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# THE ONTOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY IN AFRICAN COMMUNAL SETTING

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## Abstract

Communalism presupposes the doctrine that the community is the focus of activities of the individual member of any given society. A typical African society is organized to satisfy the basic human needs of all its members. In this context, resources such as land are communally owned for the benefit of every member of the society regardless of their status. Properly situated, it is an inclusive society and this accounts for the notion of intersubjectivity (the sharing subjective states system by two or more individuals). This paper accounts for the ontological foundation of intersubjectivity within the context of African thought. In what follows, it is argued that the African worldview has some ontological and metaphysical beliefs that helped in cementing solidarity and intersubjectivity among the members of any given African society. To achieve these, the paper uses the expository and analytical methods of data analysis. The conclusion reached is that the I-thou relationship which informed intersubjectivity in the thoughts of Martin Buber has many cognates in African communalism which ranges from Ubuntu, Ujamaa amongst others. And in the case of Africa, the good of the community is elevated over and above the

individual in the African existential life. Hence, the concept of intersubjectivity within the context of African communalism is influenced and founded on African ontological worldview.

Keywords: Africa, African communalism, intersubjectivity, ontology

### **Introduction**

It was Aristotle who first stated that man is a social animal and since then, many philosophers have noted that man is actually a social animal. Social scientists have confirmed this, observing that it is usually through co-operative behaviour that mankind survives and surmounts the problems encountered in particular settings. These observations are neither more or less true for Africans than they are for many other peoples of the world. But it is contended that Africans, were organized sometimes in which ways that were unfamiliar to others and unwitnessed anywhere else. Although all human beings are said to be social, there seem to be some unanimity among African philosophers, that Africans exhibited some sort of sociality that was both unique and more than the normal expected level of sociality. Edwin Smith, captured this form of sociality when he avers that Africans have hitherto lived in the collective stage. The community has been the unit, in which every individual's interest has been subordinated to the general welfare. In many respects, this excites our admiration, even envy. There is a level of solidarity that civilized communities find difficult to attain (in Gyekye 1987:270).

Smith finds traditional African solidarity admirable and unwitnessed anywhere else. It was in a way, a system of sociality, that other societies, even civilized ones, could not evolve. Traditional African societies are said to have been communalistic, whereby emphasis was given to the group or community rather than to the individual. The community was the centre of focus and its interest and welfare were paramount to those of an individual. Communalism held significant place in traditional Africa.

The requirement of this paper is to account for the ontological foundation of intersubjectivity in African communalism. In fulfilling this requirement, this paper proceeds from a preliminary discourse on the concepts of African communalism, through a discourse of intersubjectivity in African communalism to a discourse on the ontological foundation of intersubjectivity before the conclusion which is a summation of what have been discussed in the foregoing.

### **African Communalism**

For Gyekye (1987:36) communalism is the doctrine that the communality (or group) is the focus of activities of the individual member of the society. He further states that African communalism is a mutual society, which is organized to satisfy the basic human needs of all its members. Most resources such as land are communally owned for the benefit of everyone. If for example, a villager requires a new hut, all the men would cut trees to erect the frame and bring thatches for roofing, and women did the

mud-plastering for the walls. In the same spirit, the able-bodied would accept responsibility for tending and harvesting the gardens of the sick and deformed. The hungry stranger could without penalty, enter the gardens of the village and take, say a bunch of banana to satisfy his hunger. His action only became theft if he took more than was necessary to satisfy his needs. He argues further that the slow, inept and incapable were accepted as a valid element in community life, adding that in such societies, old people are accepted and it is regarded as a privilege to look after them as their counsel is maintained and sought after on many matters. Furthermore, this African communalism, according to him, is an inclusive one because the titled father is not restricted to only one's father but also to his father's brother, and also addresses his or her mother's sister as mother.

### **Merits of African Communalism**

African communalism is a very important aspect of African culture. So, it is not surprising to state that it has a lot of merits for which it is sustained. The merits are these:

- i. The philosophy behind the African Communalism is that, it guarantees individual's responsibility within the communal ownership and relationship.
- ii. The ethics of mutual help and caring for each other is founded on communalism.
- iii. The idea of communalism implies a way of decision making which is based on consensus, found through dialogue. Here, political decisions are taken, where everybody participates and speaks.
- iv. Democratic participation in major issues was all inclusive. This was noticed in the fact that there was freedom of expression.
- v. Community spirit means that there is a high estimation of the community in African thought and practice higher than that of the individual.
- vi. The role and importance of the individual person is highlighted.
- vii. African communalism enhances internal security against any possible invasion of the bond of unity, togetherness and close-knit.
- viii. The whole African society is a living network of relations almost like that between the various parts of an organism.
- ix. Polycarp Ikenobe in Etta et al (2016) highlighted that there exists a moderately liberal African communalism that allows the individual to engage in critical reasoning and acquire rational beliefs within the normal structures that oral tradition and elders provide for the well-being of the community.
- x. Ikenobe uses the African saying "it takes a village to raise a child", this, for him, suggests the importance of African communal belief and philosophy and the education belief and philosophy that westerners could gain from learning them.
- xi. He further supports his argument with a conception of personhood and the relationship between the individual and community in various African cultures as dynamics that reflect legitimate and critical African modes of inquiry and representation or morality. In the light of the above, Ikenobe explains that moral thought in African cultures are reflections of communalism, and has features of rationalism, naturalism, humanism etc.

## Intersubjectivity in African Communism

Intersubjectivity refers to an inter-personal relationship between human beings. In other words, intersubjectivity is a short-hand description for a variety of human interactions (Gillespie & Cornish 2010:49). It has been used to refer to mutual agreement between people on a given set of meanings. Thus, intersubjectivity in this sense is simply a word for agreement, concurrence or conformity. It is a kind of collectivism, communality based on shared beliefs and values. Scheff (2006) defines intersubjectivity as the sharing of subjective states by two or more individuals. Furthermore, intersubjectivity has also been used to refer to the common-sense, shared meanings constructed by people in their interactions with each other and used as an everyday resource to interpret the meaning of elements of social and cultural life. If people share common sense, then they share a definition of their situation. In this paper, intersubjectivity is used to mean the interconnectedness or shared experience of presence between selfs.

One of the African cognate for intersubjectivity is *Ubuntu*. Mcunu (2004:40) emphasises this when he writes "every facet of African life is shaped to embrace *Ubuntu* as a process and philosophy which reflects the African heritage, traditions, culture, custom, beliefs, value system and the extended family structures. At the heart of the above statement is the word '*ubuntu*', which variously means 'humanity', 'humanness', or even 'humaneness'. These translations involve a considerable loss of culture-specific meaning. But, be that as it may, generally speaking, the maxim '*ubuntungumuntungabantu*' articulates a basic respect and compassion for others.... As such, it is both a factual description and a rule of conduct or social ethics. It not only describes human being as "being-with-others, but also prescribes how they should relate to others, that is, what "being-with-others' should be all about (Louw 1). Thus, *Ubuntu* "is a communal way of life which deems that society must be run for the sake of all, requiring cooperation as well as sharing and charity. *Ubuntu* consequently, is the quality of being human.

The term '*ubuntu*' can be applied descriptively, that is to say, one could hear someone saying that a person has '*ubuntu*'- "*usibanibaniungumuntu*' (or in Sotho '*mangmang o nalebotho*'), meaning "that person is a human or, "that person has \**ubuntu*". Thus one would say a person is *umuntu* (a human being) because he or she possesses or displays the characteristics of *ubuntu*'. Naturally the opposite can also be said of a person or community. One would hear people say that, *akamuntuwalutholowo* ("that one has no use or help"). To this we must add that *ubuntu* is an art and quality of being human' (Mcunu 2014:31). Du Toit (2004:33) writes the following about '*ubuntu*', with a clear application for the theme of this paper:

In Africa, a person is identified by his or her interrelationships and not primarily by individualistic properties. The community identifies the person and not the person the community. The identity of the person is his or her place in the community: In Africa it is a matter of "I participate, therefore am'.. *Ubuntu* is the principle of I am only because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.

Ubuntu is African humanism.

The notion of intersubjective identity has been described as "knowing through relationship"- a form of non-sensory, non-linguistic connection through "presence" and "meaning", rather than through mechanism or exchanges of energy... intersubjectivity is "consciousness as communion". Thus, if one were to apply the dialogical conceptual framework of I-Thou' developed by Martin Buber in his philosophical essay "Ichun Du", one would be able to show that, in the African world view, it is neither the T(individual) nor the Thou' (community) that takes ontological primacy. Rather, the ontological primacy is focused on the hyphen, the "between', of the I-Thou. Ramose (1999) avers that the African concept of a person as wholeness does not deny human individuality as an ontological fact, as an analytic finitude, but ascribes ontological primacy to the community through which the human individual comes to know both themselves and the world around them. Since Ramose is not addressing the three elements presented above (the I', the between' and the "Thou'), his reference focuses, almost exclusively, on the individual within the community. However, the weight of the statement rests on the words 'to the community through which the individual comes to know'.

### Intersubjectivity and Time

Ontology is of Greek derivation. It is derived from two Greek words, *onto* which connotes "to be" and *logos* which means "word" or "study". Drawing from the above, it feels safe to state that ontology is the study of being or the worldview of a people. It forms the major concern as well as the subject matter of metaphysics because, metaphysics encompasses, cosmology, cosmogony and ontology. Drawing from the Heideggerian subdivision of metaphysics into *metaphysicaspecialis* and *metaphysicageneralis*, ontology belongs to the division of metaphysics which is concerned with the holistic study of being. It is from this background that the ontological foundation of intersubjectivity and time will be here argued.

In African ontology, the human person is a communal-individualistic being.

The African person has a deep sense of community. For Iroegbu (2000:98);

The entire African peoples possess a deep (sense) of community spirit founded on this basic kinship of belongingness. They see themselves as a people with numerous shared elements like common history, geographical, and socio-economic situation. Equally common cultural elements and shared value are found among the community peoples. These include communal solidarity, extended family system, deep religiosity and the sense of sacredness. Others are the values of fidelity, truth, and an acute sense of justice. All these and more are crowned by a high moral code believed to be sanctioned by the gods.

Another common characteristic of African societies is vitality. There is a pronounced involvement in liveliness, joy of living, boisterous activities and festivities that express these. The human person is defined by a responsible interchange in his intersubjective community. The human person is a product of his own immediate intersubjective community. Iroegbu (2000:101) believes that:

The concept of community underlies the idea of solidarity, exchange, intersubjectivity, and humane reciprocity among community members. From being a spirit of communing, it becomes a reality of life together. This necessary togetherness is what makes the different persons who participate in it, discover their identities.... As a conceptual model community is the origin of the life of its members. All are products of the community, This is both at the micro-level of parents who give birth to each, and at the macro-level where the community is the cradle that welcomes and creates the existential space for the new born to be grown and flourished.

One would see that the extended family system is inseparable from the traditional African society. It forms the basis for the communalistic living of the African people which stems from the solidarity of the entire families and individuals in the community. This extended family system as a matter of fact is the bed-rock of the communal humanism of the African world view. It is humanistic because it stresses the brotherly love which holds everybody together and demands everyone to be his brother's keeper. It discourages the dehumanization, exploitation and domination of each other, but seeks to better the living condition of all in all ramification and at all time, in all circumstances. The African communalistic system has a lot of positive effects.

In the early days of our ancestors, they were forced to band themselves together to withstand the harsh environmental conditions. There are reasons why the 'I' choose to bind itself to the others, and this fundamentally has to do with the inability of the 'I' to stand and survive alone. Harsh environmental conditions, endless forests, marauding wild animals, heavy rains, mountainous terrains, etc, decrease an individual's ability to survive alone. It leads to a tendency for the self to move towards group dependence and reliance. The intensity of the individual's relatedness to the group is determined by the level and consciousness of the inability to survive outside the group. The more this is the case; the more the centre of life is shifted from one's self to the group or "usness."

The central question and concern of life is no longer about how to live as individuals but as groups. This shift is comparable to the protective colouring that some animals assume to disguise their true selves. They change their colours to become so similar

to their surrounding that they are hardly distinguishable from it (Fromm 1942:38). In this case the surrounding environment becomes key to the survival of the animal concerned. The life of our forefathers, the ancestors, required such mechanism, which was gradually passed onto their descendants. The very survivals of the descendants' societies were made dependent on living as the ancestors lived. It required conformity to the old tested ways. Traditional African people were brought up in this reality of existence and thus the tendency to build unique forms of social groupings.

According to Nyasani (n.d.:20), there must have been many reasons that forced our forefathers into group solidarity. He singles out the need for security as having been one of the main reasons that forced them to seek their personal security through integration with others. The Africans' self-surrender to the 'we' is the result of, an inveterate psychological disposition largely borne out of a hostile environment in which he finds himself. Traditionally Africans found themselves occupying a territory fraught with all kinds of dangers and enemies, physical and psychological. The jungles of Africa and their terrifying natural hazards were themselves enough to inspire fear, compelling individuals to draw together in order to combat them in a united front. The individuals looked up to each other for security against marauding wildlife or against tempestuous wild down pours or against inter-tribal wars. Thus a sense of collective security had to be developed in order to cope with the hostile environment. Gradually this inevitable attitude that I cannot exist or cannot make it all on my own without committing myself to the other or others had to grow naturally.

For Nyasani (n.d.:21), it is the African environment and its hostility to exclusive individualism that served as the root cause of the unique solidarity that was witnessed in Africa. From a purely accidental hostile situation, an element of mutual concern in the form of solidarity, togetherness, brotherhood and extended family structures began to take concrete shapes. The hostile environment was packed by the mutual ties of blood relationship and the metaphysical link with the world of ancestors in traditional African societies.

The African worldview has some ontological and metaphysical beliefs that helped in cementing solidarity and intersubjectivity among the members of any given society. The belief sees society as consisting of both the living and the living dead, the dead continued to be not only members but active participants of their societies. Death was merely a transformation of an individual to a higher form of existence; an existence that was invested with superior power over the living. The living dead constituted the ancestors who were the guardians of the living, the traditions and practices of their societies. They influenced the living to live almost in the same way as they lived. The old tested ways, so the thinking went, are the best proved means to social harmony and good which the descendants should religiously adhere to, to avoid plunging their societies into problems.



African societies in their traditional settings were therefore cooperative, collectivist, communalist or socialist in form. There was a vivid feeling and demonstration of solidarity, which was exemplified in traditional culture by the harmony between the individual and the group of Individuals which were seen in terms of groups or collectivity from the family level to the clan and from the village to the tribe. The family was the most basic social unit and exhibited the strongest sense of solidarity. The family was the extended one, which brought quite a large group of individuals closely related by blood. The living dead were also considered to be active members of such extended families.

It is this extended family structure that was the foundation of traditional African communalism. The structure extended a web of relatedness among different extended families ensuring a fibre of relatedness among all the families of the ethnic group. This union was extended to the living dead. The larger units, the clan and tribe had a string of relatedness that bound the members of each towards the other. The units were held together by the biological bond of kinship and the immanent spirit of the tribe. Towards one's family, clan or tribe, there was deep sentiment, affection and loyalty. According to Nyasani, no person in the extended family set up can starve if neighbours have food, neither can a child be orphaned since children belong to the community. The child's welfare is not just an obligation of its family but every member of the community. In actual fact, everybody was responsible for the other.

This familiness or bond is what Nyerere sought to achieve through his notion of *Ujamaa*. *Ujamaa* served as the foundations for an African socialism: socialism "made in Tanzania" (Nyerere, 1986:49). These words aptly capture the full import of *Ujamaa*. This is exactly what traditional African society succeeded in doing; both the "rich" and the "poor" individuals were completely secured in African society. Natural catastrophe brought famine, but it brought famine to everybody- "rich" or "poor". Nobody starved, either of food or of human dignity, because he lacked personal wealth; he could depend on the wealth possessed by the community of which he was a member. This is socialism (Nyerere, n.d.: 4).

African communalism was a social structure where all individuals formed a community with their fellow men and women and their actions were conditioned by this fact. It saw the individual as an inherently communal being, and never as an isolated atomic individual. The individual was a member of a genuine community of brotherhood. The individual acquired a new form of life and meaning. In the 'I - thou' relationship, the force of the 'alterego' is reinforced by the forces of love, sentiments, blood relations, a common descent and language. Communalism points to something extra, that binding force among human beings in the 'we' relationships, a kind of subjective feeling of the members in a society usually affectual and traditional.

African communalism insists that the good of all determines the good of each, or the welfare of each is dependent on the welfare of all. In communalism the group is the

centre of focus of the lives of individuals and the measure of an individual's worth is dependent on the extent of his or her association and conformity with the group's interests and aspirations (Gyekye, in Nyasani, n.d.:24). Implied in communalism is the belief that an individual's being depends on the being of others. An individual "is because others are". The **I** exists only because of the existence of the **other** or **'thou'**. The existence of the **I** is therefore irrevocably dependent on the existence of the **'other** or the **'thou'**.

Each individual then seems to lead the life of others while leading his own. He can never be himself except as far as others are. Consequently the existential significance of any individual seems to derive its ontological value from the collective lifeblood of the community. The community ethics, therefore emerges as supreme and overriding where individual whims might inspire individualistic and selfish pursuits. The arrangement enjoins obligation upon an individual to always act for the good of the group since his or her very being is dependent on it. It is this that made traditional African communalism, a social structure in which every member voluntarily cooperates; is proud and much obliged to help any other member of his or her community. It is a value that Africans attached the readiness to help and share to group life.

The idea of communalism is based on the fact that human beings form a community of related persons and that their actions must always be conditioned by this fact, and each should contribute to the well being of all. Such a social structure was a shared way of living, and was opposed to inequality, privilege and monopoly. It formed a group spirit and a community of interests giving the individuals security and a sense of belonging to the group. It is characterized by the principle that a human person blossoms in a group, and the person internalizes the group in such a way that he ties his or her own well being to the well being of the group.

Prior to European colonialism, African ontological worldview was basically classless and communal. There was no private ownership of property, and the community was treated as being paramount to the individual. Within pre-colonial societies, there was generally no exploitation of one group by the other. African tribal society was quite literally one big harmonious family in which all members contributed to the general welfare and were in turn taken care of by the community in case of need. In effect, before the arrival of the European colonizers, there existed an African welfare state based on the principle of communalism (Ottaway et al. 1981:48),

Traditional African communalism was thus driven by some form of family-hood or brotherhood which was key in cementing the mass of individuals into a communion of relatives, each tied in one way or the other, to other members of society. Members in such communities live together in the same territory for long without meeting other cultures that radically was different from their own. Even among nomadic

communities, they were moving about physically in vast terrain without meeting or mixing with others from different communities.

This usually results in a kind of intimacy, a form of single biological relationship, creating a kind of somatic homogeneity, of locally inbred population. Under such circumstances, there is also some kind of epistemological principles involved. When people live in a territory for long, they come to know each other, to a large extent even, physically, thus the I brings most of the 'others' into his or her epistemological realm. The 'other' is therefore within the episteme of the I. This is bound to enhance understanding, brotherhood and uniformity between the 'I' and the 'other', thus a strong sense of communalism. It leads to a kind of sociality that is intimate and based on sentiments as compared to based on self-interests. It is based on the way individuals feel about each other and their obligations to one another.

These obligations are ethical in character. Members in such a community have individual interests but they are integrated as part of the ultimate values of the entire community. This creates a bond or feeling of belonging and oneness among the members forming a communion of individuals tied to each other sentimentally, this mode of social structuring is in effect different from the existential type found in western countries. In the western world, the individual is given prominence as opposed to the community. The structure emphasizes individuality and individual freedom as the essence of mankind. They subscribe to the view that human nature is not a machine to be build after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inner forces. They discourage mechanical adherence to traditions in communalism, such adherence was encouraged and built into the individual.

In the African existential life, communality was characterized by a kind of real and imagined consanguinity where each and every individual believed in some form of blood and descent relationship with others. A group relationship is associative if the orientation of social action within it is based on rationally motivated adjustments and arrangements to the common good. It is the result of the group's attempts to seek workable and comfortable arrangements in society.

Traditional African social structure was based on this dual ethics of organization. It was a combination of the associative and communitarian nature of social organization. This organization necessitated variety of values that were essential to its existence and survival. In the African case, came a strong communitarian nature of man, which had its own attendant consequences. Among these are the values such as communal ownership of land, egalitarianism, and extensive network of social obligations and duties that led to considerable cooperation. According to Gyekye, traditional communal order was participatory and characterized by a number of social and ethical values such as brotherhood, interdependence, cooperation, reciprocal obligations, social justice, hospitality, mutual neighborliness.

compassion, generosity, self-sacrifice and control (quoted in Nyasani n.d.:25).

These values arise in abundance whenever the communitarian nature of man comes out vividly. They ensure that enmity is kept at bay with mutual helpfulness, interdependence and a feeling of brotherly love as well as understanding among the people. A deep feeling of responsibility for the welfare of others was the chief guiding factor. In traditional African setting, man never does anything, receives anything or suffers anything alone. This ensures a warm fraternity, hospitality and togetherness, which could be the envy of individualistic cultures. Everybody was therefore socialized and expected to be his brother's keeper and protector. This reality of communalism is also vivid in the African language where expressions used exclude to a large extent, the individualistic terminologies and instead use collective ones. There is a tendency to avoid terms such as 'I' and 'you' and embrace terms such as 'us' or 'we'

### Conclusion

In the preceding paragraphs, attempts have been made to account for the ontological foundation of intersubjectivity and time in African communalism. This attempt proceeded from a preliminary discourse on the concept of African communalism through the discourse on the concept of intersubjectivity in African communalism to a discourse on the ontological foundation of the same in African communalism. As a conclusion of this paper, a number of positions have been raised and a rehearsal of a few of them is here considered necessary. One, that the concept of communalism and intersubjectivity in African communism is to a large extent different from the position as held in the west, is a statement of fact. Two, the concept of communalism which in Africa can pass as a socialised activity on the one hand and as a two-dimensional reality with a long past and a dynamic present is influenced by African cosmological and ontological worldview.

Finally, it must be noted that the I-thou relationship which informed intersubjectivity in the thoughts of Martin Buber has many cognates in African communalism which spans from *ubuntu*, *Ujamaa* and an interconnectivity and interrelatedness of persons within the community with the good of the community elevated over and above the individual in the African existential life. Hence, it is safe to argue that the concept of communalism and intersubjectivity within the context of African communalism is influenced and founded on African ontological worldview.

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