

APPRAISAL OF JUSTIN N. EKENNIA'S CRITIQUE ON AFRICAN COMMUNALISM AND POLITICAL RATIONALITY

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Abstract

This paper is an appraisal of Justin Ekennia's critique on African communalism and political rationality. The paper is of the opinion that Ekennia's critique was straight to the point and correct in its claims, except for some aspects pointed out in the paper. However, the paper observes that Ekennia's rejection of communalism as an insufficient foundation for African political rationality is questionable. Hence, the paper argues that if communalism is applied correctly and meaningfully in its real sense, and according to its objectives, it can become a strong weapon for African political rationality.

Keywords: Philosophy, Communalism, African, Rationality, Political, Appraisal

Introduction

Justin Ekennia, in his article published in the book, *Africa: Philosophy and Public Affairs*, edited by J. Obi Oguejiofor, critiqued African communalism and political rationality and maintained that rationality. In this paper therefore, we wish to assess and elaborate Ekennia's claims. To do this, we shall faithfully follow Ekennia's layout and methodology in presenting his article. Meanwhile, our approach shall be expository, appraisal and elaboration. What we mean here is that we shall first present Ekennia's views, and at the same time evaluate and elaborate the areas that need elaboration.

Exposition

In his introduction, Ekennia stated that modern Africa suffers from a fundamental crisis of rationality. According to him, despite the fact that Africa has many decades ago gained her independence, Africa still struggles without success in her search for ideology and criteria for political justification. Ekennia is quite right. Look at our country Nigeria for instance. It is now exactly fifty-nine (59) years since Nigeria got her independence, yet she is yet to attain political, social, and economic stability. Fifty-nine years of freedom, so to say, yet Nigeria still remains a baby in all facets of her life. This same problem can also be seen in most, if not in all African nations. The tragedy of this crisis according to Ekennia is that our traditional values seem to have lost their relevance to the modern African. This is an undeniable fact. Most, if not all African traditional values have been invaded by foreign cultures and values. Think of the modern African mode of dressing, eating, housing, language and even systems of

government or politics, to name just a few. What you see is the influence of European cultural values. A typical example is the use of English or French languages as the common language (lingua franca) in most of African countries. This intrusion of foreign values and cultures has done more harm than good to the African cultural heritage. For instance, in Nigeria, particularly among the Igbo's, English and/or "Pidgin English" has almost taken over from the traditional Igbo language such that most Igbo men and women cannot make a sentence without two or more English words in it. Some have even lost their mother tongue (indigenous language) entirely. Hence you can find a man or woman who claims he or she is an Igbo yet cannot understand Igbo language. This problem is however not peculiar to the Igbos alone; it is equally obtainable in other tribes both in Nigeria and other African nations. The fact is that none of these things has satisfied us. This is why Ekennia stated that these foreign ideas which we embrace do not replace the vacuum created by these values. We are not saying that these foreign values are all bad or have done no good at all to Africa. We acknowledge some positive effects of these foreign values, but then, we still need to point to the fact that some of these foreign values have actually destroyed most of our African ways of life. Besides, African still grope in the dark in search of better solution to her problems without success, since our governments, social and religious institutions continue to play a trial and error game with all currents of thoughts and ideas from the Western world. Ekennia laments that the worst aspect of this situation is that we do not seem to possess any criteria for rejection or acceptance of these foreign ideologies.

At this point, Ekennia raised an important question. He asked, is African culture so empty that it cannot provide a solid foundation for political ideologies suitable for Africa? Our answer to that is that African culture is not empty at all. In fact, it is so full of ideologies. The only problem Africa has is the hunger to embrace western culture, followed by the inability or disinterestedness in working with these ideologies inherent in African culture. Ekennia's concern in this regard is whether there are principles that could be accepted as the bases of rationality for modern African communities, and if there are: what are they?

Meanwhile, we are aware of the efforts of some learned African political leaders who have tried to identify with Africa certain cultural traits which promote community consciousness as against Western individualism since early colonial era. Some of these African include L.S. Senghor, K. Nkrumah, and J. Nyerere. According to Ekennia (), in appealing to the authority of African cultural heritage, these thinkers proposed ideas like negritude, communalism, and socialism. African socialism, consciencism, and mental magnitude. Communalism came out as a dominant option to this problem. But then, can African communalism be the solution to its crisis of rationality (ideology)? Ekennia strongly believe that communalism when applied correctly and meaningful in its real sense and according to its objectives, can become a strong weapon for African political rationality.

In assessing Ekennia's rejection of communalism as insufficient foundation for African political rationality, as we said in the introduction, we shall follow faithfully his methodology. Thus, we shall begin with his etymology and meaning of communalism.

Etymology and Meaning of Communalism

According to Ekennia, the term communalism derives from the adjective communal, which originates from the French *commune* and community. Its Latin origin says Ekennia is *communitas-tatis* which means joint possession or use, participation, partnership, sharing. It also refers to social relationship, fellowship, socialites, organized society. It involves obligingness. Ekennia agrees with Aristotle that those individuals who share nothing cannot constitute a community. This very view was also supported by Hirsch () when he says:

Only individuals who share something can become or remain a true community and whether that something” is defined as a set of values, or an ideology, or social position, either it must already exist – and thus the population in question must be in some very basic way, homogeneous – or its must be created and maintained through a system of moral education (p. 434).

Community

What then is a Community? The word community, Ekennia says can mean different things to different people depending on its use by these people. But then, there are essential conditions that are marks of a community despite empirical and ideological dispute about its nature. Some of these marks or characteristics are mutual respect, interdependence, place and tolerance. Community for M.W. Myers () is a network of reciprocal human relationships which provides a bounded and focused context for human action. K.C. Anyanwu, one of the traditional African philosophers, defines community as “a world of ordered relationships where all actions are integrated into the order of a cultural universe. Life in any community is an intense psychological and vital experience where the individual is face to face with a reality that goes beyond the physical world (Anyanwu, 1981, p. 381). However, for Ekennia, a community implies a group of people who share certain values or goods, visible or invisible, whether they are found in the same geographical location or not. Some of the values he said, may be consciously agreed i.e. ethical norms, whereas others may be constitutive of the community – race, culture, language etc. mutually recognized rights and obligations/duties of the members are all embodied in the idea of community. It is his opinion that the idea of community does not confine itself to a particular race or culture. According to him therefore, a group of people who share in certain ideals and principles may be called a community even when it is constitutive of people of different races, languages and culture. This is quite true especially among the religious communities where both the blacks and whites share certain common religious ideals and principles and therefore, constitute a community.

Ekennia employs Walzer's account of community here:

1. The notion that the moral community in which individuals are conjoined by their shared understanding of social goods.
2. The notion of the legal community in which individuals come together through specific acts of consent that create and legal community are congruent, and that the community of shared meanings is also the sovereign nation state.

What is Communalism?

Ekennia defines communalism as a theory that describes the basic values and shared conceptions of individuals and their own conception of the community. It can also mean living or interacting in the spirit of one's community. In other words, we can say that communalism is the doctrine that the group constitutes the focus of the activities of the individual members of the society. The doctrine places emphasis on the activity and success of the wider society rather than, though not necessarily at the expense of, or to the detriment of the individual. Thus it is implicit that the success and meaning of the individual's life depend on identifying oneself with the group. According to Kwame Gyekye (1987), communalism maximizes the interests of all the individual members of the society since the sense of responsibility is enjoined equally upon each member of the group in order to enhance the welfare of the group as a whole.

Communalism in the Modern Africa

Here Ekennia examines the meaning of communalism in the modern African context. Which implies that communalism will now maximize the interests of all the individual members (individual ethnic, religious groups, and so on) in the African context. In applying the term, communalism to Africa as a community? In what sense if yes, do we use the term community, being aware of the existence of so many autonomous communities and tribes in Africa? If it is difficult and doubtful to use community in a non-normative sense in reference to African, on what ground can we use its normative case? To provide possible response to these problems, he discusses communalism in the writings of some of the pioneers of its usage for Africa. In so doing, he first discusses communalism as a political weapon.

Communalism as a Political Weapon

According to him, the term communalism associated with African social life, has a political origin this was made popular in the 1960s during the struggle for independence. He affirms that prior to this period, Africa had no particular theory or ideology; whatever description given to their social or political life was by western missionaries. Sociologists and anthropologists. Ekennia quotes Mbonu Ojike's view to support his claim. Mbonu writes:

Perhaps you dig deeper into the depth of the African mind and want to know what our social system is. We have never thought of it in terms of theories. Our fathers never discussed or wrote about it. But we can describe the mechanics of our society. Thus you are left with little information for categorizing the African social system. It may seem to you to be socialism, communism, capitalism, communalism or notism at all (Mbonu, 1955, p.121).

If communalism, says Ekennia was regarded as one of the guesses made on the African social system by Westerners in the eyes of Mbonu, it turned out to be the foundation of

African theories of political and economic liberation, in the work of authors like Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Julius Nyerere, etc. But then, we do not think that Ekennia was fair in his assertion that prior to the period of independence, Africa had no particular theory or ideology, and that whatever description given to their social or political life was by Western missionaries, sociologists, and anthropologists. Ekennia will be right if and only if he refers to Africa collectively as a nation. Otherwise, his description is not a just and fair description of Africa. For every race or culture or nation no matter how primitive, must, we believe have one form of ideology or the other. For instance, in Nigeria, before the independence, almost all tribes in Nigeria had one form of ideology or another. This could be seen in the way they ran their communities. A typical example of this is the egalitarian society of the Igbo community and the well-organized system of the centralized government that existed both in the north and south, before the colonial masters came and destroyed it. Thus, we feel that Ekennia's assertion as well as Mbonu whom he quoted is not well founded if he did not take Africa collectively as a nation. The fact that we have never thought of our social system in terms of theories does not mean that we never have them as Ekennia claimed. Neither does the fact that our fathers never discussed them or wrote them down lend credence to the issue at all.

It is this unfair description of Africa as having no particular ideology that led Ekennia to state that the thought of how to free Africa from foreign domination was what dominated the mind of African writers during colonial and post-colonial Africa. As a result, he said. They saw that the only way to achieve this was to develop a theory of African unity. He quotes Nkrumah, saying: "African states must unite or sell themselves out to imperialism or colonialist exploiters for a mess of pottage (Nkrumah, 1969, p. 35). The same view was re-echoed by Nyerere (1963) when he said:

As long as there remain separate nations there will remain too a danger that other states will exploit our differences for their own purposes. Only with unity can we be ensured that Africa really governs Africa. Only with unity can we be sure that African resources will be used for the benefit of Africans (p. 122).

Thus Ekennia believes that it is the desire for unity as an instrument of economic and political liberation of Africa led authors to invest a common culture for Africa. Senghor he said, came up with the idea of "Negritude". This theory holds that the fact of being black and of being colonized is what Black Africa shares in common. In the mind of some authors, says Ekennia, Black Africa was a community. This is quite true especially when you recall that in part of Benin Republic, Yoruba language is spoken as well as in other part of the world apart from here in Nigeria. The author listed others who saw Africa as a community. Example: Sekou Toure, Senghor, Kenyatta. These authors depend on the similarities among people found in different African states. This, as Ekennia rightly pointed out is due to the arbitrary separation of people of the same tribe in different states, through the act of creation of states executed by the colonizers. A good example of this can be seen in the separation and creation

of the then Anambra State of Eastern state where part of the tribes that were Igbo's were cut off and joined with the Benue people along the Benue River. Thus following Nkrumah, Ekennia holds that the African nations of today created artificially by foreigners for their own purposes do not originate from ancient African civilization.

Senghor and African Communalism

Next Ekennia takes up Senghor and his contribution to African communalism. Senghor's appeal to a collective African consciousness derives from his conception of Africa's mind-set and general attitude towards reality and other human beings. Senghor says Ekennia, tried to present what he claims to be the basic difference between Africa and the West. But in doing so he committed a syntax error by categorizing the African mind-set in terms of emotive-sensitivity or a fold of consation. However, Senghor was motivated by the political climate of his time – the fight against colonialists and foreign domination. But this view was strongly criticized by professor Wole Soyinka, who exposed Negritude as trapping itself in what it was primarily a defensive role, even though its accounts were strident, its syntax hyperbolic and its strategy aggressive. In the same vein, Ekennia opines that, though there are some truths in Senghor's analysis of the traditional African world view such as harmony between man and nature, it is however false that African life is marked by emotive-sensitivity. As a result, his analysis fails to represent the present African condition. For if communalism is based on blind intuitions and sensations how can it be the principle of justification for modern Africa?

Communalism and Julius Nyerere

Like others, Nyerere was engaged in the political and economic liberation of Africa. It is in traditional African society that Nyerere sees some basic characters of humanism and communalism. Thus Nyerere believes that the African has a strong sense of family hood (Ujamaa) which creates harmony and cooperation among all the members of the community. But then, even though much of traditional African culture attaches much importance to family ties. Ekennia doubts whether the appeal to family hood and its attendant virtues went beyond the community which saw herself as ontologically bound together but their beliefs and traditions. Thus, he believes that the sense of family hood was highly limited to close relatives and friends. And so, the feasibility of this appeal to family hood is as weak as that of common humanity when it comes to prescribing a theory for any modern community. For Ekennia it is an unrealistic utopia. As for us, we do not think it is entirely an unrealistic utopia as Ekennia claimed. The problem here, we must acknowledge, is that African Socialism as propounded by Nyerere may not singularly meet its goal. However, the problem lies not with the theory itself, but with its application.

Communalism and Kwame Nkrumah

Nkrumah too, had faith in African communalism and humanistic characters. He acknowledged that traditional African society was founded on the principles of egalitarianism. To Nkrumah, communalism is not simply the descriptions of the social structure of traditional African society. It involves basic principles for social harmony. Thus

he claims that communalism finds its fulfillment in socialism.

But then, Ekennia asks, how valid is this claim in relation to the present African situation? In his critique, Ekennia sees Nkrumah's idea of communalism to be more rational than Senghor's and Nyerere's. Nkrumah unlike others employed the receptive of the spirit of communalism which he understood as the principles on which it was built. The problem that arises here is Ekennia's acceptance of Nkrumah's position and his rejection of Nyerere's appeal for extension of Ujamma beyond the tribe, community, or the nation.

Communalism and Modern African Communities

Having explained the different senses of African communalism according to some of its major proponents, Ekennia maintains that it remains a domestic concept. Thus both its principles and scope of application are limited to homogenous communities. Communalism he says, in the strict sense has ontological foundations proper to each family, kindred, and community. Having seen that modern Africa is made up of several competing ethical convictions and communities with different grounds for communalism or solidarity, Ekennia says that its implication is that if a theorist insists on employing the term communalism for modern African communities, it is necessary that he finds a new foundation and a new definition for communalism. Eventually, he believes communalism must leave its usual abode in domestic community or micro-social communities and ascend to the level of greater communities or micro-social communities.

Furthermore, Ekennia maintained that Communalism was based on a shared metaphysical pre-supposition and cultural heritage. Thus a theorist needs to invent a very strong myth in order to justify his attribution of the title of community or communalism to Africa. He then raised some questions as to what would be the basis of communalism between the elite and the common people?; between the government and the citizens? What is the point presuming that a collection of "independent" communities governed by a communalistic spirit form a single community with communalism as its principle? It is much easier, he perceives, to construct a theory for a homogenous community based on communalism than to do so with a poly-communal state like Nigeria, worse still for Africa. According to him, communalism can at best be one of the presuppositions among others, with which a sound theory can be proposed for a modern African community.

Ekennia therefore, judges as insufficient any social, ethical, or political theory which is solely based on the principles of communalism. To do this he says is similar to basing a theory on our common humanity. Such a theory is just an unrealistic utopia for any social action. They both need sufficient justification, which must be built on certain principles or values rationally derived by citizens of this ideal community.

Africa Needs Committed Dialogue

Talking on the need of dialogue for Africa, Ekennia explained that, contrary to this generalization towards modern Africa, the strategy should recommend strongly the awareness of who we really are and who our neighbors are. African communities he said, are so complex that a simplistic unification of all the conflicting convictions to communalism

would be contra-factual if not irrational. The reality of Africa's history must not be denied. Therefore, we must iron out those things which we share in common and those that divide us. This is possible, he said, if we agree to work out the norms of social cooperation, our differences notwithstanding.

The Rationality of the Committed Dialogue Model

Ekennia stated that the committed dialogue model is a realistic procedural approach. It is procedural in the sense that the parties in dialogue must follow certain conditions and rules without which the whole system collapses. The approach is realistic because it puts into considerations of modern Africa, and the modern conditions of rationality. It also considers the special and complex nature of modern African pluralism before deciding on the values and conditions which are judged rational and valid for our context. The fact that there are diverse conflicting cultures and contesting ethical convictions in modern African makes it impossible for us to accept communalism as the response to Africa's political crisis.

As we have shown, we quit agree with Ekennia that communalism was a domestic trend in the traditional African society. Again we do not debate that the traditional African setting is not the same with the modern African society. Thus it is also indisputable that, in most cases, those strategies which worked in the traditional African society will hardly work in the modern African context. Thus, communalism was practiced within a micro-group then. The evidence of the limitedness at which communalism was practiced was the feudalism and slavery which existed with it side by side in the pre-colonial era. Nevertheless, within those communities in which communalism was practiced, it was a powerful tool for solidarity. This fact, Ekennia did not dispute. Since our problem as Ekennia raised is postulation of an ideology which is original, in order words, not imported. It is on this ground that we find it difficult to jettison the contents of communalism. Communalism is very much African in all its aspects. It contrasts the individualism of the West. The problem that communalism is facing is the conflicting influence of individualism which is fast spreading among the elites.

Again, we do not neglect the idea of dialogue which Ekennia is postulating as the ideal solution. Thus in that dialogue we suggest that one of the agenda should be how to adopt communalism as the political ideology of the modern Africa. This implies that the agenda is still open for other ideas. The importance of dialogue lies in preventing unnecessary presumption devoid of consensus. The dialogue will also serve as means of awareness.

The idea of inventing myths to promote communalism, as Ekennia argued to be the only ground, does not seem to be important. The idea of such myth can only be called for where the Africans deny that they are Africans. The fact that Africans see themselves in this particular geographical location of the earth as their inheritance, urgently calls for these Africans to work towards improving their society. It is also on this ground that we grant the concession to the effort of the political leaders. The fact that many of them abused their offices as rulers does not remove the idea that we needed freedom from the colonial masters.

Again, the fact that our traditional African setting did not enjoy communalism beyond the domestic locality does not provide enough ground for us to throw it away. What is important is what was the nature of its product where it existed. Not even both the previous

conflicts and the seeming current ones should discourage us from pursuing a unified ideology. Not even the known developed nations, like European Union and others, that did not experience conflicts and are still experiencing some kind of conflicts to date. They had, and are having conflicts but they continue to work and head towards progress even to overcome those conflicts. This is the duty Africans owe to Africa.

Conclusion

At this juncture, we wish to address some of the questions Ekennia raised. He asked: what would be the basis of communalism between the elite and the common people? We believe that what should form the basis of communalism between the elite and the common people should be a committed spirit of *Ujama*, of oneness, and the awareness of our common goal as a people – as Africans. Without the spirit of oneness and brotherliness or familyhood, African nations (continent) will not be able to achieve a stable, and lasting political rationality.

Meanwhile, having assessed Ekennia's critique of African Communalism and Political Rationality, we come to the conclusion that Ekennia's critique was straight to the point and correct in its claims, except for some aspects we pointed out earlier. We wish to restate that Ekennia's rejection of communalism as an insufficient foundation for African political rationality is questionable. As we have said, if communalism is applied correctly and meaningfully in its real sense, and according to its objectives, it can become a strong weapon for African political rationality.

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