

UBUNTU philosophy: A contemporary version of the traditional African communalism

Jean Claude Nsengiyumva¹, John Muhenda², Simon Njuguna³, Patrick Ouma Nyabul⁴

^{1,2 & 3}Department of Philosophy, The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya.

⁴Department of Philosophy, University of Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya.

Corresponding author: *Jean Claude N., Postal Address: 58088-00509 Langat, Nairobi, Kenya.

Abstract

The traditional African society had at its heart the community-based value. The individual was looked at as part and parcel of the community. His welfare was everyone's concern. That is to say, the individual existed because the community existed as John Mbiti would say "I am because we are, since we are therefore I am" (Mbiti, 1969). The traditional African societies lived a communal life in that every individual cared for his neighbor's needs regardless of the family, clan, ethnic group or tribe the neighbor belonged to. If any problem befell anyone in the community, it was up to the whole community to deal with it. The situation however changed with the colonial era, as Westerners invaded Africa. The harmony, love, care, respect and every virtue which characterized the traditional African societies was tempered with, giving away such unethical practices as individualism, corruption, nepotism, tribalism and the like. By allowing the individualistic spirit to creep in their societies, the contemporary African nations have thus taken up a face, as it were, that is not African, an identity far different from what Africa ought to be. This article sets out to argue that it is with this neocolonialistic individualism in mind that some African thinkers came up with Ubuntu philosophy to remind their fellow Africans of their lost traditional values which made Africa what it really is: a communalistic society.

Keywords: Communalism, community, individual, individuality, individualism, Ubuntu.

Introduction

This article proposes a way of recovering the traditional African value that has been lost along the way as years passed, following the colonization and decolonization trends. The main goal of this paper is to show the beauty of the traditional Africa society which should be sought after at all costs and recovered so that Africans come back home and feel once again the taste that Africa used to have before it got invaded and torn apart by colonialism and

imperialism. The focus will be on the communitarian aspect of the traditional African society, which actually made it be what it was by nature, an 'African society.' This communal aspect of the traditional African society has been however distorted due to imported foreign practices and way of life. To recover this lost identity, some African writers have proposed an ethical code based on 'ubuntu', that is, a culture which stresses the dignity, welfare and importance of every individual in the

community. This paper intends to briefly venture into both the traditional African communalism and Ubuntu philosophy. By so doing, we aim to show that Ubuntu philosophy is not far from the traditional African communalism.

1. COMMUNITARIAN VALUE IN THE TRADITIONAL AFRICA

The African Ethnophilosophy has been described as communal in contrasted to the individualistic Western philosophy. However, this is not a critique; it is rather an affirmation in that, philosophy being about everyday life, takes shape in the local set up, the community in the case of Africa. This section seeks to venture in the traditional African value of communal life. We shall look at the place the African individual had in the community and the value he gave to the entire community.

1.1 Community Defines the African Individual

Most of (if not all) African traditional societies viewed the idea of a person as directly linked to the idea of the community. In traditional Africa, there was nothing like an individual standing on his own apart from the group or community; there was nothing like an isolated individual or individual standing aloof. As Wiredu (2008) remarks, the individual will need communication and socialization. And this cannot be achieved unless he is incorporated in a community. He writes:

No human society or community is possible without communication, for a community is not just an aggregation of individuals existing as windowless monads but of individuals interacting as persons, and an interaction of persons can only be on the basis of shared meanings. Indeed, without communication there is not even a human person. A human being deprived of the socializing influence of communication will

remain human biologically, but mentally is bound to subhuman.

The traditional African societies held with esteem the community life. Everyone understood that he cannot exist without others. Emphasizing the need of community in traditional Africa, Taylor once wrote that “An individual who is cut off from the community organization is nothing; whereas even the most anti-social idiosyncrasies may be redeemed by renewing the family solidarity” (Taylor, 1963). In other words, it was very clear to Africans that no man can live as an island. In the words of Okere (2005):

Man is not just an individual, an island, left to himself and sufficient to himself, on his own. Man is essentially community. No one ever came to being as a bolt from the blues, like an oil bean seed falling from the sky, as our proverb says, ‘I am always we’. We in the nuclear family, we in the extended family, we in the village and town etc.

Without others, man is just a mere being, a being with neither direction nor purpose. This is so because, communalism insists that the good of all should determine the good of each. Similarly, the welfare of each directly depends on the welfare of all. Communalism hinges on the belief that an individual’s being depends on the being of others. In Nyasani’s view, the ‘I’ exists because of the existence of the ‘other’ or ‘thou’. The existence of the ‘I’ is therefore irrevocably dependent on the existence of the ‘other’ or the ‘thou’. To him,

Each individual then seems to lead the life of others while leading his own. He can never be himself except in as far as others are. Consequently, the existential significance of any one individual seems to drive its ontological value from the collective lifeblood of the community. The community ethnic, therefore emerges as supreme and overriding where individual whims might inspire individualistic and selfish pursuits (Nyasani, 1989).

Therefore, with the communalistic understanding, the individual has an obligation to always act for the good of others since his very being is dependent on them. The word “others” here is used as an inclusive term.

In the African understanding, man cannot achieve much in life without the support of other members of society. By “others”, we are not only evoking close relatives but also everyone in the community in which one lived. Mbiti said it all. To him, the African understanding of man can be summed up in the statement “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” (Mbiti, 1969). To quote him at length, he says:

The individual owes his existence to other people.... He is simply part of the whole.... 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 the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.

Gyekye (1915) says the same thing when he contends that an African cannot live unless he is identified with a given group. He writes:

The success and meaning of the individual’s life depend on identifying oneself with the group. This identification is the basis of the reciprocal relationship between the individual and the group. It is also the ground of the overriding emphasis on the individual’s obligation to the members of the group; it enjoins upon him or her the obligation to think and act in terms of the survival of the group as a whole. In fact, one’s personal sense of responsibility is measured in terms of responsiveness and sensitivity to the needs and demands of the group.

When we talk about community defining the African man, we should note that, even though the traditional Africa stressed on the

community-based life, it did not rule out the individuality of its members. After all, as Columbus would say: “Besides what is in the mind, only individual realities exist. The act of existing is proper to, and is exercised only by individual beings” (Nnambi, 2007). We need therefore to make a clear distinction between two terms: individuality and individualism.

1.2 Individuality versus Individualism in Traditional African Understanding

As we talk of individuals in the traditional African understanding, there is a need to note the difference between “individuality” and “individualism”. Talking of individuals in the traditional African understanding refers to ‘individuality’ (not to ‘individualism’), whereby individuals are aware of the existence of others and care for them not only for themselves.

When we say that Africans value community life, we do not mean that community is put there to suppress individuals’ freedom or rights. To quote Agulanna, to argue that Africans have a strong attachment to their community or clan does not detract from the fact that the individual is also seen as a unique being in the sense that he cannot be completely submerged in the collective or the anonymous entity called ‘community’ (Agulanna, 2010).

Therefore, to say that the African concept of community places more emphasis on the right of the group rather than that of the individual does not mean that it prevents the development of the individual nor does it mean that it discourages personal initiatives and self-reliance. On this note, Obiechina (1975) contends that:

It would be wrong to interpret the concentration on common goals and the primacy of the common interest as a matter of suppression of the personality from outside, of constraint on the part of an authority. Social conformity and the

discouragement of deviation from the common norms of behavior are not the same thing as the repressive curbing of individual freedom. Social freedom is in the final analysis related to legality and this is commonly expressed as the principle of the greatest good of the greatest number. Traditional social philosophy is based on this principle and because it is fundamental to the very survival and general health of the society, is given validity by being anchored in customary practice and protected by divine and ancestral authority.

Additionally, according to Wiredu (2008), the community respects the interests and freedom of the individuals constituting it. The community is actually another way set to foster the individual's interests. To quote him at length, he says:

To adjust the interests of the individual to those of the community is not to subordinate the one to the other. The relationship is purely symmetrical. We could just as well have described it as the adjustment of the interests of the community to those of the individual. Moreover, we must not hypostatize the notion of the community. The community is simply a certain contextualization of individuals with respect to their locations and to their perceptions of their interests and of those of others. Communitarianism and individualism are both just different ways of arranging the pursuit of the interests of individuals.

However, inasmuch as the community recognizes the individuals constituting it, the latter are aware that their strife should always be to keep everything in conformity with the good for the whole community not for the self. In this line, Agulanna would say that the notion of community in Africa is in such a way that, while emphasizing the corporate nature of human existence, it altogether does not deny individual liberty or the idea of every human being as both unique and important (Agulanna, 2010).

2. UBUNTU PHILOSOPHY

In this changing contemporary world, people need to be reminded to come back from the itinerary of individualistic worldview so as to reconsider the value of togetherness. This reminder is mostly needed for the Africans, who, from their traditional value of community-based life, have been swayed to another non-fitting direction. Bearing in mind that the non-individualistic character is not only a value to Africans but their very nature, allowing the individualistic feature in African societies is not only an anti-value but a deviation from the African identity.

In this line, we find in the Ubuntu Philosophy a relevant philosophy to remind Africans of their communal values as well as their social identity. Ubuntu philosophy, being an ethic or humanistic philosophy focusing on people's allegiance and relations with each other, puts at the center of everything the community. Put otherwise, according to Ubuntu philosophy, community is the cornerstone in African thought and life (Mbigi, 2005).

2.1 Origin of Ubuntu Ethics

The word "Ubuntu" was first used by Bishop Desmond Tutu in his book *No Future without Forgiveness*. In this book, he used the term to define what a real African should be in regard to his neighbor. According to Tutu (1999),

A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.

Ubuntu philosophy reminds Africans of their natural call to be brothers and sisters, to seek the good of everyone, knowing that what harms the other automatically harms me too, since I exist not as a single

individual but in a community. This is the natural state of every African worthy of his or her name, a state that should be sought after, a state that needs being restored at all costs.

Desmond Tutu found the term Ubuntu difficult to render into a Western language. To him, it speaks of the very essence of being human. The word is expressed when Africans want to give praise to someone as they say, “Yu, u nobuntu”(Tutu, 1999) (translated as ‘Hey, so-and-so has Ubuntu). This would mean that the said person is generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate. Ubuntu calls for people to share what they have; reminds them that they live in a bundle of life. Ubuntu reminds people that “A person is a person through other person” (Tutu, 1999).

2.2 Ubuntu as Basis of African Philosophy

According to Ramose, Ubuntu is not only conceived to be part of African philosophy but is actually its root. Philosophy permeates every aspect of human life. It is in this line that Ramose sees Ubuntu as the root of African philosophy since the be-ing of an African in the universe is inseparably anchored upon Ubuntu. He adds that, the African tree of knowledge stems from Ubuntu with which it is connected indivisibly. From the two perspectives, he concludes that Ubuntu then is the wellspring flowing with African ontology and epistemology. And, since the two are the bases of philosophy, then African philosophy has long been established in and through Ubuntu (Ramose, 2003).

Through the above explanation of Ubuntu in its ontological and epistemological dimensions, it is clear that Ubuntu can be regarded as a specific approach to African philosophy. We have already seen above that Ubuntu philosophy encompasses various arenas of the African philosophy such as the philosophical, anthropological, social and

political arenas. Keenly treated, being a theory that puts the other not the self at the center, we have also shown that Ubuntu philosophy extends its roots into other areas such as philosophy of religion, logic, philosophy of medicine, philosophy of law, to mention but a few (Kimmerle, 2001).

2.3 Ubuntu and Communalism

The philosophy of Ubuntu is not far from the traditional African philosophy (the term “philosophy” hereby referring to way of life”). They both go hand in hand in that they both advocate for a community-based life, a life where everyone believes that he cannot exist as an island but in a community. It is also a fact that we cannot talk of African philosophy without talking of communalism since this has been the central value to African life. In the same line, we cannot therefore talk of African philosophy without referring to Ubuntu philosophy.

The notions of Ubuntu and communalism go hand in hand in that they both put the community spirit at the center of life. They both attest that there is a high estimation of the community in African thought and practice, higher than that of the individual though not at the expense of the individual person (Kimmerle, 2001). The notions of Ubuntu and communalism both agree on the assertion that a person is a person in the community and through others in his community. And this assertion is not only expressed linguistically but also practiced in Africans’ everyday life (Kimmerle, 2001).

From early childhood, Africans learn that as human beings we are one, regardless of families, tribes or ethnic groups of origin. As Goduka and Swadener (1999) remark, this philosophy of oneness is a reality for the traditional African people because of three main reasons. They write:

First, Africans believe that, as human beings, we possess a biological relatedness; this implies that we all originate from the same ancestral stock and, we are all closer to

one another than we are inclined to believe. Second, Africans are convinced that, as human beings, we all share the desire to want spiritual knowledge. Third, Africans hold that, as human beings, we all have the same destiny, a common humanity, therefore we have to recognize our oneness and work towards our common destiny.

The communal life is embedded in the nature of the African view of life. Put in other words, Africans are socialized within a culture which promotes the ideologies of communality, collectivism, human unity and pluralism. Due to the way in which traditional Africans are socialized, Goduka and Swadenar posit, the above mentioned ideologies start to develop as a philosophical thought in the mind of an African person and operate when an African interacts with other people, when they think, feel, learn, and talk (Goduka and Swadenar, 1999). Consequentially, both the traditional African communalism and Ubuntu philosophy contend that Africans see themselves as the one side of a coin and his/her neighbor as the other side.

Conclusion

Both the traditional African communalism and Ubuntu philosophy stress on the community-based life which ought to characterize a typical African life. Both the traditional African communitarian theory and Ubuntu philosophy advocate for a communitarian worldview. They emphasize that a man is only man through others, though they both acknowledge the individual's uniqueness. We note that Ubuntu philosophy has been coined as a reminder to contemporary Africans that the individualistic worldview taken up due to globalization and modernization is not only an anti-value but also a deviation from the very nature of an African. In other words, we can assert that Ubuntu philosophy is the

contemporary version of the traditional African communalism.

References

1. Agulanna, C., 2010. Community and Well-Being in African Culture. *Trames Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 282-298.
2. Goduka I.N.M. and Swadenar E.B. 1999 *Affirming Unity in Diversity in Education: Healing with Ubuntu*, Cape Town.
3. Gyekye K. 1915 *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, Philadelphia.
4. Kimmerle H., 2001. Prophecies and Protests – Ubuntu and Communalism in African Philosophy and Art. *Rozenberg Quarterly: The Magazine*.
5. Mbigi L. 2005 *The Spirit of African Leadership*, Randburg.
6. Mbiti J. 1969 *African Religions and Philosophy*, London.
7. Nnambi C.O., 2007. The Individual in African Communalism. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 13-27.
8. Nyasani J. M. 1989 *I, We and Body*, ed. Heinz Kimmerle, Rotterdam.
9. Obiechina E. 1975 *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*, Cambridge.
10. Okere T. 2005 *Philosophy, Culture and Society in Africa*, Nsukka.
11. Ramose M.B. 2003 *The Ethics of Ubuntu*. *The African Philosophy Reader*, Second Edition, P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux, London.
12. Tutu D.M. 1999 *No Future without Forgiveness*, New York.
13. Wiredu K., 2008. Social Philosophy in Postcolonial Africa: Some Preliminaries Concerning Communalism and Communitarianism. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 332-339.