

Applying the african
communalism
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The present-day emphasis on religious pluralism has made more pressing than ever the call and need for a genuine interreligious dialogue. However, experience has shown that a genuine interreligious dialogue is always difficult if not impossible to come by not only in Nigeria but in other parts of the world as well. The reason for this is not farfetched. For me the most notable reason among others is the claim of superiority by some religions over others. This claim suffocates any efforts to any interreligious dialogue that is based on mutual and equal footing. Whether this claim will ever cease to be made is difficult to ascertain. Yet different religions in Nigeria as well as in other parts of the world need a platform with a value capable of generating a genuine interreligious dialogue. This paper argues that applying the value of African communalism into the Religious Ecumenical Bodies in Africa will help to achieve a genuine interreligious dialogue in this part of the world. This is true since according to Chukwuemeka Nze “ The spirit of oneness predominant in African communalism precludes domination and imposition...”[1]which is mainly what interreligious dialogue needs to be genuine. To flesh out this paper, I will first explore the concept of African communalism. Then, I will argue for its application into the Religious Ecumenical Bodies in Africa for a genuine interreligious dialogue.

The Concept of African Communalism

In Africa, members of the community to which an individual belongs, comprises not just the living but also the living-dead or the ancestors, and the unborn or the “ yet-to-be-born”.[2]In this community, the guiding principle is the spirit of African communalism rooted in the realization of the fact that one needs the other members of the community for one to exist

and have meaning in life. Hence, communalism is one of Africa's greatest values, which emphasizes communal existence or living over and above individualistic mode of existence. It is an African cultural value or worldview where " the individual is a part of the community which is an organism." [3] It is a concept that portrays African community spirit. For Simeon Eboh, " the traditional African communalism considers the individual and the community as a whole. One lives from birth to the grave, in an unbroken interdependence. Life is essentially cooperation and mutual co-existence. Every member of the community feels secure and fulfilled." [4] Nze defines it as " the social life of the African which is founded on the African belief that all human beings are members of one family of mankind." [5] Trying to portray this concept of African communalism, Bede Ukwuije argues for the importance of community and the place of individuals in African traditions. He says: " The community is very important in African traditions. Africans live in community. The individual person is a network of relationships." [6]

The concept of African communalism can be seen in its South African expression -ubuntu, which basic norm " is that human existence is interconnected and communal." [7] Like ubuntu, African communalism is expressed in this South African aphorism, " Motho ke motho ka batho", which quoting Ramose, Heinz Kimmerle interprets as meaning: " to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others and, on this basis, establish respectful human relations with them." [8] This is to say that the human interconnectedness that is expressed in African communalism necessitates an interrelationship that is based on " mutual recognition and respect." [9] The concept of African communalism can also be

deduced from Innocent Asouzu's complementary ontology of ibuanyindanda, which " seeks to grasp the idea of being as being from the preceding conditions of its complementary comprehensive interrelatedness." [10] It is an ontology that creates " conditions that make for understanding among diverse peoples", the lack of which makes any " meaningful discourse" or dialogue very difficult to come by. [11] This kind of worldview is not without its implications.

The Implications of African Communalism

One of the implications of African communalism is the fact that a person can only be a person because he or she lives and acts in a community. [12] In other words, it is a community that gives a person his or her identity. The " complementary" interrelatedness that is characteristic of African communalism makes it obvious that one is seen in others and others in one. Based on this interrelatedness, John Mbiti describes the relationship between an individual and his or her community. He says:

Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people. When he suffers, he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbours and his relatives, whether dead or living. When he gets married, he is not alone, neither does his wife ' belong' to him alone. So also the children belong to the corporate body of kinsmen, even if they bear only their father's name. 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.[13]

Worthy of note is the fact that as far as African communalism is concerned, no individual suffers or rejoices alone, but with the entire community. This is important because it will necessarily play out well when I will be arguing for the application of African communalism into the Religious Ecumenical Bodies in Africa for a genuine interreligious dialogue. Still following this outlook of African communalism and the human interconnectedness it characterizes, Stan Chukwube says, “ One’s action is considered moral or immoral depending on how that very action enhances or impedes the welfare of others and the smooth functioning of the community. The concern of Ndigbo (Africa) is not how good or bad an act appears to the individual but how the community evaluates it.”[14]This could be seen in Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart where Okonkwo violated the “ Week of Peace” by beating Ojiugo his wife; an act that was seen as an abomination that “ can ruin the whole clan”. He was made to pay a fine that was used to pacify Ani the “ earth goddess” consequently reconciling him with his wife, with the whole community, and with Ani.[15]

The interconnectedness that is seen in African communalism implies that no individual person can make it or survive all alone. His or her survival depends on the survival of the community from which he or she draws his or her vital force. Kofi Asare Opoku seems to agree with this when he says: “ The concept of communalism implies that the well-being of all is that which determines the good of each individual in the community, for the welfare of each cannot be considered without reference to the welfare of all.”[16]He <https://assignbuster.com/applying-the-african-communalism-theology-religion-essay/>

illustrates this with the Akan art of a crocodile with two heads and two tails but with a common stomach. Though the crocodiles are inseparable from each other, the heads remain distinct. What each of the heads eats, enters into the common stomach, for the personal and collective good of the crocodiles.[17]Consequently, the preservation of the community is a sine qua non and an onus of every member of the community. V. Mulago, commenting on the relationship between the individual and the community and the responsibility of the individual members of the community in African communities says:

the family, clan or tribe is a whole, of which each member is only a part. The same blood, the same life which is shared by all, which all receive from the first ancestor, the founder of the clan, runs through the [veins] of all. Every effort must be directed to the preservation, maintenance, growth and perpetuation of this common treasure. The pitiless elimination of everything which hinders this end, and the encouragement at all costs of everything which furthers it: this is the last word in [Africa] Bantu customs and institutions, wisdom and philosophy.[18]

Owing to the interrelatedness, which is the underpinning principle of African communalism, every member of the community has the obligation to share with the others. Laurenti Magesa says: " Reluctance or utter refusal to share " with God, one's ancestors, other persons in the community, and the community itself...destroys the ' communitarian' purpose of the universe and is immoral."[19]Just as a fish cannot live outside water, an individual in African worldview knows that he or she has no meaning and no existence, once he or she is alienated from the community. His or her life can only be "

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grasped as it is shared.”[20]H. Sindima puts it this way: “ We cannot understand persons, indeed we cannot have personal identity without reference to other persons.... The notion of being-together is intended to emphasize that life is the actuality of living in the present together with people, other creatures, and the earth.”[21]The understanding that “ all realities are in mutual complementary relationship with each other and can be so grasped as serving each other”[22]implies that an individual does not live solely for himself or herself. His or her existence must complement the existence of others in the community just as theirs complements his or her own. In fact, African communalism implies that the individual’s due and rights are respected; that he or she is mutually supported and encouraged in the spirit of “ live and let live,” to fully, develop himself or herself.[23]Since no individual is considered superior to the other, everybody is carried along in communal decision-making.[24]The fact that the individual in African communal life is mutually encouraged and supported to fully develop himself or herself shows that African communalism encourages and supports, not uniformity, but unity in diversity. One could rightly say then, that in African communalism, the joy of living can only be realized when living denotes a life that is lived in mutual relationship. Asouzu articulates it this way:

The joy of being that is characteristic of being, in its deepest complementary ramifications, is not complete unless this joy is a shared act in the mutual transcendent experience of complementary unity of consciousness, which turns out to be the highest form of communal experience (onye aghala nwanneya) in its universal dimension.[25]

The complementary interrelatedness that is seen in African communalism implies that no individual member of the community is complete all by himself or herself. He or she is lacking something that needs to be supplied by the other. Asouzu refers to this lack in an individual as a “ missing link” that requires “ other missing links” for the realization of its being. He says, referring to the implications of the complementary ontology in African communalism:

The implications of this are that no missing link can uphold its being solely on its own. It can do this only with reference to the whole and in complementary harmony with other missing links whose legitimacy and determination are necessarily dependent on the type of union that guarantees their being. It is for this reason that one can say that to be is not to be alone (ka so mu adina).[26]

He goes on to add that “ all missing links attain full authentication and meaning when considered within the framework of complementing units that serve each other mutually and necessarily.”[27]Indeed, in the spirit of African communalism, no individual would like to be alone, knowing that he or she would not succeed. The importance of complementary interconnectedness in African communalism is commonly expressed in many folk tales, adages, and proverbs in Africa. For example, the Igbos commonly say that when a thing stands, other thing will stand beside it (Ihe kwuru ihe akwudebe ya). If a person buries himself or herself, one of his or her hands will be out[28](onye lie onwe ya out aka ya aputa n’elu ala). That is to say, a corpse cannot bury itself. P. Bock, quoting K. A. Opoku says: “ Life is when

you are together, alone you are an animal.”[29]Within the context of African communalism,

the relationship between the subject and the centre of its harmony turns out to be one that is complementary and not one that is fragmented, polarised and exclusivist. It is a framework where units do not relate to each other as discrete quantities oblivious of others. Here, to be is not to be alone (ka so mu di) but to be in mutual relationship of service in complementarity.[30]

The above citation implies that an individual can hold a different view or idea contrary to another member of the community, but he or she does not for that matter stop being in mutual relationship with the other. He or she knows that there is something lacking in him or her, “ a missing link” in the words of Asouzu, which can only be complemented in a complementary interconnected relationship with the other. This why the ontology of ibuanyindanda or the complementary interrelatedness which is embedded in African communalism, “ has the capacity to reach out to all possible relations most especially when the interests of stakeholders seem to vary because of their idea about the world and reality in general.”[31]Thus, African communalism rules out claims of any possession of absolute truth or knowledge of any type by an individual. In other words, no individual has an absolute possession of anything as to be independent of the other. This can be seen in an Igbo African adage which says: “ If the right hand washes the left hand, the left hand will wash the right in turn” (Aka nri kwoo aka ikpa, aka ikpa akwoo aka nri).

The philosophy of African communalism implies that African Religion is communal in nature. It is a religion that is human-centered, rather than Theo-centric. It is overtly utilitarian not in the individualistic, but communal sense.[32]No individual is exclusively guaranteed life beyond. For a guarantee of life beyond depends on how well an individual lives here on earth in relationship with the other. In which case, life beyond is guaranteed not just to the individual alone, but the individual and the community.[33]For though, the individual is distinct, he or she is inseparable from the community. In African communalism and by extension African Religion, therefore, one could rightly affirm that to be is to be in relationship with the other. “ This mode of mutual complementary relationship” according to Asouzu, “ becomes most actual in day to day encounter with the opposite other. It is a form of relationship carried out in mutual dependence and interdependence, as service in complementarity, outside of which no human existence in its insufficiency is thinkable.”[34]

Scholars, especially African theologians, differ in their views as to whether one could talk of African Traditional Religion or Religions. Mbiti for example, is of the opinion that one can talk of African Religions in the plural due to the fact of the many African tribes with their distinct religious systems.[35]Bola Idowu, on his own part, argues for African Religion in the singular, owing to the fact that God is the true factor of religion and this factor is identical in all the religious systems in Africa.[36]Aylward Shorter avers that we should refer to African Traditional Religion in the singular, claiming that different African religious systems interact and influence one another to various degrees, while maintaining their distinctness.[37]Emefie Ikenga-Metuh

doesn't seem to take a side; rather, he offers a caveat not to lose sight of the similarities and dissimilarities in African Religion, in whichever side one decides to take.[38]What may seem to be a problem for some of these great scholars is indeed, an implication of African communalism. Just as the individual in African communalism is distinct but inseparable from the community, so are these various African Traditional Religions distinct but inseparable from the one and only African Traditional Religion of the African ancestor. The way the individual in African communalism lives in a mutual relationship with the other, although, he or she maintains his or her distinctness, so does each of these distinct African religions live in a complementary relationship with one another. Shorter is right then, in maintaining that these different African religions interact and influence one another to different degrees, in spite of their distinctness as noted above.

The philosophy of African communalism, therefore, rules out any claim of exclusivism in African Traditional Religion. For none of the distinct African Traditional Religions can exist exclusively of the others. In the spirit of African communalism and for the fact that African Traditional Religion is communal in nature, all the various African Traditional Religions enrich and complement one another. Even when adherents of one of these distinct African Traditional Religions are integrated into another community, for example, through capture in war, they are allowed to continue with their distinct religious practices.[39]In other words, the adherents of these Religions do not search for converts. However, if one prefers one religious beliefs and practices to one's own beliefs and practices, one is free to willingly and without compulsion, convert to this Religion.

Based on African anthropology and its worldview, I think one can claim without fear of contradiction that Africans have a common ancestor. If this is true, then, one can also aver without contradiction that all the distinct African Traditional Religions have a common link to the African Traditional Religion of the first African ancestor. With their common link to the religion of the first African ancestor and owing to the fact that these distinct African Traditional Religions are communal in nature based on African communalism, African Traditional Religion is inclusive in nature. Since these different African Traditional Religions are distinct religions, though, they are inseparable from the others, one can rightly argue that in the spirit of African communalism, African Traditional Religion is as well, pluralistic in nature. When the above claims are tied together, one comes up with the affirmation that African Traditional Religion, due to the African communalistic worldview, is inclusively pluralistic.

The fact that in African communalism, the individual is identical with the community does not mean that the individual does not have his or her freedom. Harmony is the bedrock of African communalism. The same harmony according to Magesa, “ is [the] agent of freedom and is meant to enhance it.”[40]Within the context of African communalism, good acts resulting from individual choices are rewarded just as bad acts are punished. [41]This shows that the individual, in spite of the emphasis on communal life, has his or her freedom. However, freedom, as far as African worldview and by extension, African Religion is concerned, is not a license or liberty for one to do whatever one wants. Rather, it is “ what enables a person to be fully

who he or she is.”[42]It is a freedom or autonomy that is exercised within a communal context.

Since African communalism is rooted in complementary interrelationships and mutual harmony, it provides a basis for true interreligious dialogue.

Applying African Communalism into the Religious Ecumenical Bodies in Africa for a Genuine Interreligious Dialogue

Ecumenical movement in Africa started precisely in Johannesburg in South Africa in 1904 with the Protestant churches that realized how much divided they were and started searching for a way to unify themselves.[43]Later on, some other Christian churches, like, Catholic and Anglican, joined.[44]The expansion continues today to embrace other religions other than Christianity. Most countries in Africa have now their own Ecumenical Bodies. But the result has not been great. As Zziwa says, “ When one listen[s] to the contemptuous labels that several Catholic priests (let alone laity !) still use about their counterparts in Protestant Churches (and it’s probably mutual!), and when one sees the general indifference about ecumenism, then an ecumenist of feeble courage would easily give up his struggle.”[45]

One of the greatest problems Religious Ecumenical Bodies in Africa and indeed worldwide is encountering, which is hindering true religious dialogue is the claim of absolutism and exclusivism, which some Religions are making with regard to their religious beliefs and their efficacy in leading to salvation respectively.[46]For example, Pope Boniface VIII reaffirmed the claim of the Catholic Church of no salvation outside the church when he says: “ We are

required by faith to believe and hold that there is one holy, catholic and apostolic Church; we firmly believe it and unreservedly profess it; outside it there is neither salvation nor remission of sins.”[47]Even though the Catholic Church has dropped this idea since the Vatican Council II, there are still many clergy and Laity as Zziwa showed above who still cling to such mentality. The Protestant church through Martin Luther claims that “ those who remain outside Christianity, be they heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians (Catholics) although they believe in only one true God, yet remain in eternal wrath and perdition.”[48]Some Muslims on their own side, based on some Qur’anic verses, claim that Islam is the only true Religion of God and refuse to tolerate anyone who professes other faith than Islam.[49]

These obstacles to true interreligious dialogue, which Religious Ecumenical Bodies in Africa encounter, will give way if the principle of African communalism is applied into these Bodies. In the first place, each of these Religious Ecumenical Bodies should be seen as the community where the individual Religions and Denominations belong. Just as in African communalism, the individual is distinct but inseparable from the community, so are these Religions and Denominations, distinct but inseparable from the Religious Ecumenical Bodies they belong to.

The philosophy of African communalism teaches the individual that there is a missing link, something lacking in him or her, which the other will complement. In the same way, applying African communalism into the Religious Ecumenical Bodies in Africa, will teach each individual Religions and Denominations that there is indeed a missing link, something lacking in her, which can only be complemented by the others. This realization will kill
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pride and set the platform for a genuine dialogue on equal and mutual relationship.

African communalism makes it obvious that one is seen in others and others in one; that what affects the individual affects the community and vice versa. In other words, African communalism makes it clear that no individual suffers or rejoices alone but with the community. Applying this into the Religious Ecumenical Bodies in Africa implies that each individual Religion or Denomination is seen in other Religions or Denominations; and that what affects each Religion or Denomination affects the others. No Religion or Denomination suffers or rejoices alone, but with the others. What this means is that Catholics for example, cannot see members of other Christian Denominations or the adherents of African Traditional Religion , Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and so on, as people who are condemned to damnation. Neither, can these, see Catholics as condemned people. To do this, would mean to see oneself, as doomed since the “ self” is seen in the others and the others in the “ self”. When members of each Religion or Denomination that constitutes the Religious Ecumenical Bodies in Africa begin to see things in this way, then, the foundation for true religious dialogue is laid.

The philosophy of African communalism as we saw earlier, teaches that the moral rightness or wrongness of the action of an individual, does not depend on how good or bad that very action appears to the individual, but on far it “ enhances or impedes the welfare of others and the smooth functioning of the community.”[50]In which case, it is the community that determines whether an action of an individual is moral or immoral. Applying this into the

Religious Ecumenical Bodies in Africa implies that the moral rightness or
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wrongness of an action of a particular Religion or Denomination does not depend on how good or bad that action appears to the particular Religion or Denomination, but on how far the action “ enhances or impedes” the well-being “ of others and the smooth functioning of the community”. In other words, the destruction of lives and properties of Christians, by Islamic fundamentalists, is morally wrong, as long as it impedes the welfare of these Christians and the smooth functioning of the society or community. In the same vein, the destruction of shrines and traditional customs of African Traditional Religionists by Christian fundamentalists is immoral, as far as it impedes the well-being of these African Traditional Religionists and disrupts the smooth running of the community. On the contrary, the participation of Christians and Muslims for example, in the traditional festivals of African Traditional Religionists is considered morally right, in so far as it enhances the welfare of these African Traditional Religionists and promotes the smooth functioning of their community. If this kind of mindset that is embedded in African communalism is inculcated into the members of Religious Ecumenical Bodies in Africa, it will definitely enhance genuine interreligious dialogue in Africa.

The exploration of African communalism and its implications done above revealed that every member of the community is obliged to share with the other members of the community. His or her life is meaningful and understood in so far as it is shared. The refusal to share, not only disrupts the smooth running of the community, but also impoverishes both the individual member and the community, which is considered immoral. The

application of this perspective into the Religious Ecumenical Bodies in Africa implies that every in