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TRINITARIAN UNITY AND AFRICAN COMMUNALISM

Azenda IKYEGH, CSSp.

INTRODUCTION

The mystery and doctrine of the Trinity, which lies at the centre of the Christian faith, could also be found and expressed outside the Christian world. The encounter with this mystery can evoke a deep experience embracing all our humanity - emotions, reason, will, desire, heart and the like. The response and expression of this encounter by different people varies from place to place, culture to culture, and religion to religion. For example, the reaction and expression of the encounter with the mystery of the Trinity by Christians, is that of praise, worship and proclamation.

For Africans, this encounter is living the mystery through their communalistic lifestyle. In African set up families, tribes, ethnic groups and cultural structures are headed by respective kinship patterns based on communal principles. From the nuclear family to extended family structure and community, there was (is) a head. The different communities within a given culture with a common language and other cultural norms and values formed nationhood with an overall monarch as their head. Peter Sarpong holds that with this profound and well-grounded arrangement, there were and still are, self-governing, autonomous entities, and in that, all members of the African family, tribe, ethnic groups and communities took

part, directly or indirectly, in the daily running of the African people.¹

This African philosophy of life which is all encompassing is built on African communalism. Through it indigenous Africans express not only their communal feelings, worldviews, moral and cultural values based on closed-knit relationship among their kith and kin within a socio-cultural setting; but more profoundly, promotes unity, togetherness, sister/brotherliness and cooperation which are vital elements of African communalism.² These vital elements (love, unity, togetherness and cooperation) are also found in the community of the Blessed Trinity. In this paper, I intend to look at the concept and unity of the Trinity. I shall also look at the concept of communalism, communalistic way of living by the Africans, and then, link it up with the community and unity of the Blessed Trinity.

TRINITY

Trinity is the central doctrine of the Christian faith, which states that the one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In other words, there are three persons sharing or participating in the same substance or one nature. These three persons are co-equal, co-eternal, and consubstantial, and they receive the same worship from Christians.³ *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia*, on the same footing, states that Trinity is a

¹ P. Sarpong, *Ghana In Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, Accra: Ghana Publishing Cooperation, 1974.

²E. E. Etta, E. D. Duimgba and O. O. Asukwo, "African Communalism and Globalisation", *African Research Review: An International Multi-disciplinary Journal*, Ethiopia Vol. 10(3), Serial No.42, June, 2016: 302-316. [Online] Available at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrrrev.v10i3.20>> [Accessed 26 May, 2019].

³T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, Edinburg: T. & T. Clark, 1988.

distinctively Christian doctrine that God exists in three persons, Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. The unity of God is maintained by insisting that the three persons are of the same substance.⁴

According to Jimmy Akin, "the term 'Trinity' came into use in the 100s, and its precise meaning was elaborated in the 300s by the first two ecumenical councils – Nicaea 1 and Constantinople 1, in 325 and 381."⁵ The doctrine of the Trinity arose in the early Church due to the fact that some Jews held that the divinity of Christ and the presence of God in the Church through the Holy Spirit are indisputable. "The fact that there is only one God is stressed in the Scriptures of the Old Testament..., but when Jesus came he revealed to us more about the life of God, specifically that the one God who exists does so as three Persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."⁶

The Trinitarian doctrine was justified to stand at the centre of the Christian faith. The doctrine also summarised the basic truth of Christianity, that "the people are served by God through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit"⁷ Owing to this fact, they held that the doctrinal formulation about the nature of this God is the Source of all other mysteries of faith. This doctrine was given Biblical justification by many people. For example, Richard McBrien observes that "in the Old Testament, the people of Israel depicted God as their father, and personified him through the concept of word (*Dabar*), the

⁴D. Crystal, Ed. *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia*, New York: The Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 1230.

⁵ J. Akin, *The Fathers Know Best: Your Essential Guide To The Teachings Of The Early Church*, California: Catholic Answers, Inc., 2010, p. 108.

⁶ J. Akin, 2010, p.108.

⁷R. P. McBrien, Ed. *The Harper Collins Encyclopaedia of Catholicism*, New York: Happy Collins Publication, 1995, p. 1270.

spirit (*Ruah*), Wisdom (*Hokmah*) and presence (*Shekinah*).⁸ Again, in the Old Testament, God had identified himself with the name “I Am” (Ex. 3: 14), and in the New Testament, Jesus applies this name to himself as well. In John 8: 58, when questioned about how he has special knowledge of Abraham, Jesus replies, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I Am.” According to Zondervan, “this is one of the most powerful statements uttered by Jesus. When he said that he existed before Abraham was born, he undeniably proclaimed his divinity. Not only did Jesus say that he existed before Abraham; he also applied God’s holy name ‘I Am’ (Ex. 3: 14) to himself. This claim demands a response. It cannot be ignored... But Jesus is God.”⁹

In the New Testament, God is called the Father of Jesus Christ 170 times: 4 times in Mark, 15 times in Luke, 42 in Mathew, and 109 times in John. In the New Testament, the word *Abba* (Aram, Father) is used only three times in the scripture: once in Mark’s gospel (14:36) and twice in Paul’s letters (Romans 8:15 and Gal 4:6).¹⁰ The Holy Spirit is identified as God in Acts 5: 3-5, in which Peter addresses a man named Ananias who had lied about a donation he was giving. Peter asks why he would lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back of the proceeds of the land. Peter concludes, “You have not lied to men but to God” (Acts 5: 4). The most explicit triadic texts, in the New Testament about the doctrine of the Trinity include the baptismal formula in Mathew 28: 19, the benediction in 2 Cor 13:14, the account of Jesus’ baptism in Mathew 3:16-17; and the description of the whole economy of salvation in

⁸R. P. McBrien, 1995, p. 1270.

⁹Zondervan, Ed. *Life Application Study Bible: New International Version*, Michigan: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1991, p. 1895.

¹⁰R. P. McBrien, 1995, p. 1270.

Ephesians 1:13-14.¹¹ Although these texts cannot be said to express or contain completely the doctrine of the Trinity, they however, give us a profound insight into the saving works of God who redeems us through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Belief in the doctrine of the trinity is said to have started as far back as the first century. However, it emerged fully in the 4th Century, due largely to the effort of St. Athanasius and the Cappadocian fathers like Gregory of Nazianzus (329 – 389), Basil the Great (330 – 379), Gregory Nyssa (335 – 395) to mention a few. These people not only respond sharply to the doctrinal challenges of Arius and Eunomius about the status of Jesus Christ, but also promulgated some dogmas to protect the nature of Jesus in particular and Trinity as a whole.

These great theologians of the time, propounded technical concepts such as persons (*hypostasis*) and substance (*ousia*) and relined them to accommodate theological concerns. In doing so, they affirmed the nature of the one God. They held that God is unthinkable apart from God's concrete existence in the economy of redemption in the persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In other words, the one God exists as three persons. They maintained that God the Father, God the son Jesus Christ, and God the Holy Spirit are equally responsible for the salvation of humankind and thus each must be divine.¹² The doctrine of the Trinity formulated in the 4th century was defended and preserved by the succeeding councils, both in the East and in the West. In the medieval period, many theologians such as Gregory Palamas in the East and Saints Anselm and Thomas Aquinas in the West, contributed greatly

¹¹R. P. McBrien, 1995, p. 1270.

¹²D. MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, London: Penguin Books, 2009.

to the refinement and survival of the doctrine of Trinity. Their contributions enable the doctrine to stand on its feet till the coming of Vatican II and beyond.

TRINITARIAN UNITY

The concept of 'unity' in general entails the quality, condition, or state of being one or being whole. This concept according to Torrance, finds its full meaning in the Trinity.¹³ This is because Trinity described the oneness of triune God as well as the union and integrity of the person of Jesus Christ, who is both divine and human. The Trinitarian unity is not something opposed to diversity but to division within that which is one. "Within the one God there exists a diversity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are distinct persons in one divine nature or essence."¹⁴ This unity with diversity stands opposed to any type of monism of being or acting. The Trinitarian unity is expressed in the interpenetration of the three persons in one God:

The father is wholly in the Son and wholly in the Holy Spirit; the Son is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Son.¹⁵

This means that the unity of the Trinity is unity in diversity. It is the revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in eternal correlation, interpenetration, love and communion, which make them one God. Leonard Boff explains this well when he says that:

¹³ T. F. Torrence, 1988.

¹⁴ Michael Downey, Ed. *New Dictionary of Catholicism*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993, p. 983.

¹⁵ R. P. McBrien, 1995, p. 1271.

If God were one, there would be solitude and concentration in unity and oneness. If God were two, a duality, Father and Son only, there would be separation (one being distinct from the other) and exclusion (one not being the other). But God is three, a Trinity, and being three avoids solitude, overcomes separation and surpasses exclusion.¹⁶

Boff goes on to say that God the Father is the source and origin of all divinity. And being so, he communicates his whole substance to the Son and the Holy Spirit. The three are consubstantial and so one sole God.

On another note, Torrance holds that the Trinitarian unity is a unity which exists from God, who is above all an absolute Spirit and who thinks and loves.¹⁷ For such people, the supreme understanding of God himself is known as the Son, and his infinite love is the Holy Spirit. Lawrence Boadt would prefer to talk of the unity of Trinity as the three co-existing simultaneously and co-eternally right from the beginning.¹⁸ This view derives from what is stated in Gen. 1: 26 and the beginning of the first chapter of the gospel of John. Gen. 1: 26 states that "Then God said, let 'us' make human being in 'our' image, after 'our' likeness ..." There are conflicting views about the use of two plural words 'us' and 'our' by God, in this text. One view says that these are plural words in Hebrew, both of which refer to the Hebrew word '*Elohim*', which means to strengthen the concept or idea of God as being Almighty in His ability to do all things. This type of Hebrew grammar process is called: The 'Law of Majestic Plurality' or

¹⁶ L. Boff, *Trinity and Society*, London: Burns and Oates, 1992, p. 3.

¹⁷ T. F. Torrance, 1988.

¹⁸ L. Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*, New York: Paulist Press, 1984.

the 'Rule of Plural Majesty'.¹⁹ These words were used, therefore, to denote God's majesty. Another view says that God was consulting the 'heavenly court'. However, Boff holds that these plural words spelt out clearly the co-existence of the Trinitarian unity, and the participation of humanity into the communion with the triune God.²⁰ This is because from Job. 33: 4 and Psalm 104: 30, we do know that God's Spirit was present in the creation. From Colossians 1: 16 we know that Christ, God's Son (the Word), was at work in the creation.

The Johannine gospel on the same footing begins by affirming this unity and communion:

In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God and the Word was God, He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things came into being, not one thing came into being except through him ... (Jn. 1: 1-3).

Here, we can see that John not only affirms the pre-existent divine Son - the Word, but also his unity with the Father. And it was through this Word and by the power of the Holy Spirit that the Father created the world and everything in it. In line with this Boff again writes:

Because of the perichoresis and communion, everything in the Trinity is triadic. Each person acts in union with the others, even when we consider actions belonging to one or attributed to one: creation by the Father, incarnation of the Son, the coming of the spirit. The Son sent by the Father, becomes flesh by the

¹⁹James Ballemmy, *Who is the "us" when God stated "let us make man in our image"?* 2013. [Online] Available at <<https://ebible.com/questions/3589-who-is-the-us-when-god-stated-let-us-make-man-in-our-image>> [Accessed 26 May, 2019].

²⁰ L. Boff, 1992.

virtue of the life - giving spirit. The spirit comes upon Mary and fills the life of the just, sent by the Father at the request of the Son.²¹

No wonder then, Jesus prayed to his Father that his followers be united just as the three of them are united, as could be seen in Jn. 17. This means that the unity of the believers is to be modelled on the shared purpose and character of the Trinitarian unity. This unity forms the basis and justification for the unity in creation and humanity. The community of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit then, can be said to be the prototype of the human community in all but different cultures all over the universe.

COMMUNALISM

To give a single definition or description of the term 'communalism' that would be acceptable to everyone is an uphill task. This is due to the different conceptions, beliefs, interpretations and practices, people from different fields, groups, cultures and societies attach to it. Communalism may be seen as a theory or system of government in which each commune is virtually an independent state and the nation is merely a federation of such states. Etta, Dimgbe and Asukwo maintain that on a universal note, Communalism is conceived as a system that integrates communal ownership and federations of highly localized independent communities.²² In line with the above definition, Murray Bookchin also sees communalism as a theory of government or a system of

²¹L. Boff, 1992, p. 6.

²²E. E. Etta, E. D. Dimgbe and O. O. Asukwo, "African Communalism and Globalisation", *African Research Review: An International Multi-disciplinary Journal*, Ethiopia Vol. 10(3), Serial No.42, June, 2016: 302-316. [Online] Available at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrrev.v10i3.20>> [Accessed 26 May, 2019].

government in which independent communities participate in a federation as well as the principles and practice of communal ownership.²³

Another view on communalism is that it is a philosophy and practice which advocates followers of a particular religion to have allegiance to their own religious belief and commitment. Avery Dulles, for example, writes that the whole purpose of the teaching doctrines of the Catholic Church is to help her members to continue to deepen their belief and commitment to their faith, to be united and loyal to her teaching, which in turn, helps the Church to be successful in her mission from one generation to the next.²⁴

The Economic Development Institute (AEDI)²⁵ defines communalism as a strong allegiance limited to one's own ethnic group, commonly based on sharing history and cultures, characterized by collective cooperation and ownership by members of a community. Here, basic constitutive elements are spelt out, which together describe what communalism is. These are cultural history and values that enhance collective cooperation that make a given culture peculiar. Tunde Obadina, not only agrees with the above definition of communalism, but also adds that communalism understood in this context, gives a strong identity with and devotion to the interest of one's own minority or ethnic group rather than

²³M. Bookchim, What is Communalism? The Democratic Dimension of Anarchism. [Online] Available at https://www.democracynature.org/vol3/bookchin_communalism.htm [Accessed 26 May, 2019].

²⁴A. Dulles, *Models of the Church: A Critical Assessment of the Church in all its Aspects*, 2nd ed. Dublin: VERITAS, 1987.

²⁵Africa Economic Development Institute (AEDI) *Africa: Communalism, Barriers and Economics*. [Online] Available at <http://www.africaecon.org> [Accessed 25 May, 2019].

those of society as a whole.²⁶ In general, then, communalism can be said to be a belief and practice, that people who belong to a specific group like the Africans, share common elements like history, language, and culture. Here, membership of the group is strictly determined by the criteria that define the community and afford members rights and loyalty.

The concept and practice of communalism is as old as humanity itself and can be said to be found in different cultures, societies, governments, countries and continents of the world. For example, it is practised in America, Europe, Australia, Asia, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Nepal, etc. However, how the theory or philosophy of communalism is organised and practiced differs from place to place, culture to culture, country to country continent to continent; and with different insights and meanings, and at different levels and magnitudes. For example, in the Western world, communalism is seen and practiced as a theory or system of government in which virtually autonomous local communities are loosely in federation. In the Indian sub-continent context, communalism has come to be associated and practiced as a philosophy of unity, in relation to tensions and clashes between different religious communities in various regions. Communalism in South Asia is used to denote the differences between the various religious groups and difference among the people of different community. In other words, it is used to catalyse communal violence between those groups. However, below, we shall focus on the concept, understanding and practice of communalism in African context, in relation to the community and unity of the Blessed Trinity.

²⁶T. Obadinam, The Pitfalls of Communalism. [Online] Available at <<http://www.africaeconomicanalysis.org>> [Accessed 25 May, 2019].

AFRICAN COMMUNALISM

African communalism refers to a type of living which enhances social solidarity and cohesion among Africans. In other words, communalism is the social life of the Africans which is founded on the belief that all human beings are members of one family of humankind. This belief is a unifying force of the Africans which enhances the unity of families, villages, towns, communities, even countries of the continent.²⁷ Traditional African society has a great asset in its practice of a mode of life called communalism. This used to be and still is, in some cultures of the continent, the bedrock and the result of the wonderful relationship prevalent in the families and communities as well as the purpose of the existence of the societies and of the African people.

According to Chukwuemeka Nze, among traditional Africans, people's lives and ways of living are inseparable from families and the rest of the community. They live in the community, by the community and for the community. Nze explains the relationship between the individual and his/her community in the following words:

The community determined and influences his [her] life as he [she] demined and influences the life of the community. And hence his [her] life cannot be detached from the community, his [her] identification

²⁷ See Benezet Bujo, "On the Road Toward an African Ecclesiology: Reflections on the Synod." *The African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, ed. Browne Maura (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 140; Okechukwu A. Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity* (New York: Paragon House, 1994), 4; and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The Value of African Religious Beliefs and Practices for Christian Theology," *African Theology En Route*, eds. Kofi Appiah-Kubi, and Sergio Torres (New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 110-111.

with his [her] environment becomes strong that he [she] is regarded as synonymous with his [her] community.²⁸

Owing to this fact, an African is always conscious of his/her self in the community. The idea of belonging to each other permeates the whole African consciousness, and this broad concept satisfies them sufficiently in their day to day activities of life. It is always at the back of the African's mind that the consequences of his/her actions affect not only him/her but also the whole society. Commenting on this Nze has this to say:

In deed everybody is related to everybody else and this principle is the basis of the life in the African community, it is the fountain - head of African solidarity. The principle is at the root of economic and social relationships; it governs property ownership and fathoms the depth of the interdependence and inter-relatedness of human being in the community.²⁹

The spirit of collectivism among Africans could be found in almost every aspect of their lives. It could be expressed in property ownership, marriage, as well as welcoming a visitor or dealing with a stranger. The spirit of communalism is so strong and functional, such that one sometimes wonders how much of the individual is left. It is in line with this that Nze again writes:

While a member of the family tries and strives to satisfy his [her] personal needs and to develop his [her] abilities, he [she] sees all his [her] efforts and aspirations as aimed at maintaining and sustaining his

²⁸C. Nze, *Aspects of African Communism*, Onitsha: VERITAS Publication, 1989, p. 1.

²⁹C. Nze, 1989, p. 4.

[her] relationship (and the being of) other members of the family of which he [she] is a part. Any act or behaviour on the part of any member of the family which affects this relationship is like a metaphysical contagion which affects the entire family - past, present and future generations. Whatever any of the family does, he [she] must pattern it form, as well as, direct it towards achieving, the goals and ideals of the family in order not to cart away the soil on which he [she] stands.³⁰

Some people equate African communalism to fraternalism. It is fraternalism in the sense that it symbolises a form of life of a people, whose different members are held together by some parental link. It is fraternal also, because the link existing is blood relationship. "The sociability in African community is, therefore, based on kinship, on common blood relationship since all descend from common ancestors."³¹

In his book *Aspects of African Communalism*, Nze states clearly that in African world view, a person who refuses to conform to family and community, and focuses on self only is discarded by the community. This accepted practice and view explains the pain and stigma associated with ostracism among Africans. In the words of Nze, "the individual so ostracised feels like a fish out of water. He is isolated and cut off from the rest of the people like the embryo severed from its mother, he [she] withers away."³² This means that in African context, one only becomes authentically a human being when such a person lives and acts in the community. This communion and participation define and constitute an African person. This system does not only qualify the individuality and personality

³⁰C. Nze, 1989, p. 5.

³¹C. Nze, 1989, p. 6.

³²C. Nze, 1989, p. 14.

of a person, but also offers one an opportunity to develop an authentic relationship with nature as well.

In communitarian African society, an individual is not alone, but always belongs and relates to members of his/her family and the community. 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."³³ And this is the motocidity of African communalism.

LINK BETWEEN TRINITARIAN UNITY AND AFRICAN COMMUNALISM

The family which is one of the main units of every society is the foundation of African Communalism. It provides an intriguing way to understand the mystery of the trinity. In most African cultures and societies, the figure of the 'father' is not only central but also forms one of the axes around which societies and cultures are organised and united.³⁴ In the African worldview, the father of the family is always looked upon as somebody, who has been endowed with 'knowledge', 'power,' 'wisdom' and 'love' to make decisions for the family. He is regarded as a symbol of unity in the family and in the society. This is because of his power and love for his wife/vies and children, who are distinct persons but united together as one family. The father's 'power' and 'love' in this context can be said to be the attribute of the Holy Spirit. This type of paternalism is basically making the family object of help, but not subject of autonomous actions, which in turn,

³³C. Nze, 1989, p. 9.

³⁴ It is undeniable that there might also be matrilineal or matriarchal family structures in Africa like among the Ashanti of Ghana, or Umoja in Samburu of northern Kenya but the predominant structure among Africans is patriarchal.

enhances good unity, relationship and development of personal and social freedom of the community. Boff confirms this when he says:

This type of patriarchal and patrimonialist (on the political level) society projects an image of God that suits it, since it buttresses its existence and legitimises its behaviour. God is represented as the almighty Father, supreme judge and absolute Lord of life and death.³⁵

Moreover, Boff once argued that God is one but never alone. God is always the living together and co - existence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and three existing from the beginning, revealing each other, knowing one another and communicating to each other from the beginning.³⁶ As mentioned before, in African communalism, one is never alone. The individual is always part of the whole and the action of the collectivism is the action of the individual. No wonder, a story was told of how a European missionary once asked a young, unmarried African man whether he would like to become a priest. His answer was 'No, but my future son will'. The missionary demanded, why not yourself? He answered, 'What is the difference between me and my son?

The above story might be helpful in understanding the concept of Trinity in the African set up. The young man is already aware that he is the 'father' and that he is going to marry and have a 'son' who would become a priest. He knows that he has an essential connection with his son through generation just like in the Trinity the son is generated by the Father. Similarly, the Holy Spirit in African context could be understood as the woman the future wife of the young man.

³⁵L. Boff, 1992, p. 14.

³⁶L. Boff, 1992, p. 8.

Moreover, the Biblical descriptions and understanding of the Holy Spirit in some cases, allude to the feminine dimensions of life. For example, in Luke 1:35, when the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would conceive and bear a son, she questioned: How can this be possible since she is still a virgin? The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." In John 3: 3-8, Jesus tells Nicodemus that no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. In other words, though a person is born physically of human parents, he or she must be born spiritually by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the 'power, the 'womb' where the African child must come from. Therefore, the African father, son and wife are completely united as one. Whatever affects the father affects the wife and children and vice versa. Together they form a single reality we call family and hence the beginning of African communalism.

The father and the mother love each other, know each other and accept each other. The child or children are witness of this love in the eyes of the parents and the outside world. Analogically, the relationships of love and knowledge exist in the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is the proof that the Father and the Son love each other, proclaiming and testifying to this love, and therefore called '*candiletus*' (co-love).³⁷ The three together form the family of God, within which everything is bound up in the same circle of life, just as in the African family. Boff makes the point much clearer when he says that:

Whenever people have met with mystery, with absolute meaning, with something decisive important in their lives, they have come into contact with the true God. This true God exist as communion of Father, son,

³⁷L. Boff, 1992, p. 106.

and Holy Spirit. The names can vary, but they all indicate the same trinity. It may be that they have had no consciousness of god as God, let alone of a Trinity of persons as union of the divine three. But this does not mean that what they have expressed is any less the triune and true God, merely that this Trinitarian reality has not entered their understanding.³⁸

Moreover, a good number of theologians today understand and express the mystery of the Trinity in Communitarian model, just like Africans. For example, the central thesis of Joseph Braken states that, the nature or essence of God is to be an interpersonal process.³⁹ That is a community of three divine persons who are constantly growing in knowledge and love of one another and who are thus themselves in process even as they constitute the divine community as a specifically social process. Two good points stand out in Braken's thesis, namely, that being itself is dynamic process, and that to be is to be related.

In African communalism, the idea of consciousness, connectedness and relatedness is at the centre. As mentioned before, Africans are always conscious of themselves and other people in the community. They look at their communal way of living as something concerned with what people do in different places at different times. Similarly,

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are, by means of a real consciousness, three subjects conscious as much of themselves as each of the others, and as much of their notional act as of their essential act. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are three intelligent and the same will, like a triangle with three angles but

³⁸L. Boff, 1992, p. 9.

³⁹J. A. Braken, *Trinity in Process: A Relational Theology of God*, London: T. & T. Clark, 1997.

only, one area. All three persons affirm themselves as an "I", not in order to close in on themselves, but to be able to give themselves to the other two.⁴⁰

The above quotation could be summarised as what we call the 'I-thou - we' relationship. In African context, this expression is commonly known as 'I am, because we are, and since we are therefore, I am'. For the Africans, says Nze, 'I' is in 'We' and 'We' in 'I'; 'I' is a part of 'We', one of the lines of 'W'.

Moltman, as cited in O'Donnell, makes a much clearer link between Trinity and community.⁴¹ His point of departure is that God is not simply one person but a community of persons and God's unity exists in the form of communion (common-union). He goes on to say that through the mission of the Son and the Spirit, the whole creation is brought into the Trinitarian process. Taking the above assertion to be a true and valid one, we can therefore say that the mystery of the Trinity is then open to all humanity. Its unity, the fruit of its communion, includes humanity and creation. Different peoples and different cultures all over the world are then called to participate in this mystery. The Africans respond to this call through their concept and practices of 'oneness' - communalism.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

There are many criticism and arguments by different people about the whole mystery of the unity or oneness of the Trinity. However, below we shall consider few of those relating to the unity of the Trinity and African communalistic way of living as an expression or participation in the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. A good number of people would argue that it is very

⁴⁰J.J. O'Donnell, 1988, p. 115.

⁴¹J. J. O'Donnell, 1988, p. 116.

contradictory to speak of three persons in one, for example, John O'Donnell argues that if we think in substance categories, then each person is a substance in himself and the community is an aggregate of persons. He goes on to say that if one is working with this ontology and speak of the Trinity as a divine community, one will end up with a tritheistic conception.

Walter Kasper would, however, argue that if we want to understand and assimilate fully the doctrine of Trinity, we should not look at it from an arithmetical and logical point of view. This is because that would be superficial from the existential stand point. Instead, in numbering of one and three, we should look at the issue as the ultimate ground and meaning of all reality. Kasper's opinion is that the problem of Trinitarian unity is a human problem. Had it not been a human problem, it would not have been difficult to comprehend the unity of Trinity. This is because, for him:

Unity is necessary presupposed if a being is identical with itself and therefore identifiable. Everything that exists is given only one mode of unity. Unity here means that the being is undivided in it and differentiated from others. Unity is therefore an all-inclusive (transcendental) primordial and fundamental determination of being.⁴²

Joseph A. Braken even defended this better since he is regarded as one of the outstanding people associated with the relational and community theory of Trinity.⁴³ He maintains that the metaphysical reality of persons in community is higher than that of individual substance. For Braken, a

⁴²K. Water, *The God of Jesus Christ*, London: SCM press, 1984, p. 234.

⁴³J. A. Braken, *Trinity in Process: A Relational Theology of God*, London: T. & T. Clark, 1997.

community represents an ontological unity which is greater than the sum of its parts. The unity of God is not the unity of substance but the unity of community. In the Trinity, community and person are strictly correlated and the same act of being therefore would constitute each of the three divine persons as an individual existent, and all of them together form a divine community. On the level of different consciousness of the three persons of the Blessed Trinity, Braken holds that there is a perfect harmony and correspondence between them. God is the Trinity of one mind and will in everything they do and say, in respect to one another.

Some existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 - 1980), Albert Camus (1913 - 1960) and Soren Kierkegaard (1813 - 1855) criticise African communalistic way of living in diverse ways. For example, a pertinent question some of them ask is: if the individual is always viewed completely as submerging in the community, how free is the individual in African worldview? More so, in our world today, the culture of capitalism and its promotion of materialism are pushing people more and more to a life of competition, position, independence and individualism. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (PDV) notes that "individualism has not only locked some people into the prison of their subjective practices, but has also rendered such people incapable of true human relationship. The issue of secularisation in our world today, invites individuals or groups of individuals to a life of autonomy, without reference to community, God or afterlife."⁴⁴ Such a life of individualism sees the person in the African community as lacking any liberty and freedom, since his/her identification

⁴⁴Vatican II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day*, Rome: Vatican Publications, No. 7, 1992.

could only be found in the community. It is, however, held in the African understanding that the individual is free even though one's will is determined by the community. As a member of the community, one enjoys that freedom which derives from the collective way of life of the Africans. One is a limb in the organism namely, communalism which is an express construct of the eternal law of one's culture. People and their cultures are their relationships, and without this relationships there would be no people.

In spite of the criticisms and arguments about the unity and community of Blessed Trinity and African communalistic way of life, we can still say that the mystery is the summit and centre of Christian faith. Trinity does not only elucidate to us about the nature of the Christian God, but also retrieves the relational dimension of personal and communal identity. The mystery sums up the Christian story of salvation, structures the whole of Christian worship, and intimates the eschatological destiny of humanity and the cosmos as one of transformed union within diversity. These seeds of Christian doctrine of Trinity are to be found in the post Easter experience of the Holy Spirit, and the worship of the early Christian communities.

Evidence of these seeds is also found in the African way of life. Communalism as a characteristic way of life has moulded the Africans right from their origin. It has made it possible for the African to live authentic life, to progress and to outlast because it derives from the nature of the African and rooted in Trinity. Its content for the African is human interest and value. African Communalism guarantees individuals' responsibility within the communal ownership and relationship, it promotes the ethics of mutual help and of care for each other, the policy of decision making is based on consensus found through participation, freedom of speech and dialogue. Its axis rotates

on consideration and compassion for an individual and the totality of human beings. And its greatest asset lies in its humanising and deeply fundamental and unifying force, which is at the heart of the Trinitarian unity.