

A Metaphysical Dimension of African Communalism in Placid Tempels' Bantu Philosophy

Linus Oluchukwu Akudolu *

Abstract

Communalism is a traditional social system which is community oriented. Here the interest of the community reigns over the interest of the individual in a social relationship. It manifests in every aspect of African social life, and has metaphysical dimensions. This paper therefore aims at studying the metaphysical aspects of African communalism through the work of Placid Tempels: Bantu Philosophy. The paper adopts qualitative method of inquiry, using library materials, with application of analysis and hermeneutics. The research concludes that African communalism has its metaphysical root in African notion of being as force, and interaction of forces.

Key Words: Africa, Communalism, Forces, Ontology, Bantu Philosophy

* Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi State. email: oluchukwu1900@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Colonialism and modernity have drastically affected African culture. A glaring African cultural aspects disrupted is her social system known as Communalism which as a way of African life has its metaphysical foundation on African ontology. This paper therefore aims at studying the metaphysical aspects of African Communalism through the work of Placid Tempels: *Bantu Philosophy*. The paper adopts qualitative method of inquiry, using library materials, with application of analysis and hermeneutics. With a view of getting at a clearer apprehension of it and how it manifests in African society, conceptual and critical analysis is applied for reviewing related literatures on African communal system, Placid Tempels applied hermeneutics in studying its metaphysical aspect in Bantu Philosophy.

Tempels was born in Berlaar in Belgium on 18 February 1906, and named Frans Tempels. He took the name "Placid" in 1924 on his entry into a Franciscan Seminary. After his ordination in 1930, he taught for short period in Belgium before he was posted as missionary for 29 years among Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where he articulated the ethno-philosophy of the people in the book, *Bantu Philosophy*, which is a common world-view of African people. Tempels died in 1962 when he had returned to live in a Franciscan.

African Communalism

Communalism is a traditional socio-economic ideology that lays emphasis on "the primacy of the community over the individual."¹ That is the interest of the community reigns over the interests of the individual in a social relationship. The "I" is subsumed in "we", and can only find fulfillment in "being with others". Shutte states that it is a kind of socialism, but not European socialism. It is rather "an updating of the traditional emphasis on community as an ethical and religious ideal... Communalism implies above all, a quality of life made possible by common attitudes and loyalties"² --a socio-ethical doctrine that has its root in African traditional religion and ontology, and not a mere economic model.

Gyekye opines that it is a doctrine about social relations as well as moral attitude; about what sorts of relationship should hold between individuals and society, and about the need to take into account the interests of the wider society not only in designing socio-political institutions and in evolving behavior patterns for individuals in their response to the needs and welfare of other members of the society.³ Communalism "as a moral attitude" is therefore quite different from European socialism that harps on distribution of economic benefits in the society. Individual may have his personal economic benefits but not at the disadvantage or exploitation of community members. Even his success, seen as the success of the community for the communal spirits in him compels him to consider the interests of the community members while enjoying it; little wonder, some wealthy ones sink borehole and make it accessible for village members free of charge.

¹ J.O. Oguejiofor, "How African is Communalism?" In Odumegwu, I., (ed.), *Perspectives on African Communalism*. Canada: Trafford Publishing, 2007, p.5

² Augustine Shutte, *Philosophy for Africa*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1995, pp.110-111

³ Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflection on the African Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p.149

Akudolu defines communalism as “a way of life which is community oriented that has a greatest manifestation in traditional African society as well as other primitive societies.”⁴ The underlying principle is “I exist because we are”. The existence of the individual, his joy, and fulfillment is inexorable connected to the community. “He can only define himself in the context of the community. It is a unique phenomenon that binds the community in a brotherhood of well-being”.⁵ Akudolu further enumerates the basic principles that characterized African communalism as love and sense of brother-hood, caring and hospitality, unity and solidarity, interdependency and interrelatedness, belongingness and participation, equity and justice.⁶

J.S. Mbiti’s book, *African Religions and Philosophy*, contributes much in popularizing the African saying, “I am because we are and since we are therefore I am.”⁷ This concept is very far from the Cartesian expression of personal identity that is establish on individual and personal thinking: “I think therefore I am”.⁸ Mbiti’s statement means that the individual’s identity is built on social interaction. The life of the individual, his wellbeing, his life, is not separable from the community in which he lives. All these are what constitute the individual personal identity, and thus, his identity is inseparable from his social interaction and from his community. Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being.

Communalism is set apart from Collectivism as a continuum characterized by processional development, while collectivism is as an aggregation characterized by composition of distinct parts. This conception of African person has the advantage of a clear presentation of communalism as an unbroken oneness of many but it also nurses the unwholesome indication of the person as a process or the initiation of a process where the subjectivity of the individual become absorbed in the fluidity of the communal process. This uncomfortable feeling is overcome however if one adopts an integrative concept or communalist personhood in which the human person is both an individual and a communal being integrated both internally within himself and externally with the circumstances of his being by the definitive element of presenting.

Manifestations of African Communalism

Communalism manifests itself in many aspects: economic, social, political, ontological and religious. Land tenure system is a very vital and fundamental to economic aspect of African communalism. Land is contemplate as the earth goddess, the goddess of fertility and preservation. Kenyatta, emphasizing the importance of land and culture in the formation of communal African personality said that land is the soul of the people on which the harmony and stability of the African mode of life is based. It belongs to the whole community. In this community, each person is his brother’s keeper as any abomination committed against the land affects not only the culprit but also the whole community. Such evil disrupts the community

⁴ L.O. Akudolu, “Communalism in Traditional Igbo Society and Its Metaphysical Foundation”. *Ikemba International Journal of Philosophy* (2019),1 (1), p.2

⁵ Ibid.p.2

⁶ Ibid.p.2

⁷ J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*,(2nd ed). Oxford: Heinemann, 1989,p.141

⁸ Ibid.

harmony and has to be expiate, if not, disaster would befall the community.⁹ Evils like incest, killing of a kin, adultery with a kin's wife, stealing of the yams in the farm are, according to Jude Madu, abominations that disrupt Igbo cosmic harmony.¹⁰ These are therefore abhorred by *Ndi Igbo*. The land is therefore a sacred entity and owned communally. The individual and hence the family have the right to the sacred and secular utilization of the land, but not appropriation in the absolute sense. Okadigbo, quoting Chancellor lends credence to this claim thus:

Land is seen as God's special gift to man for use and as sacred heritage, transmitted by the forefathers as a bond between the living and the dead, to be held in trust by each generation for the unborn who will thus hand over to the last generation.¹¹

In fact, in pure Igbo traditional society land is communally own and apportioned according to the needs of individuals. However, one may be a custodian, but not an owner. Farming and hunting, being their major occupation are carry out communally. They work on one person's farm today and tomorrow will be at another's farm.

Furthermore, communalism also manifests in the social life of Igbo people. The community members see themselves as members of the same family. Late in the evening, they come together for moonlight picnic (*egwu onwa*). The elders sit on keg of palm wine watching the young men proving their masculinity by engaging in wrestling. Old men and women tell folklores and stories to the children. Festivals like new yam festival, funeral and marriage ceremonies are matters that pertain to the community and not to individuals per se. During the new yam festival, the villagers gather at the palace of the village chief or traditional ruler and the chief priest officiates. In marriage, communalism manifests itself in a greater way. This is because marriage is consider as the center of procreation and existence in Igbo and many African societies. Thus:

Marriage is the union of a man and a woman as husband and wife who, to all intents and purposes are join for procreation. In other words, whereas in some cultures a man and a woman can enter into marriage for companionship, in African, marriage is principally for creation.¹²

Since marriage is the center of all existence, it concerns everybody in a given family. For example, it involves the living, the dead and the unborn expectations of the family. It is not assume as a light affair. Everybody is involved in the choice of the marriage partner, in the marriage ceremony as well as the marriage life of the couple. A man does not marry a woman who was not approve by his people and so is the woman. However, this infringes on individual's rights but that is an acceptable norm for one cannot do without his people's support. Nevertheless, nowadays, some men take their fiancés to court registries and get their marriages

⁹ J. Kenyatta, "The Giyuku System of Government" in Mutiso, G.M. and Rohio, S.W. (eds.), *Readings in African Political Thought*. Ibadan: Heinemann,1975,p. 31

¹⁰ E. J. Madu, "Igbo Cosmology: A Matrix for Igbo Community- Consciousness" in Odimegwu, I. (ed.), *Perspectives on African Communalism* .Canada: Trafford Publishing,2007,P.120

¹¹ O.Okadigbo, "The Philosophical Foundation of African Personality". A Paper Presented to the Faculty of Philosophy, Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu. 1976,P.3

¹² B.C. Nze, *Aspects of African Communalism*. Onitsha: Veritas Publishers, 1989,P.14

done without their peoples, but this defiance has many negative implications on the future and fate of the marriage.

Marriage is not one man's affair in Africa. Payment of the dowry in many African communities is paid by the groom's father and his kin's men and not by the man *per se*. The woman is referred as our wife (*nwunye anyi*), indicating that she belongs to the clan and not to the man alone. However, the man alone is responsible for the procreation (except at death when his closest kin takes over). He has no right to treat the woman anyway or divorce her without the approval of his people. When children eventually arrive in the marriage, they belong to the community rather than the man alone. Nevertheless, they bear the man's name but are considered as the "property" of the community, hence the Igbo name *Nwaora* (child of all). In other words, a child belongs to the community and not necessarily to the biological parents. This is epitomized in the community's training of the child in the values and ethos of the community, a situation that gives any elder of the community the impetus to discipline any erring child anywhere and at any time.

In Igbo-African world, for instance, it is usual to see a woman calling on another to taste her food for her. It is also a common sight in the market that an Igbo will invite a member of his community to come around to view, assess and finally select an item he wants to purchase. Again, it is not puzzling to hear directives coming from one's kith and kin directing one to choose this and not that. Wine tappers also do this to determine the best mixture and taste so to know the price at which their wine will be traded. In fact, in Igbo society, what concerns one concerns others. Communal and not personal interest weighs more in the estimation of an Igbo. For the Igbo 'I' is in 'We' and 'We' is in 'I'.

This also applies in wealth utilization. When one is blessed with wealth, he is hopeful to be a blessing to his family and community members. He builds a house to accommodate all his extended family members. They all come together, live together, cook and eat from the same pot. Community members are also welcome. Even though he is rich, he is still a "being-with-others". No wonder, there is always gathering, eating and drinking in such houses especially at evening time. He helps others with his wealth as his riches belong not only for himself but also to all, though he is a custodian. Those that dare exclude themselves from others are viewed as ritualists and bad men, because such behavior is despised in African communal settings.

Political aspects of communalism are seen in prefixes to the names of villages which often bear names which mean children of X, where X is the name of the founder of the village. The political administrations of many traditional societies are demonstrations of communalism. They have the philosophy of collective efforts and decentralization in their polity. Political power belongs to all, but the elders assume more power because they are referred to as the custodian of the customs and traditions of their villages. Each person participates in decision making otherwise, decisions are overruled.

Communalism also manifests in various festivals in Africa. During traditional festivals, members of the community come home. They invite their friends and relatives to their community. The high priests would do the necessary rituals and the people would engage in dancing, dining and winning, watching of masquerades, exchange of visits and other social enjoyments. The festivals enable the people sojourning outside the town, the relatives and friends to reunite with their kith and kin.

Based on above information, we ascertain that pure African traditional society is fundamentally egalitarian. It is communalistic. In this society, every member has the right to a home, right to equal protection before the law and traditions, because all are adjoin by the same *omenala* and taboos. Every member has the right to work, right to care for the other and to be cared for, the right to protest and the right to rebel, right to training and other form of education, right to participation in government, art, religion and philosophy. Every member has also a right to inheritance and equitable sharing of all the benefits and undertakings of the community. This is communalism per excellence. In fact, African communalism is a social organization where community members see themselves as one family.

Bantu Philosophy and the Metaphysical Aspect of African Communalism

Placid Tempels in his book, *Bantu Philosophy*, delves into the metaphysical dimension of African communalism, describing the African ontology and notion of being as a philosophy that guides an African life.¹³ His work explains the metaphysical foundations of communalism. Studying Africa using Bantu people as a case study, Tempels gives a clear understanding of hierarchy of being starting from God, the Arch patriarchs, the founders of clans, the ancestors, etc., going down to living beings, animals, plants and inanimate objects. These beings are forces. In Western thought, it is permissible to engage in separation of attributes of being from being while this is not possible in African thought as force is a necessary element in being; without the element of force, being cannot be conceive. In other words, force is even more than just a necessary attribute of being: Force is the nature of being, force is being, and being is force. These forces differ in their essences or nature. There are divine, celestial, terrestrial, humans, animal, vegetable and even material or mineral forces. The concept of vital force, therefore underlines the Bantu-African notion of being. In fact, the hierarchy itself is possible because of the different degrees of vital force each level of existence possesses. The vital forces interact with each other; thus, the interaction of beings in Bantu-African thought.

Tempels goes further to explain that there are laws governing the interaction of beings, rational beings, called the laws of vital causality. The law states that one rational being can reduce or increase the vital force of another directly; a rational being can also increase or reduce the vital force of another by making use of the lower beings. In chapter six of his book, he reveals that evil reduces the vital force of a being but restitution and restoration is possible through sacrifice. He categorizes the three forms of evil, which can reduce the vital force of a being and how to redress them. The first evil is wrongs done towards superior vital forces, which he says; do not affect the vital force of the superior being but of the lesser being. Restitution for such fault cannot be made in the sense of repair of damage caused, compensation for diminution of vital force but only by acknowledgement of the hierarchical order. This acknowledgement is attain by means of propitiatory offerings by ontological purification, by what has called “magical” or “ritual” purification of the village and its inhabitants.¹⁴ The second is evil done to the inferior who the Bantu affirms that are in existence in various senses such as when an elder does not fulfill his obligation to the young one or curse his descendants.

¹³ P.Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*. Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959,P.2

¹⁴ Ibid.P.149

The explanation given above on the subject of the vital relationships in the bottom of the clan shows us that an elder may do evil to the junior, to one of his descendants. He may restrict his paternal strengthening and so reduce his descendants to a diminished condition. He may abandon him while his vital force is diminish. He may even curse his descendants or cosign them to perdition. This diminution of vital force exposes per se those who are thus victimize to become prey of pernicious vital influence. Such a fault, according to Tempels, can be repair only by readjustment into right vital relationship with his descendants. In case of curse, revocation and blessing can be made. ¹⁵

The last evil is faults committed in respect of equals. Tempels also made it clear that there is restoration in the Bantu thought system. In the case of the broken relationships among living persons, there is the need to have such re-established. It entails having the destructive force of such evil person paralyzed by every possible means. The malefactor may be exclude or get punish.¹⁶ This ensures justice in relationship between “beings” in African society. This type of relationship that exists in African community has direct link with African conception of reality presented in Bantu philosophy.

Bantu psychology cannot conceive a man as an individual, as a force existing by itself and apart from its ontological relationships with other beings and from its connection with animals or inanimate forces around it. The Bantu cannot be a lone being. It is not good enough synonym to say that he is a social being, for he feels and knows himself to be a vital force, at this time to be intimate and personal relationship with others acting above him and below him in the hierarchy of forces. He knows himself to be a vital force, even now influencing some forces and being influenced by others. The human being apart from the ontological hierarchy and interaction of forces has no existence in the conception of the Bantu. It is upon this notion of being, its hierarchy and interaction that African communalism stands. In other words, African communalism is a social and physical manifestation of African ontology. In the word of Ogugua

African communalism is based on our conception of man; that he is not only a social entity but a communal being as well, sandwiched between the physical and the spiritual world. That man is a communal being is a metaphysical conviction. The anthropology and our world-view are based on metaphysics.¹⁷

Metaphysics as the study of reality does not study that which is physical but that “being” which does not appear to our senses but serves as the groundwork of any physical being , its character and behavior. Even the arch-empiricist, David Hume, noted for his critique of metaphysics concedes this to metaphysics. Onyewuenyi citing Alpern’s presentation of Hume writes:

Metaphysics by the very definition that it is the study of reality, or that which does not appear to our senses, of truth in absolute sense, is the groundwork of any theory concerning all phases of human behavior.... It is the foundation

¹⁵ Ibid.160

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ I.N.Ogugua,“Metaphysical Basis of African Communalism. In Odimegwu, I. (ed.), *Perspectives on African communalism*. Canada: Trafford Publishing,2007,P.24

on which one builds one's career consciously or unconsciously; it is the guide, the author of human interest; upon its truth or falsity depends what types of man you may develop into¹⁸

The metaphysical foundation that guides people's actions and determines their ways of life is what ontology is all about. Tempels therefore tries to give us the ontology of African race; it is upon this ontology that African communal way of life can be elucidate. African philosophy is therefore "characterized by the harmonious participation between human beings and nature, where everybody takes part in whatever that is being done. The participation is aimed at restoring harmony and it is known as ontology of participation."¹⁹

CONCLUSION

Based on above discussion we can then adduce that in African world, realities though separate are not separate from others. This means that everything is in everything, each dovetail into the other. "Moreover, our understanding of reality is anthropocentric, vitacentric, intuitively inductive, weaved in a cob-web manner and our sensibility constitutes the proper limits within which we can make any ineligible judgment about it."²⁰ African communalism as a community oriented social system, is anti-egotist ideology, extended community family, that is religious and ethically bound, a tradition, a custom, and a culture, that define African society. It has its metaphysics on African otology: the doctrine of being as force and its interaction. Tempel in his Bantu Philosophy has given us exposition on that ontology using Bantu community as a case study. In other words, communalism is an essential aspect of African culture; nevertheless, post-colonial modernity disrupts its phenomenon and causes its decline, to the rise of individualism with its consequences. Akudolu bemoans, "Today, we are bedeviled with bribery and corruption, ritual killings, raping, prostitution, kidnapping, terrorism, armed robbery, examination malpractice, social injustices, cultism and various forms of violence."²¹ Nonetheless, it may be impossible to reenact this cultural heritage, but we can transmit and preserve its essential principles and values through education.

¹⁸ I.Onyewuenyi, "Igbo (African) Philosophy" unpublished paper, University of Nigeria, Nsukka,1983,P.5

¹⁹ Edna M. Peter,. (2014). "Modern Philosophy: The African Philosophy of Ntu". *Essay*.
<https://www.grin.com/document/322629> accessed on 20 December 1919

²⁰ L. O. Akudolu, L.O. "Educational Reform and Value Re-Orientation for Preservation of African Communalistic Principles", *International Journal of Social, Politics and Humanities* 2 (2): 1-5.
<https://zambrut.com/communalistic-principles> accessed on 15 December 2019

²¹ Op.Cit., Akudolu, *Communalism in Traditional Igbo Society and Its Metaphysical Foundation* ,p.4

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