science and the social science embodying human interest in technical control, but also different from the human-historical sciences in the ordinary sense which are supposed to be the embodiment of the human interest in subjective communication. These human-historical sciences presuppose the cognitive interest in inter-subjective communication, while critical theory not only presupposes this interest, but also self-consciously reflects upon this interest, and makes efforts to expose and criticize obstacles to communication. Thus, critical theory is not only characterized by the fact that cognitive interests are admitted in its methodological self-understanding, but also by the fact that it has a cognitive interest in the new sense: it has itself an interest in human emancipation.[20]

Thirdly, critical theory with the emancipatory interest in the above sense is significantly different both from classical Marxism and the first generation of the Frankfurt School not only in terms of a theory's normative basis, but also in terms of a theory's practical effect.[21] Our interest in this paper is to see how the critical theory approach to society can actually aid in prohibiting domination and enhancing reasonable emancipation in examining the charge of authoritarianism in African traditions.

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[19] Tong S. «Critique» Immanent in «Practice»: New Frankfurt School and American Pragmatism // *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*. 2006. № 1–2. P. 302.

[20] Tong, op. cit., p. 302.

[21] Ibid.

The charge of authoritarianism in African Cultures:
the case of morality in Esan traditional culture

Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Anthony Appiah and Didier Kaphagawani have been at the forefront in making the charge of unjustified authoritarianism against African traditional cultures. In his classic, *Philosophy and an African Culture*, Wiredu (1980: 2) describes authoritarianism in this manner:

> «What I mean by authoritarianism may be stated in a preliminary way as follows: Any human arrangement is authoritarian if it entails any person being made to do or suffer something against his will, or if it leads to any person being hindered in the development of his own will. This definition is likely to be felt to be too broad. It might be objected that no orderly society is possible without some sort of constituted authority which can override a refractory individual will. Anybody wishing to elaborate on this kind of objection has a rich tradition of both Western and non-Western philosophical thought to draw upon. Let me here cut the matter short by making a concession. We might now say that what is authoritarian, is the *unjustified* overriding of an individual's will … a society would be seen to be revoltingly authoritarian in as much as a person's will would usually be the result of the manipulations by others»[22].

By implication, authoritarianism is the authoritative stance about what is good, real, truth, and so on that a society or culture manages to persuade or induce its members to hold dogmatically or without questioning to the extent that it overrides on the individual's will. In African traditions, these scholars assert that such inducement is made possible by means of superstitions or religiously garnished ideologies which would involve a kind of upbringing that is inculcating/indoctrinating rather than educative.[23] Their aim has been to show that many of the beliefs in African traditions that provided the basis for moral values, principles, practices and ways of life are accepted and held not on the basis of adequate evidence, but on the basis of the authoritarian dictates of tradition, ably represented by the authority of the elders who are seen as the repositories of knowledge. The groveling respect that is accorded to traditional beliefs and elders may, to some extent, imply the dogmatic, unquestioned and uncritical acceptance of their authorities, as well as their dictates and ideas.[24] Didier Kaphagawani, for example, argues that this kind of authoritarianism is an essential but a negative aspect of African communalism. He argues that elders in African communities were considered to be the authoritative source of all traditional beliefs and wisdom. Elders were accorded tremendous authority and power, and they had a status where their will and dictates are not questioned, but

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[22] Wiredu K. *Philosophy and an African Culture.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980. P. 2.

[23] See Wiredu, op. cit., p. 1–4.

[24] Ikuenobe P. *Philosophical Perspective on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions,* London MD: Lexington Books, 2006. P. 175.

instead, are taken as representing the will of the community {as well as the supernatural forces}.[25]

For instance, with specific regard to moral training in traditional Esan community, there is the belief that:

> «Men should be taught virtue and forced to act virtuously. Since men are not born virtuous, they must acquire their virtue. The acquisition is the outcome of the performance of acts which promote the attainment of the Good. Such acts are sometimes performed by accident. But they are most effectively and persistently performed when men are directed and controlled by trainers, coaches, disciplinarian teachers in and outside the home»[26].

Following from this background, the Esan traditional community is structured in a way that the elders, as the repositories of knowledge and the guardian of the traditions or established beliefs of the people, are the authorities when it comes to morality. They are seen as having the wisdom, epistemic condition and moral uprightness to determine what is permissible or impermissible in the society. As Albert Onobhayedo says, the elders – what he call the Esan elite group – in Esan culture

> «…were the opinion leaders and custodian of the customs and values of the people. They ensured that the younger ones were groomed to be conformists within the traditional settings. They also provided leadership in politics, industry, religion as well as individual and community health management. The ordinary subjects generally obeyed and emulated these supposedly knowledgeable and well adjusted members of their community»[27].

The Esan elders are, therefore, those the people, particularly the young ones, look up to and imitate with regard to moral behavior. This is why an elder in the Esan community ought to be a morally upright person to avoid a situation where he/she becomes a bad example. The respect and reverence accorded elders in the Esan community is particularly made obvious in the designation accorded any elder, *Onwalẹn*. *Onwalẹn* translates as «wise one». It is meant to indicate that the bearer of such a designation is a repository of the customs and traditions of the people and, by implication, he is the custodian of the tradition of the people. He is therefore primarily responsible in protecting that tradition and preventing it from oblivion. The *Onwalẹn* is therefore saddled with a crucial responsibility of maintaining and sustaining communal equilibrium by internalizing into members of the community the values and norms that will bind them together.

In order for the elders to fully perpetuate their aim and promote a particular moral standard in the community, the Esan community with the elders as the custodian is structured in a way that religion serves as

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25   Ikuenobe, op. cit., p. 175.
26   Weiss P. *Modes of Being.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1958. P. 157.
27   Onobhayedo A. 2007. Western education and social change in Esan Land // *IRORO: A Journal of Arts.* 2007. Vol. 7, № 1–2. P. 270–271.

an enforcer of moral norms. With its ideologies, religion helps to compel people to behave in one way rather than another. This is because the Esan believes in the existence of a number of supernatural forces – ancestors, divinities, and the Supreme Being – which he seeks to establish and sustain a relationship with. This being the case, the Esan will not want to fail in his religious obligations or behave in a manner that is impermissible in the sight of these supernatural forces because of the fear that he might lose a much needed relationship for survival. Having this knowledge, the elders are able to garnish moral precepts with religious sanctions to guarantee compliance.

When morality is viewed from this perspective, we can then understand why some persons simply act because they believe such moral codes have been handed down by the divine or a rich tradition. Such a commitment therefore involves the suspension of one's own critical judgment or rational evaluation of ideas. Rather than exercising one's own capacity to decide whether or not a particular norm ought to be followed, one acts simply because he met it so or because it is backed by some divine precepts. Elechi Amadi describes the attitude by society to enforce moral norms using religious ideologies as follows:

> «The overall effect of all these is to enforce a moral standard acceptable to a particular society. A secular interpretation leads to the conclusion that moral precepts have always had their origin in the mind of man. Even when deities are said to have laid them down, they have had to do so through the mind of man. It would appear, then, that while man formulates the moral code, he enlists the influence of religion for its enforcement. In other words, *in ethics man proposes, god enforces*»[28].

Thus, one is not autonomous with respect to these actions since the will that directs these actions is not one's own will.[29] Thus, although scholars such as Wiredu[30] and Gyekye[31] has rightly argued that ethics in African cultures were highly humanistic and social rather than religious as Mbiti[32] would argue, the enforcement of such social moral norms and values were highly founded on religious beliefs

Helen Lauer agrees with the above description of African traditions as authoritarian but has some reservations. According to her, it is generally accepted that specific features of a traditional upbringing curtail individuals and groups from defining their own ideals and fulfilling their own self-determined goals. For instance, it is widely observed that authoritarianism inhibits curiosity, independent inquiry and freedom of expression. Superstition is recognized as a characteristic of the persona-

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[28] Amadi E. *Ethics in Nigerian Culture*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1982. P. 6.

[29] McGarrity T. Authority and Virtue. A Paper presented at the *Conference on Value Inquiry*, U.S.A., 1993.

[30] Wiredu, op. cit., p. 6.

[31] Gyekye K. *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*. Accra: Sankafa Publishing, 1996. P. 58–59.

[32] Mbiti J. *African Philosophy and Religion*. London: Heinemann Publishers, 1969.

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lity-type called authoritarianism.[33] She however contends that such authoritarian attitude is not peculiar to African traditional societies, nor is it peculiar to traditional societies in general, but also featured in our everyday existence in contemporary societies. That authoritarianism pervades our societies today is clearly made vivid in the collected essays of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno.[34]

However, Polycarp Ikuenobe has contended that although African traditions encouraged authoritarianism, such authoritarianism were rationally defensible. While distinguishing between irrational and rational authoritarianism, he argues that the error made by critics – such as Wiredu, Appiah and Kaphagawani – is that they fail to see the rational form. The basis of the rational form of authoritarianism, he says, is the principle of epistemic defense and social, contextual and pragmatic nature of knowledge and justification. Hence epistemic or rational authoritarianism in African cultures is not something that is insidious or bad. In fact, it is pertinent to note that an element of epistemic authoritarianism is accepted in science as a legitimate principle.[35] Ikuenobe also adds that the main reason why ideals, principles and practices were not questioned in African traditions was because,

> «Apparently, they did not have the need to question their beliefs, especially the fundamental beliefs that gave the status of epistemic authority to their traditions and elders. They also did not question because of their epistemic rules, practices and evidence in the community, which gave credence to their *understanding* of their communal, social, inter-subjective, and contextual nature of inquiry and justification»[36].

While admitting Lauer's point, Ikuenobe's points raises a number of issues. There is no doubt that inculcation that leads to authoritarianism insists that the present knowledge is absolutely true and that the present power and order are reasonable and inviolable. So it tends to refuse any kind of suspicion or criticism. Naturally, these heritages delivered from the past as traditions have some rationality which is what Ikuenobe has tried to show. However, the problem is not if they are correct or rational, but if they are necessary and possible to be reflected on and criticized eventually. Once this is a problem, then the authoritarian structure definitely overrides on the individual's will. Again, his claim that there was really no need for questioning the available belief system obviously gives credence to the fact that such a culture bred close-mindedness in a closed structure, an undue resistance to belief revision, which is a symptom of authoritarian indoctrination. According to Callan and Arena,

> «those whom we suspect of being indoctrinated may devote themselves to winning converts and exposing the errors of all who disagree with them and that cannot be done without heeding relevant evidences... {Thus} To

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33   Lauer H. *Tradition versus Modernity: Reappraising a False Dichotomy*. Ibadan: Hope Publication, 2003. P. 18–19.
34   See: Lauer, op. cit., p. 18–21.
35   Ikuenobe, op. cit., p. 210.
36   Ibid., p. 209.

believe *P* close mindedly is to be unable or unwilling to give due regard to reason that are available for some beliefs contrary to *P* because of excessive emotional attachments to the truth of *P*»[37].

Perhaps, Ikuenobe fails to admit that, sometimes, it was not that people in an African traditional community did not see the need to question authority, but did not do so out of fear of (supernatural) consequences if they did. So, such questioning only took place secretly in the whisperings of close friends and in the soliloquizing of a troubled fellow. It was not often done openly to avoid being labeled a deviant, a name that was avoided like the plague considering the communalistic nature of the society.

The point to be drawn here is that traditional societies somehow managed to, to some extent, impede moral autonomy of the individual as a necessary requirement for community survival – if we understand moral autonomy to mean acting convincingly, willfully and deliberately. This does not in any way imply that the moral norms of such societies were not effective in maintaining social order or were barbaric and autocratic in nature (though they have sometimes been accused of being so), but that people were not necessarily part of a deliberate decision making process and that moral principles and practice were not necessarily educated in the proper sense of the term, but inculcated. Even the choices people made were often tailored in a way that one could only think within the box and never outside it.

The seriousness of the issue of the lack of moral autonomy in traditional Esan society, for example, becomes obvious once we realize the outcry by the elder today over the degeneration of moral value among the Esan people. The elder is quick to blame this on Westernization or the Esan's contact with the West or foreign cultures.[38] However, the main reason for the degenerative nature of moral values among the Esans is because the people were not given the needed space and autonomy to develop their culture and prevent it from becoming anachronistic in the face of new ways of doing things. Due to the authoritarian nature of the culture, its contact with other cultures and modes of thinking about reality, and morality in particular, led to the gradual breakdown of traditional values held in high esteem and kept beyond questioning and review.

Therefore, similar to what the Frankfurt School theorists have tried doing, scholars like Wiredu and his friends has advocated for a more open culture that allows for revision and dynamism. They have advocated for a more science-oriented and less superstitious society since science, to a large extent, encourages rational evaluation of beliefs and provides the atmosphere necessary for such.[39] They also advocate the

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[37] Callen E., Arena D. Indoctrination // H. Siegel (ed.) *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. P. 13–14.
[38] Onobhaye, op. cit., p. 272–275.
[39] See: Wiredu, op. cit., chap. 1.

practical role philosophy can play in the critique of ideology (at least in the bad sense of unjustifiable overriding of an individual's will).[40]

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**Concluding remarks:
echoes from the Frankfurt School**

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So far, we have examined the legacy of the Frankfurt School – Critical Theory – and how it serves as a model for philosophy's critical interrogation of culture. Critical theory, we have seen, is the struggle for social change and the unification of theory and practice. «Critique», in this context, therefore involves criticism of ideologies, oppression and exploitation and the struggle for a better society. In doing this, critical theory does not simply diagnose the oppressive and dominative aspects of society that hinders freedom, it strives also to detect and develop positive and progressive aspects of society that can promote emancipation and freedom of the individual to the extent that he can deliberately develop the society in which he lives. This is the idea of immanent criticism associated with the Frankfurt School critical theory. Immanent critique presupposes that there are progressive ideals in the society and that individuals will respond critically and actively to attack on civil liberties, inequalities, oppression, threats to democracy, and other reactionary attacks on human freedom. In this context, immanent critique attempts to promote social criticism and change by utilizing the norms of the existing society.

Critical theory therefore provides theoretical and practical resources to draw upon to create theories and practices adequate to the contemporary era, an era of upheaval, unpredictability, utopian possibilities, authoritarian repulsion, and as yet unforeseen crises and openings for social transformation. The critical theorists and early members of the Frankfurt School of the 1930s found themselves in a similar complex sociopolitical situation and revised the classical theories of Marx and Weber accordingly to provide new theoretical syntheses for their present moment. They filled in some of the missing parts of classical Marxism, developing theories of culture, society, psychology, and the state, lacking in the Marxian theory, while fleshing out the philosophical dimension of the Marxian theory. They also updated the Marxian theory and critique of monopoly state capitalism, analyzing the transition to the new stages of capitalism and fascism. They developed the Weberian themes of rationalization and the Nietzschen themes of the massification of society and decline of individuality to describe the dynamics of their social situation. Critical theory remains of intense interest for the present conjuncture and provides crucial resources for a renewal of critical social theory and liberal, less dominative societies in the current age. This is precisely because, like the 1930s, our age is undergoing vast transformations, some of which are promising and some of which are threatening. Going back to the classics in critical theory is therefore not

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[40]   See: Oladipo O. *Philosophy and the African Experience: The Contributions of Kwasi Wiredu,* Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1996.

a matter of mere antiquarian pleasure, but of gaining methodological insight, theoretical illumination, and practical inspiration to carry on the tasks of critical social theory in the present situation.

In applying critical theory to traditional Esan culture, the following points can be deduced: the diagnosis of moral ills is to be found in the authoritarian nature of such cultures; the remedy to such social ills is the critique of ideologies that support such authoritarianism, and embracing a rational outlook towards life by the application of reason and philosophy to the critique of the ideas we hold. In this way, emancipation can be attained and people in such a society can act deliberately and convincingly. However, there is much to be done in ensuring that these diagnosis and remedies do not simply remain in the realm of theories but become practical aspects of our everyday existence.