

A CRITIQUE OF EJIUGU AMAKU'S REJECTION OF AFRICA'S COMMUNALISTIC ONTOLOGY.

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Abstract

The question of the Africanness (or otherwise) of communalism is an intractable discourse in African Philosophy and Studies. This paper undertakes the simple task of carrying out a critique of Ejiogu Amaku's sweeping rejection of the communalist ontological foundation of Africa. And in carrying out this critique, the paper helps to show: one, that Amaku's understanding of Communalism is truncated and myopic; two, that the reasons given for his rejection of African communalism are confusing, contradictory and logically flawed; and three, that communalism is African because it is human. Employing the expository, hermeneutic and analytic methods, the paper concludes by presenting communalism as an ontological mode of being, not just for Africa but for the human species, using the analysis of two African philosophers, Chukwuemeka Nze and Chibudum Okolo.

Key words: *Africa, Amaku, Communalism, Individualism, Ontology*

Introduction

The idea that there can be nothing general that can be said about human nature and therefore, minimum human needs, would seem (so a critic might say) just the sort of nonsense salaried professors of philosophy produce in their self-regarding efforts to be controversial.-A.C. Grayling.¹

Although this essay is not on the question of human nature, there is a sense in which it brushes the idea. For if there is a continuous investigation on the nature of humanity, then it is possible to have an "African nature". But there is a sense in which one can equally say that since the African is the original *homo sapiens*, there is a sense in which the African nature is human nature. However, my interest in Grayling's statement above is on the penchant and propensity of philosophers or "salaried professors of philosophy" to love stirring "controversies"

¹A.C. Grayling, "Foreward" in, Robin Headlam Wells and Johnjoe McFadden, Eds., *Human Nature: Facts and Fiction* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), xi.

It is unfortunately fortunate that without controversy, scholarship (and especially in philosophy) would be grounded. No work is expected to be the very final word on an issue, a topic, situation or concept. However, when a work, in an attempt to remain or become relevant, makes unsustainable claims, outrightly contradicts itself or stands logic on its head, there would be a necessary need for another work to, at least, point out the flaws-even if nothing else is achieved. However, this essay hopes to do a little more than point out flaws in Amaku's paper. It hopes to point out the ontological basis for communalism in Africa. I intend to use the views of two contemporary African (Nigerian) philosophers, C. Nze and C.B. Okolo, to present this ontological position.

What I intend to do in this paper is to carry out a brief re-statement of Amaku's position on African communalism and then proceed to do a critique of its claims. If mine is called a review article, a critique of critique or a counter-critique, one would not be too far from a truthful description of the paper. The purpose, therefore, would be to show that Amaku took his criticism of African communalism too far, in the process, over-shot the runway.

Among scholars interested in communalism and community theory, Africans are dominant in the former. Those non Africans who investigate communalism almost certainly agree that it has an African tilt. Those who brazenly deny Africa's communalist ontology are in the minority, few walk the communalist path with caution, while a vast majority insist on the view that communalism is Africa's ontological constitution. EjioguAmaku is one of those who adopt the extreme position that Africa is not even communalist at all, and it is to his views that we now turn.

Amaku on African Communalism

Ejiogu Amaku's recent essay; "Are Africans Truly Communalistic, Socialistic and Hospitable by Nature?"² argues that there is nothing natural about African communalism. For Amaku, the claim of African communalism is "dogmatic", "a socio-political and philosophical credo", "romantic", "myopic", and a contextual fantasy, eulogistic, etc³. The basis for the paper's sweeping conclusion is that the intertribal conflicts and hatred that characterize relations among African people make the fostering of a "communalist" ethos an unsustainable possibility. The paper argues from the onset that it intends to:

² E. Amaku. 'Are Africans Communalistic, Socialistic and Hospitable by Nature.' *US Open Sociological Science Journal*, vol.1 (August, 2014),

³These designations are found in the "Abstract" and "Introduction" of Amaku.

Agbo

Demonstrate that Africans are not communalistic or socialistic or as hospitable as has been presumed and propagated by African academics, as distinguishing marks from other peoples. The intended critic of the over-dogmatized African communitarian pattern of life is to awaken Africans' self-consciousness regarding ethnic discriminations and non-confraternal tribal intolerance inbuilt at the core of the continent. The claim of Africa's naturalistic communalism is the result of myopic cognition of the pedigree of ethnic racism and hatred in the continent.⁴

But in the midst and in spite of the above intended critic, the paper still found a place to (paradoxically) aver:

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 ... Therefore, Africans must unite to protect themselves from gradual extinction by clamping down on gradual hatred and by promoting authentic Pan- African humanism... This paper does not rule out the urgency of an authentic neo-pan-African socialism.⁵

But if the immediately considered quote paints a paradoxical and antithetical picture of the "Africa is not communalistic by nature" claim of the paper, what does one make of the out rightly contradictory tone of the following: "this paper tries to expose the loopholes of the African communalism credo with the fundamental intention of establishing it on a firmer pan-African ground"⁶. The possibility of establishing what does not exist on "firmer grounds" is a wonder that the paper would have to explain.

As the tradition goes for most reflectors on communalism, the paper carries out an exploratory exposition of the post-Independent leaders of Africa, notable, Senghor, Kaunda, Nkrumah, Nyerere, as the basis for the rejection of African communalism. Also as is usual, the paper notes that the African communalistic credo is a way to distinguish Africa from the supposed European opposite: individualism. From this angle, the paper argues that communalism "was hatched mainly to distinguish the African world view from the western world"⁷.

The main argument of Amaku's paper is that, "Africans are not by nature communalistic... [and] communalism and socialism is a dream that can still be Africanized if Africans can substitute tribal hatred with enlightened self-

⁴ E. Amaku. Are Africans Communalistic..., 1.

⁵ E. Amaku. Are Africans Communalistic..., 2

⁶ E. Amaku. Are Africans Communalistic..., 3

⁷ E. Amaku. Are Africans Communalistic..., 6

consciousness”⁸. If Amaku's position is restated, what we get would be: communalism is the absence of tribal hatred or disagreement or crises; once there is tribal hatred, there cannot be communalism. Would it then mean that the presence of conflicts and hatred among peoples and communities signifies that communalism's opposite, individualism is dominant? The paper's succinct understanding of communalism as “sharing life and property in common”⁹ portrays a myopic and truncated grasp of the ontological content of that concept. This simplistic and reductive interpretation of communalism has tended to make it look like socialism, family ties, an economic or political theory, or any of its cultural determinations. And this is why the paper examines “communalism” alongside such concepts as “socialism” and “hospitality”, as though they are connected. Agreed, a social and hospitable propensity may be part of a communal being, but communalism is a deeper ontological ideal.

The paper goes further to deliver the *coupde grace*, “Africans are anti-communalistic by nature”¹⁰ and then it finally declares that “African communalism should grow to protect unity in tribal diversity”¹¹I guess that Amaku's “growing” metaphor here is in line with his belief that communalism is a concept “hatched” by African intellectuals. His use of “hatched” is interesting. It gives the impression of a clandestine plot, a conspiracy of some sort, by African scholars. Or if one is to use the metaphor of the scholarly chickens of Africa, one can then ask: if they hatched the communalist eggs, did they also lay them

Critical Reflections

Somehow, it never appeared to Amaku that the “consanguine” communalism (which he agrees existed in Africa), was not allowed to take root in Africa (to his generalized desire) because of colonial disruption and imposition. Granted that there are conflicts in pristine Africa, but it was not exclusive to Africa. Again, how the paper expects what does not exist ‘by nature’ to become a contemporary ontological creation, in order to foster pan-African unity, is still an enigma which has to be resolved. There is also the conception of “tribe” in derogatory terms in the paper, as if belonging to a tribe is a subtraction. The paper did not equally reflect on the fact that one of the major causes of conflicts in Africa today is the “forceful” lumping of ethnic nationalities into modern

⁸ E. Amaku. Are Africans Communalistic..., 7

⁹ E. Amaku. Are Africans Communalistic..., 7

¹⁰ E. Amaku. Are Africans Communalistic..., 8

¹¹ E. Amaku. Are Africans Communalistic..., 9-10

states, without mutual agreement by these nationalities”. The people (as government) that administer these modern nation-states use state apparatus to become literally an “occupation force” within the territorial boundaries of these nationalities. The result is endless conflicts, and the one who controls the political sphere, controls economic resources. That has been the reason for the global resurgence of democracy.

Whatever merit contained in Amaku’s essay is vitiated by the fact that he denies communalism in Africa on one side, and still says it exists in “consanguine” communities, as if he needs a kind of “African communalistic Government” before we would agree that it exists. Further, the argument in the paper is weakened by the fact that the existence of conflicts is not a necessary condition for the automatic absence of communalism.

There are many attitudes and dimensions to the intellectual and theoretical battle against Africa’s communalistic ontology. Scholars like EjioguAmaku belong to the extreme, non- compromising group. For Ejiogu, the idea of African communalism is a “romantic postulation... over- dogmatized... [and] the result of myopic cognition of the pedigree of ethnic racism and hatred in the continent”. The conclusion of his logic is thus, that any communalistic relation cannot, could not and should not have involved any type of hatred. But he did not bother to reflect on the historical emergence of such existing hatred. He equally appeared to have grossly exaggerated both the intensity and permeation of this so-called hatred, and seemed to have assumed that the so-called hatred occurs only or is exclusive to Africa. However, Amaku appears to have destroyed his own argument when he said that his paper “tries to expose the loopholes of the African communalism credo, with the fundamental intension of establishing it on a firmer, pan African ground” , that communalism is “sharing life and property in common”, that it must be “extended to all corners of the Africa world”, but that “African consanguine families exhibit communalistic spirit among themselves”; and finally, he delivers the ultimate fatal blow; “Africans are anti- communalistic by nature”¹²

Certain questions arise from the claims made by Amaku: would it not have been better for him to have said something like, “there is no communalism in Africa” or that “Africans are not communalistic”, than to state with finality that “Africans are totally “anti- communalistic by nature”? Where would the communalism that he wants to establish on “firmer grounds” with his idea of pan Africanism emerge from? And what grounds his idea of pan- Africanism? Would it still not be the same spirit of

¹²E. Amaku. Are Africans Communalistic....

communalism? Amaku's acceptance of the existence of communalism at the fraternal (family) level, his insistence that a universal expression would ground communalism is poor logic. Perhaps, he is a disciple of Innocent Asouzu, the *Ibuanyidanda* exponent who, in a relatively recent paper¹³, advises against what he calls "Over reliance on the method of synthetic induction". This is because of its adverse impact on the universal outreach of theories", which has the further disadvantage of limiting "our knowledge of the world".

However, what Amaku shares with Asouzu in this context is the universal thrust or appeal. He (Asouzu) surely does not share Amaku's sweeping position on communalism in Africa. For indeed there may be need to keep at the back of our mind Asouzu's call for caution while formulating theories in African philosophy, in order to avoid making such exercise "more or less variants of empirical qualitative research activities exemplified by the method of synthetic deduction underlying ethno-philosophy"¹⁴. This is not the place to restart all the arguments for and against which "philosophy" is "ethno" and which is not or to raise anew the question of the value of science to (and) the difference between them. They are awash in scholarly literature. Asouzu's reconstructive approach to issues surrounding communalism perhaps stems from his conviction that "the traditional African ontology is still largely a determining factor in the way most Africans see the world"¹⁵

Nze and Okolo on Africa's Communalist Ontology

There is no better time to look at C. B. Nze's *Aspects of African Communalism*¹⁶ than now. Nze is one of the principal reflectors on the idea of communalism and his small but insightful lending book has become a strong reference for many scholars on this subject. The book examines the various aspects of Africa's communalist position and seriously sees communalism as something that has its foundation in the family. This leads to his conception of communalism as "Fraternalism". That is, as something that concerns brother or brothers. He, therefore, says: "African communalism is fraternal, because the link existing between members of the community is blood relationship,

¹³ I. Asouzu. "Ibuanyidanda (Complementary Reflection), Communalism and Theory Formulation in African Philosophy." *Thought and Practice: A journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya*, (New series), 3/2, (December, 2011), 9- 34.

¹⁴ *Ibuanyidanda* (Complementary Reflection), 31.

¹⁵ I. Asouzu. *Ibuanyidanda: New Complementary Ontology* (Zurich, LIT VerlagGmbH Co. an Wien, 2007), 178.

¹⁶ C. B. Nze, *Aspects of African Communalism* (Onitsha: Veritas Publisher, 1989).

Agbo

blood ties and marriage links are generally the foundations and fortifications of communalism”¹⁷

The implication of Nze’s position is that African communities exist as “one big family”. And it is this type of view that makes people like Amaku to agree that:

Communalism indeed characterizes Africa at the consanguine level, but not at the wider community or inter-community levels. But the blood ties linking communities stems from the blood ties linking members of the same family, and Nze believes that these ties are “spiritually” the binding of African communalists like Nyerere and others before him, who developed the Ujaama (familyhood of principle as the foundation of his theory of African) Socialism.¹⁸

Nze believes that the African personality or personhood is tied up with the binding relationship that exists within the blood-linked family and which then extends to the entire community.

This community link that begins from the family makes Nze to argue that in the traditional African world, identity is always established in terms of relationships such as mother and father of so and so person, wife or husband of such and such person.¹⁹ What this means is that no one is an isolated being or exists separately. The moment one is called “Nna Chioma” (Chioma’s dad), for example, there is a mental link to someone else who the man is linked without. For although it is the man that occurs in the immediacy of perception, by referring to him as “Chioma’s dad” even the Chioma, that which is not immediately in perception becomes identified.

That the pristine African is a community person is the point being made by Nze. For him, therefore, the African human being “lives a life quite inseparable from the rest of the community. He lives in the community by the community and for the community.”²⁰ This relationship is mutual, for the community does not “swallow” the individuals as persons. Individuality or individual autonomy is not obliterated by a totalizing person called “community.” The community is rather a creation of freely relating and autonomous individuals.

In Nze’s view, the African person does not just obtain “membership” of the community, as it were; he is one with the community in ontological “spiritual” way, “where with the community is constituted into being by the community of the

¹⁷ C. B. Nze, *Aspects of African Communalism*, 7-8

¹⁸ J. Nyerere, *Ujaama: Essays on Socialism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

¹⁹ C. B. Nze, *Aspects of African Communalism*, 1.

²⁰ C. B. Nze, *Aspects of African Communalism*, 5.

Communing persons".²¹ It is when African communal existence is expressed in the way that one begins to see the opposition of communalism to rash individualism. African communalism ensures or expresses the basic fact that no one lives or loves a life of isolation. Nze believes that everyone is caught in a web of meritable relationships and interaction that not only bind people together but equally bind them to and with community. For him;

The community determines and influences his life (the individual) as he determines and influences the life the community, and this life cannot be detached from the community. His identification with his environment becomes so strong that he is regarded as synonymous with his community.²²

For Nze, this relationship between and among individual and groups of individuals and the community is critical because it is only when the individual sees him/herself as part and parcel, maker and sustainer of the community, that ensures that the individual is "elevated beyond his subjective individuality"²³

For him, at the physical and "spiritual" realms, the phenomenon responsible for the communal communion is, *Ala* (the Mother Earth). This common belief in the Mother Earth acts as unifying principle. Every individual takes their being therefore, lives, forms and stands on the Mother Earth and even at death, we return therein. For Nze, the Mother earth, is what makes the link and unity between all the members of the community tangible.²⁴

If the type of communalist relation that Nze examines has been vitiated in today's Africa, it would be the worry of empirical investigators. But for us philosophers, it is our concern to rationalize on the values of such commitment and cooperation in a world where atomistic individualism and balkanization of societies have been exalted to the status of immutable truths and existential needs. And realizing that man is condemned to agree to disagree and disagree to agree, unite to live, we must find ways of articulating this communalistic value for the progress of contemporary Africa. By keeping these ideals and values as something to hanker after, we maintain an attitude of hope for the continued survival of humanity.

But if Nze's view is ontologically social and consanguine, Chukwudum B. Okolo presents a more sweeping and ontological perspective of the place of

²¹I. Odimegwu, I. *Integrative Personhood: A Communalist Metaphysical Anthropology* (Zurich, LIT VerlagGmbH Co. an Wien, 2008), 31.

²²I. Odimegwu, I. *Integrative Personhood*, 16.

²³I. Odimegwu, I. *Integrative Personhood*, 6.

²⁴C. B. Okolo. *What is to be African? Essay in Africa Identity* (Enugu: Cecta Publishers, 1993).

communalism in the African universe. In the book, *what is to be African?*²⁵, he conceives communalism in Africa by looking at the African person as a “being with”²⁶ a being that is open to others and the community. Communalism, thus, becomes a “feeling” of internal closeness that is made manifest in social interaction. “Feeling” here does not refer to some psychological or emotional attachment (even though it is part of it), but a much deeper perception that sees communalism as a more or less essential constitutive feature of Africanness.

Although Okolo uses the term “being with” (a term made popular by Heidegger’s analysis of *Dasein* (man)), it is easy to see that the term if properly interpreted, would be “a mere substitution for communalism.”²⁷ Okolo argues that “being with” is the characteristic feature of being African and sees it as an ontological quality. According to him:

We assert that the African is easily identifiable ontologically as a being in the African world. He is not just a being, but a being- with; or again philosophically, the African is not just a human being, but essentially a being with, the very bases of his claim to the title, “African”.²⁸

Okolo explains that this “being-with” is not just in relation with others, but equally in relation with and to the community and other realities created in the universe. Okolo’s retreat to the primordial state of communalism, where the self relates with the others, means that “being-with” others is the very fulcrum of existence. He points that the realness of individuality in Africa is anchored on the relationship with the others in a community. He, thus, avers that, “without the community the individual has no existence”²⁹

Well, if without the community, the individual cannot really exist, it simply means that without the individuals, it would be impossible to conceive a community. For indeed, the individuals, the community and other existents in the universe form a sort of “mystical body” in an inevitable relational web.

Okolo’s concept of “being-with” is deeply ontological and transcends each individual self and the community to embrace the infinite vertical and horizontal relationship that are intertwined between and among them. This relationship is very objective and occurs within the visible and invisible world. However, Okolo argues that

²⁵ C. B. Okolo. *What is to be African?*, 11.

²⁶ Oguejiofor, “How African is Communalism?”, in Ike Odimegwu (ed.) *Perspectives on African Communalism* (London: Trafford Publishers, 2007), 12.

²⁷ C. B. Okolo. *What is to be African?*, 4-5.

²⁸ C. B. Okolo. *What is to be African?*, 6.

²⁹ C. B. Okolo. *What is to be African?*, 11.

inspite of the gigantic universal and mystical interaction going on in the African universe, the relation between and among men is at the centre of all other relations. Human social living and concern is, therefore, what drives all other relationships, and the author calls this "African humanism". Okolo, consequently says; "the African as a being-with is simply his tendency to stick together as a member of a family, with its roots in the extended family system. It means feeling involved with others, existing with and for other, through participatory living"³⁰

There appears to be some degree of ambivalence in the conception of the communal or, more specifically, "being with" in Okolo's perspective. Or how does one reconcile his position that it is an essential feature of being "African" and his view that it can be acquired, nurtured and lost? This is why we believe that "being with" is not synonymous with "communalism" for it seems that it is the tendency of "being-with" that can be acquired, nurtured or lost. It is tendencies that have come under siege by western individualism. Certain institutional and structural devices have appeared in the modern period to attack this tendency of "being-with" and thus, weaken the communalistic ethos of Africa. But we maintain that communalism cannot itself be discredited or become untenable by these tendencies of individualism. That there is a questioning of what is happening to communalism in Africa and what is happening to individualism means that, head or tail, it is communalism that is at issue.

But those who could not sustain the doubt about the communalist ontology of Africa usually turn around to posit traits that betray their tacit belief in it. It is the preponderance of communalism and (especially) the muzzling of individuality that have become the explanation for Africa's low level of development. I have addressed the communalist ontological challenge of political development in Africa in my paper "The Ontological Basis for the Failure of Liberal Democracy in Africa: A Phenomenological Rescue"³¹, where I argued that the fundamental reason for the poor showing of Liberal Democracy in Africa is that it is an attempt to hoist a strictly individualist ontology upon a people with communalist, integrating ontology.

Conclusion

What I have tried to show in this essay is; first of all, that EjioguAmaku's understanding of communalism is mistaken; that his interpretation of its place in Africa is uncharitable

³⁰J. Obi Oguejiofor (ed). *Africa, Philosophy and Public Affairs* (Enugu: Delta Publishers, 1998).

³¹J.C.A. Agbakoba& T. C. Ajah, (eds.). "Relativism and Intercultural Philosophy." (Washington D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2016), 79-104.

and incorrect. I have also shown that his analyses are illogical, invalid and sometimes paradoxical.

Secondly, I have used the positions of Nze and Okolo to point out that communalism is a deeper ontological condition of Africanness or Africanity than Amaku portrayed in his essay. Although my concentration on Amaku's position has not allowed me to go deeply into the conceptual issues involved in communalism, it is not difficult to discern it within the essay, in spite of its restricted focus. I have also reflected on some of these concerns in some other essays.³²

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³²J. N. Agbo. "The Principle of Refraction as the Basis for a Culture of Philosophy in Africa." *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions*, 2/2, (2013), 204-234.