

AFRICAN IDENTITY AS TYPIFIED IN AFRICAN COMMUNALISM

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Abstract

The debate on the existence of African philosophy got its climax with a summary discourse, which did not only concern itself with existence but also the nature and scope of African philosophy. Today, the existence, nature and scope of African philosophy is no longer an issue for debate. With the existence of African philosophy, African identity should not have been an issue that ought to be debated. This paper, following the above line of thought examines the nature, trend and the root course of African identity crises. The principle method of hermeneutics will be adopted in this work. Thereby, matching the theoretical notion of African identity and African communalism against the antithesis of classical criticism of Western colonialism and then progress to achieve a synthesis that reflect the point of view that is represented in this paper. Findings indicate that the crises of African identity and its effect on African communalism set in with the emergence of Western colonialism. This paper tries to identify the manner, method and means applied by the colonial masters that made the Africans lost hold of their identity. Inspired by the confused state of some scholars in what looks like African identity crises, this work wish to affirm that, there is African identity and that African communalism is an aspect of African identity. Although there are diverse cultural backgrounds, it is not an indication that there are problems in who or what the true Africans should be or identified with.

Keywords: Communalism, African Identity, Colonialism

Introduction

Africans in the Diaspora and at home wanted to reaffirm their culture, which had been derogated and nearly destroyed by Eurocentric works, slavery and colonialism. The black race (Africans) had to heed to a re-finding, redefinition and re-proclamation of itself. Apart from the effect of slavery and colonialism, the academic expression of the two prominent European philosophers - Emmanuel Kant and George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel helped in depleting the African Identity. Kant described the Africans as a decadent race. For Hegel, Africans have no reason that is why they are described as coming from "Dark" continent. They are not developed because of their lack of application of reason to "the world" and they are sometimes seen as pre-logical. The Christian Missionaries took the Hegelian and other European teaching about Africa as a basic assumption and helped in the near annihilation of African humanity and civilization. The Africans were viewed as having at a time no religion, no culture, etc. and at another time inferior forms of religion, law,

economy, etc. They were seen and regarded as not having anything to offer to humanity by the Europeans. They were labeled people without roads, government and civilization. But the truth is that the traditional Africans left legacies, and the modern Africans are not without precious and singular gifts for the world. Africa is blessed. People like Senghor, Nyerere and Nkrumah, believed that Africa has a legacy of social, economic and political system that need to be discovered and recovered so as to give the African person his proper place in human history and development. The suggestion is new Africa on African soil for Africans. The seminar is centered on the authentic African identity and African communalism as typified in the African identity which is not only as it affects the African personhood but also as it affects her cultural values, which African communalism is one. It will equally make possible positive contributions as to what will enhance the African personality.

Most African persons could not say who they really are. To establish his person in the midst of other personalities appear very difficult. We cannot define ourselves in terms of other people or continue and in most times are filled with negative self-perception. The Africans having accepted these conditions of inferiority as inborn and are there just as a member of the crowd, not a personality. The colonialists worsen these conditions for they were ignorant of the valuable elements in the African culture and traditions rather they forced the Africans to believe that the Europeans are of superior race and culture. There was what we can generally describe as a global marginalization of the Africans. This led to the famous Igbo saying that the Whiteman is a spirit (Bekewuagbara).

Black people unconsciously acknowledge the distinction between Black and White, as well as affirm the superiority of Whiteness and the inferiority of Blackness of anything under the sun. This notion has long been planted in the minds of most people both black and white. In its global application, the adjective "Black" is always associated with evil, disaster, danger and bad omen. A very dangerous terrorist group was Black September. The day on which an earthquake struck a city and obliterated over five thousand people... was described as Black Saturday. A week of torrential rain or hurricane or blizzards was described as Black Week. The day some cultic group who committed mass suicide was discovered was called Black Friday. Many such references are employed to describe the events of national and international catastrophe... Many dictionary applications clarify the various meanings attached to the terms, Ndiokwere, (1998:124-125).

In the light of the above experiences this work is being presented to address the question of the nature of African identity and whether the African concept of communalism is an aspect of African identity. One of the specific purposes of this work is to carefully elucidate the concepts of African philosophy in the light of African identity, crisis of African identity following a number of questions raised and the consequences of African communalism as a unifying factor of the African cultural values and then systematically illustrate the role of African philosophy in the search for African identity. Again to see how the true African person could be helped to come out of his predicaments of inferiority complex. This will to a great extent help the Africans move forward in the overall development of the African person. Although the work is centered on African Communalism as typified in African identity, it is meant to help the Africans realize and establish their authentic self as well as clearly state that African communalism is an aspect of African Identity, relying on available literatures and electronic materials.

The Concept of African Identity

The concept of African identity or self-identity or rather a people's identity hinges on genuine self-knowledge and self-understanding, which according to Eneh, Joseph in one of his works titled, *An Introduction to African Philosophy and Thought*, originated from antiquity. Though not to be identified with the ancient Greek as they claimed but was an inscription "on the entrance of the doors of the Egyptian temples, written as a motto: *man know thyself*, the term which was erroneously believed to have been introduced by the Greek", Eneh, (1999:55). This means that there should be no doubt, on the existence of the concept 'African identity', which is centered on the African self-hood. It is surprising to observe that among some African scholars, there is still the question of the existence of African identity. According to the work,

the fact that such prescriptions are written on the doors of the Greek temples and shrines or used regularly by Socrates does not mean that the Greeks were the initiators of such mottos that recommend man to constantly re-examine his life, actions and values, Eneh, (1999:55-56).

Edeh, (1985), in a work he titled *Towards an Igbo Metaphysics*, affirmed that Africa is among the ancient continent of the world and so wondered if the crisis of African identity is worth the while. In his consideration of the origin of man and relying on the conclusions of archaeologists, he writes that Africa is historically the most senior of the five continents in the world in the sense of sustaining human life; that man's ancestors first became differentiated from primates in Africa, (5).

As such, who is an 'African'; what does the term 'African' imply or refer to; what exactly qualifies as an 'African'; what identity does the African bear, as the pivot in the issues of self-identity. In the parlance of contemporary African philosophy, the search for African identity has been a central task. Thus, what has thrown the African back to a much more serious search for whom he is, his concrete life, his cultural characteristics and identity as African, is African Philosophy, which at present is a vibrant intellectual pursuit, Okolo,(1993:3), as is contained in Chukwudum Okolo's, *What is to Be African? Essay on African Identity*. Many scholars have argued that the search for African identity is in vain and not feasible because Africans are not one but many peoples and races with a diversity of cultural beliefs and traditions. Whether the African is one people or many is grossly insignificant or inconsequential in ascertaining the fact of African identity. What is important rather is to assert that the African is easily identifiable ontologically. Seen in this light therefore, the African is a being-in-the-African-world. He is not just a being but a 'being-with', Okolo, (1993:4). This concept of 'being-with' is in fact the fundamental idea or explanation of African identity. The specter of self-identity constantly confronts the African, thus the question raised by Jacques Masquet in a work titled, *Africanity: The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, whether it is arguable that to be born black suffices to be an African? Indeed, "the African child is born black but becomes African", Jacques Masquet, (1972:55). The question then is, what is to become African? What culturally characterizes a person as African? As we have noted above, the African is not just a human being but essentially a 'being-with', and this is the very basis of his claim to the title 'African'.

In African metaphysics, the self is conceived essentially towards others, that is, a being-with and this is the very basis of his claim to the title 'African' as is presented in the Placide Tempel's *Bantu Philosophy*. According to the work, it is clearly stated that in African metaphysics, the self is conceived essentially towards others, that is, a being-with-others. As a matter of fact, the African, "cannot conceive of man as an individual or force existing by itself and apart from its ontological relationship with other living beings and from its connection with animals or inanimate forces around it,"Placide Tempels, (1959:103) Consequently, it is the community which makes the individuals, because of his relationship with others in the community. In other words, the African self is defined in terms of we-existence', Okolo, (1992, Vol. 32, No.4), as is seen in yet another of Chukwudum Okolo's "Self as a Problem in African Philosophy", in an *International Philosophical Journal*. However, 'being-with' as an ontological category and as defining culturally the mode-of-being of the African, is beyond egoistic and utilitarian needs of self. In its

ontological relationships, 'self' in African metaphysics is attuned to both the visible and indivisible worlds.

On the general range, most African scholars regard African concepts of the individual and self to be almost totally dependent on the subordinate to social entities and cultural processes. No wonder John S. Mbiti, in his work, *African Religions and Philosophy*, believes that the individual has little latitude for self-determination outside the context of the traditional African family and community. He writes:

Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am. This is a cardinal point in understanding the African view of man, Mbiti, (1969:109).

Nyasani possesses a far egalitarian view of the individual in African society in his book called *the African Psyche*. For him,

everything boils down to 'me' in the 'we' or rather to the survival of the self through the enhancement and consolidation of the 'we' as a generic whole...Thus, in African, the individual will go to all length to ascertain the condition of the corporate 'we' and to play his part, if necessary, to restore the balance of wholesomeness, Nyasani, (1997:81-82).

Furthermore, Julius Nyerere in a work titled *Freedom and Development*, referred to this distinctive African trait simply as 'African brotherhood', with its root in the African extended family system otherwise referred to as 'Ujamaa' in Swahili, on which the concept of African communalism found its base. He built his own concept of social progress, unity, and peace for Africa upon this concept of African brotherhood, Julius Nyerere, (1976:12-13). Tom Mboya in a work titled, *Freedom and After* also gives his conception of African socialism which embodies the basic human values, characteristic of inter-personal relationship among the Africans as clear manifestations of 'being-with', as follows: communal spirit, hospitality, generosity, acceptance, and practice of egalitarianism, Tom Mboya, (1962:16). The question now is, what then is African self-identity, that which makes the African become who or what he is? It is nothing but the African 'being-with' that is, the self being-with and-for-others in social existence. Masquet called it Africanity, and he

defined it as “the totality of cultural features common to the hundreds of societies of sub-Saharan Africa”, Masquet, (1972:55). Yet the questions that still abide is whether the fact of ‘blackness’, confers the African identity on someone? Or, is it being born in the African continent that passes one as an African? What exactly is the distinctive content of the African self-hood or identity?

The plagues of colonialism cannot be dissociated from the current pandemonium of the contemporary African who is in search of an identity. Through acculturation and exploitation, the vestiges of African culture and identity were bastardized, mutilated and at best, mixed up or perhaps replaced with the Western civilization and culture. What then could best describe the fate of the African in the search for cultural identity? Perhaps, as Frantz Fanon said, “Black skin, White masks”. Since African Philosophy is a quest into the African past and present in a bid to make sense of the people’s existence, many scholars have argued that it is inestimably relevant in the search for African identity. It is on this context that we consider African communalism as an aspect of African identity.

African Communalism as an Aspect of African Identity

The Western society is collectivist while the African society is communal. Our society stresses on the communal relation among members and not on autonomy of members; as one is not considered separately but as a member of a mystical body where he can only live life to the full. The solidarity underlying these members, which is the effect of the principle of oneness or belongingness to the same roof is what is described as African communalism. In a work titled, *The Ontological Foundations of African Communalism*, Aja affirmed that African communalism in the traditional African concern man and his well-being. It presupposes that while the family is the unit of the African community, everyone in the community is his brother’s keeper, Aja, (1986:49).

It could be said to be the principle that determines social organization in Africa. In the *Ontological foundations of African Communalism*, Senghor affirmed that the individual lives the life of the community and as such, the individual feels and thinks that he can develop his potentials, his originality only in and by the community in union with all other men, even with all other things in the universe: God, animal, tree or pebble, Ruch and Anyanwu, (1964:599).

African communalism entails the kind of relationship which is analogous to the type existing between the mother and her foetus. The same is found existing between the individuals and African society. In the work, *Aspect of*

African Communalism, Nze, Chukwuemeka held the view that African communalism can be compared to fraternalism, not in the sense that it designates some multiple associations which combine some social character with a financial co-operation but in the sense that it symbolizes a form of life of a people whose different members are held together by some parental link, Nze, (1989:5-6). It is likened to a link which exists among individuals and or the community of blood relationships. He identified an element or the spirit of oneness or unity that existed and continues or should continue to exist among individuals or between the individual and his community in African communalism, Nze, (1989:2).

It is not a social movement or organized behavior as such or even crowd behavior. It is rather a mode of living which weaves spirit of oneness, solidarity and cohesion in a community; in short, it is the bedrock of the traditional African society. In Ikegbu's work on *African Communalism*, it is simply seen as "a situation where property is collectively owned, work is done in common and the goods were shared out equally", Ikegbu, (2003:31). Communalism therefore, is a kind of social relationship that defines one's appreciation of another in a defined community, Ikegbu, (2003:33). In the work, it is understood that the individual is somehow tied to the community, which introduces the collectivist spirit around and in African community, and he added that the individual has meaning only in the context of the community. The community, which adopts communalism as a standard of operation, delves into the individual's rights and freedom in order to protect the individual from attack and undue molestation (32).

Man in the above social relationship is seen as a social being that must necessarily live among other human beings. No wonder it is regarded among Africans as a social collaboration as well as a natural legacy which ought to be lived, recognized at all times and therefore, is developed and preserved as a treasure, Ikegbu, (2003:31)

Conclusion

Having reached this point, the only thing that remains is to posit that communalism as a mode of life opens to sight the richness of not only the human person but equally what the community could achieve due to the collective spirit of oneness and peaceful existence that it breeds. Peace is necessary for human flourishing and development. In communalism through relationship, participation and responsibility, the individual and community are enriched. There is a necessary temptation of being aggressive though out of sympathy, when discussing a people's stolen heritage. Nevertheless, this study has been less sympathetic but instead, it has refused to economize the

truth, for how can we label a people that posse a multi-identity as having a confused identity or even no identity? The identity of Africans is in doubt because Africans in the presence of the colonial masters could not recognize their identity. We must realize that the ultimate search for the African identity is the starting point for economic and social transformation in Africa. Besides, it must be noted that the practice of African communalism that is 'being-with' will once more breed the spirit of brotherhood in the African world, and all such crimes and inhuman acts associated with the western world would be eliminated.

However, we must admit that the Western world brought along with them a recognized civilization and / or development in religious, social, economic and political life of the African man. It may be said that their mission has some selfish motive but they really opened our eyes to recognize that we are naked. Africans must also recognize that they were somewhere when the colonial masters came, under some peculiar cultural heritage. While we appreciate the new way of life brought to us by our colonial masters, we must not lose sight of who we are and our natural heritage, which is our culture, our identity, our pride and our life. That is what actually made us Africans. We must not allow this knowledge part from us for a people without identity is no people at all. It is only then that one can comfortably refer to the Africans as possessing an African identity or claim their authentic self.

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