

SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND ITS SUSTENANCE IN AFRICA

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Abstract: There is no gainsaying the fact that Africa is inundated with many problems which have made the development and the attainment of social order, conceived in normative terms, daunting tasks. It is also a fact that there are many causes of this scenario such as political marginalization, ethnic chauvinism, economic mismanagement, religious bigotry and corruption in its various facets. However, in this disquisition we identify the lack of the development, internalization and application of the sense of community, loosely tagged community consciousness, as a major factor that has aggravated the African crisis and which if addressed can reverse the order of things positively. It is the contention of this paper that fundamentally in the case of Africa, as shown in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Nigeria, there has been a blind pursuit of private or individual interests to the detriment of the public sphere or public good. Ironically too, when leaders put up repressive laws in the pretense to pursue the public good, the underlying motive has always been the pursuit of selfish private whims and caprices. We noted that in contemporary Africa a major way towards a desired level of social order and development consists in engendering the required sense of community (a situation in which there is mutual co-operation, interdependence and fellow-feeling) on which other developments can be predicated. Although, the quest and realization of the sense of community is not a grand solution to our myriad of problems in Africa, at least it forms the basis on which we can start to address our problems in Africa in a meaningful way.

Keywords: Africa; community; individualism; development; social order.

Introduction: On The State of Disorder in Africa

Irrespective of one's religious, ethnic and political leanings, human existence itself is punctuated with problems of various natures which we grapple with from time to time. The resolution of a set of problems necessarily brings in other problems. However, for many societies in which there is a manageable sense of social order, the resolution of one set of problems normally improves their fortunes especially as often reflected in their socio-economic leaning. A similar thing cannot be said about many countries in Africa, a continent whose showcase to the world is fratricidal civil wars, ethnic conflicts, child labour, child prostitution, political instability, corruption, famine, economic stagnation and a fall in life expectancy. These problems are not peculiar to Africa as there are so many crisis situations in other parts of the world for instance in Iraq, between the Israelites and Palestinians, in former Yugoslavia, in Northern Ireland to mention but a few.

What we experience in Africa concerning the socio-political order however leaves much to be desired. Let us visualize for instance the Liberian conflict until the

installment of the current female president in 2006, where there was free for all killing over political ascendancy coupled with the illegal trade in diamonds that further escalated the conflict situations in Sierra Leone and the Great Lakes region of the Congo Democratic Republic; Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. Notable names like Idi Amin Dada, Mobutu Sese Seko, Charles Taylor, Emperor Bokassa, and Sanni Abacha come to mind not because of their ability to liberate their people and put them on a secure path to development but because they have decimated the human and material resources of their nations leaving these nations poorer and more unstable than they met them. We are then forced to start asking questions about how we reached this situation. But before answering this question let us quickly make a disclaimer here. It is that things still turn out well in some African countries. Senegal, South Africa, and Botswana come to mind.

In Mandela's South Africa, the blacks and the whites were easily reconciled by President Nelson Mandela especially through the Truth Reconciliation Committee. Within two decades of majority black rule in South Africa, the country has become a showcase for the rest of the world indicating that things can work properly in Africa. But we cannot but give kudos to South Africa's great leaders like Nelson Mandela, De Klerk, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Thabo Mbeki and many others who have put the public good above their own individual interests and aggrandizement.

It is quite fascinating also that since her independence from France, the West African country of Senegal has not experienced a coup d'état. Coupled with this fact is the smooth transition from one government to the other. The small nation of Botswana is so well-organized that per capita income of her citizens has continued to soar such that many in other parts of the continent seek paid employment in that country. Other heartwarming examples are Ghana, Kenya and the Benin Republic where there has been a change of batons from the incumbent governments to the opposition. Given this scenario, one cannot say that Africa is doomed. But again what, we may ask, has made social order and development Herculean tasks in other African countries. For instance, the months of January and February 2007 were marred with chaos and anarchy in Guinea, where the incumbent was incapacitated as he was afraid of relinquishing power and also reluctant to appoint a popular prime minister until anarchy was let loose. Ivory Coast still continues to be in the news as a result of the division within the country, especially along religious lines. All cannot be said to be well with Nigeria, the self-acclaimed giant of Africa, as reflected in ethnic conflicts, the Niger Delta crisis coupled with free hostage taking, corruption and insecurity of lives and property.

One of the reasons for the situation in Africa, and the major thrust of this paper, is that we lack a sense of community or put differently the community spirit or consciousness required in modern nation-states. In other words, many of our leaders do not feel obligated to protect the state in a genuine manner and the citizens on their part do not even see the state as a community that can protect their interests.

According to A.E. Murphy, "It is only in so far as a state is in some respects a community that it can morally obligate us in any way" (Drengson 1978, 347). In other words, this relationship between the citizens and the state entails some kind of mutuality. So when we talk of the state as being a community, we imply a moral situation in which we naturally feel obliged to do all within our power to see to the survival of the state. Therefore:

A “community” is not just any group that influences the behaviour of its members. It is a group whose members are related in a quite distinctive way, the way of moral understanding, and the group is a community in so far as they are thus related (Murphy 1978, 376).

In our context therefore, we are talking about a community that encompasses the political, economic, religious and social spheres; whose members are driven by the need to work towards common goals that will ensure their continued survival and development. Our argument in this work is precisely that we cannot engender the sense of community required in Africa that will take us out of our social and political predicament without tackling the antagonistic postures of interests in both the public and private spheres in most African states. We believe that it is when there is a proper alignment of these two spheres that we can start to tackle other developmental problems.

Sense of Community within Africa Today

The basis of our inability to achieve a sense of community is as a result of incompatible values which individuals exhibit in both private and public spheres. After all, both spheres are made up of individuals playing different roles (typical or actual) as occasions may demand. Furthermore, the conflictual situation in both realms is the result of certain human factors, which although not peculiar to Africa, have had a deep-seated influence on Africa.

The first factor has to do with injustice among the major actors within countries in Africa. This could be as a result of the political marginalization of some ethnic groups within a state. Apart from the conflict this generates, the pressing need in such a situation will be for citizens who are either in control of state power or who are marginalized by the state to think more about what accrues to them especially through unconventional means. In such a situation, people think less about the public good. This trend is aptly captured in P. Ekeh's (1975; 1980) analysis of “two cultures and two publics” in which the public servant exhibits double morality when it comes to probity. For instance, his tribesmen would see a public servant who happens to defraud his country as a hero. However, if such a person defrauds his tribal community he would be treated as an outcast. With this kind of attitude one can hardly experience the development of a sense of community. Although, we are not unaware of the damage done to our body politic by the colonial incursion with undue balkanization of the African people, the emphasis is on the fact that several decades after our political independence we have not developed the required sense of community needed to enhance social and political development.

The unprecedented level of poverty in most African countries, many studies have revealed, is not due to lack of human, material and natural resources. Rather it is due to the “self” syndrome of many African leaders who loot their nations' treasury with reckless abandon. In a situation of want in the midst of plenty, the majority of Africans in their bid to survive have responded in Darwinian ways to the Hobbesian imperative (Oyeshile 2003, 81). In this kind of situation facing many citizens in African countries the moral pedigree required to develop a sense of community, will be scarcely available. It is then not surprising to hear that African leaders are richer than their countries.

Poverty has led to over dependency on a few individuals who are on government payroll and hold political appointments. This has in turn bred corruption. This is one major reason why many regional and continental bodies such as the defunct ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) and OAU (Organization of African Unity) recorded dismal failure or little success in coming to terms with the African predicaments. Even the renewed attempt by some African leaders to tackle the African crisis through the formation of alternative bodies such as NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa's Development) and AU (African Union) coupled with the Peer Review Mechanism can only succeed if the moral question is taken seriously. It is on this moral basis that the objective of NEPAD seen as

An African package to the international community in return for increased aids, investment, debt relief and trade opportunities... involving African States committing themselves to democracy, good governance and peace.... (Post Express, Sept. 1, 2002, 26)

can be realized.

The problem of political chaos, anarchy and instability as a result of the quest for and retention of political power at all cost cannot provide a fertile ground for the germination of the sense of community required in contemporary Africa. Perhaps, the toga of democracy worn by many African states to secure financial aid from Western nations has been punctuated by many sharp practices especially the stifling of opposition parties, manipulation of the electoral process and the emasculation of the political space. This tendency cannot allow for the protection of the public good and the development of national consciousness.

Related to African countries' pretense to democracy are economic reforms based on false application of liberal capitalist economic principles. Many African leaders although professing capitalist economic arrangements, nevertheless gloss over the welfarist principle of a capitalist economic agenda, which would alleviate mass poverty. For instance, many programmes on poverty alleviation especially in Nigeria such as the "Better Life Programme for Women and Children", "Peoples Bank Small Scale Loan Projects" and many others have not reduced the plight of the people. This is due to the fact that a few individuals who mistakenly found themselves at the balcony of power, due to brain rather than brawn, have appropriated and mismanaged funds meant for such projects. This is also an indication that common good holds no meaning for these individuals. In recent times, the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) in Nigeria has exposed several government officials who have looted the nation's treasury at the local, state and federal levels.

The factors identified above have led to a lack of trust and hope in the national entity across the African continent. The citizens have become disillusioned and hence believe that nothing salutary can come from their countries. In Nigeria, the self-acclaimed giant of Africa, there is a persistent energy crisis (electricity and gasoline supply), the public schools no longer have the confidence of the masses—anything government owned is now viewed with ignominy and suspicion. Even the National Identity Card exercise that swallowed billions of Naira from tax payers' earnings ended in abysmal failure mainly because of the corrupt government officials who thought less about the common good or public interest.

This brings up the problem of the individualistic orientation of many African elite as a result of the improper mastery of foreign values and concepts. The communal mainstay of our relationship that promotes public interest is either jettisoned or paid lip service. The African dictum “I am because we are, and since we are therefore, I am” (Mbiti 1981, 108) is no longer respected and observed. This has worsened our situation because as individuals our values must be aligned with that of others in order to ensure common good. The interdependent nature of human existence is underscored by Sartre, the great existentialist philosopher when he writes:

Thus the man who becomes aware of himself through the *Cogito* also perceives all others, and he perceives them as the condition of his own existence. He realizes that he cannot be anything unless others recognize it as such. In order to get any truth about myself, I must have contact with another person. The other is indispensable to my own existence, as well as to my knowledge about myself (Sartre 1957, 37-38).

We are invariably forced to ask the reasons for the abuse of power and the monopolization of the goods in the public sphere by the elites. Does it result from the lack of internalization of moral precepts that provides the proper ground for socialization and public good? Or is it as a result of poor education? We want to note that it is a combination of these factors. Although education influences one’s moral pedigree, as Socrates will assert: “knowledge is virtue”, it is also the case that individuals with adequate knowledge are still morally bankrupt. In a few cases in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, where sensitive political offices are held by “money bags” who have little or no formal education, there is a high tendency for such individuals to become intoxicated with power and therefore become greedy and self-centred.

However, much of the problem is not that of the lack or low quality of education as many present day African leaders have enviable academic qualifications. Rather, their misuse of power and corruption which ultimately becomes injurious to the public good stems from their inability to develop the requisite moral consciousness as a result of the spoil of office. The spoil of office with its attendant expensive profile has led to what can aptly be described as false consciousness of consumerism. A society in which individual members produce wealth they do not consume, and in which others consume wealth that they do not produce will lack political stability (Bolarinwa 1993, 95-96). This situation is further aggravated in many African countries by the neglect of the environment, as governments do nothing to counter the destruction of forests and degradation of the agricultural potential of the land coupled with governments’ inability to control the rural—urban drift.

Let us note from the foregoing that this scenario described above can only further lead to the dearth of public good. It is fascinating to note that the anti-corruption crusade of Obasanjo’s administration in Nigeria between 1999–2007 has indicted and prosecuted several highly educated political office holders. In fact, during this period, Nigeria had no less than five Senate presidents instead of the maximum two. Three of these five were impeached on corruption charges. It was also pathetic that a minister of Education under the same government was sacked for the allegation of offering bribes to get the budget of his ministry approved by the Senate. This tendency of self-seeking and inability to use power for the benefit of the people within the African continent is aptly captured by Oladipo thus:

Given this situation, it should be no surprise that democracy has not been able to realize its transformational potential in most African countries. A leadership that is self-centred, lacks the commitment to African emancipation in all its ramifications, and is indifferent to the outcome of its policies, cannot provide the kind of enabling environment for the release of the people's energies and the mobilization of efforts for innovative and creative development (Oladipo 2006, 48).

The sense of community in Africa today is not only at its lowest ebb, it is also fast disappearing and the task of how to revive it depends much on our ability to move beyond the "self" and realize that in the first instance the public and private spheres are reconcilable and compatible if we are to realize our goal of survival and development.

Background Causes of Problems with Community in Contemporary Africa

Of course we have enumerated certain factors in the preceding section which have contributed towards our inability to achieve a sense of community in Africa and which have manifested and resulted in some cases in injustice, political corruption, poverty and economic marginalization, all of which have diminished our goal of sustaining and nourishing the public good. But we can only appreciate these factors if we examine the background or root causes of our problems with community in contemporary Africa. Although, these factors are not independent from each other, they can nevertheless be discussed under different headings. These causes include colonialism that brought with it exploitation, marginalization, balkanization and amalgamation in the colonies, the failure of the leadership that took over from the colonial masters after independence and the attendant ethnic chauvinism that resulted from the failure of leadership to ensure fairness in both the distribution of political power and economic resources in post-colonial African states.

It is an undeniable fact that colonialism brought into Africa new political and economic relationships that ultimately resulted in the pursuit of individual interests to the detriment of the common good. Freund correctly submitted that:

Colonialism largely destroyed the fundamental rhythm of pre-capitalist social and economic life without fully advancing a new self-sustained process of accumulation (Freund 1998, 204).

The emphasis here is that colonialism brought in capitalism in an explosive dimension thereby creating a new class of "haves" and "have-nots" especially through the extraction of wealth that went overseas. Coupled with the new political configuration which the colonialists put in place, the stage was set for rivalry and conflict among the peoples of the colonies. Sadly enough, the political parties that emerged after independence in most African states were autocratic and in no time most of the states became one-party states under the guise of protecting the African communal kinship value system, which to many leaders of the new African states is averse to opposition. In this kind of situation, individuals at the helm of affairs had absolute power to plunder the resources of most states. This tendency has had a carry-over effect on contemporary governance in many African states.

The post-colonial situation, according to Ake (1996), has not fared better due to the fact that political independence only brought changes in the composition of state

managers while the lop-sidedness of the state character remained the same as it was under colonialism. This development also led to the factor of ethnic chauvinism that led to conflicts of various natures.

While many scholars are not under any illusion as to the obtrusive nature of ethnicity in African socio-political dispensation, a few others have attempted to trivialize the potency of ethnicity by seeing it as a purely invented phenomenon and therefore a myth which has been perpetuated most by colonialism (see Anderson 1983; Appiah 1992; Owolabi 2003).

However, the fundamental thrust of our focus on ethnicity, whichever way it has been construed, whether as a reality or fiction, is that ethnic configuration has affected social relations in most African states especially in a negative sense leading to fratricidal conflicts, wars, famine and the loss of a sense of belonging to the state which consequently makes the quest for common good a mirage.

The ethnic configuration in most post-colonial African states has also led to a failure of leadership. Most African leaders see themselves primarily as ethnic or regional leaders who are at the centre to protect the interests of their ethnic groups. And so it becomes easy for leaders to plunder resources at the national level and still be commended by their tribesmen. The reason is that the centre of post-colonial African states does not enjoy any protection and integrity since the ethnic groups do not have faith in its existence in the first instance. The centre is seen as a forced union that has been imposed upon them.

Given all these factors, one may tend to be pessimistic about the prospects of a positive social relations in Africa that will lead to the promotion of a sense of community which will ensure not only the survival of the individual but also that of the community seen in larger perspective as the state. It should be borne in mind that it is very difficult, if not impossible, for disparate ethnic configurations to go their different ways. At least, such attempts have led to unending wars. Therefore the most plausible way to manage our differences in the situations we have found ourselves in is to try to work together to promote the common good of which individuals, no matter their ethnic leanings, are primary beneficiaries. It is the need for this that we try to discuss in the next section.

Enhancing our Quest for Community

In this section, we try to show through analysis of the relationship between the community and the individuals that there is now more than ever an urgent need for African leaders to know that without engendering and sustaining a sense of community individuals no matter how rich or powerful cannot survive and flourish. And that in the long run the articulation of an individual's rights and interests is only possible because there exists the community which serves as a receptacle in which various values can be developed, nurtured and protected.

Community, we should note, is the basis for the actualization of individual values, aspirations and goals. Anything that would hamper these objectives, all in the name of an individual's freedom, should be conveniently checked by the communal might for the good of the individual himself and the community at large. The compatibility of

community and individual values starts from the premise that the individual who has imbibed the spirit of community voluntarily gives up certain personal rights in ensuring the continued survival of the community. There is an implicit recognition by the individual that he could only actualize his potential within the community. This explains the reason why some individuals go to the extent of sacrificing their lives for the survival of the community during famine, war and natural disasters.

While individuals cannot survive without the society, the society itself needs its individual members for its survival. The point is underscored by Hegel when he argues that “individual freedom can only be attained in a kind of rational ethical community” (Daly 1994, XX). By this Hegel means that there is always an existent community in which the individual finds himself because this is the only way through which his happiness can be guaranteed.

The individual’s goal needs the community for its realization. However, for the proper enhancement of his project, there must be some checks and balances which the community imposes on individual actions. Furthermore, it is through checks and balances such as rewarding and punishing those who make the actualization of the goal of the community possible or difficult that order is brought about. But we may ask at this juncture: what is the goal of the community? Our answer(s) to these questions would provide the reason why public and private interests or values must be aligned in a human social environment such as Africa. But let us pause to consider the reasons why leaders and followers might actually feel motivated to serve the “common good” or the “public interest” in specific cases when doing so would on balance diminish their own self-interest.

Given the constitution of society itself it becomes imperative for leaders and followers alike to make some self-sacrifices in order to ensure the continued blossoming of the society. We should note that the diminution of self-interest occurs only in the short run considering what the individuals in society, whatever their status, will gain in the long run. The utilitarian argument comes handy in providing an answer to the above question in the sense that there is no sacrifice on the part of the leaders and followers that is too enormous if it promotes greater good over evil or greater happiness for the greater number of people. Of course this is not to suggest that the satisfaction of the majority is the focal point of any action, rather the majority in the loose sense gives us an approximation of what the general good is.

Furthermore, a major incentive for self-sacrifice on the part of the leaders and followers is based on the need to ensure liberty, equality and justice, which are all within the individual’s domain since this is only possible when there is social solidarity. This clearly underscores the fact that there is no protection for the individual who finds himself at odds with collective decisions based on fair play and justice. Perhaps this is the reason why in some African states, Nigeria in particular, election results are accepted by opponents not based on the conviction that they lost the election but on the conviction that the acceptance of the election results will stem the tide of violence which may result in the disintegration of those countries. This also explains the unceremonious end of two of Africa’s foremost political rebels, Fode Sankoe of Sierra Leone and J. Savimbi of Angola, who in spite of their inclusion in governments of national unity did not see the need to abide by the general will.

From our analysis, the goal of the community is synonymous with that of the individual and that is the good life or well-being of both the individual and the community. The individuals through an implicit social contract have come to have a sense of the community formed to serve their interest. The social contract involves the individuals seeing the need to work together and control themselves so that their persons and properties can be preserved. In other words, the community is serving the interest of the individuals and we can see that the two are not anti-thetical to one another, they are complementary.

Our claim that both the community and the individual are not antithetical is not to suggest that there are no tensions between the community and the individual. The tension may sometimes be brought about by the fact that an individual's action threatens social existence, or it may be that the community's stance is detrimental to the survival of the individual. The nature of the tension tends to show that: "Our self-inventions and our allegiances are always complex, contingent and shifting" (Basu 1998, 8). This means that we switch between our communitarian and individualist identities from time to time. In other words, our actions may be in line with communal or individualist values as occasions may demand. However, in cases where the survival of the community is pitched against the individual's will the community will take precedence over the individual (Gbadegesin 1998, 133). The suppression of the individual's whims and caprices is only legitimate if it would help to foster the survival of the community. And in cases in which the individual's survival is threatened, it is perfectly legitimate for the individual to disobey communal norms to ensure his own survival.

From the analysis so far, it is obvious that public interest and individual interests are compatible when they form a synthesis in achieving the goal of well-being. According to Ruth Benedict (1946, 232-235) the society and the individual are not antagonistic in the proper sense of the term. In fact, it is the society which provides the culture from which the individual gets the raw material to make his life. In addition, if the culture of a particular society is rich, it is reflected in the fast development of the individuals and if it is poor, the individuals also suffer. Though we must concede that individuals have their differences, which also account for their autonomy, yet the importance of the community cannot be over-stressed. This is because:

Society is never an entity separable from the individuals who compose it. No individual can arrive even at the threshold of his potentialities without a culture in which he participates. Conversely, no civilization has in it an element, which in the last analysis is not the contribution of an individual (Benedict 1946, 234).

Conclusion: Prospects for Contemporary African Society

Our modest attempt in this essay has been to show that the quest for community, a first step towards realizing an African society where there is social order (conceived as harmonious and progressive development), will be made possible on the realization that the public and private spheres are not mutually exclusive. This is further buttressed by the belief in African communal orientation that:

The feeling of togetherness and the desire for the common good is, perhaps more than anything else, what inspires the African to do what his society considers right, and avoid what is considered wrong. Corporateness and group solidarity are important factors that determine and help maintain norms and standards of conduct within the society (Kudadjie 1977, 24).

The attainment of a sense of community required in Africa to ensure social order and development should go beyond that of idealism. It should involve pro-active efforts at genuine democratization, poverty alleviation, amicable management of ethnic conflicts and above all moral education that inculcates human values such as fellow-feeling, interdependency and a common belief in the ability of man to live in harmony with others based on the principles of justice, fairness, equality and the dignity of man. These goals, though daunting, are not unachievable. They only require our resolute commitment to changing our situation for the better in a world in which joint survival is the most plausible option open to man.

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