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In Quest for Individual-Community Relationship in Contemporary Age: Lessons from African (Yoruba) Thought System

Abstract: The contemporary African society is infiltrated with the consequences of post-independence cultures of individualism: terrorism, corruption, climate change, unstable and irresponsible government, poverty, greediness, etc. This has adversely affected the cherished African communal existence from her social through political to religious values. As a result of this, there is an urgent need to addressing these anomalies in African society through a genuine alignment between the individual and the community as embedded in Yoruba thought system. This study employed both the expository and analytical approaches in philosophy. These will undoubtedly promote and revamp, in Africa again, the spirit of individual initiatives within the framework of the communal structure without suppressing one for the other. This balancing strategy is basic towards achievement of human personality formation, reformation and development in Africa continent today.
Keywords: Communitarianism, Humanism, Individualism, Personality, Yoruba Cultural Value

Yakınçağ'da Birey- Cemaat İlişkilerinin Peşinde: Afrika (Yoruba) Düşünce Sisteminden Dersler

Özet: Bağımsızlık-sonrası gelişen sonuçlarla bireycilik kültürleri Çağdaş Afrika toplumuna sızmıştır: terörizm, yolsuzluk, iklim değişikliği, istikrarsız ve sorumsuz hükümet, yoksulluk, açgözlülük, vb. Bu durum sosyal ve politik değerlerden dini değerlere kadar kıymetli Afrika komünal varoluşunu olumsuz yönde etkiledi. Bunun bir sonucu olarak, Afrika toplumundaki bu anomalileri, Yoruba düşünce sistemine gömülü olarak birey ve cemaat arasında hakiki bir uyum yoluyla ele almaya acil ihtiyaç vardır. Bu çalışmada felsefenin hem açıklayıcı hem de analitik yaklaşımları kullanıldı. Şüphesiz, bunlar Afrika'da, komünal yapı çerçevesinde bireysel girişimlerin ruhunu, birinin diğerini baskı altına almayacağı şekilde teşvik edecek ve canlandıracaktır. Bu dengeleme stratejisi, bugün Afrika kıtasında insanın kişiliği formasyonu, reformasyonu ve gelişiminin gerçekleştirilmesine yönelik temeldir.
Anahtar Sözcükler: Komüniteryanizm, Hümanizm, Bireycilik, Kişilik, Yoruba Kültürel Değeri.

Introduction

The paper addresses the historic tension of individual-community relationship in contemporary society using the traditional Yoruba (African) moderate communitarian value systema as pivotal for resolving some of the experienced challenges therein. The discourse dominates the 1980s Western public space on the means toward promoting a common good in respect to the scope, power and concept. Most often the capacity of the discourse could not proffer harmonious relationship in the society but rather escalates in an extra-ordinary discordant way. Thus, the traditional Yoruba thought system attempts to fill this gap of disaffections. For the sake of discussion, the paper is divided into three sections: (1) Individual- Community tension in Contemporary Discourse; (2) the traditional Yoruba Moderate Communitarian system; and (3) the implications of the traditional Yoruba (African) Moderate Communitarian system to contemporary age.

Individual- Community tension in Contemporary Discourse

The historical trend of the word, individualism, has its root in the earlier works of Robert Nozick (1974), Ronald Dworkin (1985), and John Rawls (1971) despite the fact that the last two have moved toward a partial acknowledgement of some elements of Communitarian principles. Individual position strictly concerns with the critics of Communitarian. It argues that the individual agents are rather independent of any societal influence in their formation and value preferences (Etzioni 1996: 3-4). It precludes the social scientific evidence about the evil of isolation; the cherished attachment of man for communal principle, perhaps the social anchoring of reason itself; and the advantages of interactive influence of society members on one another. In short, the principle upholds the aggregation of individual preference as being intrinsic without membership in, influence from or regard for a community. Allen Buchanan adds that individualism revolves around the enforcement of the basic individual civil and political rights such as the right to freedom of expression, religion, thought and association, the right to political

participation and the right of due legal process (Buchanan 1989: 854). Also, Will Kymlicka canvases for political morality on behalf of individualism on the ground that the state should extend equal concern and dignity to each person's interest in leading a life that is in fact good (Kymlicka 1989: 13). However, the basic traits of contemporary individual discourse include, first, the principle of autonomy. Autonomy denotes the capacity for self-direction without constraint which is nurtured by, and can be exercised properly only under, specific social conditions. Scholars in this train of thought, Mill, Nozick and Dworkin, are of the view that the state ought to treat people as equals, that all have an unalienable right to equal concern and respect. The second is the priority of autonomy over any considerable value. The final priority emphasizes the importance of element of good life of everyone against any primitive regards for some specific good. In short, it strictly relates with values conceived from individual perspective rather than being dictated from some extraneous frontiers (Mason 1993:230-232). However, despite the commitment to this intense on individualism by the Western democracies, it produces what Francis Fukuyama refers to as negative social trends which graduate with time to constitute a 'great disruption' in the social value system (Fukuyama 1995:5). Some of the fall out today include crime and social disorder; the decline of kinship system; de-industrialization; low fertility syndrome; increased divorce; out-of-wedlock childbearing; mental illness; declined trust and confidentiality in institutions; etc. Thus, individual trivializes the activities that should be jealously guarded and nourished. He condemns invasion of privacy, to the extent of condoning immoral contents (homosexual, lesbianism, gay practices, terrorism, corruption, etc). He celebrates and equates freedom without submission to an exacting discipline such as the right to do as one pleases to the right to change one's mind at will. He affirms private life as primary culture laden with freedom of religion, speech, sexual preference, economic freedom, etc. Thus, the objection by the public agents over these comprehensive indictments of individualism raised issues on the corruption of practices by institutions.

Communitarian is concerned with the bond of community in its creation, maintenance, and reproduction. It is originally coined by liberal scholars to block all thought of the system by critics. Though differ in their submissions, the communitarian theorists, Sandel (1982), Macintyre (1984), Walzer (1984) and Barber (1984), do not intend to return to authoritarianism, but rather to build a framework where the autonomy of person can be achieved without submission to right-based individualism. This framework involves a commitment to a set of shared history and identity. It is a form of collective, not an aggregate of individuals, with common identities and purposes of their own and can act as a unit (Etzioni 1996: 5). In this sense, the collective must, in moral sense, be mutually committed and 'refrained from systematically exploiting each other' (Mason 1993: 217). Mason further proposes both moral and prudential attributes in realizing the value of community. The moral contends that everyone in such contract ought not to exploit one another; and prudential value is to affirm that lives of members flourishes because they experience concern for and from others (Mason 1993: 227-228). By and large, communitarian stresses the value of certain non-individualistic goals such as public participation, fraternity, solidarity, cohesion in order to eschew universalism and shared understanding of community (Caney 1991: 511). Thus, communitarian projects a fundamental and irreplaceable source in the good life of man. More so, it provokes full participation in political community for the good life of man.

However, the critics affirm that despite its anti-individual posture, it will as well reduce existing civil rights, and will do nothing to tackle the challenges of uneven distribution of power that divides genders, classes, races or generations (Newman and De Zoysa 1997:630). Nevertheless, it represents the common nostalgia for the past experiences where the rights of women and minorities were not only suppressed but also upholding the paternalistic hierarchical structure. Individualism further argues that both men and women cherished their private purposes and associate only to advance these purposes more effectively. In addition,

the communitarian critics viewed that life in itself will be docile where people are not allowed to live more or less as they please within the limits of respect for the rights of others.

To this end, the tension between the principle of autonomy and the practice of public order merely belaboured itself with whether a group of individuals should have a shared concept of the common good in respect to the scope, power and content of such concept rather than with the defining elements of community in general, to which the paper attempts to fill the gap. The traditional Yoruba (African) thought system explores to mine the importance of the communal virtue and obligations which facilitate the social solidarity of individual as responsible being.

The Traditional Yoruba (African) Moderate Communitarian System

The Yoruba speaking people make up one of the major influential tribes in contemporary Nigeria. They spread across Ogun, Ondo, Ekiti, Oyo, Osun, Lagos states and a substantial part of Kwara, Kogi and Edo states. This homeland spans the other West African countries of Benin Republic, Togo and Ghana. About thirty-five million people are estimated to live in south western parts of Nigeria; three million Yoruba live in Benin Republic, which borders Nigeria to the west. Some of the inhabitants include, Ketu, Sabe, Port-Novo (also known as Ajase). In Togo, the Yoruba occupy the south-central regions of the country. Togo's second largest city, Atakpame (ile- anaa) is a Yoruba city. There are about fifty Yoruba villages in Ghana. The belief in Ile-Ife as the cradle of life is one key element of Yoruba culture in Africa and the Diaspora (Aina 2016: 15).

The political and social spaces in traditional Yoruba thought system defers to a moderate communitarian principle. Moderate in the sense that individual in the community is a potential factor of a sound moral life because of his commitment to the communal order, all things being equal, with the condition that by being responsible within the dictate of the norms he may lead a good life and therefore may flourish even if he is not. But the hindsight here is that being responsible is tied

to the apron string of moral values of social solidarity, harmony and cooperation. This viewpoint on moral value draws attention to social morality wherein humanistic practice is grounded. This represents an ascending order from the austerely commitment to social sympathies of rigorous individualism to the pervasive commitment to social involvement. By this we mean social reverberations of an individual's conduct of *ìwàpèlè* (good character) in the community. It is due to the fact that a human being, in Yoruba thought system, is part of a social whole. This social practice, that an individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. It implies that an individual cannot run adrift from the community that nurtures him/her. Rather the individual, through socialization and the love and concern which the community extended to him/her, cannot now see him/herself as an isolated being. This social character is intrinsic to the notion of morality in Yoruba culture. This is grounded in human experiences in living together. Hence, man owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. Whatever happens to the individual is believed to happen to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group is the responsibility of the individuals.

Thus, in realising this objective of Moderate communitarian principle, an individual has an obligation to maintain harmonious relationship among all the members of the community and to do what is necessary to correct every breach of harmony and to strengthen the community bonds, especially through the principle of justice. The Yoruba belief system strongly upholds the principle of justice as its absence may efface the communal living, and justice involves some aspects of punishment. That is to say, the communalistic orientation of Yoruba society emphasizes the notion that an individual's image will depend rather crucially upon the extent to which his or her actions benefits him/herself first but yet satisfy the interest of others which is not, of course, by accident or coincidence but by design. It is important for man to see to his ambitions, desires, and actions but not at the detriment of needs and interest of others. In another sense, human conduct in

Yoruba culture demands absolute behaviours grounded in personal and social well-being.

Implication of Traditional Yoruba Moderate Communitarian System to Contemporary Age

It stares us in the face today the implications of post-colonial individual practices. First, terrorism, though has graduated to international concern, falls within the scope of both political and moral discourse. It represents justification through violent quest for self-affirmation or freedom from imposed governance. It demands for political equals rather than being respected within the polity. The legitimate demands of terrorist are often lost in the immoral or unconventional means of asserting its self-affirmation. The terrorist presents a communitarian appeal which is normally missing in the modern liberal society. This also may be the restoration of cultural values which are depreciated or repressed by the government. Should we then say that the terrorists' principled activity is to foster the achievement of prized values of freedom or justice against state institutions? I may respond that its action may be out of frustration and rejection of unacceptable institutional practices. However, if principles dictate the actions of terrorists, then practices are not acceptable for the most part. By and large, the problem of terrorism emanates from the principle of autonomy in defence of individualism at the expense of community dictating the order (Westra 2012: 853-855). The community, on the other hand, could not in modern liberal system balance the structure due to persistence corrupt practices in the polity. The word corruption, taken to the moral discourse, involves individual feelings of depravity and pervasion as to the moral decay of whole societies (Nuijtena and Anders 2007: 1). The long standing meaning of corruption is the legal prohibitions of bribery, theft, embezzlement and the misuse of public property for private gains. The *Boko Haram* menace could not be exempted from the act of corrupt practices in Nigeria as funds meant to fight insurgency were diverted and used for political campaigns and other frivolities in

the polity. Transparency and proper accountability mechanism were perverted by corruption while constitutional laws became an exclusive preserve right of the rich and corrupt leaders; the commoners now live at the mercy of the rich while justice became ephemeral to the poor. In short, institutional graft of this nature is like a cancer capable of morphing and attracting newly malignant players, to the point where it infects entire societies (Cockcroft 2010: 23).

Going by the above briefly mentioned challenges experienced today out of the individual practices, the traditional moderate communitarian cultural value system constitutes a leeway to resolve the problems to some extent. This would reach out towards ensuring and maintaining wholesome human relationship among members of the community both at individual and communal levels. Individual, physically and economically, depends on others for his survival and, socially relies upon his community for his development and satisfaction. This strategy the individual fuels with a religious fervour to the extent that he/she is willing and able to make sacrifices, such as personal, economic, spiritual, social, etc., to see it endures and perform his/her obligation therein (Sofola 1978: 67-68). By this, individual will see to the reinforcement of integration and solidarity coupled with a sense of personal and group commitment to one another. A Yoruba saying in support of this is *Igi kan kò lè dà'gbó se* (literally, a tree cannot make a forest) (Olowookere, 2004:18). But recognition is placed on individual differences as separate human being with his/her own unique capacity and as being with whom one shares at least some experiences, problems and interests.

From the juristic viewpoint, the system embraces the victims, offender, their families and the general community involved in defining the forms of punishment and reconciliation. It exhaustively addresses the interests of all parties to the conflict. It is engendered by the dialogic nature of Yoruba jurisprudence. This 'openness' involves social solidarity system whereby no family or group would allow its members to be unjustly punished or subjected to inhumane treatment with

impunity. It is also a system which restrains individuals on certain reciprocal obligations as the mutual interest of the group (Deng 2004:501-2). This humane people centeredness is reflected in the treatment of offenders. Offenders are encouraged to understand and accept responsibility for their actions. The offender is expected to accept accountability with discomfort but not so harsh as to degenerate into further antagonism and animosity, thereby alienating the offender. Strenuous efforts follow chastisement to integrate the offender back into the community.

This punitive justice conveys genuine reconciliation which transcends established normative rules, institution and formal procedures, which are inadequate to resolve conflict, to a creative and a flexible human activity that is undertaken for the sake of humanity as a shared community. Individuals in such cultures are enjoined to think in terms of what the society can gain from them so that all can prosper.

It further involves the principle of adjustment of personal interest to the interests of others even at the possible cost of some self-denial. This provokes the acceptance of responsibility, as alluded to earlier, to the point of willingness to be part of the search for a solution. In fact, it is not an alternative to conflict but a transformation of the conflict. Both parties to conflict would be able to define the stakes involved and relate them for the sake of the wider community as well as for the future of next generation. This is mainly with a view to promoting not only self-understanding but mutual understanding as well.

Furthermore, the political implications of this spirit of African humanistic cultural values evolve the need to consult before policies are formed in the polity. Thus the Yorubamaxim Ajeje *owo kan kii gbe eru d'ori* (It is impossible for one hand to lift a load on to the head) further confirms this emphasis on the political value of consultation. The idea here is that discussion and deliberation by group heads on matters of public concern are always better and more fruitful. Decisions of this

nature protect individuals in the face of conflicting demands as well as promoting moderation in the exercise of political power. This is also the import of the saying that *Agbajo owo la fin so 'ya* (It is through joint decision making that confidence is built). Thus, consultation enhances individuals' interaction with others, by coming to know each other's both as separate human being with their unique capacities and as beings with whom one shares at least some experiences, problem and interest. This position is reinforced by the Yoruba proverbs *Omode gbon, agba gbon la fi da otu 'fe* (It is through the joint wisdom of both young and old that Ife kingdom is created) to further showcase the essence of communal principle with the recognition of individual's initiative and opportunities in the polity. A good illustration is sourced from the Yoruba parlance that *Ka fowo we wo lowo fi n mo* (Washing hands together makes the hands clean). A hand remains unclear if it lacks the support of the other hand. Even where it attempts to clean itself, it may not succeed. In relating this to politics, though each of us can have a sense of purpose in our individual action, but this subjective desire is impossible to make a whole. Rather, some of these desires would have to be checked in order to make cooperation possible.

The religio-ethical implications show that there is no formal distinction between what is sacred and secular. The proverb *eniyan ni aso eniyan* (man is the cloth of man) recognises a feeling of family togetherness and of the extended family. Its practice involves the belief that humanity is a creation of God. Hence, there ought to be some intrinsic value in man worthy of dignity and respect. This constitutes the basis of value of unity and humanness in the Yoruba community. The importance of showing compassion, generosity and hospitality makes it possible for people to recognise its ideals by the people. It signifies that one should always be open to the service of others' interest and welfare. In addition, this attitude further suggests that the worth of other human beings is equal to one's in term of basic value, ideals and sentiments. This supportive attitude shows the spirit of brotherhood, which covers

not only family relations, but also persons between whom there are no blood ties at all.

Corroborating the above position is the Yoruba sayings that *Bi oju ba fara ba'le, yoo r'imu* (if the eye is patient, it will see the nose). Practically, it is somehow difficult to see the tip of *imu* (nose) without some mental concentration. This attitude and approach are expected of man to display in his outward dealings in life. The inculcation of this moral virtue is the main aim of moral instruction in Yoruba community. Its possession leads man to pursue the kinds of moral commendable actions and behaviour expected in the context of a social morality.

Conclusion

In this work, I have been able to unearth the relevance of traditional Yoruba moderate communitarian system with the aim to advancing a detour towards resolving the individual-community tension in contemporary discourse. I noted that the infiltration of post-colonial reality has dislocated Africans from their solidarity to communal norms and values for a trivial end which provokes enormous division and ill-will. Specifically, I then advanced the spirit of African humanistic practice to fashion an orientation for mutual understanding and cooperation for development of personality in Africa. This communal relational ethics would be a fertile ground for strong democratic practice with the recognition of individual's initiatives and opportunities in the polity.

By and large, the study provokes a thought system whereby man is saddled with the responsibility to maintain an interactive course of duty where the spirit of compassion, recognition and neighbourliness are not only generated but also equitably distribute in the public space. Small wonder the Russian-Ukraine crisis could have been put to check but for the celebration of egocentric attitude which the Yoruba value system denounced in its entirety. It is imperative therefore that the tension raised in the individual-community relationship demands for a thorough harmonisation of interests which accounts for good of all on the long run.

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