

A Critical Analysis of the Philosophy of *Ya Na Anmgbian* and its Impact on the Growth of Africa's Cultural Values

By

Akaa Paul Iortimbir

Department of Philosophy,

University of Calabar, Calabar,

E-mail: akaaiortimbir@yahoo.com,

Phone: 07034990416.

&

Anongu Iorhen M. Moses

Department of Philosophy,

University of Calabar, Calabar,

E-mail: anonguiorhen@yahoo.com,

Phone: 08065594529.

Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze the philosophy of *Ya Na Anmgbian* (eat and give your brother), and examine its impact on the growth of Africa's cultural values. The paper highlights and discusses the various ways in which Individualism is a privation of the rich African heritage. It identifies the effect of individualism and suggests possible ways to restoring Africa's lost glory. The paper makes use of primary and secondary data as sources of information. It adopts critical, analytic, and descriptive methods for data analysis and concludes that individualism is alien to Africa and should be disregarded.

Key words: *Ya na Anmgbian*, Communalism, Individualism.

Introduction

Africa is generally known for her communitarian culture. For some selfish reasons this culture is gradually washing away by a growing trend of individualism. Some traditional values such as love, selflessness, fairness, brotherhood and the likes have been relegated to the background. Contemporary African society has replaced the ancient communal dictum "be your brother's keeper" with "to your tent O Israel". Consequently, the cases of social

vices such as corruption, kidnapping, cultism, political assassination, insurgency, and very many others, have come as necessary acts to complement the gospel of self-centeredness and individualism which was hardly mentioned in the traditional African society. This paper sets out to identify and discuss some important philosophical and ideological doctrines that unite Africans together before the advent of colonialism. Also, the paper decries the antisocial culture (individualism), exposed the evil effects of individualism and recommends that the African mode of socialism be made to take its full implementation by our present leaders. More so, the paper recommends the philosophy of *Ya na Anngbian* which emphasizes justice, fairness, altruism, accountability and responsibility in all our actions, both as leaders and as followers. It considers primary and secondary data as sources of information while it adopts the critical, analytic, and descriptive methods for data analysis. The paper concludes that individualism is alien to Africans, and a privation of the rich African heritage. Therefore, it should be disregarded by all well-meaning Africans.

The philosophy of *Ya na Anngbian*

The philosophy of *Ya na Anngbian* is a socio-political and cultural philosophy of the Tiv people of Central Nigeria, however, other tribes in Africa particularly, in Nigeria may build their uniqueness on the principles of this philosophy. It is an old-aged philosophy whose origin cannot be absolutely ascertained. The reason is that Tiv nation was caught up in the cobweb of majority/minority issues with some northern tribes who initially considered Benue State (where the Tiv people dominate) an annexation of the North. Secondly, the majority/minority dispute that characterized the power sharing formula in the days of Benue-Plateau informed Tiv people to come up with an ideology that will bind them together, hence; the philosophy of *Ya na Anngbian*.

Briefly speaking, the philosophy of *Ya na Anngbian* became widely known at the beginning of the 19th century as one of the major African existential philosophies. It was then championed by Anshi Martin Wang of blessed memory. In his book titled *Ieren: An Introduction to Tiv Philosophy*, Wang discussed extensively the cultural and historical experiences of the Tiv people including the philosophical aspects of Tiv cosmology. He also x-rays the importance of the philosophy of *Ya na Anngbian* to the contemporary political issues in Nigeria and states how these problems could be resolved by applying the principles of *Ya na Anngbian*.

“Eat and give your brother” is the transliteration of the term- *Ya na Anmgbian*. In other words, it connotes what Julius Nyerere confronts in his political system of Ujamaa, which basically revolved around the indigenous practice of African brotherhood, family assembly and being your brothers’ keeper. This philosophy is simply summed up in the principle of fraternity. *Ya na Anmgbian* as a Tiv socio-political philosophy is built on the idea of kinship ties and has long been in the body politics of the people. It is a philosophy of fairness and altruism, equity and responsibility (Wang 5).

Principles of *Ya na Anmgbian*

The philosophy of *Ya na Anmgbian* is built on the following principles; fairness/justice/equity, altruism, and hospitality. Others include; responsibility and transparency. These principles are briefly explained below:

Fairness/Justice/Equity

Ya na Anmgbian is a philosophy that is grounded heavily on the idea of fairness. It also dwells on justice principle and believes that leadership at all levels should not be confirmed on one particular tribe, region, or group of persons. But rather, it should be a shared responsibility to all qualify individuals, tribes or groups. Politically, *Ya na Anmgbian* defamed the Nigeria popular adage of “winner takes all” and ethnic based politic, greed and selfishness. It is a philosophical principle which advocate fairness in everything be it political or economic resources. For Akiga, therefore, the entire philosophy of *Ya na Anmgbian* is built on equity (Qtd in Kerker 30).

Altruism/Brotherly

This principle is opposed to egoism or selfishness. Altruism connotes regards for others, both natural and moral or it means devotion to the interest of others. A Tiv person is unselfish and eschews all attempts to greed. He gives his brother the last lump of the food in his palm and confirms that, *ka ingin i waren or ye* ‘it is this one that saves somebody’. He practically invites you to eat with him no matter how small the food is. The brotherhood of the Tiv man consecrates the family piety that was (is) crusaded by Confucius in his principle of the “jen”. No matter what comes to play, the Tiv man is hospitable and open to others.

Hospitality

Hospitality means the act or service of welcoming, receiving, hosting, or entertaining guests. The philosophy of *Ya na Anmgbian* is also built on hospitality. This

sense of hospitality is inherently essential in the currently surviving African values. There is always spontaneous welcome and accommodation to strangers and visitors. The Tiv man easily incorporate stranger and give him lands to settle hoping that he would go one day, and the land would be reverted to the owner. This is usually done with the belief that one will never opt out of his own community.

Unlike his Western counterpart, no appointment and special invitation are needed for one to visit a distant relation or neighbour. On arrival, once there is food the visitor is invited to eat. He is treated kindly, just as one would wish to be treated when visiting another home. Like other Africans the Tiv man has symbolic ways of expressing welcome. These include the presentation of drinking water from calabash along with native fruits called *Nyakough* (black nightshade-solanum nigrum), *Mngishim* (garden egg), slaughtering of fowl to prepare the meal in honour of the guest. The basis of this hospitality is that “a guest must not harm his host for whatsoever intention he has before he visit him, and that when he goes home; he should not develop a hunch back” (Interview with Torkula).

It is very unfortunate that this level of hospitality is interpreted differently by many un-informed scholars. Some persons even alleged that the Tiv man normally give out his wife to his guest for sexual satisfaction. This position is recently debunked by prominent Tiv elders including the Tor Tiv Chief Dr. Alfred Akawe Torkula (now late), during an interactive session with Traditional Chiefs and Elders at the Traditional Council Meeting held in Gboko. According to the Tor Tiv, the Tiv culture does not warrant such sacrilegious act whatsoever the level of hospitality. He asked thus: if the Tiv man would not permit his blood brother to see the nakedness of his wife, how then would he offer his wife to his guest for sexual gratification? What the Tiv man does was to leave his matrimonial bed for the guest while he resorts to manage a locally made bed (usually, one made of palm fronts) with his wife and probably, the children. The reason was that there was no alternative bed that was meant for visitors due to the level of poverty at that time. Do we interpret this act to mean what is fictitiously not obtainable within the Tiv culture? He asked. This negative perception according to him, has almost elopes the spirit of hospitality among the Tiv people.

Another aspect of hospitality which is highly cherished is sharing with a needy neighbour who comes for assistance. Anybody who has and does not assist is taken to be a

bad fellow. Hence, Akiga introduces the selfless Tiv communal system and fraternity of the universal brotherhood with the cricket story: where the cricket is shared among those who are at the meal table and other parts reserved for those absent. The head of the cricket is given to the owner whereas; the hind legs to the other and so on till the parts are conveniently shared amongst the people (Cited in Kerker 30). This second distributive attitude at meal extends to all aspects of the political and community life. This is why J.S Tarkaa could call on a Hausa man from outside the Tiv division to contest and win an election under the cognomen of *Iwarwar*.

Responsibility

Responsibility connotes one's duty to deal with or take care of somebody or something to avoid blame. *Ya na Anmgbian* is a philosophy that entrust a lot of responsibility on the leader to the people whom he rule. Hence, the principles of *Ya na Anmgbian* are opposed to any attempt by an individual to accumulate material wealth and use it to grasp absolute power because power is given by the people (Wegh 15). It is a democratic principle which bestows absolute power to the people. The principle further enjoins our leaders to dissuade themselves from the irresponsible act of selfishness, corruption and all the public vices that provoke and endanger the masses' confidence in the leadership.

Transparency/Public Purity

Apart from the above mentioned principles, *Ya na Anmgbian* had the principle of transparency and public purity as the basic regulatory principle which seeks to regulate the life of the leader and his followers. Mvendaga Jibo shows this feature in his analysis of Tiv political behaviour from 1959-1993 during which Tiv sons swore affidavits to expose the uncompromising attitudes of their fellow Tiv brothers in positions of leadership (22). Similarly this socio-political philosophy is egalitarian and avoids individualism. This expresses the collective, communal and brotherly piety for one another. Therefore, the love of your brother goes a long way to explaining your benevolence towards him. His needs are your needs and you strive to apportion to him what is his due. Provided you are there he feels represented and accumulates a lot of confidence and trust in you, that all is well with him too. This confidence is founded on the premise that, you cannot fail him and he finds it naturally ungrateful if he attempts to agitate for your position (23). This confidence and trust

on the leaders culminates into a sense of responsibility and altruism and also the challenge to live up to expectation. One essential fact to note is that the promotion of these principles will curb the menace of deprivation and the far cry of public marginalization, oppression, and abandonment, or selected treatment of other ethnic groups within the society.

Impact of the Philosophy of *Ya na Anmgbian* on the Growth of Africa's Cultural Values

Ya na Anmgbian is a political and cultural philosophy which has far reaching effect on African value systems. Its principles discussed above can help African States to eschew self-centeredness, injustice, corrupt practices, and ethnic bias in dealing with national issues. For instance, the principle of fairness will help African States to learn to be diligent and just in the treatment of fellow human beings. Politically, the principle will help to shape the power rotation policy as well as the allocation of resources equitably for the welfare of everybody. This will go a long way to cubing inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic rivalries across African States.

On the other hand, the principle of hospitality will help to build the spirit of tolerance among different ethnic groups. It will also help to cushion the negative effect of religious intolerance, and tribal sentiment which has disengaged people from their original settlements. Most importantly, the spirit of hospitality will help to unite African nations whose bilateral and unilateral agreement has been terminated as a result of one disagreement to another. Hospitality if inculcated will help to build a peaceful nation where citizens will be free to move and free to settle anywhere.

Finally, the principle of responsibility will help to direct leaders on their respective duties and service to humanity. Most of the African leaders today lack the zeal and vision to govern. Consequently, these leaders turn tyrant to scare their subjects away from demanding for what is due for them. Therefore, if the principles of Philosophy of *Ya na Anmgbian* are adopted and put into practice by well meaning Africans, there will not only be justice, tolerance and commitment in governance, but also, the story of Africa's cultural heritage will change and her glory restore.

Communalism

The concept "communalism" is not applicable only to Africa; it also applies to other continents of the world. Communalism is synonymous to Africa because, it finds its

usefulness within the African way of life, or what we can conveniently call African world view. Communalism normally takes the form of communal living or communal property, among others. It is sometimes said to put the interests of the community above the interests of the individual, but this is usually only done on the principle that the community exists for the benefit of the individuals who participate in it. In several parts of the world, communalism is considered as a modern term that seeks to describe a broad range of social movements and social theories which are in some ways centred upon the community. Therefore, to serve the interests of the individual is to indirectly serve the interests of the community, because community exists for the well being of man.

Olasunkanmi defined Communalism in the light of Naomi as ‘a system or ideology that is both supersensible and material in its terms of reference. According to him, both are found in a society that is believed by the Africans to be originally ‘god-made’ because it transcends the people who live in it now and it is ‘man-made’ because it cannot be culturally understood independent of those who live in it’ (Naomi cited in Olasunkanmi 61). In this context however, we define Communalism to mean a theory or belief or ideology in which individual states or local communities, sometimes seek virtual autonomy within a federated state on the basis of religio-cultural or ethnic inclination. A comprehensive grasp of communalism presupposes knowledge of what a community is, and upon this knowledge lays the bedrock for our explication. According to Kohn, ‘a community is a group of people who share the same culture. It comprises of individuals who form a network of reciprocal human relationship, which provide a bounded and focused context for human actions’ (Qtd from Mvendaga 55). He further explained thus; “within this community of individuals, goals are set, which becomes the ‘focus’ for all sundry, and the common good because it were the common denominator of a actions” (55).

Features of Communalism

Olasunkanmi highlights the features of communalism in his work titled “Economic Globalization and its Effect on Community in Africa”. These include; Communalism is a strong identity with and devotion to the interests of one’s own minority or ethnic group; it is a form of nationalism at the sub-national level; it is based on the assumption of common identity and belief that people belong to specific groups, sharing history, language, culture

and historic space; the membership of this group is strictly determined by the criteria that define the community and afford members rights and loyalty (61).

The diction “no man is an island” according to Mvendaga finds a patent expression in the communal character of African life. Communal living which breeds solidarity is a value that makes an African realizes his needs within the community stating the importance and indispensability of communal living (55). Hence; Aristotle once declared, “he who is unable to live in a society or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must either be a beast or a god” (Qtd in Stumpf 103). Mvendaga affirmed Aristotle’s position when he declared thus;

in the communitarian culture of Africa, man finds fulfillment and the sense of belonging. He sees his contribution and those of others not as infinitesimal but as enormous and vital to the growth of all. For him, “we are the community and the community is us”, nobody may be treated as stronger either in right or in responsibilities (55).

In fact, Mbiti, J.S. expresses the communal attitude of the African thus, “I am because we are; and since we are, I am” (Qtd in Ekwuru 11). This value is of great importance. It makes the African his brother’s keeper as it ensures mutual protection among people. He asserts further that a brother’s misfortune was a common misfortune. For instance;

if there was fire outbreak in ones house immediately and spontaneously, the whole community will gather, work hard to extinguish the flames; and in the instance where they failed, rebuilding the damaged house would be resorted to. People would assist with labour and building materials without been begged to do so. This was not only spontaneous; it was also ‘gratis’. Also, a brother’s success was equally a common success, celebrated as such “we have made it in you”, it is echoed (12-13).

The philosophy behind the African Communalism, therefore guarantees individual responsibility within the communal ownership and relationship. And this is exactly what individualism is out to destroy. Individualism is creating a situation of 'all to himself' where the only governing principle is to 'survive by all means'. Survival in this case, is not seen as a community phenomenon but within the context of (egocentrism) the 'I' in exclusion of others. The scenario today in Africa is an indication that "the ground has been pulled under one's feet and with this emergent situation, survival has replaced rationality and desperation replaces reason.

Individualism

In contrast to *Ya na Anmgbiam* and Communalism is individualism which is both opposite and antagonistic to the duo. Communalism and *Ya na Anmgbian* are fast giving way to individualism and a cross glorification of the self. The 'ego' is given pride of place while altruism is repudiated courtesy of Western institutions and subjugation via the evils of colonialism and slave trade. Slave trade and colonialism gave heavy blows on the foundation of African values for example humanism. Decades after liberation from colonial bondage, the continent of Africa finds itself plugged into a cultural system that has made it loose the sense of its traditional value system (Oota 44 emphasis added).

Darwish and Huber carefully defined individualism in the light of Hofstede and Bond, as "a situation in which people are concerned with themselves and close family members only" (47). This definition appeal to the interest of the paper and is therefore adopted. Individualism holds sway all in the name of 'civilization'. And as Chinua Achebe says; "the white man has put a knife on the things that held Africans together and they have fallen apart" (44). He went further to state that "today, many African elite have become prisoner of their egoism in the high walls and iron gates, which are constitutive parts of their houses and for them they serve as defensive mechanism against armed robbery, banding, and other alien vices which were not predominant in the past"(45).

The scourge of individualism and maladministration in governance is the cause of recent upheavals that left hundreds of deaths in some parts of Africa like Egypt, Libya, and Ivory Coast, etc. On the chaotic atmosphere pervading the political and economic sphere of the continent, Africans now possesses lethal weapons and even charms for sorcery which they use, experimentally, on their brothers and sisters. Consequently, many have become

refugees constantly in their own land, always fleeing for their lives. Africa is no more a home for some as they pass everyday in fear (Cited from Oota 45).

To Ehusani, it is obvious that in contemporary Africa, individualism has pushed the communal spirit of Africans to the background. The “we” mentality has crumbled given room for the “I” approach to life. Ehusani further observed that individualistic pursuit of wealth and self-aggrandizement rise very quickly in Africa. Thus, according to him, selfishness is so common that lack of altruism today is like describing to a fish in an ocean what fire looks like. The sacredness and purity of life now sounds so strange to many. Consequently, African now uses his brother (to whom he should be a keeper) as a means to his own ends (103).

The culture of visiting and rejoicing with our neighbour in times of prosperity and sympathizing in times of adversity is gradually fading and if caution is not taken, it may soon become history. For instance, some of our relatives have suffered various degrees of sickness, depression and death unattended to. There are cases of abandonments of parents or relatives who have contributed immensely in the lives of those who had abandoned them. Most painful is the fact that at death, these same persons who abandoned their parents and relatives budget huge sums of money for funeral arrangement. Sometimes the corpse will be kept for quite a long time in the pretence of giving the person a “befitting burial” but while alive, the person never drank a cup of cold water from the neighbour or relatives. There is no doubt that such abandonment can cause desperation, which will even lead someone to commit suicide (Cited from Iyabosa 6 emphasis added).

The contemporary Africans have forgotten the real cultural values that were attached to human life hence; the taken of one’s life today is just like crushing an ant. They have also forgotten that food is very important and so should be made available to a hungry person who desires it except, on medical ground. This is why, in the traditional African Society when cooking is done there is always surplus, in case of unexpected visitors. But in the contemporary African society the opposite is the case. For instance, a fellow African on seeing a neighbour while at table will hide his dish. In such a situation, the excuse normally given by the supposed host would be “we have just finished our meal”. The question is why are we changing our normal African communalistic culture to individualism? Why are we

changing the “we” for the “I”? To address these questions therefore, we turn to evaluation and way forward as both has something to ponder about.

Evaluation

From the course of our research, we have observed that poor economic planning and the culture of overdependence are the two major factors shaking African cultural heritage. Because the situation today is that people are now re-examining the size and essence of extended families. For some people, the large size of the extended families appears as a huge burden that needed to do away with in order to manage the meager available resources. As a result, many well-to-do families today try to block the poorer ones from accessing them personally. Consequently, they created bureaucratic conditions which are not favourable to the poor. They also tend to see them as parasites and nuisance to them.

We also observed that the introduction of individualism to Africa has bastardized the communalistic culture, and the spirits of unity and fairness which Africans were known for. This unbending reputation for individualism also makes African States almost impossible to rule because an individual is more concerned about his own success than the communal success.

However, all these factors seem amenable; they are not enough to derail the African values that were held in higher esteem. The economic crises and poor planning can be taken care of if available resources are adequately channel to appropriate quarters for effective use. Also, if we actually value our culture we can guarantee its survival for the benefit of the future generation. By so doing, individualism will have no place to reign in our lives.

Conclusion/ Way Forward

It is fundamental to every research that the first step to tackle a problem is to be aware of it. If we are to restore the lost glory of African culture then, all hands must be on deck, beginning from the mini society, which is the family, to the larger society. This is why Ireogbu posits thus;

the family makes indispensable contribution to the progress and unity of the society. It can also contribute to the downfall of a society when its work is neglected. A family may be taken as a miniature state where law, peace and unity abound. It is the family, which teaches one as a child to practice the virtues

of charity, unity and justice towards brothers and sisters and parents. It is worthy of note that, the family is a training school for social virtues (89).

Similarly, A.C. Obi suggests that, in the struggle to regain our communitarian culture the three dominant religions namely; Traditional, Christianity and Islamic religions must play their part. He affirmed that Africa is highly religious therefore; leaders of the three dominant religions should inculcate the teaching and practice of African value systems in their respective domains. They should endeavour to teach adherents ways which will help them to live lives of love and service to humanity. Also, they should refuse being suffocated in the practice of individualism (60).

The African mode of socialism should also be made to take its full implementation by our present leaders. It must be developed by those free from what Tom Mboya called “intellectual imperialism” referring of course, those Africans who are still trapped by Western doctrinarism and fanaticism. Traditional African society is not based on conflict, struggle or tension but on “familyhood”, that is, family relationship. However, in the contemporary world this familyhood will have to be extended beyond the continuums of the tribe and made to embrace the whole society, the whole country, the whole of Africa and indeed the whole human race.

Most importantly, we should re-align ourselves with the philosophy of *Ya na Anmgbian* which emphasize justice, fairness, altruism, accountability and responsibility in all our actions, both as leaders and as followers. The time has come for all of us to work together for the realization of the new Africa. And it all depends on the right steps of collective action taken by virtually, every reasonable individual in the new century. It is true that Africa has borrowed extensively from her colonial masters but it is time we start appropriating these gifts with African trademarks (which include communal living, brotherliness, selflessness, and love etc). And finally, let us accept our root that we are Africans, therefore, our Africaness should reside in the happiness we give to others.

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