



## **THE BASICS OF KENYAN MORALS AND THE PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE OF JOURNALISM: THE CASE FOR SOCIETY-CENTERED MEDIA DECENCY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The theme of this paper is that the communal approach should be used in solving moral hitches in journalism. The individualism and divisionism that permeate the practice of journalism in Kenya today should be thrown away since they are not only unKenyan but also professionally unpleasant. The article asserts that Kenyan journalism should have an ingrained self-correcting mechanism that facilitates journalists counseling one another. It is submitted herein that world journalism, equally overwhelmed with divisionist and selfish styles to the practice of ethical journalism, could learn from Kenya the value of journalistic solidarity and common problem-solving. The paper ends with a recommendation that the world needs journalism with a human face.*

**Keywords:** Journalism ethics, Information superhighway, Kenyan press, Media democratization, Private media, World journalism, Kenyan journalism, Media decency.

### **Contribution/ Originality**

This paper's primary contribution is finding that Kenyan ethical foundations would, if taken seriously into account in the practice of journalism in Kenya, donate to world journalism, contaminated by questionable objectives and practices, a new lease of life that would make journalists deserve the tag 'respectable professionals' rather than the present one of 'professional liars'.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In a country where the information superhighway has made journalists practice their profession in a hurry as they struggle to satisfy the need for more and faster news and other information, the humaneness of journalism has progressively been giving way to the pragmatism of cut-throat financial or political competition. The world, and in particular the Kenyan press, seem to be abandoning the noble objective of serving public interest for the selfish cause of 'serving self. Instead of being a 'means to an end', world journalism, of which Kenyan journalism

is a part, is fast becoming an end in itself. Possessed by selfish motives of profit maximization, the Kenyan press just like any other press in Africa as Kasoma (1994) put it 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. The skeptical Kenyan society watches in awe as the largely irredeemable press literarily damages and massacres those it covers to fulfill its not-so-hidden agenda of self-enrichment and self-aggrandizement and refuses to be held responsible for the destruction it causes to society both individually and collectively. In its rush to clean up society of its scum, the Kenyan press and indeed the world press, has often forgotten or simply ignored the fact that it also badly needs cleansing (Kasoma, 1995). The answer in redeeming some decency for the scribes (journalists) lies in going back to the elemental ethical checks and balances that have always existed in the Kenyan society and ensured levelheadedly good moral order. The tragedy facing Kenyan journalism of the 2000s and beyond, however, is that the country's journalists have closely imitated the professional norms of the North previously known as the West which they see as the height of good journalism. Consequently, the Kenyan mass media's ethical fundamentals, their aims and objectives have been blue-prints of the media in the industrialized societies of the North. Some Kenyan journalists even claim that the Northern standards they follow are world journalism standards which every media person should observe. They garbage any suggestions that journalism could have Kenyan or African ethical roots and still maintain its universal validity and appeal. Anyone suggesting that Kenya or any other country in Africa could teach the world some journalistic manners has been declared anathema (Kasoma, 1992; 1993; 1994b; 1995).

## 2. KENYAN SOCIETY AND THE JOURNALISM PROFESSION

This paper submits that Kenyan society, borrowing from its humane approach to life, could inspire its unruly journalists to bring some sanity into Kenyan journalism and with it redeem the crumbling Kenyan press. Perhaps Kenyan journalists could bring in some fresh air into their journalism by making it a more society-centered rather than a money and power-centered profession which always wants to have the last word on issues and hardly admits any wrongdoing. The answer that should be given in the Kenyan ethical context to the question posed by Christians et al.: 'To whom is moral duty owed?' should it be 'society' followed by 'professional colleagues' first and foremost. The 'self, 'clients/subscribers/supporters' and 'one's organization or firm' should be played down very considerably if we are to arrive at a new Kenyan ethical approach that this paper proposes (Christians Clifford *et al.*, 1987). Ironically, while some Kenyan journalists have been busy advocating that journalism should be practiced according to how it is done in the West, their mentors in the West have themselves increasingly become unhappy with the role the media have been playing in their society, leave alone the world. For one, they have been unhappy about the media playing the role of activists in world society. This is what comes out clearly from thought-provoking sentiments like the following from Merrill, a media analyst from the West: 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 (Merril, 1995). Not only are the media in the West and Kenya seen as creating divisions in society, they are also increasingly being seen as propagating their own individual agendas as opposed to societal ones. They are more concerned with advertisers, proprietors, politicians and other stories that benefit them more. The situation has become so bad that, Dennis McQuail, a prominent media scholar from the North, has even asserted that there is misunderstanding over whether the activities of the media belong to the public or private sphere. He points out: (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). Journalism of the West, which Kenyan and African journalists have been mimicking, can, therefore, today be said to be characterized by an individualized 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 or political capital. A communal or societal approach to journalism is obviously lacking as the world's journalists and media houses, particularly those in Kenya, try to outdo each other in sensationalism in the name of competition and freedom of the press.

Furthermore, 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).

According to Kasoma (1995) 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 article is seeking a solution to the present state in which Kenya's, and world's, media are simply uncaring activists concerned with maximizing their profits and publicizing their political agendas. This could be illustrated by many radio stations and newspaper organization in Kenya which are owned by prominent politicians, political parties and businessmen. Such media entities popularize the agendas of the owners and not the public they report to. The paper proposes a collective approach to journalism ethics in Kenya. The justification for supporting society-centred journalism in Kenya is being sought in the fundamentals of Kenyan ethics. After all, journalism should be based on the sociopolitical and ethical doctrines of the society it serves (McQuail, 1992; Merrill, 1996). It would interest those who advocate that journalism in Kenya should be practised according to how it is done in the North to know that media experts in the North expect Kenyans, 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 notes: 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 socially responsible in a microscopic sense (Merrill, 1996).

Traber (1989), a person who has spent the greater part of his life working as a journalist in Africa which Kenya is part or 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 regretted the lack of Africaness in African journalism. Discussing African communication problems with particular reference to communication and culture, Traber further 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). In line with Traber's argument Kenyan media have content which is best suited for the West. 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 appalling. Now consider the half-truths, misinformation, disinformation and lies contained in our Kenyan press. That is not only wrong in itself, but in Kenya and Africa at large is culturally alienating (Traber, 1989). This article has been written against the background of a press in Kenya of the 1990s recently unshackled from the bondage of one-party and dictatorial regimes of the 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s, 1990s and the 2000s; 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 chained 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, what pleases the owners and damn the consequences to society generally and, the individuals who constitute it.

Kenyan newspapers, have spared no one in their muckraking journalistic exploits libeling, 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' as Kasoma (1995) posits, 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. It is not by coincidence that in the wake of the multi-party politics of the 1990s and beyond, Kenyan courts have been overwhelmed with legal suits from individuals and groups who have repeatedly accused the press, often with good reason, of treating them unfairly. Astonished 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 responsibly. Citizens have watched with mixed feelings: some in utter disbelief as the 'liberated' press makes all kinds of allegations against their leaders; others have addressed the muckraking journalists as heroes whose shocking 'revelations' and attacks on those in power, they hope would bring some sanity into Kenyan politics.

The international community, particularly the donor countries whose support largely propelled multi-party democracy in Kenya, have urged on and supported what Kasoma (1995) terms as scandalmongering 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 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; 1994): 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. This is again contrary to responsible journalism.

The biggest ethical problem of journalism in the Kenya of the 2010s multiparty 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 efforts to establish the truth. 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 Kenyan dirty politicians and most of them really are, deserve fair-play from the media and should not be accused, tried and sentenced by the media of wrongs they have not committed. Many Kenyan journalists behave in this way because they have a selfish and self-centered approach to journalism rather than a societal one. They have discarded the mutual counseling and correction of Kenyan communal living. It is proposed in this paper that the individualistic approach by Kenyan journalists in the practice of their profession could change to a more accommodating, societal one if they based their professional behaviour on Kenyan ethical foundations. The paper

starts by discussing the foundations of Kenyan ethics rooted in Kenyan communal approach to life. It establishes the basis of Kenyan ethics by answering the question: what constitutes ethically good and bad behavior in Kenyan society? In other words, the paper tries to establish how Kenyans distinguish good from bad behaviour, a good person from a bad one. The paper delves into the question of how Kenyans and Africans at large ensure ethical behaviour in their societies. A link is then made between Kenyan ethics and the practice of journalism by Kenyans based on the premise that journalists serve, first and foremost, their own society and secondly, the world at large. Finally, the paper posits that Kenyan ethical foundations would, if taken seriously into account in the practice of journalism in Kenya, donate to world journalism, contaminated by questionable objectives and practices, a new lease of life that would make journalists deserve the tag 'respectable professionals' rather than the present belittling one of 'professional liars or propagandists'.

### 3. FOUNDATIONS OF KENYAN ETHICS

The word 'ethics' refers to both a discipline and the subject matter of that discipline, the actual values and the rules of conduct by which we live (Solomon, 2005). Talk of ethics and everyone will think of a blameless and flawless individual. Yet every human being has a system of ethics. For most people, it is not systematic therefore, they have to employ various ethical guidelines depending on the situation to help them make decisions. However, there are people who actually prescribe to systems of ethical analysis. Three major areas of prescribed systems of ethical analyses are metaethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. Metaethics explores where our ethical principles came from and what they mean. Metaethics focus on the origins of ethics. It tries to establish whether morality is humanly constructed or is something that exists apart from humans or both (Stanford, 2005). The key point of focus is what guides our decisions about what is right and wrong. The word 'ethics' comes from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning 'character' or 'custom' and the derivative phrase *ta ethika*, was used by the philosophers Plato and Aristotle to describe their own studies of Greek values and ideals (Solomon, 2005). Ethics is first of all a concern for individual character, including what we call 'being a good person'. It is also a concern for the overall character of an entire society. Ethics is participation in and an understanding of an ethos- the effort to understand the social rules which govern and limit our behaviour especially those fundamental rules, such as prohibitions and requirements to respect the rights of others, which we call morality. According to Solomon (2005), ethics is that part of philosophy which is concerned with living well, being a good person, doing the right thing, getting along with other people and wanting the right things in life. Ethics is essential to living in society with its various traditions, practices and institutions. Those traditions, practices and institutions determine many of the rules and expectations that define the ethical outlook of the people living within them. Solomon further argues that ethics has both a social and a personal dimension, but it is not at all easy, in theory or in practice, to separate these dimensions. The prescriptive model for ethical leadership given in this paper builds on this understanding. The study of ethics teaches us to appreciate the overall system of reasons within which having ethics makes sense (Zimmerli and

Holzinger, 2007). It is not enough that we have ethics and that we act according to our values and rules. We must act for reasons and be able to defend our actions if called upon to do so. Similarly, it is not enough to have strong opinions regarding an issue or to hold a position on a certain controversial social issue. It is important to have reasons, to have a larger vision, to have a framework within which to house and defend one's opinions (Solomon, 2005). Ethical leadership in a media institution must construct its foundation on reasoning that establishes mechanisms for promoting practices that pursue the greater good for all. The concept of transformative leadership practices show that we cannot build a strong ethical society without emphasizing on a value system. This is where normative ethics finds its place. Normative ethics is the field of ethical study that seeks to determine norms or standards for right and wrong behaviour. The three major types of theories within normative ethics are virtue theories, duty theories and consequentialist theories. Virtue theories focus on demonstrating virtues (good behaviour) while avoiding vices (bad behaviour). Duty theories focus on our obligations. Consequentialist theories look at the results of our actions (Beauchamp and Bowie, 1993). The results determine the rightness of the action. Having attempted to define the term 'ethics' this paper analyzes how a Kenyan views life and human nature as follows: The world of a Kenyan consists of the living and the dead. 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. 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 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 deviations or are deliberately planted on them by evil living people or spirits.

As Fortes (1960) asserts basing on the African context 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 Kenyan 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. 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 Kenyan life is that the bad people in a community are constantly advised and counseled so that they become better members of the community. They are not simply condemned and ostracized. The counseling 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 Kenyan 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 a Kenyan 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 has 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 'bihieno' as Luhyas of Kenya describe them, The Tesos call them 'Ipara'. 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' (Kasoma, 1995).

The people looking at the bad actions of people possessed by evil spirits or 'bihieno' do not merely blame these people for their bad actions. On the contrary, they sympathise with them and try to help them get out of their predicament by seeking for the intercession of good spirits or the help of medicine people. Kenyans, 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. Kenyans believe that a family with bad people usually brings bad omen. So, although an individual may be blamed for the actions arising from his or her own free will, Kenyans also look at and may blame the person's behaviour partly on the family upbringing. Kenyans 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. Kenyans also recognize 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.

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 conspire with the bad people to make life difficult to 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 change them, and after the bad people degenerate into really irredeemable states such as those of being witches or wizards, does society give up and shun 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 Kenyan 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. 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 succession ceremony (Fortes, 1960).

The bad spirits are people who died as bad people and 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 seeks the intercession of the good spirits. This is done through ancestral worship which should be distinguished from cults of the dead (Fortes, 1960). Parrinder (1954) and WiUoughby (1970) distinguish two forms of ancestor worship- public or communal and private or personal.

The basis of morality in Kenyan 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 (Wilson, 1971; Mbiti, 1975). Wilson, for example writes that: African people 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). This is so in Kenya. 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 paper submits that this ordering of morality in Kenyan society should be emulated by Kenyan journalists in the practice of their profession.

#### **4. KENYAN JOURNALISM AND KENYAN ETHICS**

A number of parallels can be found between the foundations of Kenyan ethics as outlined above and how Kenyan journalism should be practised. First, Kenyan journalists can learn from the emphasis on the community and society in Kenyan ethics. Like in Kenyan ethics, they should hold that the basis of morality in journalism in Kenya 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 Kenyan and 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 should be dialogue among media people so that the practice of mass communication becomes a democratic and participatory one drawing its strength from the Kenyan African cultural heritage.

Discussing democratization of communication as a social movement process White (1995) writes: The democratization of communication is not brought about simply by passing 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 organize social relations in a participatory and dialogical fashion (p.111). The cultural basis of a participatory approach to communication in the Kenyan context takes a leaf from the Kenyan ethical exposition given above, and it is the elaborate sense of belonging together that permeates Kenyan society. Information is shared in the family, clan and tribe so that the sense of togetherness 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 democratization of mass communication should begin in the newsroom. 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, this is what is meant by the claim by journalism that reporting should be undertaken 'in the public interest'. The biggest lesson that Kenyan journalists should learn from Kenyan ethics 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 likelihood that they are unethical.

Morals in Kenyan journalism should, like in Kenyan ethics, lay great stress on social conduct of journalists as a collective and not on what an individual journalist or media house does. Consequently, blundering journalists or media houses should, in the true Kenyan spirit, be counseled by the other journalists to behave well and not be immediately condemned as misfits in the 'family' of Kenyan journalism. Such counseling calls for true professional solidarity among Kenyan 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 Kenya and Africa, something that African journalists have hardly started thinking about, leave alone agreeing on, as a body of professionals. Solidarity in Kenyan journalism, however, would not be achieved if Kenyan journalists remain as divided as they have always been. It is an undisputable fact that professional journalists' unions or associations in Kenya have always been weak. Their membership has been pathetically low due to disinterest or divisions within the journalistic corps. The divisions among Kenyan 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, Kenyan journalists are unable to speak with one voice and therefore incapable of checking each other's mistakes. Consequently blundering journalists and media houses are left, and sometimes even encouraged, by the 'family' of journalists to continue with their mistakes. Unless Kenyan 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 Kenyan journalists is not possible unless there are common ethical approaches to the practice of the profession. Kenyan ethics can provide the necessary common ground. In the true Kenyan spirit, when counseling fails to correct wayside journalists and media houses, the 'family' of journalists should be unanimous in condemning those who step out of line and ostracizing them from the profession. The silence by journalists that prevails across the country 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 Kenyan society, been given free. To a Kenyan, 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 Kenyan journalists continue giving the people raw deals in the name of professional competition, the people of Kenya are likely to make Kenyan journalism irrelevant to their lives and would seek news and information elsewhere. As a matter of fact, this is already happening to some extent. An increasing number of Kenyan media consumers are more and more turning to alien 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 writer knows a number of newspapers in Kenya 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 Kenyan society looking to ancestors for spiritual and practical guidance in difficult moments, Kenyan 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. Kenya 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 Kenyan journalist choose to dishonour these great men and women by ignoring them in preference for inspiration from the North? Kenyan journalists should learn to revere and glorify their own predecessors instead of leaving the North to do it for them. It is not Northerners but Kenyans, that these journalists served and it should be Kenyans first and foremost to accord them the honour and dignity they deserve for being outstanding journalists. Am not saying that bestowing international awards on Kenya 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 Kenyan journalists whose journalistic performance is

ethically anything but illustrious. These awards are sending wrong signals among Kenyan 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 felonious character with the danger that felony 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, Kenyan 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 Kenyan phraseology 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 Kenyan ethics unless, of course, one has been banished into solitude by society. In Kenyan ethics, 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 Kenya is still in its formative stages and open to collective professional counselling. Some of the journalists and media houses in Kenya today are novices 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 practicing 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 Kenyan journalism. The tug of war that currently exists in Kenya 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 Kenyan 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 currently constitute the minority especially with the rise of the private media. The blame for the existence of government media in a democratic policy should not be put on journalists who work for these media but on the government. Journalists 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.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The underlying theme of this paper has been that the communal approach to solving ethical issues in Kenyan life should be used in solving moral problems in journalism. The individualism and divisionism that permeates the practice of journalism in Kenya today should be discarded since it is not only un-Kenyan but also professionally unhealthy. If this is done, Kenyan

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, Kenyan 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 Kenya the value of journalistic solidarity and common problem-solving. We in Kenya 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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