

AFRICAN COMMUNALISM IN AFRICAN SOCIETIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Abstract

Communalism has been claimed as a way of life that characterizes African social existence. This way of life emphasizes the interdependence of the members of a community. The claim and the pursuit for the definition of this concept have been affected by the context of its origination. And while the claim to its peculiarity and exclusiveness has been significantly refuted, the postulation of its centrality in the definition of Africanness has been sustained. The arguments for its contributions to the upliftment and/or obstruction to African development dot the literature of contemporary African Philosophy. This paper acknowledges the strengths and weaknesses of communalism as argued by various scholars and examines the challenges that confront communalist theory and practice in the light of the changes in human social existence occasioned by the advances in technology, communications, mobility and urbanization in the 21st century global village.

Key words: Communalism, African Communalism, African Societies

Introduction

Human actions are basically perceived as governed by thought. Culture, the aggregation of those persistent human actions into permanent modes of group mannerism, flows also deeply from human thought. In the modern times, the challenges and circumstances of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism and their underpinning ideologies provided the background for the systematic search for the rational basis of many aspects of African cultures. Gardner's essay, "Black Philosophy" (1954), though on

stricter scrutiny is nothing more than analysis of meaning of a number of African proverbs, made an important claim that at the base, African cultures exhibit a high regard for mutual obligation and interpersonal dependence of persons in a group. At issue in Gardner's proposition is whether this high regard for mutual obligation can be regarded as product of any form of rational thought, a philosophy. If Gardner felt that this mutual obligation was accentuated by a philosophy, it is an inferior philosophy, dark, sub- and black philosophy that is incomparable with pure and white philosophy, an idealized prerogative of Gardner's race.

African philosophers have moved beyond the negatives of Gardner's proposition to undertake philosophical deconstruction of the philosophy behind this Africa's sense of mutual obligation. The aim is to reveal or construct what Wiredu (2009, 8) regards as philosophical component to African culture, the basis upon which African sense of mutual obligation is built. If, as Aristotle held, happiness is the goal of life, Higgs and Smith (2000, 58), write that for the African, "happiness at least partially consists in living with others, in supporting each other." This line of thought makes fulfillment a communal affair, as it is only realized in, for, and by the community (Nze, 1989, 1). Historically, three terms, communalism, commensalism and communitarianism, emerged in contention as descriptions for this mode of existence that is rooted in the community. While the use of commensality (cf Okafor 1982), and communitarianism (cf Oguejiofor 2006; Matolino 2009), is sparse in literature, most scholars favour communalism as an appropriate philosophy that captures the basis of African culture, that gives life to the sort of living that emphasizes interdependence of community members.

Oguejiofor (2006, 5) has shown the preposterousness of any system of thought that views communalism as exclusively African. In this sense, communalism can even be attributed to people as far away as Indians, Chinese, and Australians. Even Karl Marx lists communalism as one of the evolutionary systems of economics which European societies discarded on their path to capitalism. This vindicates Oguejiofor's position that neither the practice nor the origination of communalism is peculiar to Africa. Despite the possibility and actuality of attribution of communalism to non-African societies, one can still argue that communalism in Africa, in its various dimensions, has certain distinguishing characteristics that set it apart from others. This position holds insofar as it is accepted that communalism forms the basis of African culture, and insofar as it can be proved that African culture is remarkably different from other cultures.

This paper attempts to show the dimensions of African communalism. It seeks to highlight those points that stand African communalism out as a mode of social organization. The paper proceeds as follows: In section one, it seeks to understand the meaning of communalism. Section two undertakes analysis of oral tradition as sources of African Communalism. In section three, the paper examines the various spheres of African communalism. Section four considers communalism in the light of the twenty-first century developments.

Understanding African Communalism

Communalism is understood as emphasis on the primacy of the community over the individual (Oguejiofor 2006, 6). It is an ideological, organizational and relational system which empowers the community to determine the individual in whatever he is and in whatever he becomes. African communalism, on the other hand, is

an ideology, a system of thought that governs the totality of the human acts of the African as a being in the world. It regulates the patterns of his relational behaviours, with insistence that they must be in conformity with ethos laid down by his community. What this means is that both in conception of an inspiration and in their execution, the African is conscious that his acts must conform with the standards set for him by his community. The metaphysics behind this is the African understanding of a person as community-structured being (Odimegwu, 2008, 41). This sense of community-structuredness of the African establishes his essence as a human person on the quality of aggregation of the whole relation he holds with members of his community. Odimegwu (2008) identifies communing as the essence of this relation and locates its beginning in the conjugal relation or union between parents of an individual. Since conception, the formation and calling into existence of a hitherto non-existent being is consequence of this conjugal activity which is an instance of communing, even the individual himself is considered the product of communing. There is here a fundamental shift from Menkiti who refuses to consider the African child as a person and rather accords him/her the status of a thing, an *it*, based on its non-possession of ethical characters (Menkiti, 1984, 176). The range of sanctions which the taking of life of a child attracts in African societies is the same that murdering an adult attracts. This fact shows that African societies make no distinction between the personhood of a child and an adult in Africa. Oyeshile (2006, 113), feels that the error in Menkiti's view that denies personhood to the African child stems from his failure to take note of the potentialities of the child and in thinking that the English neuter "it" is ascribed to an infant in African societies as the English do.

However, Menkiti (1984), and Wiredu (2009), make powerful sense when they hold that the personhood of an African individual is not

merely guaranteed by the fact of his nativity, and the presumed possession of certain universal characteristics like rationality, body and soul, etc., as emphasised in Western tradition. An African gains and loses personhood to the extent that his actions are sanctioned by his community. The African community is an extensive realm that includes the living, the dead, and the unborn, as well as gods and deities of his community, the earth, mountains, sky, etc. (Higgs and Smith, 2000, p. 55). Wiredu sees the preponderance of ethics in this relational chain through which the African person acquires his personhood. In this sense, there is a whole gamut of laws, traditions, and customs around which the community organizes itself. Metaphysical order is maintained by deferential observance of these laws, traditions and customs. In regulating the life and activity of the individual, the community guides him/her against taking actions that have negative consequence not only for the individual but for the whole community. The emphasis here is not only in abstaining from negatively consequential acts but also in participating in observance of positively rewarding ones, in communing with other members of the community, in sharing with them the community's language, way of thinking, values, worldviews and general culture of the community. To do this is to be reasonable (Odimegwu 2008, 42). This reasonableness involves dialogue with the community, reasoning together with members of community, joining, rejoining and conjoining with them. Senghor (1965, 16) also expresses this sense of conjoining in another way when he writes that African communalism entails "people conspiring together, *con-spiring* in the basic Latin sense, united among themselves even to the very centre of their being." The possibility of community itself in the absence of reasonableness between community individuals is precluded as "reasonableness makes community and communion with other persons possible and communion with others is the ground of the possibility for both self-realization and community-realization"

(Odimegwu 2008 42). This point emphasizes reciprocity in the relation between individual and community. They mutually make and reinforce each other even as they can weaken and or destroy one another.

One whose engagement in all these is in line with community's expectation is reputed to be a person and one who fails is a no person. Again, this is not a closed system. One who fails the test today can pass it tomorrow and can, therefore, be subsequently have his personhood restored and his life reintegrated into community (Menkiti, 1984, 171). The foreground for this is retracing of step, in amendment of ways to accord with community's expectation. The whole process of socialization of children in Africa seeks to implant in them the consciousness of the advantages of this line of thought and the consequences of threading the negative path. The seriousness with which this is done can only be explained by the consequences which too await non-serious parents. Not only that they stand the risk of having their children fail to acquire personhood but they also face personal risk of losing their own personhood. This way, the African community ensures that the grooming of a child, his insertion into the ways of life of society is not left to the personal idiosyncrasies and decision of his parents.) This is the basis of the African saying that "it takes a village to raise a child" (Ikuenobe 2006, p. 1)

Critics often point at the tension generated between the individual and community in the observance of African communalism. In this light, African communalism is viewed as shackling the individual, suppressing his individuality and of producing one dimensional individuals through maintaining an authoritarian hold on him. On account of this observation, Gyekye labels African communalism, especially as propagated by Menkiti as radical communitarianism which rides roughshod over the individual's autonomy and rights (Cf

Matolino 2009, p. 160). Ikuenobe (2006, 84), views such criticisms as arising from misunderstanding. He explains that what the African “community does as a normative structure, epistemic context, and conceptual scheme is to circumscribe the context of relevant alternatives and counter-evidence, and to provide some basis for one’s rationality, imagination, and creativity.” Gbadegesin (1998, p. 296) quoting Busia, aligns himself with Ikuenobe and writes that in African communalism as practiced by the Akan of Ghana:

...there is everywhere, the heavy accent on family, on blood relatives, the group of kinsfolk held together by common origin and a common obligation to its members, to those who are living and those who are dead.... The individual is brought up to think of himself in relation to this group and to behave always in such a way as to bring honor and not disgrace to its members. The ideal set before him [or her] is that of mutual helpfulness and cooperation within the group of kinsfolk.

The implication of this is that the so-called authoritarian nature of the African communalism has positive effects. It is geared towards the production of an individual who is useful to himself and his community. Thus, instead of stifling the individual, African community inspires and motivates him to great heights. All the acts of rolling out drums in celebration of an achieving community member undertaken by African communities means that free air is given to the individual Africans to operate and to enhance themselves within certain bounds without which communal life, and indeed society is impossible.

Oral Tradition and African Communalism

For most African philosophers, communalism is more of a question of reconstruction of the pre-colonial African world. The truth of this

is hinged on two factors. The first factor captures the fact that the life practices that communalism inspires among the Africans have waned considerably in the postcolonial world in which African philosophers are philosophizing. The second factor recognizes the non-availability of literate culture in pre-colonial Africa where communal living was a norm. In the absence of this literate culture, the question then becomes: how does the African philosopher arrive at knowledge of pre colonial African world for a successful reconstruction of the philosophical basis of that world? This question can be put more directly: how did African philosophers arrive at the conviction that communalism was the foundation of pre-colonial African societies? Many African scholars who have given thought to this question locate the answer in African oral tradition, (Cf. Wiredu, 2009; Ryan and Majoza, 1998; Imbo, 2002). Djeli Mahmoudou Kouyate, the Malian griot whose story is told in D. T. Niane's *Sundiata: The Epic of Old Mali*, captured the essence of the importance which African scholars attach to African oral tradition. Accordingly, he views the essence of oral tradition in bridging the gap between the past and the present, in ensuring that the tools that made past survival possible are available in the present.

Oral tradition is defined as “transmission of ideas from generation to generation by means of the spoken word and any associated devices short of writing” (Wiredu 2009,10). Associated devices can include proverbs, art, and architecture. Oral tradition provides impetus for spontaneous creativity, as it affords limitless opportunity for hermeneutic of meanings of the story being shared. In this matrix, Ryan and Majoza identify both the story teller and the listener as agencies of this interpretation. Accordingly, they write that: “In making demand on the listener, the performance dynamic prompts her/him to become self-conscious about what and how s/he knows,

and how s/he remakes this knowledge.” (Ryan and Majoza, 1998, p. 126).

Beyond the advantages of African oral tradition to African modern scholarship in general, Wiredu writes that they frequently have philosophical significance (p.10), as they possess knowledge that can be converted into philosophical use. In the presence of the oral traditions the African philosopher takes up the role of extractor of knowledge (Imbo 2002). In this sense, African philosophy becomes a wide-ranging extractive process that involves recollection, reflection, analysis, interpretation and writing down. This is the process through which the philosopher lays bare the hidden meaning which oral traditions contain. The condition for the possibility of this is to see oral traditions as texts whose inherent meanings can be extracted through hermeneutical interpretation. It is through this process of interpretation that African communalism emerged as the philosophical basis of African cultures. Wiredu’s practical hermeneutical example goes thus:

My own favorite among the art motifs I have found in Akan culture is that depicting a crocodile with one stomach but two heads locked up in a fight over food. I think this symbol captures both the most fundamental problem of ethics and its solution. The problem is that although we all as individuals have our own legitimate interests (symbolized by the two separate heads), excessive fixation upon those interests could lead us to lose sight of the fact that, ultimately, we all share the same interest, namely, our common well being (symbolized by the com-mon stomach). That loss of perspective is the root of conflict, and its restoration should facilitate that agreement on the sharing of assets which recognizes the interests of all parties concerned. (Wiredu p.10).

Spheres of Communalism in African Societies

Extant literature on African communalism focuses on three spheres of influence of communalism in African societies. Those spheres are

social, political and economic. We feel strongly that the fourth sphere of influence, the religious, has not been paid attention by African scholars. Any consideration that focuses on the social, the political and the economics and loses sight of the religious may give false impression that African society is essentially a materialistic world concerned just with how to organize society for the material comfort of the Africa.

The social is the starting point of influence of communalism in Africa. Here communalism regulates human relations. The philosophy of *njiko ka*, an Igbo aphorism meaning that unity is strength is the principle underlying the social sphere of communalism. It is also this social sphere that plays the biggest role in demarcating the boundary of community whose traditions bind an individual. Thus, the community emphasized in communalism is not just any community, like that of believers, of sportsmen, of classes, and so on. It is community of blood-related individuals who in one way or the other trace their origins to a single ancestor. This means that blood relatedness marks the boundary of community in African communism, and the tie is stronger when the blood relationship is a closer one. In this sense, anyone not related by blood ties to the community persons is regarded as an outsider. This communalistic conception of the social has implication in other spheres of communalism. In politics it determines who falls under the political authority of the community, in economics who participates in the economic life of the community, and in religion it determines who should worship or not worship in the community shrine.

Insight into how communalism operates at the political level is provided by Julius Nyerere (1968). According to Nyerere, communal African societies are models of egalitarianism devoid of classes. It establishes association of members on the basis of equality

and fraternity. Under this arrangement, the exercise of political power is not based on coercion but on cooperation of members and decision is often arrived at by consensus. The fear that the quality of decision arrived at can be questioned since the masses do not always reason rightly is easily deflated by Odera Oruka's sage philosophy's insistence that communal societies possess wise individuals acknowledged by all whose position on issues serve as guide to their communities.

At the economic level, communalism insists on the egalitarian welfare of members. Land is reputed the most powerful piece of property in communal African societies and so is owned in common by all community members. The essence of this is to ensure equitable distribution to members of society as their needs and ability demand. Emphasis placed on land highlights the agrarian nature of the traditional society (Nyerere 1967). The poor were not abandoned to their fate and were always provided the communal leverage necessary to succeed in the community. Thus, if a young man was poor and could not afford the seedlings needed to plant in his farm, the community members supplied. Ekei (2001) holds that this relationship between the poor and the community is factored in the term used to describe the poor among the Igbo. The Igbo language for the poor is *ogbenye*, (let the community give), and expresses the responsibility the community assumes for the welfare of its members. We see the dramatisation of this in the hero of Achebe's *Things Fall of Apart*. Okonkwo, the protagonist of that novel suffered the misfortune of being born into poverty on account of what the community reckoned as his father's laziness. The community members who had noticed the industry of the young Okonkwo provided him seedlings to plant his farm in keeping with the communalistic spirit that prevailed in the society. What obtained here was more a case of sharing and fulfilment of one's

responsibility to community. It is certainly not an act of charity. The same attitude was not extended to the lazy. Indeed, laziness was abhorred and the Igbo refer to the lazy individual as *efulefu*, a nonentity. Nyerere's claim that traditional African society was devoid of class and class division, can only be said to have its foundation in this attitude towards the poor. This also ensured that inherent struggle occasioned by the economic gap between the rich and the poor in the Western world was never witnessed in traditional Africa. It was a society of all for all, never an entirely materialistic world but one that moderated its appetite for acquisition by taking care of the needs of all.

Religion is another sphere influenced by communalism in Africa. As a consequence all religious activities in traditional Africa is communal. This means that the worshipping community admits no outsiders. It also means that deities and gods are sensible insofar as they are locative in a community. Their power and relevance begin and end in the community where they are found. Equally, religion provides avenue for direct interaction with ancestors, the gods, and deities as invisible members of community.

Communalism and the Twenty-First Century Reality

The communal practices that form the focus of our discussion are, for the main, set in the traditional Africa. There is a remarkable difference between the outlook of the present Africa and that of traditional Africa. Nyerere (1968) links this difference to colonial onslaught on the African soul marked with wholesome importation of Western values and practices in Africa. Oguejiofor sees the difference as extending beyond colonialism. The realities of world development manifest in technological, communication and information advancement, as well as urbanization are powerful factors capable of eroding communalism and the practices it inspires

in the present age. In the light of postulation by philosophers like Oguejiofor linking the shrinking influence of communalism to modern realities, can it be rightly said that present realities have rendered communalism impracticable and the ideals it urges useless.

To begin to answer this question we must accept that communalism has its own problems. Many African philosophers like Gyeke, Oguejiofor, Nyerere, etc., have enunciated these problems. Nyerere for instance claims that traditional African societies inspired by communalism are built on sexism and therefore promote inequality among the genders. He also feels that the scarcity of resources in traditional African societies engendered ignorance (1968, p. 339 – 340). If Nyerere is right in holding that ignorance pervaded traditional African societies, his diagnosis that scarcity of resources gave rise to this ignorance is faulty. Rather we see it as the function of the closed nature of communal African societies. A closed society that shuts itself against other societies has little capacity to learn new ways and to integrate same into its own scheme of things. Thus, the pervading ignorance of traditional African societies can be attributed to absence of collaboration among communities resulting in non-sharing of useful information that would have aided mutual survival of members. Do these inherent pitfalls vitiate the possibility of constituting communalism into a useful philosophy in Africa? Put differently, can we, in this age when sustainable development has assumed the measurement of worth of any sort of discourse, still find a role for African communalism? If yes, can those roles be universalized or are they to be factored as solution to African problems.

Kwame Nkrumah has genuinely alerted us of the type of cannon that should be avoided in answering these questions: care should be taken not to confuse African society itself with communalism. While

Nkrumah notes that a return to traditional African society is not “worthy of ingenuity and efforts of our people,” he feels that the spirit of communalism is worthy of emulation. (Cf Oguejiofor 2006, p.10). Nkrumah’s response aside, we are confident that foreclosing the possibility of positive contribution of African communalism in the twenty-first century will amount to a betrayal of human interpretative capacity. Eco (2013) calls attention to limitless power of the interpretative mind. He alludes to Rorty and argues that the use that can be made of a screwdriver to tighten screws is not imposed by the nature of screwdriver but by human subjectivity. He lists other possible uses of screwdriver to include scratching the ear, opening a package, committing a homicide, and so on. The same can be said of communalism, that if we do not find uses for it in the twenty-first century, the failure is not due to communalism itself but due to our inability to take to task the creativity of interpretation.

Thus, the starting point of any interpretative articulation of the uses of communalism in the 21st century must focus on the community-consciousness inspired by communalism. Despite the narrowness of traditional Africa’s sense of community, we can attempt a projection of the consciousness which that sense of community generated in traditional Africa into the modern world. This is at the root of what both Nkrumah and Nyerere attempted to do even though the proposals were not followed up by subsequent African thinkers. Nyerere himself made the mistake of recreating traditional African societies in Tanzania when the spirit of communalism that regulated those societies was yet to percolate into the consciousness of Tanzanians. To avoid Nyerere’s error, in articulating new uses of communalism in the contemporary world, African philosophers should place emphasis on expansion of feeling of community that will accommodate all humanity. This is more urgent in the face of new forms of relations that are receiving impetus from interactions

engendered by globalization. Communalism can moderate the sense of competition and rivalry which globalization inspires in the world. The ground for this is a new interpretation of communalism that will view it as a new humanism emphasising the brotherhood of all human persons. In the present, the failure to achieve this lies behind the criticisms against communalism in the Western world. W.G. Carson (2004, p. 202), gives insight into the nature of such criticisms:

The difficulty with communalism, whether dressed up as community or social capital, is its inbuilt potential for exclusion and intolerance of otherness.... On the more practical plane, it will be recalled ... how in Europe, paranoiac and xenophobic responses to migrants and asylum seekers might already be spilling over as obstructions to the reconstruction of debates about crime, security, safety and disorder in general. As recently as June of last year the European Forum for Urban Safety (EFUS) was reiterating the Naples Manifesto of 2000: "We want cities to be hospitable to other citizens of the world, migrants and travellers. The problems linked to immigration cannot be resolved by criminalisation and the rejection of diversity."

Thus, instead of closing the community against strangers, doors should be opened to them, for a new interpretation yielded by communalism will take for granted the possession of common ancestors of all mankind. Not only will this enhance global interaction, it will also lower the level of tension prevalent in present day Africa often generated by unhealthy ethnic rivalry, and rather explore the advantages inherent in that sort of diversity. We can move forward from here to explore the model of sharing advocated by communalism. The present day reality where some people live in extreme wealth while others die in extreme penury can be moderated by the form of sharing inherent in communalism. Again, strict

loyalty and adherence to traditions and laws of community can be explored to yield strict loyalty to laws of state.

Conclusion

The communalism of traditional African societies was a system of social, political, economic, and religious organizations. This communalism was founded on morality and was built on the principle of cooperation, fraternity, mutuality and sharing among members. We have argued that the philosophy of African communalism can be interpreted and reinterpreted in order to find its sustainable relevance in the contemporary world.

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