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TOWARDS A DEFENSE OF AFFRICAN COMMUNALISM

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Abstract

In spite of inter-tribal hatred, hostilities and colonial mentalities in the continent, this paper still insists and strongly defends the dogmatic claim that Africans are by nature socialistic, exhibiting the virtue of brotherhood among them and sharing things equally in common. Whether this can be sustained today or not is not the issue here. The issue is that Africans must learn from their glorious past - those things that united them, that made them co-exist and live peacefully and meaningfully in the past before the coming of the colonial masters. Some African writers had advocated that African communalism be left out in the present pursuits for a viable African development. However, it is the position of this paper that the idea of African communalism is genuinely pertinent for the future survival of the black race in the world. Africa is rapidly becoming an endangered species internally and externally due largely to too much internalization of Western cultures. Hence, African needs to hold tenaciously to those values that define and hold them together as a people. Therefore, employing critical and historical analysis as the methodology, this paper strongly defends African communalism as the veritable model of life pattern that unites and distinguishes Africans as Africans.

Keywords: Defense, African Continent, African Communalism, Political Activity, Rationality.

Introduction

The Humean, Kantian and Hegelian teachings about Africa were taken by the Early Christian Missionaries to Africa as the gospel truth or as a basic assumption. Consequently, their activities helped in the near annihilation of African humanity and civilization. The Humean, Kantian and Hegelian views of Africa were so negative and nasty that they presented a picture of Africa at one time as people who have no rationality, no morality, no religion, and no

culture, and at another time inferior forms of religion, law, economy, etc. Hume (2000) in particular was the first to articulate such racial views when he writes:

> I am apt to suspect the Negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient GERMANS, the present TARTARS, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are NEGROE slaves dispersed all over EUROPE, of which none ever discovered any symptom of ingenuity; tho' low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In JAMAICA, indeed, they talk of one negro as a man of parts and learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.

Appropriating or echoing Hume's idea above, Kant on his part, described the African in such a disdainful manner that left him (the African) with no value. Kant (1960) writes of the black people thus:

> The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have even been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art and science or any other praise-worthy quality even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference between the two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour.

Thus following such Humean, Kantian and subsequently Hegelean views of Africa, most if not all Europeans regarded Africans as a people having nothing to offer to humanity. Africans were from that period labeled a people without roads, civilization and even government or forms of leadership. On the contrary, Africa had well developed cultures, empires and kingdoms before the coming of the colonial and slave masters. Several great kingdoms and empires of Africa such as the Songhai empire, the Mali empire, the Ethiopian empire, the Benin empire, the Mossi kingdom, the kingdom of Ghana, the Bornu kingdom, and so forth existed before Hume, Kant and Hegel were born. Indeed, traditional Africans left lasting and solid legacies, while the present or modern Africans have and are still demonstrating and showcasing their talents and extraordinary gifts to the world. African people like Philip Emeagwali (Nigerian computer scientist and internet father), late Chinua Achebe (Novelist), Kofi Annan of Ghana (Diplomat and the seventh secretary-General of the United Nation),

Marcus Garvey (a visionary pan-African leader and thinker), W.E.B. Du Bois (African-American intellectual and political leader), Bob Marley (Jamaican musician and creative genius), Michael Jackson (African-American Music Superstar and king of pop), and Toussaint L'Ouverture (Haitian leader who beat the French army under Napoleon and freed the African slaves in Haiti), just to mention a few, contributed and immensely to the world civilization and development through arts and sciences.

African thinkers and philosophers like Senghor, Nyerere and Nkrumah, believed that Africa has a legacy of social, economic and political system that need to be discovered and recovered so as to give the African person his proper place in human history and development. The African Society, unlike the Western society, stresses on the communal relation among members and not on the autonomy of members. In the African traditional society for instance, one is not considered separately but as a member of a mystical body where he can live life to the fullest for himself and for the society. The principles of oneness, belongingness, solidarity and community, are therefore, described as African communalism. Communalism in traditional African Society has been a common theme in most discourses on African Philosophy. This paper attempted an examination of the reality and ontology of communalism in traditional African societies, the underlying philosophical issues, and the influence that it has continued to exert on the continent since the end of colonialism. The paper strongly affirms that communalism has been a reality in traditional African societies and had a far reaching impact on the African people and their societies.

Concept of African Communalism

Communalism is a term derived from the Latin word *communitas-tatis* which means joint possession or use, participation, partnership, or sharing. It also refers to social relationship, fellowship, socialites, organized society. It involves obligingness. Communalism according to Justin Ekennia (1995) is a theory that describes the basic values and shared conceptions of individuals and their own conception of the community. It can also mean living or interacting in the spirit of one's community. From Ekennia's definition, we can say that communalism is the doctrine that the group constitutes the focus of the activities of the individual members of the society. The doctrine places emphasis on the activity and success of the wider society rather than, though not necessarily at the expense of, or to the detriment of the individual. Thus it is implicit that the success and meaning of the individual's life depend on identifying oneself with the group. This was why Kwame Gyeke (1987) had opined that communalism maximizes the interests of all the individual members of the society since the sense of responsibility is enjoined equally upon each member of the group in order to enhance the welfare of the group as a whole. For scholars like Tunde Obadina, communalism can further mean "strong devotion to the interest of one's minority or ethnic group rather than those of society as a whole"(Obadina, 2016). For Nze (1989: 56) African communalism is defined as "the social life of the African which is founded on the African belief that all human beings are members of one family of mankind". The African strongly believes in "one family" and this is strengthened and upheld by the traditional African religion which by its very nature, is not primarily for the individual but for the entire community of which the individual is but a microcosm. In this way, African communalism is seen in the conviction that the society forms an ontological and well structured unit in which everybody is linked with the other members, both living and dead, through a complex net-work of spiritual relationships into a kind of spiritual or mystical body.

The South African expression of *Ubuntu*, whose basic norm "is that human existence is interconnected and communal" aptly describes the concept of African communalism. It is not merely a reference to humanity or personhood, but an indication of human conduct in relation to others. As rightly noted by Onebunne (2019:143), "African communalism is a moral doctrine that also values human dignity, rights and responsibilities". According to Elza (2004), it refers to a positive ethical/moral way of going/being in relation with others. African communalism is equally and beautifully expressed in these two South African maxims, "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" which means 'I am because we are' (Teffo, 1998), and "Motho ke motho ka batho", which means "to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on this basis, establish respectful human relations with them" (Heinz Kimmerle, 2016). In other words, a human being is a human being through other human beings – the human being, thus, only exists and develops in relationship with others (Higgs and Smith, 2000). The core of African communalism was vividly captured and summarized by M.O. Eze when he writes:

> 'A person is a person through other people' strikes an affirmation of one's humanity through recognition of an 'other' in his or her uniqueness and difference. It is a demand for a creative intersubjective formation in which the 'other' becomes a mirror (but only a mirror) for my subjectivity. This idealism suggests to us that humanity is not embedded in my person solely as an individual; my humanity is co-substantively bestowed upon the other and me. Humanity is a quality we owe to each other. We create each other and need to sustain this otherness creation. And if we belong to each other, we participate in our creations: we are because you are, and since you are, definitely I am. The 'I am' is not a rigid subject, but a dynamic self-constitution dependent on this otherness creation of relation and distance.

The implication of the above is that the human interconnectedness that is expressed in African communalism requires an interrelationship that is purely based on mutual recognition and respect. The concept of African communalism can also be seen in Innocent Asouzu's complementary ontology of *ibu anyi danda*, which "seeks to grasp the idea of being as being from the preceding conditions of its complementary comprehensive interrelatedness" (Asouzu, 2011: 22).

To say that the traditional African societies value community is an understatement. Hence, in traditional African societies, the community comprises not just the living but also the living-dead or the ancestors, and the unborn or the "yet-to-be-born". In other words, every individual African person is a member of the community whether dead or alive. Therefore, the spirit of communalism is rooted in the awareness of the fact that one needs the other members of the community for one to exist and live meaningfully. Thus, in spite of obvious criticisms against communalism, it still remains one of Africa's greatest values, which detests individualism and strongly emphasizes living over and above individualistic style of existence. Obviously, communalism is the natural African identity, cultural value or worldview where the individual is given the opportunity to become part of the community and find his essence within it. Stressing the importance of communal living over and above individualistic living, Eboh (2005) explains that, the traditional African communalism

considers the individual and the community as a whole. For Eboh, one lives from birth to the grave, in an unbroken inter-dependence. Life is essentially cooperation and mutual co-existence. Every member of the community feels secure and fulfilled (Eboh, 24). According to Ekennia (2001), communalism expressed in a community, refers to social relationship, fellowship, socialites, organized society. It invokes obligingness''.

In his book *Things Fall Apart,* late Chinua Achebe vividly and beautifully depicts the spirit of collectivism - African communalism. Ogbuefi Udo's daughter was killed at Mbaino, according to Achebe. Because the entire community was concerned and connected, the village people referred to Ogbuefi Udo's slain daughter as "Our daughter," rather than "Ogbuefi Udo's daughter." This clearly demonstrates the huge difference between the African communalism and the Western ways of life. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe depicts another striking characteristic of African communalism known as the "we in I," or, as John Mbiti (1970:108) aptly puts it, "I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am." On his way back from a fishing trip, a man with an amputated leg was targeted, and the fish was snatched from his grasp. When he screamed, the entire village came out to help him retrieve the fish. This also shows the power of unity, which the Igbo people refer to as "igwe bu ike." As demonstrated in Achebe's tale, African communalism is based on the idea of "We in I" or "I am because we are," which is reinforced in collectivism, brotherhood, team spirit, or communal spirit.

At this point, it is clear that the traditional African value system is communalistic and human-centered. We see this as African traditional communalism insists that the good of all determines the good of each, or that the welfare of each is dependent on the welfare of all as is illustrated in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Thus in African communalism, the group is the centre of focus of the lives of individuals. Accordingly, an individual's worth is measured by the extent of his/her association and conformity with the group's interests and aspiration. By its very nature and structure, communalism is simply the belief that an individual's being depends on the being of others. In other words, 'I' exist only because of the existence of the others in my community. In this way, African traditional communalism enjoins each individual to lead the life of others while leading his own. He can never become fully himself except in as far as he unites with others. This is clearly illustrated in the story of a man with amputated leg in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart.* As the story goes, the man with amputated leg could never have defended or retrieved his fish without the communal efforts of the "other" – the whole village. Hence, it is the community that makes it possible for the individual to live, find meaning and purpose in life.

Furthermore, in traditional African society, an individual is not left alone as an individual to whatever befalls him whether good or bad. This is why, when a child is born in traditional African society, the entire community rejoices; and when a child or someone dies the whole community mourns. Equally, if there is a crime committed by an individual, the whole community gathers together to appease the gods. To that effect, the individual is not left alone to suffer his fate in the entire African community. Hence, African traditional communalism makes everyone an active participant - both an actor and a spectator. This is why Nyerere defines African communalism as African brotherhood (Onebune, 2019:147).

From the foregoing, African traditional communalism is better described as being democratic in nature because it is a participation of all for the good of all. Hence, it is a system that upholds wholeness as against individualism. For this reason, we believe that if traditional African communalism is allowed to operate in its traditional forms, it would certainly go a long way in enriching the disorderly modern African democracy. African communalism is therefore a reality since it is an aspect of African identity, and African identity is quite unique and undeniable.

African Communalism as a Political Weapon

Some writers had opined that the term communalism associated with African social life, has a political origin that was made popular in the 1960s during the struggle for independence. Ekennia for instance, had claimed that prior to this period; Africa had no particular theory or ideology. He believes that whatever description given to Africa's social or political life was by western missionaries, sociologists and anthropologists. To support his claims, Ekennia quotes Mbonu, thus:

> Perhaps you dig deeper into the depth of the African mind and want to know what our social system is. We have never thought of it in terms of theories. Our fathers never discussed or wrote about it. But we can describe the mechanics of our society. Thus you are left with little information for categorizing the African social system. It may seem to you to be socialism, communism, capitalism, communalism or notism at all (Ekennia, 2001).

If Mbonu regarded communalism as one of the guesses made on the African social system by Westerners, it however turned out to be the foundation of African theories of political and economic liberation, in the work of authors like Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Julius Nyerere, etc. (Ejeh, 2020:5). According to Ejeh (2020:5), Ekennia was fair in his assertion that prior to the period of independence, Africa had no particular theory or ideology, and that whatever description given to their social or political life was by Western missionaries, sociologists, and anthropologists. As Ejeh rightly observed, Ekennia would have been right if and only if he had referred to Africa collectively as a nation. Otherwise, his description is not a just and fair description of Africa. For every race or culture or nation no matter how primitive, must, we believe, have one form of ideology or the other. For instance, in Nigeria, before the independence, almost all tribes in Nigeria had one form of ideology or another. This could be seen in the way they ran their communities. A typical example of this is the egalitarian society of the Igbo community and the well organized system of the centralized government that existed both in the north and south, before the colonial masters came and destroyed it. Thus, we feel that Ekennia's assertion as well as Mbonu whom he quoted is not well founded if he did not take Africa collectively as a nation. The fact that we have never thought of our social system in terms of theories does not mean that we never have them as Ekennia claimed. Neither does the fact that our fathers never discussed them or wrote them down lend credence to the issue at all.

Ejeh(2020) is of the opinion that it is this unfair description of Africa as having no particular ideology that led Ekennia to state that the thought of how to free Africa from foreign domination was what dominated the mind of African writers during colonial and post-colonial Africa. They saw that the only way to achieve this was to develop a theory of African

unity. He quotes Nkrumah, saying: "African states must unite or sell themselves out to imperialism or colonialist exploiters for a mess of pottage" (Ekennia, 2001). The same view was re-echoed by Nyerere when he said:

> As long as there remains separate nations there will remain too a danger that other states will exploit our differences for their own purposes. Only with unity can we be ensured that Africa really governs Africa. Only with unity can we be sure that African resources will be used for the benefit of Africans (Nyerere, 1963).

The desire for unity as an instrument of economic and political liberation of Africa led authors to invest a common culture for Africa. Senghor for instance, came up with the idea of "Negritude" as mentioned earlier. This theory (Negritude) holds that the fact of being black and of being colonized is what Black Africa shares in common. In the mind of some authors such as Sekou Toure, Senghor, Kenyatta etc., Black Africa was a community. These authors depend on the similarities among people found in different African states. This is due to the arbitrary separation of people of the same tribe in different states, through the act of creation of states executed by the colonizers. This is quite true especially when you recall that in part of Benin Republic, Yoruba language is spoken as well as in other part of the world apart from here in Nigeria. A good example of this can be seen in the separation and creation of the then Anambra State of Eastern state where part of the tribes that were Igbo's were cut off and joined with the Benue people along the Benue River. Thus following Nkrumah, we sincerely acknowledge the fact that the African nations of today created artificially by foreigners for their own purposes do not originate from ancient African civilization.

Iroegbu (1995) believes that, ''Communalism is not an abstract theory, it is rather a realizable model designed for a particular society, an African one''. Communalism as an African political weapon, therefore, addresses the foundational and distributive structures of any society that is the institution of any society, which are so justly arranged for the good of all the members. And like Onebunne (2019:148) rightly said, "Communalism remains a theory of justice for a well-ordered society where everyone belongs for the wellbeing of all.

Implications of African Communism

No doubt, the reality of African traditional communalism has some noteworthy implications. One of the implications is the fact that a person can only be a person because he or she lives and acts in a community. In other words, it is a community that gives a person his or her identity; a community that makes it possible for one to be seen in others and others in him or her through complimentarity and interrelatedness. Significantly, no individual in African traditional societies suffers or rejoices alone, but with the entire community. This interconnectedness in African communalism implies that no individual person can meaningfully make it or survive all alone. His or her survival depends on the survival of the community from which he or she draws his or her vital force. Hence, the well-being of all determines the good of each individual in the community. In this sense, the welfare of each individual cannot be considered without reference to the welfare of all in the community.

Another implication of African communalism is that since interrelatedness is the underpinning principle of African communalism, every member of the community has the obligation to share with the others whether good or bad. And just as a fish cannot live outside

water, a traditional African man or woman knows that he or she has no meaning and no existence, once he or she is estranged or separated from the community. Hence, an individual does not live life solely for himself or herself alone. His or her entire existence must complement and give meaning to the existence of others in the community just as theirs complements and meaning to his or her own. This is why every African man tries hard to avoid being ex-communicated, stigmatized or alienated by the members of the community.

Again, the implication of African communalism implies that the individual's rights and privileges are duly respected. Hence in the spirit of *biri ka m biri* in Igbo language meaning - "live and let live," the individual is mutually and amicably supported and encouraged to fully be himself or herself; develop himself or herself and reach his or her full potentials. This goes to show that African communalism supports and encourages unity in diversity, or as the Igbos have it – *Igwebuike!* In African communalism, no individual is considered superior to the other; everybody is carried along in communal decision-making which makes it possible to reach the highest form of communal experience known in Igbo language as *Onye aghana nwa nne ya* or simply communalism. The complementary nature of African communalism implies that no individual member of the community is complete all by himself or herself. In a sense, every individual is lacking something that needs to be supplied by the other. This lack in an individual is what Asouzu refers to as a "missing link" that requires "other missing links" for the realization of its being. Asouzu writes:

> The implications of this are that no missing link can uphold its being solely on its own. It can do this only with reference to the whole and in complementary harmony with other missing links whose legitimacy and determination are necessarily dependent on the type of union that guarantees their being. It is for this reason that one can say that to be is not to be alone (ka so mu adina).

African communalism therefore, teaches the individual that there is a missing link, something lacking in him or her, which the other will complement. It makes clear to individuals that one is seen in others and others in one; that what affects the individual affects the community and vice versa. In other words, African communalism makes it clear that no individual suffers or rejoices alone but with the community. This realization will kill pride and set the platform for a genuine dialogue on equal and mutual relationship for the development of both the individual and the community at large. It is important to note that African communalism does not in any way diminish the freedom of the individual. It rather enhances individual's freedom since it enables one to be fully who he is, while recognizing the fact that freedom within African communalism does not permit one to do whatever one wants. Even outside African traditional system, there are limits to individual freedom. No one has absolute freedom to do whatever he or she wants or desires.

Finally, African communalism rules out and does not encourage any type of relationship where any member of the community is insensitive to the suffering or misfortunes of others. This is why the Igbos living outside Igbo land would always rally round to help any of their kinsmen who is in difficulty or ensure that the corpse of any of their kinsmen gets back to their father land – the Igbo land at all costs. We see this spirit of African communalism demonstrated recently and whole heartedly by Allen Onyema, the CEO of *Air Peace,* who donated and sent his air craft to South Africa to help evacuate or bring back Nigerians

suffering from xenophobic attacks. He extended the communal spirit not only to his kinsmen – the Igbos, but to all Nigerians, knowing that what happens to one happens to all and that one does not just live for himself but lives for himself through the society.

Merits of African Communalism

African communalism has severally been rejected by some scholars as an insufficient foundation for African political rationality. Some scholars even argue that the African communal lifestyle is the main obstacle to African development. On the contrary, we dare say and strongly assert that African communalism has several and undeniable merits and benefits which it offers to African communities. Some of these merits include but not limited to the following:

1. African communalism lays emphasis on the role and the importance of the individual person in the community.
2. African communalism is all inclusive. Democratic participation on major issues is open to all without exception as long as you belong to the community.
3. Africa communalism encourages the ethics of mutual help and of caring for each other.
4. Community spirit is inculcated and valued higher than that of the individual.
5. African Communalism guarantees individuals' responsibility within the communal ownership and relationship.
6. The bond of unity and togetherness are principles of African communalism which enhance internal security against any possible invasion.
7. African communalism is capable of turning the whole African society into a living network of relations.

Remarks

As we have shown, communalism was a domestic trend in the traditional African society. Meanwhile, we do not debate that the traditional African setting is not the same with the modern African society. Thus it is also indisputable that, in most cases, those strategies which worked in the traditional African society will hardly work in the modern African context. Thus, communalism was practiced within micro-groups then. The evidence of the limitedness at which communalism was practiced was the feudalism and slavery which existed with it side by side in the pre-colonial era. Nevertheless, within those communities in which communalism was practiced, it was a powerful tool for solidarity. It is for this reason that we find it difficult to jettison the contents of communalism or abandon it completely as some authors had suggested. The fact that our traditional African setting did not enjoy communalism beyond the domestic locality does not provide enough ground for us to throw it away. What we should be concerned about now is what was the nature of its product where it existed. Not even both the previous conflicts and the seeming current ones should discourage us from pursuing a unified African ideology. Not even the known developed nations, like European Union and others, that did not experience conflicts and are still experiencing some kind of conflicts to date. They had, and are still having conflicts but they continue to work and head towards progress even to overcome those conflicts. This is the duty Africans owe to Africa, because communalism is very much African in all its aspects. It contrasts significantly the individualism of the West.

Conclusion

It is therefore, unfair and quite an overgeneralization to say that Africans are not by nature generally friendly, hospitable and brotherly to themselves. Or that Pan-African communalism

is still the fiction of the mind. Yes, inter-tribal wars and often hostilities among some African countries may seem to override this assumption, but then, that does not mean that Africans are not friendly, hospitable and brotherly to themselves. We think the mistake many writers make when they take up the issue of African communalism is that they tend to insist that all Africans without exception must possess the same communalistic qualities or features. But this is not the case because to think so implies that when we say that a mango tree produces sweet mango fruits, we mean that all the mangos produced or that will be produced by that particular mango tree must be sweet without exception. Through experience, we know that is not the case, and this is exactly the case when we say that Africans are by nature communalistic.

We believe that what should form the basis of communalism between the elite and the common people should be a committed spirit of *Ujama,* of oneness, and the awareness of our common goal as a people – as Africans. Without the spirit of oneness and brotherliness or family hood, Africa as a nation (continent) will not be able to achieve a stable, and lasting political rationality. Therefore, the rejection of communalism as an insufficient foundation for African political rationality by some scholars is highly questionable. We believe strongly that if communalism is applied correctly and meaningfully in its real sense, and according to its objectives, it can become a strong weapon for African political rationality.

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