

Chapter 6

The Ubiquity of the Character Strengths in African Traditional Religion: A Thematic Analysis

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Introduction

Religious Traditions and the Character Strengths

The catalogue of core virtues and character strengths (Peterson and Seligman 2004), or the “Values in Action” (VIA; Peterson 2006), has become for positive psychology what DSM-IV or ICD-10 has been for psychiatry. Empirical research within positive psychology has been greatly influenced by this “catalogue of sanities”.

Virtue in positive psychology (PP) is understood as “any psychological process that enables a person to think and act so as to benefit him- or herself and the society” (McCullough and Snyder 2000: 1). In other words, virtue contributes to subjective, psychological and social well-being. Peterson and Seligman (2004: 13) further suggest that virtues “are universal, perhaps grounded in biology through an evolutionary process that selected for these aspects of excellence as means of solving the important tasks necessary for survival of the species”. Virtues are expressed in character strengths. “Character strengths (CS) are the psychological ingredients – processes or mechanisms – that define the virtues. Said another way, they are distinguishable routes to displaying one or another of the virtues” (p. 14). They are different from talents and abilities but composed of a family of positive traits which lead to human flourishing.

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One of the criteria applied in the original selection of the candidate strengths to the catalogue of the VIA was their ubiquity across cultures and religious traditions (Park and Peterson 2007: 296; Peterson and Seligman 2004: 14–27; Peterson 2006: 29–48). More precisely, this was achieved by examining the philosophical and religious traditions of China (Confucianism and Taoism), South Asia (Buddhism and Hinduism) and the West and Ancient near East (Ancient Greek philosophy, Judaism, Christianity and Islam), looking for the insights each provide for the pleasant, good and engaged life (Dahlsgaard et al. 2005; Peterson and Seligman 2004: 33–52; Snyder and Lopez 2007: 23–50).

Earlier, Haidt (2003: 275) had invited scholars within positive psychology to look “to other cultures and other historical eras for ideas and perspectives on virtue and the good life”. He supposed that world religions hold a great promise of a “highly developed and articulated visions of virtues, practices and feelings, some of which may even be useful in a modern secular society”. In a similar vein, Maltby and Hill (2008) see religion as a fertile ground for positive psychologists to study systematically the “common denominators” of virtues and character strengths. There have been other similar efforts in facilitating a dialogue between positive psychology and various religious traditions, either in support, or in critique, of positive psychology and its constructs (Chu and Diener 2009; Delle Fave and Bassi 2009a; Sundararajan 2005; Joseph et al. 2006; Watts et al. 2006; Vitz 2005; Zagano and Gillespie 2006).

In all these discussions, reference to African traditional religion (ATR) is minimal. Even in research works carried out in South Africa (see Coetzee and Viviers 2007; Eloff 2008) ATR gets no mention. Worthy of mention here, though, is the work by Biswas-Diener (2006) that evaluates the existence, importance and desirability of character strengths across cultures. This study included a sample ($n=123$) of the Kenyan Maasai. Yet another web-based study on character strengths (Nansook et al. 2006) drew data from 54 nations, including four African countries. The aim of the present qualitative study was to supplement this ongoing discussion on the ubiquity of character strengths across cultures and religious traditions with input from cultural and religious traditions of Africa.

African Traditional Religion

Politically, the adjective “African” is often used to refer to the whole continent of Africa as it is understood within the African Union (as also some historians do: see Mazrui 1986: 26–29). On account of its diversities, this geographical identity is hardly appropriate while speaking about African cultures and religions. Given the prevalence of the Mediterranean world view in countries that lie to the north of the Sahara, cultural anthropologists prefer to speak of the sub-Saharan Africa as a cultural locus (see Shillington 2005). Despite their own linguistic, political and

historical variations, certain commonalities of culture and world view are identifiable, particularly within the beliefs and practices of the traditional religions (Beugré and Offodile 2001; Selvam 2008).

Scholars have often referred to traditional religions as “primitive” (Tylor 1871/1958; see also P’Bitek 1970). This term generally carried a pejorative meaning. However, looked at positively, the term “primitive” could imply that these religions and practices preserve the early stages of human religious consciousness and its expressions. According to this understanding, the study of “indigenous religions” (Cox 2007) offers us a possibility of encountering the human psyche in its primeval form (Lowie 1924). Thus, the study of African religions could open a window to the world view and the psyche of not only the African peoples but of humanity itself.

Some anthropologists like Mbiti (1969) prefer to speak of “religions” in the plural, because there are about 1,000 ethnic groups in Africa and each has its own cultural peculiarities while sharing certain commonality in the religious system. Therefore, African traditional religion does not refer to a monolithic institution. On the other hand, on account of the commonalities present, other scholars refer to African religion in the singular (Magesa 1998) or to African traditional religion (Idowu 1973; Shorter 1975). While recognising the issue of religious diversity, it can be argued that the commonalities outweigh the differences, and in this article, the singular form is maintained on the grounds of commonalities suggested by Magesa (1998).

ATR can be described as a collection of beliefs, codes and cults that encapsulate the primeval experiences and expressions of the African peoples in their search for the sacred. Here, belief is understood as a set of possible explanations for the mysteries of the origin and nature of the world and of humans and how humans may interact with the empirical world of objects, people and the non-empirical world of spirit(s). Beliefs in ATR are not seen in dogmas and doctrines. They are to be recognised in oral traditions that include myths, riddles, aphorisms and the cult itself. Code is the set of taboos and casuistry that ensure the preservation and the continuity of human life and its relation to the sacred (see Magesa 1998; Nkemnkia 1999). Cult contains the various expressions of the relationship between the living and the sacred that includes the living dead (the ancestors) and the yet unborn. From the psychological perspective, cult also plays an important role in accompanying individuals in negotiating the various stages of lifespan development.

For all the variety that is undeniable in the religious expressions found in sub-Saharan Africa, one commonality that is crucial, even to this essay, is that in ATR there is no separation of the sacred from the profane (Durkheim 1915; Evans-Pritchard 1965), and because of this, scholars have often spoken about African philosophy and culture in conjunction with African religion (Magesa 1998; Mbiti 1969; Taylor 1963). This justifies the use of anthropological data for the present study, which focuses on the ubiquity of character strengths in African traditional religion.

Research Questions

The objective of this study was to explore the presence and nature of the core virtues and character strengths of positive psychology in ATR. This qualitative study began with two generic research questions:

- (a) Can the core virtues of PP be consistently discerned within a sample of textual anthropological data on ATR?
- (b) How can the six core virtues of positive psychology be understood within the discourse of ATR while rendering ATR in the contemporary lexical and thematic discourse of PP?

Method

Data Set

The data used for this qualitative analysis was a set of raw data in textual form previously collected and published by the Maryknoll Institute of African Studies (MIAS) in Nairobi, Kenya (Kirwen 2008). MIAS offers graduate degrees in anthropology and African studies. Based on field research carried out for over 17 years, the institute has identified 35 domains in cultural studies. These domains are further delineated into four cycles, namely, (1) individual life cycle, (2) family and interpersonal relationships cycle, (3) community and communal activities cycle and (4) religious rituals cycle (Kirwen 2008). The present study used the data available under the first cycle, which comprised ten domains (Table 6.1).

The present data were collected in English from graduate students ($N=75$) during the MIAS academic programmes, between January and August 2003. The students were asked to reflect on some open questions (Table 6.1) and briefly write out the meanings of cultural domains within their personal lives and that of the cultures from which they come. The questions were answered also by non-African students; their responses were not considered for analysis in the present study. The African respondents represented at least 20 ethnic groups hailing from 10 countries. As regards language, all except the participants from Rwanda and Burundi would have had their education in English starting from the secondary school level or earlier; and most of them would be at least bilingual.

Method of Analysis

The method of analysis used in this study was “thematic analysis”. Put simply, “Thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns

Table 6.1 Description of the data set

No.	Domains	Questions	N	E
1	Pregnancy and birthing rites	Describe the circumstances of your own conception and birth. What was said, the care given to your mother, and the expectations of the community? How is pregnancy related to the theme of creator God?	72	13
2	Naming rites	Describe the rituals by which you received your name. Who were you named after? What was said and done in the process of naming you? Was your name changed at any time after birth? Describe the person after whom you were named and indicate in what matter you are similar to him/her in terms of your personality, attitudes, looks and vocation. How is the naming process related to the theme of creator God?	75	15
3	Attitudes to sickness and ill health	What do you think and feel when you are not well? What do you feel is the cause of the problem? What does your community feel is the cause? What remedy(s) do you usually apply? What if the problem continues? Are the services of a diviner ever contemplated?	67	19
4	Formation and education	How were you formed and educated both informally and formally? Name as many as you can of the persons who were most influential in your own development. Indicate why they were important.	66	16
5	Initiation into adulthood rites	Describe how you were initiated into adulthood. How old were you, what were the rituals and rites that were performed? What was expected of you afterwards? How is the initiation process related to the theme of creator God and lineage ideology?	71	15
6	Marriage rites	Describe how you were married. How was your spouse selected, was there a person negotiating between your families, how was the bridewealth determined and paid, what were the various ceremonies and feasts that were held? (If not married, give the details of the ordinary marriage within your ethnic group.) How is marriage related to the themes of creator God and lineage ideology?	72	14
7	Mourning rites	Describe how you mourn and grieve at a funeral and the effect it has on the living. What is the meaning of mourning?	69	18
8	Inheritance ceremonies	How is the property, status and wife(s) [if patrilineal] of the deceased man inherited? When is this done? Is there a second funeral ceremony? What is the effect of inheritance ritual on an individual?	64	20
9	Elderhood rites	Describe the rites by which a person becomes a respected elder in your ethnic group. How is one selected, what is said and done? What are the instruments used, how is the feast organised, who is invited, what is expected of the elder afterwards? How is this domain related to the themes of creator God, lineage ideology, and witchcraft?	70	14
10	Funeral rites	Describe dying and death of a person in your ethnic group. What is said to explain the death? What are the major rituals? Is there a difference in the rituals and the rites if it is a man, woman or child? How is the grave dug? What is said at the gravesite? Is there a memorial feast at some later date? How is dying and death related to the themes of creator God, lineage ideology and witchcraft?	72	15

N number of participants, *E* number of ethnic groups represented in the sample

Table 6.2 The classification of values in action

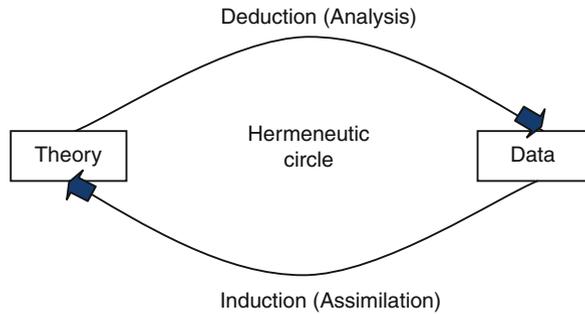
	Core virtues	Character strengths
1	Wisdom and knowledge	Creativity (originality, ingenuity), curiosity (interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience), open-mindedness (judgement, critical thinking), love of learning, perspective (wisdom)
2	Courage	Bravery (valour), persistence (perseverance, industriousness), integrity (authenticity, honesty), vitality (zest, enthusiasm, vigour, energy)
3	Humanity	Love, kindness (generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, “niceness”), social intelligence (emotional intelligence, personal intelligence)
4	Justice	Citizenship (social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork), fairness, leadership
5	Temperance	Forgiveness and mercy, humility (modesty), prudence, self-regulation (self-control)
6	Transcendence	Appreciation of beauty and excellence (awe, wonder, elevation), gratitude, hope (optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation), humour (playfulness), spirituality (religiousness, faith, purpose)

(themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke 2006: 79). Often, this approach goes beyond identifying and analysing to interpreting various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis 1998). Thematic analysis is closely related to content analysis. Some scholars see thematic analysis as a technique of content analysis (Trochim and Donnelly 2006). While content analysis tends to be more systematic and mechanical (Eto and Kyngäs 2008; Hsieh and Shannon 2005), thematic analysis is more flexible and offers a possibility for theoretical openness and interpretation (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The present project took a hybrid approach of induction and deduction to thematic analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). This approach is underpinned by the concept of “hermeneutic circle” that Gadamer (1979) borrowed from Heidegger. No interpreter (or researcher) comes to the text (data) with a mindset of “*tabla rasa*”. The interpreter’s pre-understandings become not just the starting point for interpretation but a condition for understanding. Therefore, while many theorists of qualitative research methods invite researchers to own up their “prejudices” in a reflexive process (Koppala and Suzuki 1999) in order to set them aside, in this project, the researchers embraced an explicit theoretical framework (positive psychology). However, after the data were interpreted, the possibility for the transformation or adjustment of the theoretical framework was also considered. This was in the spirit of what Gadamer (1979: 273) called “the fusion of horizons” but may be more correctly described as a “meeting of horizons”.

In the present study, the theoretical framework of positive psychology acted as the coding template (Crabtree and Miller 1999). More precisely, the list of 6 core virtues and 24 character strengths (Peterson and Seligman 2004) together with their lexical equivalents (Table 6.2) were used. On the basis of this template, themes were initially identified within the data. The emerging patterns were then further used to

Fig. 6.1 Meeting of horizons in data analysis



elaborate the codes. Having gone through this process, proposals were also made on possible contributions of African traditional religion to positive psychology. Thus, two distinct processes were at work (Fig. 6.1):

1. A deductive process of analysis: The data were analysed and interpreted using the template; this process was theory-driven.
2. An inductive process of assimilation: The possibility for the data to contribute to the reformulation of some aspects of the template was discussed; and this process was data-driven.

Procedure of Analysis

The deductive-inductive hybrid process as carried out in this study could be laid out in four stages as represented in Table 6.3. The table also explains briefly how the four steps were used in the present project. The present essay reports the outcome of these steps.

The analysis of the data itself consisted in applying the template of codes to the data set and picking up patterns in the data set. And this was carried out in the following steps:

The data set was initially read, domain after domain, with the coding template in mind. The purpose of this stage of reading was to get a general grasp of the tone of the data and to see if they have any correspondence to the coding template at all.

In the second round of reading, lexical expressions, descriptions of cultural institutions and conceptual equivalents in the data that had resemblance to the description of the character strengths were marked and assigned a code (see Table 6.4). For instance, here is a quote from the data set (Kirwen 2008: 193) reporting what an informant belonging to the Akamba ethnic group in Kenya had to say under the domain of elderhood rites (the italics shows phrases that were assigned codes by the researcher and verified by the secondary author):

One becomes an elder after considering certain qualities. Mainly age, marital status, *discipline (CS8)*, *wisdom (CS5)*, wealth/success and experience which goes with the age. The community and also the existing elders choose an elder (*CS15*). Before one becomes

Table 6.3 Tabular representation of the stages undertaken in the project

	Steps in thematic analysis ^a	Application of the steps in the research
Step 1	Identification of coding template	Description of character strengths within the theoretical framework of positive psychology
Step 2	Identification of the data set	Description of the anthropological data from the Maryknoll Institute, Nairobi
Step 3	Analysis of the data: identifying themes by applying the coding template to the data set	Identification of conceptual, lexical equivalents and patterns indicating the presence of character strengths in the data set, paying special attention to cultural institutions that sustain them
Step 4	Examining the identified themes: discussing their significance within context of the coding template	Further exploration of the conceptual and lexical equivalents by the use of other theoretical sources on ATR, in an attempt to understand them, and considering their possible contribution to the theoretical framework of positive psychology

^aAdapted from Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), who in turn adapt their steps from Boyatzis (1998) and Crabtree and Miller (1999)

an elder, he passes through certain rites of passage and rituals. At a certain point a ceremony is organized to welcome him to the council of elders. Afterwards he is given the *responsibility of being in charge of the community (CS13)*. Elderhood enhances the life process and directs the community *to the creator God (CS24)*, lineage and protects the lineage from witchcraft.

In this process of coding, particular attention was paid to cultural institutions, since it is one of the criteria used by positive psychology for the inclusion of any character strength in the “Manual of Sanities”. The presence of cultural institutions shows that a given society places importance in the cultivation of that strength (Peterson and Seligman 2004; see also Biswas-Diener 2006).

At the third stage, a report was created for each of the CS picking up the marked phrases and sentences across the domains of the anthropological textual data. This formed the results section of the final report, which, in this essay, is significantly summarised. It was possible that one domain yielded data for more than one CS, and there were occasions when more than one domain yielded data for the same CS (see Table 6.4). The report was not just a listing of phrases but was in the form of meaningful sentences often integrating verbatim quotes. This implied certain degree of interpretation. However, care was taken to elucidate the expression of one participant with the help of the expressions from other participants within the same domain.

Results

For the sake of brevity, in this section, results are summarised in Table 6.4. Some typical statements are included below in the Discussion section to substantiate particular claims.

Table 6.4 Convergence of character strengths and African cultural religious domains

	D1. pregnancy and birthing rites	D2. naming rites	D3. attitudes to sickness and ill health	D4. formation and education	D5. initiation into adulthood rites	D6. marriage rites	D7. mourning rites	D8. inheritance ceremonies	D9. elderhood rites	D10. funeral rites
<i>I. Wisdom and knowledge</i>										
1 Creativity										
2 Curiosity										
3 Open-mindedness										
4 Love of learning				✓						
5 Perspective				✓	✓					
<i>II. Courage</i>										
6 Bravery					✓				✓	
7 Persistence									✓	
8 Integrity									✓	
9 Vitality										✓
<i>III. Humanity</i>										
10 Love						✓				
11 Kindness							✓			
12 Social intelligence									✓	
<i>IV. Justice</i>										
13 Citizenship				✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
14 Fairness			✓					✓	✓	
15 Leadership										
<i>V. Temperance</i>										
16 Forgiveness and mercy										
17 Humility/modesty										
18 Prudence										
19 Self-regulation					✓				✓	
<i>VI. Transcendence</i>										
20 Appreciation of beauty	✓									
21 Gratitude	✓									
22 Hope										
23 Humour							✓			✓
24 Spirituality	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓

Note: ‘✓’ indicates that at least one participant used expressions that were similar to the description of the character strength in positive psychology

Eighteen out of the 24 character strengths were rated as showing some correspondence to the ten domains of the data set (Table 6.1). Out of these, eight CS showed correspondence to at least one of the domains, and others showed correspondence to more than one domain.

In general, two salient points emerged from the thematic analysis: (a) From the coding template, statements rated as corresponding to two character strengths

(citizenship and spirituality) showed greater prevalence in the data set; (b) From among the anthropological domains, elderhood rites (D9) showed the greatest match to the character strengths.

Discussion

The absence of some of the character strengths in the present data set may not indicate their lack in the ATR. It is important to be aware that the data were not collected for the purpose of the study of the presence of character strengths. In addition, the data set used for the present study considered only the ten domains of the individual life cycle (Kirwen 2008). The Maryknoll Institute of African Studies (MIAS) has collected data for 25 domains drawn from a further three cycles, namely, family and interpersonal relationships cycle, community and communal activities cycle and religious rituals cycle.

It is possible that the greater prevalence of spirituality (CS24) in the data set has been a result of a bias in the questions presented to the participants. Out of the ten questions (see Table 6.1), six had a precise mention of “the creator God”. Nonetheless, since the data used for the present analysis were collected for a very generic purpose, the consistent prevalence of spirituality in the data set could also reflect the world view of the general population. Does the high prevalence of citizenship say something significant about the world view of ATR? Citizenship includes social responsibility and loyalty and represents general commitment to common good. Is this CS really strong in the African religion and culture? And what is the significance of elderhood in relation to the CS of positive psychology? In what follows, we answer these questions and others, generating a dialogue between the present data set and other scholarly works in an attempt to validate our interpretation.

It Takes a Village: The Context and Purpose of Wisdom and Knowledge

The character strengths of wisdom and knowledge cannot be understood in the African context apart from the community. It is in the framework of the community that an individual acquires wisdom and knowledge. No wonder Hillary Clinton chose a phrase from a West African proverb for the title of her book on welfare of children and family: “It takes a village to educate a child” (Clinton 1996). As it has emerged from the data set, the process of acquiring knowledge is informal and done in the context of the family, though there are also formal moments like the preparation for initiation (Moshia 2000). The purpose of knowledge is for the well-being of the community within which individuals find their own well-being. One Tigrinya-speaking

participant (from Eritrea) offers a succinct summary of this core virtue under the domain of “formation and education” (Kirwen 2008: 76): “Although the contribution of the larger community cannot be ignored, my parents played a critical role both in my informal and formal education. At an early age they taught me to fear God. They instilled in me the values of honesty and truthfulness, respect for elders, and love for learning and seeking wisdom”.

One of the points of divergence between the empirical findings in positive psychology and the anthropological data about ATR is the correlation between age and wisdom. In some adult samples, relationship between chronological age and wisdom-related knowledge was non-significant (Pasupathi et al. 2001). Many respondents in the present study consistently related wisdom to mature age and elderhood. For instance, a Luo informant from Kenya states, “In my tribe, one becomes a respected elder because of his sense of responsibility, his age and wisdom” (Kirwen 2008: 192). However, no mention of chronological age was made. On the other hand, in his attempt to develop an “African sagacity”, some of the “sages” that the African scholar Oruka interviewed were in their forties (Oruka 1990). Moreover, according to Magesa (1998), any initiated person is potentially an elder. Therefore, we can conceptually assume that also in the African world view, wisdom is related to maturity and elderhood and not necessarily to chronological age.

Abundant Life: African “Vitalogy” as the Basis for Courage and Integrity

The character strengths that are grouped under the core virtue of courage feature strongly in the ATR. The initiation ritual is accompanied by an element of physical pain: whether it is the most common ritual of circumcision or the extraction of teeth (among the Luos and other Nilotic peoples) or tattooing (among the Teso) or making incisions on the head (among the Nuba). The young initiates are expected to be “bold” (Kirwen 2008: 103), to pass through this immediate pain, so that they would be able to enjoy the privileges of being an adult in their community. The descriptions of the elderhood rites in ATR allude to the understanding that the elder is an exemplar of bravery. While physical valour would be the pride of younger warriors, bravery of the elder would be seen in his ability “to settle disputes or represent the clan in matters that required negotiation among [other] elders” (Kirwen 2008: 193). In the ATR, formation and education consists not only in learning knowledge and skills but also in acquiring values, especially of “honesty and truthfulness” (Kirwen 2008: 76). In the selection of elders, besides wisdom, as reported above, integrity is another important criterion. There is a consistent voice among the respondents about “the moral uprightness” of the elder: “The elder was expected to live an exemplary life – no arguments or quarrelling, not greedy, not corrupt, above lies and having an enhanced ability of keeping his wife and children under control” (Agikuyu informant from Kenya, in Kirwen 2008: 195).

The character strength of vitality deserves a special mention. In positive psychology, vitality consists in "...living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated" (Peterson 2006: 32). In the present data, it is the African attitude towards death, expressed in the funeral rites, which brings out their attitude towards life. While "the death of elder is celebrated as the culmination of a life fully lived" (Kirwen 2008: 224), and that of a warrior is marked by "dancing and eating to send [him] off", suicide is "handled very seriously with plenty of cleansing and destruction of the deceased's home" (Kirwen 2008: 228). Placide Tempels (1959) in his groundbreaking work, *La Philosophie Bantoue*, had introduced the concept of "the vital force" (see also Taylor 1963: 51). While Magesa (1998) develops an African norm of morality based on the principle of "abundant life", Nkemnkia (1999) proposes "vitalogy" as the central concept in African philosophy. In this light, the inclusion by positive psychology of vitality as a character strength under the core virtue of courage seems not appropriate. Perhaps "vitality" could be a generic construct, which in turn could be the basis for courage and integrity.

There Is One More Place: African Expressions of Humanity

Taylor (1963: 188) concludes his book, with a succinct assertion about "the primal vision" of the African world view: "Africans believe that presence is the debt they owe to one another". "Presence" could be suggested as a one-word summary for the character strengths listed in VIA under the virtue of "humanity": love, kindness and social intelligence. In the African traditional religions, mourning rituals powerfully express kindness and compassion as understood by positive psychology. It is in this domain that a large manifestation of agreement was noticed among the participants. These expressions of kindness and compassion range from being "nice" to the dead to showing solidarity by being "present" with the living. These twin aspects are affirmed by many respondents: "Talking nicely about the departed is a way of mourning" (Kirwen 2008: 151), and "mourning is a sign of great loss and companionship to the bereaved family" (p. 152). It is important to note that during the period of mourning, the neighbours and relatives physically spend most of the time together with the bereaved, as a Dinka (Sudan) respondent voices: "[mourning] involves wailing and living at the home of the deceased for four days" (p. 153).

African society is generally inclusive and welcoming. Whether it is in the bus, or at the table, there is always one more place for anyone. In African sagacity, happiness itself is defined as being open to all people (Oruka 1990: 112). A concrete expression of this openness and presence is hospitality (Healey 1981). Strangely, hospitality has not received much attention within positive psychology. This could be another meaningful contrition from ATR to character strengths.

The African sense of inclusiveness is also seen in the way people express their opinion. This can be considered the core of African social intelligence. During meetings, points are not debated as in a Western parliament, but everyone adds data to the common search for truth and meaning (Donders 1985). This theme

of “consensus-seeking” could be a valuable contribution from ATR to the character strength of social intelligence in PP. The African elder then is expected to be endowed with a great degree of social intelligence. He plays a vital role in consensus building. The elder “is selected on the merit of being straightforward” (a Tutsi respondent, Kirwen 2008: 196); similarly, he is also expected to be “mature, respectable, obedient, kind and loving” (An Agikuyu participant, Kirwen 2008: 197).

I Am Because We Are: African Citizenship, Leadership and Justice

As it has been stated previously, the African identity and virtue – being and functioning – emanate from the context of the community. Mbiti (1969: 108–109) affirms, “Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: ‘I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am’. This is a cardinal point in understanding the African view of man”. This view is rephrased by a Nigerian scholar, “I am because I belong” (Metuh 1985: 99), or as Taylor (1963: 85) put it, “I am because I participate”. In this sense, the character strengths that are grouped by PP under the core virtue of justice, together with those under the virtue of humanity (love, kindness and social intelligence), form the core of the African world view. In the data analysis, in addition to bravery, initiation rites were seen to be related also to the character strength of responsibility or citizenship: “I was initiated to adulthood through circumcision at fourteen years. I was secluded for one month for training to be responsible...” (an Agikuyu participant, Kirwen 2008: 103).

This is also supported by Mbiti’s claim (1969: 121) that through the initiation rites, “they enter into a state of responsibility: they inherit new rights, and new obligations are expected of them by society”. On the other hand, leadership is attributed to the role of the elders. The observation of Magesa (1998: 71) regarding African leadership is relevant to explain this character strength: Leadership is concerned with enhancing life; it is communal – always bringing people together; it is caring for the whole of life – spiritual and secular.

Also, African marriage is communal (Kirwen 2008: 126, 133). In the parlance of our coding template, we can say that marriage represents a general commitment to the common good: “Marriage is seen as a way of bringing a man and woman together to give the community children who will carry on the name of the family” (a Teso participant from Kenya, Kirwen 2008: 126). The theme of moral reasoning as an aspect of fairness emerges very explicitly in the African attitude to sickness and ill health. Several responses in the data set show that someone who is ill would perceive a moral implication in their condition, particularly examining their own moral role in the sickness, even if infection of some kind could be the immediate cause: “I have neglected my social responsibilities” (p. 57); or “sickness is a curse which one receives after disowning certain rules and rites of the society”

(p. 58); “I wonder whether I have wronged someone” (p. 59); “it is due to some mistake that I did or as a result of sin” (p. 60). “The community will want to find out what mistake I have done and there are also feelings that someone is behind my sickness” (a Dinka from the Sudan, p. 65). Against this background, “the remedy is to take medicine, that is Western or herbal. If the problem persists, I may seek the services of the diviner” (an Akamba participant from Kenya, p. 62). The role of the diviner is sought, not only to find the real cause of the sickness but also to mediate reconciliation between conflicting parties in such a way that the social order that was disrupted by the transgression may now be restored.

Maintaining Communion: Regulation and Reconciliation

Self-regulation as a character strength of temperance, according to positive psychology, is also referred to as self-control or self-discipline. Self-regulation is marked by a readiness for delayed gratification. In ATR, the preparation towards the initiation ceremony could be seen as a cultural institution to instil the need for self-discipline. The young initiates are expected to endure immediate pain, so that they would be able to enjoy the privileges of being an adult in their community. Discipline is also considered as one of the salient virtues of an elder. An Akamba respondent from Kenya affirms, “A person becomes an elder first by virtue of his age and discipline” (Kirwen 2008: 191, see also p. 193).

Though the data set used for the present analysis, perhaps prejudiced by the anthropological domains and their related questions, did not show any direct allusion to the theme of forgiveness, many other anthropological discussions on ATR do make reference to this theme. Reconciliation is seen as behavioural and attitudinal changes that are “intended to re-establish harmony and equilibrium of life” (Magesa 1998: 208). This process, even if often it could be only between individuals, is facilitated by the community through rituals and external signs. For instance, what is achieved in gesture and word through the performance of a ritual called *kutasa* among the Taita people of Kenya has to be matched by the person’s inner state of freedom from anger (Harris 1978: 28). Similar rituals are reported among the Nyakusa of Tanzania (Wilson 1971). Among the Chagga people of Tanzania, the exchange of the leaves of Isale – dracaena trees – as a sign of reconciliation is also well known (Healey and Sybertz 1996: 316–317). Other character strengths listed under the virtue of temperance need further exploration.

Being Notoriously Religious: A Spirituality of Life

“Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices....African peoples do not know how to exist without religion” (Mbiti 1969: 1–2). In the opinion of a non-African scholar,

Parrinder (1954/1974: 9), “What are the forces behind these surging peoples of Africa? One of the greatest forces has ever been the power of religion. ‘This incurably religious people’ was a phrase often on the lips of many old [colonial] administrators”. A similar finding emerged also in this study. From birth rites to funeral rites, almost all character strengths were seen to be related to the spiritual realm. For instance, the respondents are almost unanimous in their claim that the African societies see pregnancy and birth as “a blessing from God”. An Akamba participant affirms, “Pregnancy is the start of life and it is sacred and the process is God given” (Kirwen 2008: 14). In naming rites, there are expressions of the individuals’ link with reality beyond themselves – in this case, the link to the generation’s past. One Aembu respondent offers a typical summary: “There is a comprehensive scheme of naming children after maternal and paternal relatives – dead or alive. Names give social identity to a child. Naming is a rite of incorporation in which the sacred is pivotal” (p. 37). Formation and education is associated with fear of God. One respondent recalls that his or her parents played a critical role in their “informal and formal education. At an early age they taught me to fear God...” (p. 76). Many of the initiation ceremonies described by participants relate to shedding of blood of the initiate. “The shedding of the blood [was] to unite me to the lineage” (p. 101). This, together with animal sacrifice, can be considered as cultural institutions that express transcendence. Again, in the understanding of marriage in Africa, and the rituals that accompany it, there is an underlying conviction that there is a transcendental dimension of marriage, and that marriage is an event that fits into the larger scheme of life. “God is seen as the one who arranges marriage” (p. 123), and “marriage is a gift (or a blessing) from God where life is expressed” (p. 125). The sacredness (p. 134) of marriage is particularly expressed in the sacrifice and libation performed (p. 124), which signify that marriage is a bridge between God, the ancestors, the couple and community at large and the yet unborn (pp. 131–132). Expressions of transcendence are seen in the domain of mourning rites, not in a direct relationship with God but “mourning symbolizes companionship with the dead whose spirit is still believed to be around” (p. 150). And some “people believe that there is no death as such but [only] passing over to the spirit world” (p. 153). These expressions allude to the unswerving faith of the African peoples in a reality beyond the here and now. In the domain of elderhood rites, on the one hand, during his lifetime, the elder is considered a representative of God (p. 194); that is why the installation of the elder involves offering of sacrifice and libation (p. 195). On the other hand, after his death, he becomes an ancestor who continues to mediate between God and the people (p. 193). African spirituality is also demonstrated in the peoples’ attitude towards death. Even if there is initial mourning, there is an acceptance of the event: “God is the giver and taker of life”. This concept is repeated in almost every page of the participants’ description of funeral rites (pp. 223–235). This consolation comes from the fact that dead people, if they lived a virtuous life, are considered ancestors (p. 226). Sacrifice and libation give the possibility for the living to commune with them (p. 230).

Besides the CS of spirituality, the other character strengths of transcendence are also prevalent. Rituals found in the African mourning rites seem to allude powerfully to the African expressions of hope. Several respondents representing various

ethnic groups mention “shaving of head” or “cutting of hair” as one of the rituals accompanying mourning (Abaluyia, p. 151; Baganda, p. 152; Kipsigis, p. 152; Luo, p. 153; Tigrinya, p. 153, just to site the most salient). This ritual could be seen as a “form of self-punishing behaviour” (as noted by a Tigrinya respondent, p. 153) or as “a sign of innocence, i.e., you have nothing to do with the death” – that is, you have not caused the death (as claimed by an Abaluyia respondent, p. 151), or “as a sign of helplessness and weakness” together with smearing of ashes (as noted by a Luo respondent, p. 156). However, this ritual could also be interpreted as a sign of hope that the hair that is now cut will eventually grow again and life will go on. This is supported by scholars like Magesa (1998: 150): Hair is a symbol of life because of its continued growth. “When the hair grows back – and this is what the ritual also says – the life of family and clan, now aided by the new life force of the deceased relative, must continue and thrive”.

In the study by Biswas-Diener (2006: 300, 302), all of the Maasai participants ($N=123$) endorsed “appreciation of beauty” as an existing virtue in their society, but they also pointed out that there is no cultural institution among them related to appreciation of beauty. In the present data, appreciation of beauty featured only in the domain of pregnancy. Other aspects of transcendence, like optimism, hope and humour, which did not emerge strongly in the present study, may be found in ATR, but this needs further study. For instance, “hakuna matata”, a Swahili phrase popularised by the Disney film *Lion King*, means “there is no problem”. This is not just a jargon but an attitude in Africa. African greetings consistently and explicitly make use of positive phrases (Healey 1981: 156). In brief, most scholars claim that spirituality permeates almost every aspect of African life (Magesa 1998).

The African Elder: A Paragon of Character Strengths

Another interesting finding that emerged from this qualitative research was the figure of the African elder and its association to character strengths. The domain of the elderhood rites shows association with at least eight of the character strengths, stretching across all core virtues (Table 6.4). The elder is expected to be endowed with wisdom. This wisdom is an outcome of experience and reflection. The elder is also an exemplar of courage, especially in “speaking up for what is right” (Peterson 2006: 32). The elder is also known for his integrity: upright, exemplary and refined in his dealing with others. This moral standard provides him the authority to advice others – a trait of social intelligence. In a possible leadership role, the elder is able to influence the community in decision making and is able to inspire others. In short, he is the paragon of character strengths (see Peterson and Seligman 2004: 24). As Magesa (1998) states, the African elder is not necessarily a leader in a social or political sense. Since in the African world view religion is not separate from society, the elder could also play the role of a diviner, a priest or a medium. In the world of the living, he mediates between God and the community. And in death, he joins the living dead and becomes immortal. He lives in the memory of the community as an ancestor.

Concluding Remarks

Norenzayan and Heine (2005: 766) propose cross-fertilisation between anthropology and psychology in the study of “psychological universals”. They acknowledge the importance of strategies that will facilitate cross-cultural discourse while respecting the “idiosyncrasies of psychological research”. This research project was meant to be a modest contribution to the ongoing discussion on the ubiquity of core virtues and character strengths of positive psychology drawing evidence from cross-cultural data. Insofar as the project reinterprets the beliefs, codes and cults of ATR in the contemporary parlance of psychology, this study also makes a contribution to the discourse of ATR.

The most meaningful way of studying a traditional religion was to use anthropological data, even if that data came from students who were educated in the Western system. This background of the participants who contributed to the data needs to be considered in the light of how ATR works. As Magesa (1998) explains, African religious perspectives persist even among the African adherents of Christianity because ATR is not a structured religion but a spirituality and a world view (see also Shorter 1973). It is spirituality insofar as ATR influences people’s relation to the Higher Power, and it is a world view inasmuch as it governs the way the African people interpret the reality around them.

In the analysis of the sampled anthropological data, it was also more convenient to use a qualitative method of analysis, as it is increasingly being used in cross-cultural studies in positive psychology (Delle Fave and Bassi 2009b). Ong and van Dulmen (2007) consider the possibility of integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches in positive psychology. Besides, as Robbins (2008: 96) contends, “Eudaimonic happiness cannot be purely value-free, nor can it be completely studied without using both nomothetic and idiographic (i.e., quantitative and qualitative) methods in addressing problems of value...”.

In qualitative research the influence of researcher’s subjectivity is inevitable, particularly given the fact that the primary researcher has spent 16 years in East Africa. The focus in this work was on how this subjectivity could be meaningfully used in analysis (Sciarra 1998). The role of the secondary researcher, who has interests in psychology of religion and positive psychology, has contributed to improve the reliability of the findings. Several other aspects that enhance the “validity” of qualitative research (Merrick 1998; Yardley 2008) have been taken into account in this project. The researchers have been transparent about the method of qualitative thematic analysis that was employed in this project. The discussion section of the project has employed a type of triangulation, by way of a modest literature review of other scholarship. In any case, since both the coding templates and the data set came from previous scholarship, at least the stages of data collection and framing of codes have not been contaminated by the research questions or the subjective influence of the researchers.

Peterson (2006) agrees that the Values in Action (VIA) is still a work in progress. Therefore, of particular importance would be further study of specific concepts that have emerged in the present study: For instance, could hospitality and “presence” be

character strengths within the core virtue of humanity? Again, some character strengths that have direct moral implications like integrity and fairness are found to be classified in the VIA under core virtues of courage and justice respectively. During this study, it was found that, on the one hand, the core virtue of “courage” does not best represent the character strengths that are listed therein; on the other hand, integrity might need a shift to the core virtue of justice. We suggest this needs further examination.

The present work studied only the first volume of data, collected by MIAS, Nairobi, pertaining to individual life cycle, covering ten anthropological domains. MIAS has data in three other volumes (Kirwen 2005) on family and interpersonal relationship cycle, community and communal activities cycle and religious ritual cycle, covering 35 domains in all. It would be fruitful to expand this present work to analyse data from all domains.

In general, this qualitative study has shown that more cross-cultural studies are needed on the VIA so that the list might be enhanced in the light of their findings, and thus provide a universal and culturally fair perspective on good and engaged life.

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