Political Philosophy
Политическа философия

COLONIALISM, ETHNICITY AND THE QUEST FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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Abstract. The aspirations of post-colonial political elites in Africa can be summed up as the quest for development. This quest since independence, involves, in part, the pursuit of a common citizenship, shared nationality and common interests and values, the evolution of which provide the bedrock for mutual co-existence and the commitment of all to the common good. It also involves the establishment of institutions that will guarantee peace, justice, and fairness. However, the process of realizing these goals of broadening the scope of socio-political interactions have been vitiated by our colonial experiences and consequently unleashed certain centrifugal forces that have made the quest for community development in most African states a daunting task. The divisive tendencies of the colonialists created communal identities which provided a new symbolic and ethnocentric focus for each group where none existed and thus complicated the task of welding diverse elements in each colony into a coherent whole. This became the source of the proliferation of many life threatening conflicts which has impeded the process of community development in Africa. But why has these conflicts persist in spite of the several attempts to meet them? This paper argues that the above account fails because it ignores the values Africans place on human worth given expression in their communal context. The attempt here is to explore South Africa`s indigenous unifying social ethic of Ubuntu in arriving at a humane society that has a participatory value; founded on co-operation, charity, reconciliation and justice rather than the individualism of the West. This paper will, therefore, employ the analytic-descriptive method to examine the above in a manner many scholars have ignored in an attempt to develop a viable sense of community in Africa. Hence, it is expected that this paper will initiate a perspective that will challenge extant interpretation of this discourse.

Keywords: Africa; colonialism; ethnicity; community development; reconciliation; Ubuntu

Introduction

The quest for development appears to some to be the main focus of our political elites in many African states immediately after independence. This is based on the assumption that the advent of independence will provide the requisite atmosphere that will lead to the eradication of poverty and the ills of our country and the continent. These African

leaders spoke and acted as if the attainment of independence automatically means socio-economic and human development; and. consequently, rather than "transform colonial institutions in a manner that would make them suitable for serving new needs and interests, they simply proceeded to use them, in many cases without significant changes in the means and methods used, to achieve'... (Oladipo, 1998: 111) "the limited aims of colonial governance" (Appiah, 1992: 164). Thus, apart from the fact that the inherited colonial institutions was inadequate for the attainment of the goals of post-colonial development in Africa, the colonial structures assisted in further dispossessing the colonised people, of their material resources, both human and cultural values: and consequently turn the normal ethnic differences into debilitating ethnic cleavages. In this circumstance, the ideas and initiatives of the colonised people do not count in the scheme of things in determining the goals of development and designing the process of their realisation. Although, the colonial institution was adequate for the needs and interests of the colonialists, at independence, they could not generate that spirit of nationalism which was needed to command the commitment of the people into "feelings of loyalty and support for the larger unit". (Oladipo, 1998: 112). Hence, the state, lacking the authority to command the commitment of the people becomes an environment for social disorder, rather than integration and therefore unable to discharge its developmental duties. In a situation of this nature, it is difficult to develop institutions that will guarantee peace, good neighbourliness and help society foster common purposes and projects that will command the commitment of all to the common good. It is pertinent to note at this point that the pursuit of these goals, or more appropriately their unsuccessful realisation has unleashed certain challenges which have made the quest for community development in Africa problematic. The central thrust of this paper is to examine the nature of these challenges by exploring the South African unifying social ethic of *Ubuntu* founded on cooperation, reconciliation and charity to arrive at a sustainable sense of community in Africa

The quest for community development

To realise this desire for community development, it is important we understand the nature of the quest for Community Development in Africa. This is with a view to explicating the theoretical perspectives for this analysis of the problems of colonialism and ethnicity as they affect activities involve in the quest for Community Development in Africa. What has made this quest imperative and complex is not the fact of the multiplicity of ethnic groups in the continent, since there is nothing inherently conflicting about ethnic pluralism itself, rather the imperative of this quest has been the way we have treated and managed the people that constitutes disparate ethnic groups that has generated multiple conflicts that bedevilled the evolution of sustainable sense of Community Development in many Africa States.

Our understanding of this sense of community in Africa cannot be easily deciphered without situating it within the context of our present socio-political realities in African societies with the following features. These are societies where social relations are determined by external overarching structures, that is, a situation that erode traditional

boundaries which hitherto defines the locus of value priorities in different societies, by extension, encouraging the invasion of societal values, customs, traditions and the institutions that sustains these values whilst simultaneously denying it effective local control over policy formulation and policy outcomes. They are societies in which the presupposition of a democratic state, such as justice, fairness, freedom, a common nationality, interest and values, the pursuit of which provide the platform for social solidarity and human happiness, were lacking to a large extent. In fact, they are societies, where their leaders are unable to command the commitments of the people because their loyalties are no longer connected to their larger states because of their inability to fulfil their obligation to the people and as result have moved their loyalties to their ethnic bases. They are therefore, societies that are susceptible to all kinds of conflict; be it socio-political, ethnic or religious. Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Tunisia, D.R. Congo are examples of African countries in this regards.

From the foregoing, we can see that the quest for Community Development as explicated above goes beyond socio-political solidarity as an integrative platform. It involves other concerns which are easily excluded in the explication of the challenges surrounding Community Development in Africa. Here, by the quest for Community Development we do not only mean coming together of disparate groups to promote the common interest of the larger society. Rather, by the quest for Community Development we refer to the "articulation and fostering of common purposes, projects and constitutive attachments which would help unite all areas of the society into a self-contained community" (Hicks, 1995: 64).

The point is to a process that deals with the political, socio-economic on the one hand, and on the other hand the normative, which involves the facilitation of members of a community that are bound by shared moral beliefs, that imply the existence and acknowledgement of common values, roles, obligations and meaning. In a social context of this nature, everybody is committed to the development of the community and this is expressed through the recognition of the desire to advance its interests in a way that cannot be fully expected in a social context in which individuals primarily promote their own interest, ends, wellbeing, and pay lip service to the common good. (Ebijuwa, 2007: 194).

The thrust of this paper is that the path to Community Development in Africa has been bedevilled by certain impediments which have made the quest for Community Development in Africa in real terms a daunting challenge. I ask, what are these impediments and how within the context of our contemporary realities can we mitigate them? It is to these impediments to Community Development in Africa we will now turn.

Impediments of community development

Any discourse of Community Development in Africa that undermines the colonial perspective in the explication of its experiences will obviously be running against history and consequently be wrong-headed. Our arguments in this section will be couched in recognition of the events of this period, and how they have in concert generated despair,

disappointment, frustration, parochial identities and consequently impeded the quest for Community Development in Africa.

The first place to start this impact of colonialism in Community Development is to analyse what Walter Rodney (1972: 246) has referred to as the "balance sheet of colonialism" in order to set the template for understanding the nature of the problem. On this balance sheet, Rodney made us to understand the credit and debit account of the contribution of colonialism to African development. He writes that some often conclude that, by and large the benefits of colonialism outweigh the disadvantages. But this claim to my mind is false. It actually undermines the dignity of the colonized and in most instances depersonalised them by dispossessing them of their material resources for the development of their societies. The viciousness of this system with respect to how the colonised people were treated can be seen more in the expression of the Arusha Declaration that states that:

> *"We have been oppressed a great deal, and*
> *we have been exploited a great deal, and we have been*
> *disregarded a great deal"* (Rodney: 251)

Now, this combination of being oppressed, exploited and disregarded can be expressed in the architecture of economic infrastructure in the colonies, especially railways, hospitals and roads. Quite frankly, railways and roads were built with the bare hands of Africans under the strict supervision of oppressors. Railways and roads were not constructed to better the lives of Africans, rather, they were the conduit pipes used to siphon the resources of colonies without due regards for the dignity of labour and the economic implications this portend for the existence of the people. Hospitals were not built for the generality of the people. They were meant for those that work in the plantations and their oppressors. Indeed, "often at the level of the district of a given colony, there would be discrimination in providing social amenities, on the basis of contribution of exportable surplus. For instance, plantations and companies might build hospitals for their workers, because some minimum maintenance of the workers' health was an economic investment." (Rodney, 1972: 251). The argument that infrastructural developments in the colonies like the railways, hospitals and roads can also serves as indices of development in the colonies would have served as a good credit in the balance sheet of colonialism, but this particular position fails because of the weakness in the process of reasoning or what Walter Rodney calls "sentimental persuasiveness" (Rodney: 246). This argument appeals to the reasoning that, after all, there are two sides to an issue and that irrespective of the impact of colonialism, it at least assisted in the development of Africa. If this was a good argument the so called development should have been evenly distributed and not restricted to areas that would benefit the Europeans market alone. This is how Rodney put this:

> *Within individual countries, considerable regional*
> *variations existed, depending on the degree to which different*
> *parts of a country were integrated into the capitalist money*
> *economy. Thus, the northern part of Kenya or the south of Sudan*
> *had little to offer the colonialists, and such a zone was simply*

> *ignored by the colonising power with regard to roads, schools, hospitals and so on.* (*1972: 250 – 251*)

The long term economic impact of this imbalance in the regions held some negative consequences for Africa. The infrastructure that was developed was not only designed to exploit the natural resources of the colonies, it stalled the indigenous technology and industrial development that was available before the advent of colonialism. *Prior to the partition of Africa, local production provided Africans with a wide variety of consumer goods. The policies of colonialism forced the demise of African industry and created a reliance on imported goods from Europe. Had native industry been encouraged and cultivated by the colonising power, Africa would probably be in a much better economic and technological position today.*

If the structures and institutions were not evenly distributed in the states as we can see from the proceeding discussion, what then was the intention of the colonialists in terms of state formation and its implication for Community Development? For Oladipo, what the colonizers did with regard to State formation was to combine the territories of formally distinct people to form colonial territories" and in the words of Eme Awa, "the colonial systems and the political processes of both the pre- and post independence era turned the normal cultural differences into debilitating ethnics cleavages. Poorly formulated and inefficiently executed economic policies over the past 50 years caused the retardation of certain areas and thereby tended to aggravate tension along ethnic lines in many countries" (Awa, 1996: 8). This situation, Yaya Abubakar says is characterised by the "total collapse of moral consciousness or what he called a deep contamination of the original human-centred African communal philosophy, which unavoidably led to a continuous decay of African socio-political framework which is now aggravated by exponential decline in economic viability" (see preface of Awa, 1996: 1). The point of this cultural and social dispossession was to put the people in the colonies under a form of control that would make them unable to question colonial practices and the assumptions on which they were based. (Oladipo: 1998: 108). This was a deliberate act of the colonizers needed to separate the spheres of influence of different European rulers. To put this differently, the aim of the colonizers was not the creation of new states in the colonies for social and economic development, rather, in the words of Oladipo, the demarcation was meant to "ensure colonial control and dispossession could be achieved without undue rivalry among colonizers" (Oladipo: 108). Hugh Clifford, s Nigeria's colonial Governor in the 1920s, also attest to the fact that the ideas of putting together of territories of distinct people to form colonial territories was a deliberate policy of the colonizers. He told the members of the National Council of British West Africa that he was:

> *Convinced of the rights for example, of the people of Egbaland ..... of any of the great emirates of the north to maintain that each one of them is a nation ...*

(and that) it is the task of the government of Nigeria
to build and fortify these national institutions
(Coleman, 1958: 176)

The above is an indication of the coloniser's recognition of the distinctiveness of the different ethnic groups put together – the implication of which was the dispossession of the people of those values and practices, which hitherto served as vehicles for social identity and solidarity. This situation, Yaya Abubakar says, is characterised by the total collapse of moral consciousness or what he calls the result of a deep contamination of the original human-centred African Communal Philosophy, which unavoidably led to a decay of the African socio-political framework which is now aggravated by exponential decline in economic inability" (see preface of Awa, 1996: 1). The point of this "cultural and social dispossession" was to put the people of the colonies under a form of control that would make them unable to question colonial practices and the assumptions on which they were based" (Oladipo, 1998: 108). To do the contrary, for the colonialists, would mean to "mould one citizenry from many people" which will amount to the formulation of policies whose implementation would be geared towards development of a new consensus among the various peoples they brought together to form a new colonial territories" (Oladipo: 108).

This is an option the colonialists were not prepared to accept because it could eventually be used to question the legitimacy of their authority. This is responsible for the adoption of the divide and rule system by the colonialists in their territories, which sufficiently disunited the people in their colonies. In support of this position, Hugh Clifford, the Colonial Governor of Nigeria in the 1920s says his administration would seek to secure:

to each separate people the right to maintain its
dentity, its individuality and its nationality, its chosen form
of government, as the peculiar political and social institutions
which have been evolved for it by the wisdom and the
accumulated experiences of generations of its forbearers.
(Coleman, 1958: 176).

The insistence on the separation and distinctiveness of ethnic groups created a new sense of communal consciousness and identity for the people where none existed before and provided a new symbolic and ethnocentric focus for each group. Of course, this did not only complicate the task of wielding diverse elements in each colony into a coherent whole, it also became the "source of many life threatening conflicts, which were to proliferate, and consequently impede the process of Community Development and social solidarity, in many African countries, a few decades after independence" (Oladipo, 1998: 108). We have examples of these conflicts in States like Nigeria, Sierra-Leone, Cote-d'Ivoire, Somali, Liberia, Zaire, Rwanda and Sudan among others. We can see then that the "divide and rule" strategy adopted by the European colonizers widened the social distance among the communal groups, consequently reinforcing the ethnocentric factor in the emergency of ethnicity.

It is true from the above that colonialism as a system was exploitative and oppressive of the people in the colonies and their resources, it is also important to note that it also created a bourgeoisie class in Africa in the form of nationalists whose policies and activities are partly the source of ethnic conflicts in Africa. When many African states gained independence, the nationalists that took over the mantle of leadership from the colonialists were not only interested in replacing Europeans in leading positions of power and privileges" they created opportunities for themselves and their cronies that enabled them plunder the resources of the states and made sure that existing opportunities and benefits in the states were reserved for themselves and people from their ethnic or tribal enclaves.

In his, *The Crisis in Zaire*, Nzongola-Ntalaja explains this view in the following manner:

> *It is the national ruling class itself that constitutes*
> *the principal obstacle to economic growth and development*
> *through the privatisation of the state, depriving it of those*
> *essential means and capabilities within which to generate*
> *economic growth, improve the living conditions of the masses ...*
>
> (1984: 9).

Mobutu represents one of those Nzongola-Ntalaja refers to above as those that plundered the resources of the states for personal benefits. In Nigeria, as in other colonial territories, the struggle for independence was a serious issue in the lives of the people involved. The people had hope that their living condition would improve after independence and this was in fact what their leaders promised them. But this was not the case after independence for several reasons, one of which was the fact that the anti-colonial struggle had masked the conflicts between the bourgeoisie political elites and the ordinary people. These conflicts became a major concern after independence when, instead of fulfilling their promises to the people, the political elites either responded to the people with more promises or with repression. As reported in a monthly magazine, the writer says:

> *Since he came to power, Mobutu has been alleged to*
> *hold about US $4billion in a numbered Swiss Bank account*
> *he owns. Documentary evidence of the extent of corruption*
> *also attested to the fact that Mobutu, his family and friends*
> *own twenty-six extensive properties in Belgium and France ...*
>
> (Adesina, 1998: 83)

The case is not completely different from that of Nigeria. In fact, it is worse in terms of official corruption of public office holders. How then do we explain how the wife of the Director General of the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), could afford to buy a flat in an Ikoyi Osborne Tower (a rich suburb in the commercial city of Lagos) with a whopping cost of ₦360million and stashed the flat with raw cash to the tune of US$43.3m and ₦23million, all amounting to ₦15billion. There is also the loot stashed in a building in southern Kaduna in Kaduna State revealed by the Economic and Financial Crime

Commission stolen by the former Managing Director of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, Mr. Andrew Yakubu.

The result of this kind of massive corruption in a nation is that only a few benefits because most times they get away without punishment because of the weakness of the relevant institutions. This invariably generates confusion in the sense that those that suffers as a result of these corrupt officers action inevitably feel cheated and alienated from the state. The outcome of this is the lack of confidence in the state. So, as the state become derelict in her responsibility to the citizens, that is, being unable to provide for the common good of the citizens, they gradually withdraw into their ethnic enclaves for social fulfilment. This withdrawal is occasioned by the conscious or emotional relationship of the people to their values, life style and beliefs, especially their communal way of life. When people recoil in this manner, we say the "moral bond" between them and the state, that is, the basis upon which the state could justify its powers over the citizens, has been broken.

In this situation, mutual distrust, despair, frustration and hatred become the order of the day. What is next, the state becomes an arena of ethnic conflict where social relationships can no longer generate important common goals, interests and values in terms of which a sense of neighbourliness can be developed among them and identity forged.

The philosophy of Ubuntu

Now, how can this sense of mutual distrust foster common purpose, projects and constitute attachment which will help unite the disparate groups into a self-contained community? Put differently, why have these conflicts persisted in spite of the several attempts to meet them? We believe that several attempts failed because they ignored the value Africans place on human worth given expression in their communal context. In what follows, we explore South Africa's indigenous unifying social ethnic of Ubuntu in arriving at a humane society that has participating force; founded on co-operation, charity, reconciliation and justice as against the individualism of the west. Ubuntu as a participatory force is ideally expressed through the recognition of this humanity. Teffo quoting Mfeyame separates the word UBUNTU into the prefix UBU; from the root NTU:

> *NTU is the arrestor who got human society going. He Gave us our way of life which says that society should be run for the sake of all. This requires cooperation, sharing and charity. There should be no widows or orphans left alone – they all belong to someone. If a man does not have a cow, then give him a cow to milk. There should be no Ohlule Kileyo, or deprived person.*
>
> *UBU: refers to the abstract. So Ubuntu is the quality of being human. It is the quality or the behaviour, of NTU society, that is, sharing, charitableness, co-operation. It is this quality which distinguished a human creature*

> *from an animal or a spirit. When you do something*
> *that is not humane then you and being like an animal.*
>
> (1998: 240)

From the foregoing Ubuntu is the capacity of individuals in a society to express compressive reciprocity and cooperation in the interest of building and maintaining community. In fact, Ubuntu invites individuals to see that: your pain is my pain, your wealth is my wealth and your progress is my progress. In essence it addresses our interconnectedness, our common humanity and the responsibility to each other that flows from our connection. A person's self-worth, therefore, depends upon the degree of humane behaviour manifested towards other fellow human beings. So which colonialists maltreated Africans and charted away their material and human resources to their home to develop their countries they, in the spirit of Ubuntu, "diminished themselves as they humiliate, and treat people less than who they are". In the words of Nelson Mandela:

> *A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner*
> *of hatred; he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and*
> *narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away*
> *someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not truly*
> *free when my freedom is taken away from me"*
>
> (1994: 544)

Just as it is demeaning to take another person's freedom, so also Africa's political elites that deprives their citizens their rights to basic necessities of lives by massively looting the resources of their states lacks the spirit of self worth which is part of the defining qualities of an Ubuntu person. This is so because the prevalence of this vital force of Ubuntu is manifest not only through hospitality to strangers but, also through the general spirit of sharing. So when someone appropriate what belongs to the state to higher family and cronies as we have seen earlier with Mobutu and other Nigerians, they rob themselves of their humanity, sense of belonging and meaningfulness. This is because it is their sharing, compassion and cooperation that confers on their dignity as persons in the community. In a community of this sort, there are bound to conflicts as there are desperate ethnic groups. But management of such conflicts is not based on majority opinion or those with stronger argumentative power rather they are based on rational consensus. "So strong was the value of solidarity that the chief aim was to reach unanimity, and they talked till this was achieved ..." (Teffo, 1998: 240). In this sense, consensus as a decision procedure requires, in principle, that each stakeholder, or representative should be persuaded, if not of the optimality of each decision, at least of its practice necessity, all things considered" (Wiredu, 1995: 47)

This is to say that those whose views do not prevail have been made to see reasons with those whose views are accepted. Indeed, they prevail upon them to accept the decision arrived at, not just to live with it. In other words, the decision is based in the spirit of Ubuntu on the overall interest of the community rather than the promotion of individual's will. In this way, we can say the decision reached is the whole and

the contributions of the representatives are the parts, which is the totality of the ideas. Wholeness therefore is a stand point, a reference point, in which various views about the issues at stake are perceived as interconnected and interdependent. They are not connected by a single metanarrative or that it is a product of an authority, but by common human concerns directed at the emancipation of the community. This wholeness can be described metaphorically in the words of Leighton quoted by Manuskhani as follows:

> *The universe can be described as a vast net, and at each junction where the meshes meets sits a jewel. Each jewel reflects the light of all around it, and all of those jewels reflects others around them. In this way the whole universe of jewels is ultimately reflected in every single jewel.*
>
> (2002: 191)

Conditions for the realization of Ubuntu

What is it that makes the realisation of this kind of wholeness possible? Or put differently, what are the conditions in the philosophy of Ubuntu that will make the consensus of ideas possible? We have earlier noted the idea of consensus presupposes the need for integration of ethnic groups or individuals that are alienated by reason of their inability to benefit from the common good. As Teffo says, the pervasive spirit of Ubuntu provides unity in shared adversity. This is not to say that dissent is not permitted in any arena of discourse, but the object is to reach agreement and avoid division. In this sense, compromise and consensus become inevitable for the parties in dispute. Since both parties will be operating under the influence of the general spirit of sharing and compromise, the encounter cannot be reduced to the act of one party depositing idea in another. As an act which denounces the relation of domination, such relationship will be that of responsible people who operate in an arena of freedom.

Beside the issue of freedom, *Ubuntu* as the vital force of transcending differences cannot exist without humility. This is to say that if a party considers itself superior to others or that it has monopoly of knowledge or truth, what we find is a case of one party manipulating the other. For example, if I am disturbed by the possibility of being displaced or I am offended by the contribution of others in a dialogue, how can there be reconciliation? This is to say that, in the spirit of reconciliation, we must develop the attitude of tolerance while admitting that it is possible for previously held views can change.

In addition to above, reconciliation requires an intense faith in one another. Without the initial faith in the possibility to overcome our differences, there cannot be reconciliation. Simply put, faith in one another is an apriori condition for reconciliation. Now, founding itself on freedom, humility and faith, reconciliation becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between parties is the logical consequence. It would amount to contradiction in terms if reconciliation based on freedom, humility and faith does not create the atmosphere of mutual trust that will eliminate the manipulation and oppression of one party by the other. In the words of Paulo Freire:

> *Trust is contingent in the evidence which one party provides the others of his true, concrete intention; it cannot exist if any party's words do not coincide with his actions. To say one thing and to another, to take one's word lightly cannot inspire trust.*
>
> (Freire, 1970).

From the foregoing, we can say that whereas faith is an apriori requirement for reconciliation, mutual trust is established by reconciliation. When these conditions are absent, we should not expect meaningful reconciliation. These conditions are clearly expressed in the concept of Ubuntu which emphasizes cooperation, mutual trust, reconciliation, respect as well as unity within and across community. The prevalence of this vital force is manifest in our collective goal, which in the words of Hicks is the "articulation of common purposes, projects and constitutive attachment which would help unite all areas of the society into a self- contained community" (Hicks, 1995: 64).

Conclusion

The attempt thus far has been that of how in spite of the differences of ethnic groups occasioned partly by our colonial experiences and political elites and their attendant conflicts, we can reconcile disparate groups and individuals. In doing this, we have explored the South African unifying social ethic of Ubuntu in arriving at a humane society that has a participatory value; founded on cooperation, charity, reconciliation and justice rather than the individualism of the West .We argue that this vital force of reconciliation can only be achieved in our community on the condition that it rest on the pillars o freedom, humility, faith and mutual trust.

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