

Liberalism Versus communal Values in Africa: A Philosophical Duel

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Abstract: This work examines liberalism in relation to communal values in Africa. The paper shows that there are indispensable basic social values in African tradition that are germane to development. The proponents of liberalism have attempted, on the one hand, to jettison these core values and to replace them with ideals that do not fit the African society. This paper argues that basic African values are indispensable and they presuppose that Africa has a value system that is in consonance with her environment and conditions, and any attempt to displace it will pull the society backwards. These values are the guiding principles for genuine development which must remain indispensable to the Western values of individualism.

Key words: Development, Individualism, communal values, Liberalism, Society, Tradition.

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I. Introduction

Liberalism is the belief in the importance of liberty and equal rights. According to Maurice Cranston (1967: 459) "a liberal is a man who believes in liberty". Liberals accord liberty primacy as a political value and maintain that "humans are naturally in 'a *State of perfect Freedom*' to order their Actions...as they think fit...without asking leave, or depending on the Will of any other Man" (Locke, 1960 [1689]: 287). Other recent liberal thinkers such as Joel Feinberg (1984: 9), Stanley Benn (1988: 87) and John Rawls (2001: 44, 112) share the same view. To Gaus, (1996: 162-166) this might be called the *Fundamental Liberal Principle*. The Fundamental Liberal Principle holds that restrictions on liberty must be justified, in other words political authority and law must be justified, as they limit the liberty of citizens. Thus John Rawls's first principle of justice is: "Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive system of equal basic liberty compatible with a similar system for all" (Rawls, 1999b: 220).

Liberals disagree, however, about the concept of liberty, and as a result the liberal ideal of protecting individual liberty can lead to very different conceptions of the task of government. As is well-known, Isaiah Berlin advocated a negative conception of liberty: For Berlin, the heart of liberty is the absence of coercion by others; that is the citizens do not coerce each other without compelling justification. You lack political liberty or freedom only if you are prevented from attaining a goal by other human beings (Berlin, 1969: 122). That is to say that negative liberty is an *opportunity-concept*. Being free is merely a matter of what we can do, what options are open to us, regardless of whether or not we exercise such options (Taylor, 1979).

Many liberals have been attracted to more *positive* conceptions of liberty. For Green (1986 [1895]: 228), a person is free only if s/he is self-directed or autonomous. Running throughout liberal political theory is an ideal of a free person as one whose actions are in some sense his/her *own*. In this sense, positive liberty is an *exercise-concept*. One is free merely to the degree that one has effectively determined oneself and the shape of one's life (Taylor, 1979). Such a person is not subject to compulsions, critically reflects on his/her ideals and so does not unreflectively follow custom, and does not ignore his/her long-term interests for short-term pleasures.

This ideal of freedom as autonomy has its roots not only in Rousseau's and Kant's political theories, but also in John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. And today it is a dominant strain in liberalism, as witnessed by the works of S.I. Benn (1988), Gerald Dworkin (1988), and Joseph Raz (1986).

Communal values on the other hand, according to Gyekye, are those values that "express appreciation of the worth and importance of the community" (Gyekye, 1996:35). It is these values that define and guide the social relationship in the form of attitude and behaviour that should exist between individuals living together in a community, "sharing a social life and having a sense of common good" (Ibid.). These values include sharing, mutual aid, caring for others, selflessness, interdependence, solidarity, reciprocal obligations, social harmony and mutual trust (Eboh, 2003).

A popular African proverb comes to mind here to express the African sense of community. It says: "Go the way that many people go; if you go alone, you will have reason to lament" (Davidson B, 1969). The African idea of security and its value depends on personal identification with and within the community. Communalism in Africa is a system that is both suprasensible and material in its terms of reference. Both are found in a society that is believed by the Africans to be originally "godmade" because it transcends the people who live in it now, and it is "Man-made" because it cannot be culturally understood independence of those who live in it now (OnwubikoO, 1991). Therefore, the authentic African is known and identified in, by and through his community.

In another sense, the community offers the African psychologically and ultimate security as it gives its members both physical and ideological identity. It must be noted that in the African mentality, the community as an entity remains, while individuals, as persons, come and go. Therefore, Africans emphasize community life and communalism as a living principle of which the basic ideology is community-identity. Its aim is to produce and present an individual as a community-culture-bearer. Culture is a community property and must therefore be community-protected.

This essay examines liberalism and its challenge on communal values in Africa. In this discourse, liberalism is seen as a suspect, which acts as a vehicle of western imperialism in a nuanced fashion. The essay attempts to expose the impacts of liberalism on African communal values and further highlights the indispensability of Africa communal values to the Western values of individualism.

II. Liberalism And Communal Values

Liberalism undermines development generally and discourages regard for the common good. To Africans in particular, individualism has bastardized their spirit of oneness, their communal spirit and above all, their sense of leadership. This unbending reputation for individualism also makes African states almost impossible to rule; because in an attempt to employ individualism in African, individual success become more emphasized over and above that of the group; that is the reason why corruption is very common in African states. The few that are lucky to find themselves at the corridor of power will want to take everything for themselves, and even wish to remain in power permanently.

On the other hand, liberalism is committed to individual rights as an ultimate value in any society. It claims that an individual should be autonomous, self-determined, capable of evaluation and choice making. In their attempt to secure autonomy, freedom and dignity of individuals in the society, the Liberals hold the atomistic view of the self. To them, for an individual to enjoy uninterrupted rights, he/she must strive to be self-sufficient and this can only be possible in an atomistic society. In an essay, entitled "Atomism", Taylor objects to the liberal view that "men are self-sufficient outside of society" (Taylor, C. 1989). Instead, Taylor defends the Aristotelian view that "man is a social animal, indeed a political animal, because he is not self-sufficient alone, and in an important sense he is not self-sufficient outside polis" (Ibid).

This atomistic view of the self can undermine liberal society because no one is an island, man as a social animal can only function properly in the assembly of men. As a member of a community, one must share a number of things, share certain commitments, and cooperate with others. Okotp'Bitek (1998:74) expresses this poignantly when he claims that man cannot and must not be free. Son, mother, daughter, father, uncle, husband, grandfather, wife, clansman, mother-in-law, chief, medicine man, and many other such terms, are the stamps of man's un-freedom. It is by such complex titles that a person is defined and identified. They order and determine human behaviours in society. Accordingly, the answer to the question "who am I?" can only be sought in relational term because: "I" is not only one relationship, but numerous relationships, "I" has a clan, a shrine, a country, a job, "I" may or may not be married, may or may not have children. Is "I" a chief? Then he has subjects or followers (Ibid.). Beside this, the liberals acknowledge the intrinsic worth of the self and the moral rights that are necessarily due to an individual. The liberty to accumulate wealth and to organize productive activity into hierarchically ordered enterprises in a liberal society "poses a challenge to the extent to which political liberty can be enjoyed by all citizens" (Dahl, 1985). In other words, it poses a challenge to the extent to which citizens can act as equals in the political process. It is necessary to examine this challenge because it is one of the main threats to liberty in the contemporary world. Ignoring it will create inequality and the consequences of this will certainly lead to violation of political liberty. This unavoidable mistake accounts for incessant violence in liberal societies.

Moreover, the liberals' resolute attempt to emancipate the individuals from authority has permeated the contemporary society. They have been accused of giving too much attention to individual choice. Their actions have led to the erosion of the sense that we might have unchosen responsibilities and also that we owe something to our community whose tradition and resources have made us what we are. Liberalism, Bell maintains: is responsible for a variety of social pathologies and is unable to respond to communitarian concerns about loneliness, divorce, political apathy, and everything else connected with the breakdown of community in contemporary western society (Daniel, A. B. 1985).

In many countries today, the government and the individuals are more worried about moral values, the breakdown of the families and the decline in civil life. The public wants the government and individual elected officials to play a more active leadership role in dealing with the declining values. Many states are now talking of going back to the community. The intention is to introduce the values inherent in the community into the system. Individualism seems not to be working well any longer; "secularism and individualism" (Conrad, F. G. 2001) are the target in the new culture war embarked upon by many states today. Amital Etzioni also advances the thesis that the major woe facing the western world is this issue of personal freedom with a lack of concomitant responsibility. For Etzioni, (1993) "it is the family, the 'community' and other values-giving institutions not the individual...which are the building blocks of society". "Living together" and the sense of "community of brothers and sisters" are the bases of, and the expressions of, the extended family system in Africa. The rationale behind it according to Davidson is that "balance of kingship relations, seen as essential to the ideal balance with nature that was itself the material guarantee of survival, called for specific patterns of conduct. Individuals might have rights but they had them only by virtue of the obligations, they fulfilled to the community. This explains [the African] logic of regarding legality in terms of individual obligations, not of individual rights. At least in ([ur]jural and moral assumptions, ([ur] communities lived at an opposite extreme from the 'free enterprise individualism' which supposes that the community has rights only by virtue of the obligations it fulfills to the individual" (Davidson B 1969).

In addition, to liberals, an individual is not defined by tradition or community, because an individual is free to reject or accept the values associated with any of these roles. Liberals claim that individuals have no strong attachment to ethnicity, religion, or any traditions or community. Since they are not encumbered by any of these, they are free to determine their ways of life, and any value associated with those roles could be rejected or accepted at will. While in Africa, the community is the custodian of the individual, hence s/he must go where the community goes. In the material term of reference, the individual must go to the "community centre" or village square which is a social, political, judicial and religious centre. It is the communal meeting place for political discussions, communal tribunals, sports and games. It is therefore a traditional place of congregation for the entire community. This is why, beyond the community - the clan - for the African, "there stood the void in strong and ever present contrast. Outside this ancestrally chartered system there lay no possible life, since 'a man without lineage is a man without citizenship': without identity, and therefore without allies...; or as the Kongo put it, a man outside his clan is like a grasshopper which has lost its wings" (Davidson B 1969). The clan here is 'clan vital' that is 'a living clan' (Davidson B 1969). Hence, in an African community, everyone is accommodated. This African sense of accommodation accounts for why, "in traditional African culture, the weak and the aged; the incurable, the helpless, the sick were affectionately taken care of in the comforting family atmosphere" (Okafor F.C 1974). The "comforting family atmosphere" is provided by the extended family system. It is a system that ultimately rested and still rests on the philosophy of "live-and-letlive", otherwise known as "the eagle-and-kit" principle. This principle is according to Onwubiko (1991) "a principle which defined rights and duties, responsibilities and obligations towards the less fortunate, those incapacitated in one way or another".

That is however the reason why individualism, as an ideology and principle of life, is not encouraged in Africa, even though it is not destroyed. In the words of Steve Biko (1978): "We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us but as a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life. Hence in all we do we always place man first and hence all our action is usually joint community oriented action rather than the individualism."

III. Conclusion

The attempt here is not to condemn liberalism out right, as it has had some positive impact in the western world. However, the introduction of liberal ideology has given way to a sober assessment of the difficulties of implementing liberalism outside the western world. What of Iraq and Afghanistan? The brutal ethnic warfare that follows the introduction of liberalism is worth mentioning. What of the crippling poverty, environmental degradation and corruption? These are some of the obvious troubles that pose a serious obstacle to the successful establishment and consolidation of liberal democratic political arrangements outside the western world. Beside that, liberal's morality is too thin to give people a sense of what is important in life. It is based on the pursuit of the only goods generally admired in a liberal regime, that is, the instrumental goods of money, recognition and power. However, the pursuit of these goods only exacerbates the already competitive character of liberal politics and societies. Those individuals who find themselves in a competitive and threatening environment may isolate and withdraw themselves, because they see liberal morality as a barrier to their wellbeing. These set of people may be tempted to go beyond the bounds of liberal morality and when this happened, a vicious cycle is likely to result. And as more and more people begin to cut moral corners, those who still live according to liberal morality will begin to see themselves as suckers. The consequence of this is

that, their conscience will become weaker, which will result to moral decline of private life which will definitely have public repercussions in the rise of crime and criminality.

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