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# **The Foundations of African Ethics (Afriethics) and the Professional Practice of Journalism: The Case for Society-Centred Media Morality**

By Francis P. Kasoma

## **Abstract**

The impact of the information superhighway on journalism education in Africa is addressed by the author. The theme of this paper is that the communal approach should be used in solving moral problems in journalism.

The individualism and divisionism that permeate the practise of journalism in Africa today should be discarded since they are not only unAfrican but also professionally unhealthy. The article asserts that African journalism would have an inbuilt self-correcting mechanism that facilitates journalists counselling one another.

It is submitted herein that world journalism, equally beset with divisionist and selfish approaches to the practice of ethical journalism, could learn from Africa the value of journalistic solidarity and common problem-solving. The article ends with a note that the world needs journalism with a human face.

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# **La Fondation d'Ethiques Africains (AFRIETHIQUES) et la Pratique Professionnelle en Journalisme**

*Par Prof Francis Kasoma*

## **Résumé**

L'auteur s'efforce d'éclairer l'impact de la Super Voie de Communication sur l'éducation de journalisme en Afrique. Kasoma est de l'avis que pour résoudre les problèmes moraux en journalisme, il faudrait adopter une approche commune.

L'individualisme et le divisionisme qui caractérisent le journalisme en Afrique sont à éviter. Car non seulement que ceux-ci ne sont pas africains, mais ils empêchent également le développement de professionnalisme. Cet article soutient que le journalisme en Afrique devrait se doter d'un mécanisme d'auto-correction, permettant aux praticiens de s'entre-conseiller.

Le journalisme au niveau mondial pourrait également tirer profit d'un tel modèle, car même à cette échelle le divisionisme et l'approche individuelle caractérisent cette profession. Or cette dernière devrait s'efforcer de promouvoir la solidarité et la coopération. La conclusion de Prof Kasoma est que ce qu'il faut au monde contemporain est un journalisme avec un visage humain.

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## Introduction

In a world in which the information superhighway has made journalists practise their profession in a hurry as they strive to satisfy the world's craving for more and quicker news and other information, the humaneness of journalism has increasingly been giving way to the expediencies of cut-throat financial or political competition. The world, and in particular the African press, seem to be abandoning the noble objective of 'serving the people' for the selfish cause of 'serving self'. Instead of being a 'means to an end', world journalism, of which African journalism is a part, is fast becoming an end in itself.

Driven by selfish motives of profit maximisation or political expediency, the African press has increasingly become the accuser, the jury and the judge all rolled up in one as it pounces on one victim after another in the name of press freedom and democracy. The unbelieving African society watches in awe as the largely incorrigible press literarily maims and murders those it covers to fulfil its not-so-hidden agenda of self-enrichment and self-aggrandisement and refuses to be held accountable for the harm it causes to society both individually and collectively. In its haste to clean up society of its scum, the African press and indeed the world press, has often forgotten or simply ignored the fact that it also badly needs cleansing.

The answer in redeeming some respectability for the men and women of the pen lies in once again going back to the primordial ethical checks and balances that have always existed in African society and ensured reasonably good moral order.

The tragedy facing African journalism of the 1990s and beyond, however, is that the continent's journalists have closely imitated the professional norms of the North (formerly known as the West) which they see as the epitome of good journalism. Consequently, the African mass media's philosophical (ethical) foundations, their aims and objectives have been blue-prints of the media in the industrialised societies of the North. Some African journalists even claim that the Northern standards they follow are world journalism standards which every media person should observe. They refuse to listen to any suggestions that journalism can have African ethical roots and still maintain its global validity and appeal. Anyone suggesting, as this author has often done, that Africa can teach the world some journalistic manners has been declared anathema (Kasoma, 1992; Kasoma, 1993; Kasoma, 1994; Kasoma 1995)

This author submits that African society, drawing from its humane approach to life, can inspire its recalcitrant journalists to bring some sanity into African journalism and with it redeem the disintegrating world press, and the African press in particular. Perhaps African journalists can bring in some fresh air into their journalism by making it once more a society-centred rather than a money and power-centred profession which always wants to have the last word on issues and hardly admits any wrong-doing.

The answer that should be given in the African ethical context to the question posed by Christians et al.: 'To whom is moral duty owed?' should be 'society' followed by 'professional colleagues' first and foremost. The 'self', 'clients/subscribers/supporters' and 'one's organisation or firm' should be played down very considerably if we are to arrive at a new African ethical approach that this article proposes (Christians, Rotzoll and Fackler, 1987:17-19).

Ironically, however, while some African journalists have been busy advocating that journalism should be practised according to how it is done in the North, their mentors in the North have themselves increasingly become unhappy with the role the media have been playing in their society, leave alone the world. For one, they have for some time been unhappy about the media playing the role of agitators in world society. This is what comes out clearly from thought-provoking sentiments like the following from Merrill, a leading media analyst from the North:

When we examine the world media today, we get the feeling that jangled nerves of the world's populations can hardly be eased by the newspapers and certainly not by TV. On the contrary, anxieties are created, magnified, and perpetuated; religion is set against religion, social class against social class, race against race, and nationality against nationality. Instead of being conveyors of enlightenment and harmony, the national media systems tend to be mere extensions of functional and party differences and animosities, thus doing a good job of increasing irritations and suspicions among groups and governments and giving distorted pictures of various nations. (Merrill, 1995: XVI)

Not only are the media in the North and the world seen as creating divisions in society, they are also increasingly being seen as propagating their own individual agendas as opposed to societal ones. The situation has become so bad that, McQuail, another leading media analyst from the North, has even

claimed that there is confusion over whether the activities of the media belong to the public or private sphere. He writes:

(Mass) communication has several relevant dimensions: the same act of communication can have a social-political as well as an economic value, it may be regarded as either a matter of necessity a fundamental right - or as an optional private indulgence - a matter of wants rather than needs. On most matters, there is no objective way of determining the 'correct' identification and it is impossible, in general to say when and where the activities of mass media belong, the public or the private sphere, and thus whether or not they are proper matters of public concern. (McQuail, 1992:2)

The journalism of the North, which Africans have been imitating, can, therefore, today be said to be characterised by an individualised and agitational approach to reportage. Each individual journalist and media house hold jealously to what they report, regardless of what the other journalists and media houses are reporting and largely oblivious of the effect of their reportage on society, as long as they make money and/or political capital. A communal or societal approach to journalism is conspicuously lacking as the world's journalists and media houses, particularly those in Africa, try to outdo each other in sensationalism in the name of competition and freedom of the press.

Moreover, there is big disagreement on ethical standards among media people in the North. For example, with regard to the United States, a country whose media have been synonymous with the world's media, Goodwin writes:

The picture this study paints of the state of ethics in the news business in the United States is one of large numbers of obviously intelligent people honestly disagreeing about ethical standards, goals, and procedures.... Other ethical principles may be adhered to religiously by some or many journalists but ignored by some or many others. There is even disagreement about what constitutes an ethical or moral issue in the field. (Goodwin, 1987:352)

All this has been happening despite the truism that journalism is, unlike medicine and law, a collective, team profession in which what one journalist does or does not do can be complemented or destroyed by what other journalists do or do not do. If this truism were to be followed, journalists as a professional 'family', and not just as individuals or media houses, should be responsible for the outcomes of their work on society. In other words, journalists as a

collective should be more concerned with the effect on society of what they disseminate, instead of leaving this responsibility to individual journalists or media houses as largely seems to be the case.

This paper is seeking a solution to the present state in which Africa's, and world's, media are simply uncaring agitators concerned with maximising their profits and propagating their political agendas. The paper is proposing a collective approach to journalism ethics in Africa as a sequel to the proposal for the need for journalism ethics in Africa (Kasoma, 1994b).

The justification for advocating society-centred journalism in Africa is being sought in the foundations of African ethics (Afriethics). After all, journalism should be based on the sociopolitical and ethical tenets of the society it serves.

It would interest those who advocate that journalism in Africa should be practised according to how it is done in the North to know that media experts in the North expect Africans, like any other people in the rest of the world, to practise their journalism according to the ethical tenets of their society. In his analysis on a conceptual overview on world journalism, Merrill has submitted:

A media system reflects the political philosophy in which it functions. That is basic. A nation's journalism cannot exceed the limits permitted by the society; on the other hand, it cannot lag very far behind. Journalism is largely determined by its politico-social context, and when it functions basically in accord with its national ideology it is considered - or should be, I maintain - socially responsible in a microscopic sense. (Merrill, 1976:18-19)

Traber (1989), a person who has spent the greater part of his life working as a journalist in Africa or in activities connected with African journalism, like many other African or Africa-based media analysts who have made the same submission as Merrill which have largely been ignored by African journalists, has bemoaned the lack of Africanness in African journalism. Discussing African communication problems with particular reference to communication and culture, he posits:

If one were to subject African newspapers to a scrutiny of how rooted they are in African values and traditions, the likely outcome would be that they are foreign bodies in the cultural fabric of Africa. (Traber, 1989:93)

He goes on to argue that if African journalists followed values provided by

their own culture, such as truth-telling, in their practice of journalism, African media would look different and better. He continues:

Honesty and truthfulness are highly valued African virtues, and telling lies is utterly despicable. Now consider the half truths, misinformation, disinformation and lies contained in our press. That is not only wrong in itself, but in Africa it is culturally alienating. (Traber, 1989:93)

This paper has been written against the background of a press in the Africa of the 1990s recently unshackled from the bondage of one-party and military regimes of the 1960s, the 1970s and the 1980s; a press which in its enjoyment of its newly won freedom, has gone to the other extreme of behaving like a watch dog which is always tethered and which upon being let loose goes wild with excitement; a press for which all that seems to matter is to publish what it wants to publish and damn the consequences to society generally and, in particular, the individuals who constitute it.

African newspapers, particularly the independent tabloids in countries which adopted multi-party politics in the 1990s, have spared no one in their muckraking journalistic exploits libelling, invading privacy and generally carrying out a type of reportage on those they report on that can best be described as 'vendetta journalism'.

'Vendetta journalism' is ethically wrong because it puts the individual journalist's or media houses' feelings before the interests of society and of the profession of journalism. 'Vendetta journalism' may be described as a journalism of hatred, revenge, and dislike against people in the news. African journalists practice 'vendetta journalism' by, among other things:

1. **Using abusive language against sources or any other people in the news they are reporting.** Abusive language is used when a person is so angry with someone that instead of choosing to reason with him/her vents his/her anger by insulting them. The role of journalists is to convince people through well-presented facts and reasoned-arguments and not by insults.
2. **Choosing not to approach a source for a comment on a story that incriminates him/her.** This is not fair because people must be given a

hearing before their supposed wrongs are exposed to the press. Fingerprinting by the press should be done very carefully, otherwise it is bound to destroy not only the cohesion of the journalistic profession, as journalists compete with each other on who is telling the truth in the accusations and counter accusations, but also in the cohesion of the larger community whose members are encouraged by the press to character assassinate each other. Journalists should try everything within their means to establish the truth of the accusations. They should always identify the people who are making serious accusations unless requirements of using anonymous sourcing exist - and they should report the story in such a way that both the accusation and the defence are highlighted.

3. **Selectively choosing facts that paint a bad picture of the source and writing a biased story.** This includes deliberately quoting sources out of context in order to make them appear ignorant or stupid so as to get square with them.
4. **Using sarcasm in reporting sources the journalists hate or dislike.** Sarcastic reporting tries to make the people journalists are reporting on appear foolish and the journalists clever. Sometimes the sarcasm takes the form of writing down on sources or people in the news by demeaning them and trying to show that they are nothing, compared to the journalist. Quite often journalists take a know-all posture which is totally uncalled for since journalism does not bestow on them a monopoly of knowledge.

It is not by coincidence that in the wake of the multi-party politics of the 1990s and beyond, African courts have been inundated with legal suits from individuals and groups who have repeatedly accused the press, often with good reason, of treating them unfairly.

Flabbergasted politicians, who have been the main victims of some of the most unfair publicity, have often vowed to do everything in their power to restrict press freedom once again so as to teach journalists a lesson to behave "more responsibly". Bemused citizens have watched with mixed feelings: some in utter disbelief as the 'liberated' press makes all kinds of allegations against their leaders; others have hailed the muckraking journalists as heroes

whose shocking 'revelations' and attacks on those in power, they hope would bring some sanity into African politics.

The international community, particularly the donor countries whose support has largely propelled multi-party democracy in Africa, have urged on and supported the muckraking journalists to carry on with their 'good work' of uncovering the dirty work of the people in government. The truth of the allegations made by the press does not seem to bother them as long as these allegations are made in the name of democracy and freedom of the press.

Lest this author be grossly misunderstood and accused of being against freedom of the press and democracy, the uncovering of dirt in the corridors of power is, indeed, what any press serving democracy should do (Kasoma, 1993; Kasoma, 1994c). However, making allegations against politicians, based on the flimsiest hearsay and suspicion that there is dirt under the political carpet is not the same as actually exposing the dirt.

The biggest ethical problem of journalism in the Africa of the 1990s multi-party era is that it is playing to the gallery of political parties as they engage in one political character assassination after another in their jostling for political power. Serious allegations, many of them based on unnamed and dubious sources, are published without the journalists who write them making concerted efforts to establish the truth of the allegations. Consequently, the people defamed are left permanently injured with little or no meaningful redress.

The harm that unfounded accusations against those in government can do to society and the individuals who constitute it can be devastating. Even Africa's dirty politicians, and most of them really are, deserve justice and fair-play from the media and should not be accused, tried and sentenced by the press of wrongs they have not committed.

Many African journalists behave in this way because they have a selfish and self centred approach to journalism rather than a societal one. They have discarded the mutual counselling and correction of African communal living. It is proposed in this paper that the individualistic approach by African journalists in the practice of their profession could change to a more accommodating, societal one if they based their professional behaviour on Afriethical foundations.

The paper starts by discussing the foundations of Afriethics rooted in African communal approach to life. It establishes the basis of Afriethics by

answering the question: what constitutes ethically good and bad behaviour in African society? In other words, the paper tries to establish how Africans distinguish good from bad behaviour, a good person from a bad one. The paper delves into the question of how Africans ensure ethical behaviour in their societies.

A link is then made between Afriethics and the practice of journalism by Africans based on the premise that journalists serve, first and foremost, their own society and secondly, the world at large.

Finally, the paper posits that Afriethical foundations would, if taken seriously into account in the practice of journalism in Africa, bequeath to world journalism, contaminated by questionable objectives and practices, a new lease of life that would make journalists deserve the tag 'honourable professionals' rather than the present derogatory one of 'professional liars'.

### **Foundations of Afriethics**

To understand the foundations of Afriethics, we need to start from an analysis of how an African views life and human nature.

The world of an African consists of the living and the dead (**Figure 1** on the next page). The living and the dead all share one world - the world of the living-dead or dead-living - in which they also share one life and one vital force. What the living do or do not do affects the dead and what the dead do or do not do affects the living. The dead are not actually 'dead', they merely transfer to another life - the life of the dead-living or living-dead. The living need the dead to carry out a normal and full life. The dead, in turn, need the living to enjoy their 'life' to the full (hence libations and other sacrifices by the living to the dead).

What the dead do or do not do can have a telling effect on the living. The evil spirits (bad dead people), for example, have the power and influence to haunt those among the living against whom they have a grudge by generally making life difficult for them. The good spirits, on the other hand, have the ability and the power to protect the living from problems which come with life's vicissitudes or are deliberately planted on them by evil living people or spirits.

There are good and bad people among the living, just as there are good and bad spirits among the dead. The spirit, 'Umupashi' (Bemba) 'Muzimu' (nyanja), 'moya' (Tonga) etc., is the vital force which gives life to both the living and the dead. The spirit does not die. What dies is the body in its physical form. Africans believe the spirits of the dead have bodies too but these bodies are spiritual and not physical.

Figure 1: Graphic view of the foundations of Afriethics



The living-dead are in a continuum. At one end are the very good people and at the other end are very bad people. In between are good people and bad people. Because African society is communal, there is constant interaction between the good people and the not-so-good. The aim is to have the good acts of the good people rub-off on the not-so-good so that they too can emulate them and also become good.

The yardstick for good acts is whether or not they serve the community — the whole community consisting of the living and the dead — either as a family, a clan or the tribe (ethnic group). When acts only serve to propagate or satisfy pursuits of individuals, they are not regarded to be as good as those that serve the family, clan or tribe and may be even regarded as bad acts if they are harmful to the family, clan or tribe.

The more beneficial to a larger community the acts are, the ethically better they are. Thus, acts that only serve an individual are not as good as those that serve the whole family and, similarly, acts that only serve the family are less good compared to those that serve the clan and the tribe. Acts that are only for the good of the individual at the exclusion of the clan and the tribe may even be regarded as bad. Thus, to eat alone individually or as a family when the rest of the village or clan is starving is regarded as bad act and a person who repeatedly does this is looked at as a bad person.

A noteworthy ethical point in African life is that the bad people in a community are constantly advised and counselled so that they become better members of the community. They are not simply condemned and ostracised. The counselling is usually done by elders, who, because of their wide experience in life, are looked up to as being wiser than the younger members of the community. When it is elders who are going wrong and there are no age mates to advise them, there is also room for young people to advise elders provided proper etiquette is followed.

The need for common good for the community overshadows all acts in African society. There are positive and negative acts of self preservation. Cultivating a crop, for example, is a positive act of self preservation because it is carried out without intentionally trying to harm other people. When an individual, however, acts deliberately to harm another person by, for example, killing him or her in self defence, such an act is regarded as a permissible negative act of self preservation.

To risk one's life for the good of family, clan or tribe is regarded as a heroic act worthy of commendation. Thus, a person who goes out of his way to rid the village of a marauding animal such as a snake or lion and ends up being killed, is regarded as a hero while one who tries to save his life by running away from danger that confronts him/her and the rest of the community, is regarded as a coward and, therefore, a bad person. Brave people have been rewarded in African society with all sorts of favours, including marrying the chief's daughter and thereby becoming part of the royal household; while cowards have always been despised and ridiculed in African society.

There are two types of ethically bad behaviour by the living: that generated by self will and that brought about by the influence of either bad people or

bad spirits on the person acting. The living have no control over the latter type of bad behaviour and, therefore, cannot completely be blamed for it. The blame is heaped on bad spirits or evil people who have taken possession of or cast a spell over the actors and are making them behave in such a manner.

This is the case with regard to people who have bad spirits or 'ingulu'. It is also the case with ritual performers like 'nyau' dancers among the people of eastern Zambia who are said to be possessed by 'vilombo'. What they do while under the influence of the spirits or 'vilombo' cannot be blamed on them. Such people sometimes literally get away with murder if the act is committed while they are in their 'possessed state'.

The people looking at the bad actions of people possessed by evil spirits or 'vilombo' do not merely blame these people for their bad actions. On the contrary, they sympathise with them and try and help them get out of their predicament by seeking for the intercession of good spirits 'imipashi isuma' or the help of medicine people.

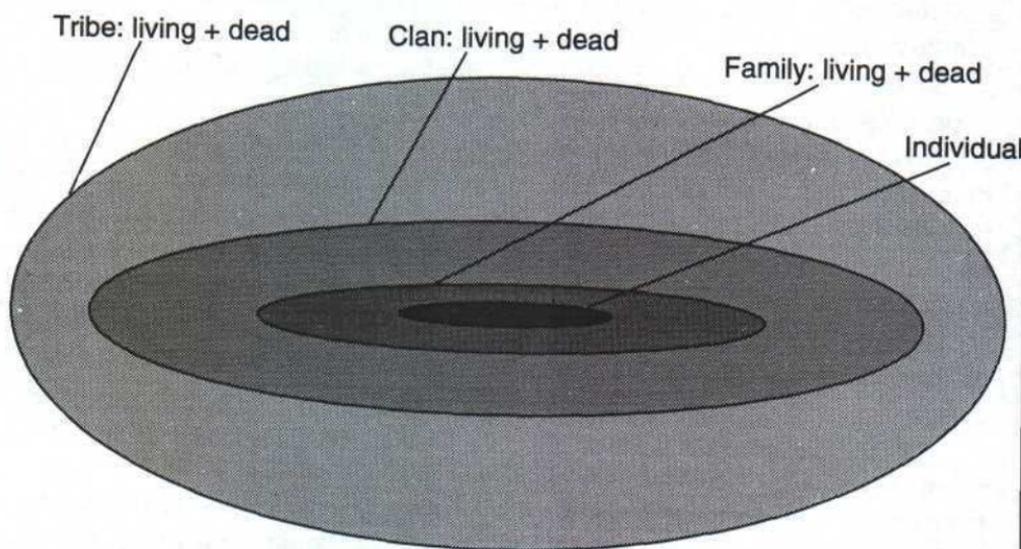
Africans, however, condemn people whose bad actions are brought about by their own free will or choice. While Africans believe that some people may be led to do bad things by bad spirits or evil people, they also believe a human being can be in full control of his or her actions, including the bad ones. A person who, for example, refuses to share food with others is usually regarded as doing so on his own choice and not because he is led to act in this manner by bad spirits or people. So is one who steals other people's livestock or tells lies.

The influence of the community, particularly the family, is sometimes taken into account when apportioning blame to a person for his or her bad behaviour. Some personal acts are, thus, attributed to the family influence or background. Africans believe that a family with bad people usually begets ill-mannered children and that a good family begets well-behaved people. So, although an individual may be blamed for the actions arising from his or her own free will, Africans also look at and may blame the person's behaviour partly on the family upbringing. Africans believe that it is unusual for a good person to come from a bad family and vice versa. The ethical responsibility of a person who hails from a bad family is, therefore, not accorded with the same weight of blame as that of a person who comes from a good family. A person with a good family background is blamed more for the same bad act

than a person from a bad family. The reverse is also true; a good act from a person who hails from a bad family is valued much more than the same good act from a person with a good family background.

Africans also recognise the influence of friends and close associates, who may not necessarily be members of the immediate extended family, on a person's behaviour. Those repeatedly caught engaged in bad behaviour are advised to change their friends and join the company of well-behaved people. If they refuse to listen, they are condemned as bad people belonging to bad company.

*Figure 2: The ethical influence on an individual person*



A similar continuum exists among the dead. There are very good spirits and merely good spirits just like there are very bad spirits and merely bad spirits among them. The bad spirits connive with the bad people to make life difficult for both the good people and the good spirits.

There is a constant struggle between the good and the bad among the living and their counterparts among the dead. The good people and spirits try and win over the bad people on their side by showing them that it does not pay to be bad. Only when they fail to convert them, and after the bad people

degenerate into really irredeemable states such as those of being witches or wizards, does society give up and ostracise these very bad people from the community so that its well-being can be preserved.

The good spirits guard over and protect the good people from falling into evil ways engineered by the bad spirits. They carry out this assignment generally by protecting all the people in the family, clan and tribe. They also particularly do this to those after whom they are named or who bear their totem.

(In African custom, usually names given to the living belong to the dead so that the dead become alive in the living and propagate their vital force or 'umupashi'. Only good spirits have the honour of having their names given to the living either to babies at their birth or to adults during the 'kupyanika' or 'succession' ceremony.)

The bad spirits are people who died as bad people and who have an axe to grind against society generally and the individual, family or clan in particular. They are bent on revenge against wrong done to them. Sometimes the revenge is on an individual who wronged them while they were still alive.

To ensure protection against both the bad people and bad spirits, the living seek the intercession of the good spirits. This is done through ancestral worship (which should be distinguished from cults of the dead) (Fortes, 1960:122-157). Willoughby (1970:179-180) and Parrinder (1954:79-100) distinguish two forms of ancestor worship- public or communal and private or personal. Willoughby writes:

*For such public benefits as victory, rain, fertility of lands and herds, salvation from epidemics and ravaging beasts, and often successful hunting and fishing, resort is had to the spirits of the ruling dynasty.*

*For private boons, and for protection or deliverance from private ills, each ancestor-worship relies upon the spirits of his own forbears. In some tribes, simple offerings are occasionally made to the ancestor-spirits of a family almost as a matter of routine. (Willoughby, 1970 :179-18-)*

They also seek protection of medicine people and witch-finders whose role it is to cleanse African society of the scum.

The basis of morality in African society is the fulfilment of obligations to kins-people, both living and dead. It is believed that some of the departed and the spirits keep watch over people to make sure that they observe the moral

laws and are punished when they break them (Mbiti, 1975:175; Wilson, 1971:77). Wilson, for example writes that:

The basis of morality among the Nyakyusa was the fulfilment of obligations to kinsmen, living and dead, and to neighbours, living in a community with kin and neighbours, showing respect to seniors and fulfilling obligations to dependants. (Wilson, 1971:77)

And Mbiti writes:

...It is also believed or thought that some of the departed and the spirits keep watch over people to make sure that they observe moral laws and are punished when they break them. (Mbiti, 1975:175)

African peoples have a deep sense of right and wrong. They lay emphasis on societal as opposed to individual morals. Mbiti has observed:

African morals lay a great emphasis on societal conduct, since a basic African view is that the individual exists only because others exist (Mbiti, 1975:175).

Because of this great emphasis on one's relationship with other people, both living and dead, morals have been evolved in order to keep society not only alive but in harmony. Thus individual morals must conform to family morals and if the two conflict, the family morals are held paramount. Similarly, family morals must conform to clan, and clan to tribe morals. What strengthens the family, the clan and the tribe or ethnic group is generally morally good. To safeguard the welfare of the community, there are many taboos concerning what may not be done and the consequences for disregarding these taboos.

This author submits that this ordering of morality in African society should be emulated by African journalists in the practice of their profession..

### **African Journalism and Afriethics**

A number of parallels can be found between the foundations of Afriethics as outlined above and how African journalism should be practised. First, African journalists can learn from the emphasis on the community and society in Afriethics.

Like in Afriethics, they should hold that the basis of morality in journalism in Africa should be the fulfilment of obligations to society and to the journalistic corps. The emphasis on societal as opposed to individual morals by journalists can only work if the journalists, in the true African spirit, develop a deep sense of right and wrong so that they are able to feel guilty for behaving unethically and try and correct colleagues who falter in their journalistic performance. For this to happen, there is need for dialogue among media people so that the practice of mass communication becomes a democratic and participatory one drawing its strength from the African cultural heritage.

Discussing democratisation of communication as a social movement process White writes:

The democratisation of communication is not brought about simply by passing a certain legislation or introducing a new policy. The values of participatory communication must become deeply a part of cultural identities so that, in every context, people automatically organise social relations in a participatory and dialogical fashion. (White, 1995:111)

The cultural basis of a participatory approach to communication in the African context takes a leaf from the Afriethical exposition given above, and it is the intricate sense of belonging together that permeates African society. Information is shared in the family, clan and tribe so that this sense of belonging-together is strengthened rather than weakened. Whether through interpersonal channels or through traditional media, communication is undertaken to solve communal problems rather than create them.

The democratisation of mass communication should begin in the news room. Like in a family, there should be more dialogue in the newsroom regarding what news and information should be disseminated and what should not, as opposed to the present mainly one-way communication in which the editors give instructions to the reporting staff regarding their assignments, particularly how they want the stories covered. The criterion for vetoing the dissemination of information should be the good such information brings to society in the first instance and to the 'family' of journalists in the second instance. In other words, news and information that is meant to propagate the aims of individual journalists or their media houses at the expense of the wellbeing of society should be avoided. After all, is this not what is meant by

the claim by journalism that reporting should be undertaken 'in the public interest'?

The biggest lesson that African journalists should learn from Afriethics is the communal approach to morals. Journalism is a communal profession in which the wrongs of an individual journalist have a capacity to tarnish the image of every one who practices it. Like in the African approach to morals, the ethicality of the individual acts of the journalist should be first and foremost measured against whether or not they serve the wider community and the journalism profession. If they do not, there is every likelihood that they are unethical.

Morals in African journalism should, like in Afriethics, lay great stress on social conduct of journalists as a collective and not on what an individual journalist or media house does. Consequently, erring journalists or media houses should, in the true African spirit, be counselled by the other journalists to behave well and not be immediately condemned as misfits in the 'family' of African journalism. Such counselling calls for true professional solidarity among African journalists so that they do things together as a 'family'. It also calls for a deep sense of what is right and what is wrong in the practice of journalism in Africa, something that African journalists have hardly started thinking about, leave alone agreeing on, as a body of professionals.

Solidarity in African journalism, however, would not be achieved if African journalists remain as divided as they have always been. It is an undisputable fact that professional journalists' unions or associations in Africa have always been weak (Kasoma, 1994c). Their membership has been pathetically low due to disinterest or divisions within the journalistic corps. The divisions among African journalists along the lines of media ownership (government-owned versus privately-owned), ethnic or tribal lines, political affiliation, religious beliefs, urban versus rural, rich versus poor, age (youthful versus old) and education (literate versus illiterate) have been too divisive for any meaningful cooperation within the profession to exist. Consequently, African journalists are unable to speak with one voice and therefore incapable of checking each other's mistakes.

Consequently erring journalists and media houses are left, and sometimes even encouraged, by the 'family' of journalists to continue with their mistakes. In the end it is the whole 'family' of journalists that suffers since all journalists, without exception, get a bad name.

This author, as President of the Press Association of Zambia (PAZA), tried for two years (1994–1996) to rally together Zambian journalists and found out that the belonging-togetherness was generally lacking among news-people. The majority remained either non-members or non-active members of the association. The few journalists who rallied behind PAZA were very good at talking, making all sorts of demands, but did little or nothing to propagate the aims of the association. Similar experience has been reported with regard to journalists in other African countries (Kasoma, 1994d)

Unless African journalism rises above petty divisions and ethical disinterestedness within its ranks, it will always be unable to put its house in order. The rallying together of African journalists is not possible unless there are common ethical approaches to the practice of the profession. Afriethics can provide the necessary common ground. In the true African spirit, when counselling fails to correct wayside journalists and media houses, the 'family' of journalists should be unanimous in condemning those who step out of line and ostracising them from the profession.

The silence by journalists that prevails across the continent as media consumers continue to be subjected to some of the most abject journalism the world has ever seen is despicable. Media people have a duty to speak out and condemn those of their colleagues who step out of line before their bad professionalism spreads to the whole 'family' of journalists. They should not wait for society to do this for them. Society may not always be able to tell bad from good journalism but journalists can. We are witnessing in the 1990s in most of our countries in Africa a self centred and arrogant brand of journalism which is insensitive to people's feelings even when they should be taken into account.

The communal approach to journalism ethics is not against healthy journalistic competition. To the contrary, it promotes it. Even traders of the same trade should have rules of dealing with their customers. There should be an unacceptable way of trading which if allowed to continue unabated would end up destroying the trade altogether. When people see that they are getting a raw deal from traders of one type, they are likely to be fed-up and seek new business connections with a more reasonable group of traders.

Journalism is not just any trade. It is a special type of trade whose wares, news, has traditionally in African society, been given free. To an African, it is

bad enough to have a group of people selling news as journalists do. But to have them sell it without due regard to the sensitivities of the family, the clan and the tribe is worse.

If African journalists continue giving the people raw deals in the name of professional competition, the people of Africa are likely to make African journalism irrelevant to their lives and would seek news and information elsewhere. As a matter of fact, this is already happening to a some extent. An increasing number of African media consumers are more and more turning to foreign journalists and media houses for news and information that matters and which their own journalists and media houses either cannot provide or provide poorly.

This author knows a number of newspapers in the southern African region which have become laughing stocks of informed readers who chuckle each time they see their screaming headlines which are often not backed by any substance in the stories they announce. One gets the feeling that the people are saying that they have been cheated by the newspapers for too long and they have decided that enough is enough. But the journalists on these newspapers continue to publish their trash unabated while their professional 'family' colleagues maintain an embarrassed silence instead of speaking out.

Like African society looking to ancestors for spiritual and practical guidance in difficult moments, African journalists should be proud of the achievements of their dead predecessors and try and emulate them instead of aping journalists of the North even where they have more appropriate precedents. Africa has seen some of the finest representatives of the profession the world has had. Some of them have died in the pursuit for truth befitting a good journalist. Why does the African journalist choose to dishonour these great men and women by ignoring them in preference for inspiration from the North?

African journalists should learn to revere and canonise their own predecessors instead of leaving the North to do it for them. It is not Northerners but Africans that these journalists served and it should be Africans first and foremost to accord them the honour and dignity they deserve for being outstanding journalists. We are not saying that bestowing international awards on Africans for journalistic excellence is wrong, for some of them really deserve international recognition.

What is worrisome is that some backyard organisations in the North have been bestowing accolades on a number of African journalists whose journalistic performance is ethically anything but illustrious. These awards are sending wrong signals among African journalists, particularly the young ones, who may try to imitate the prize winners in unethical journalism. It is like giving a Nobel prize to a delinquent with the danger that delinquency may become the accepted norm of behaviour.

It is the conviction of this author that by adopting a society-based approach to professionalism in journalism, African journalists will be better equipped to check on one another's professional misgivings and thereby improve the quality of journalistic performance on the continent. The wisdom of our ancestors has always believed in a communal approach to problem-solving. There are many wise sayings in African parlance which attest to the efficacy of a given community becoming better through mutual correction of its members and society disintegrating because those who constitute it are unable to correct one another as a collective community. To remain in isolation and do things one's own way is alien to Afriethics unless, of course, one has been banished into solitude by society. In Afriethics, it is only in extreme cases of persistent misbehaviour and after every effort has been made by the community to correct the wrongdoer that a person is banished from the community and is let to live a solitary life.

Journalism in Africa is still in its formative stages and open to collective professional counselling. Some of the journalists and media houses in Africa today are greenhorns who, instead of being arrogant and incorrigible should listen to more experienced and knowledgeable professional colleagues. If the older and more knowledgeable journalists themselves need reforming on how they have been practising their journalism, that can best be done by young journalists remaining within the 'family' and trying to change things from within and not by rebelling. The arrogance that we have witnessed of new newspapers adopting a know-all attitude and breaking away from professional colleagues smacks of ethical delinquency in African journalism.

The tug of war that currently exists in Africa between journalists from the government media and those from the private media in which the two rarely see eye to eye is not good for the profession. As long as African governments stubbornly cling to the ownership of the mainstream public means of mass

communication defying public outcries, there will always be journalists working for government, who throughout the 1990s constituted the majority. The blame for the existence of government media but on the government media in a democratic policy should not be put on journalists who work for these media but on the government. Journalist in the private media have, therefore, no reason for hating and refusing to cooperate with their colleagues in the government media just like government media journalists have no reason for holding a grudge against their counterparts in the private media. It is important that the two regularly meet under the umbrella of one organization and counsel one another on how to ethically execute their journalist tasks. Forming different bodies to take care of the supposedly different interests of the two types of journalists, as seems to be the case at the moment in a number of African countries, only exacerbates the cleavage between the two types of media people to the disadvantage of the ethical well-being of the journalistic 'family'.

## **Conclusion**

The underlying theme of this paper has been that the communal approach to solving ethical issues in Africa life should be used in solving moral problems in journalism. The individualism and divisionism that permeates the practice of journalism in Africa today should be discarded since it is not only un-African but also professionally unhealthy. If this is done, African journalism would have an in-built self-correcting mechanism in which journalists will as a 'family' mutually counsel one another and thereby practice the profession more morally.

For this to happen, African journalists should start looking into their own culture and precedents for inspiration instead of the North.

It is the submission of this author that world journalism, equally beset with a divisionist and selfish approach to the practice of ethical journalism, could learn from Africa the value of journalistic solidarity and common problem-solving. We in Africa have a chance of redeeming the profession which is there to serve society by being more sensitive to its shortcomings. The world needs journalism with a human face.

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