

Kinship in African Philosophy and the Issue of Development

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Abstract: *Kinship can be understood as a culture's system of recognized family roles and relationships that define the obligations, rights, and boundaries of interaction among the members of a self-recognizing group. It could be defined through genetic relationships, adoption, or other ritualized behaviour such as marriage and household economies. Kinship systems range in size from a single, nuclear-family to tribal or intertribal relationships. Above all, kinship creates a network that gives its members a sense of belonging. The basic question that constitutes the burden of this piece is on how kinship in African ontology can contribute to development. To be better equipped to make this study, it analysed the meaning of development. This led to the submission that kinship network, when properly harnessed can be a vehicle for development in Africa, which can take social, economic, political and moral dimensions.*

Keywords: *Kinship, African, Ontology, Development, Political, Economic, Social and Moral*

1. INTRODUCTION

Africans are known world-wide for their sense of “kinship or family”. And in fact scholars are generally agreed that kinship, with all it implies, has been one of the strongest forces in African life. The characteristically African family or kinship, is an institution in which “everybody is somebody”. Westerman (1949) puts this succinctly when it declared that the African society is characterized by the prevalence of the idea of community, “The whole of existence for the African is organically embodied in a series of associations and life appears to have full value only in those close ties” (p. 65).

This is one of the most vital features of the African heritage. Reflecting on the dividend of African of kinship, Achebe (1949) writes,

A man who calls his kinsman to feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their homes. When we gather together in the moonlight village ground it is not because of the moon. Everyman can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so. (p. 155).

This captures the African concept of kinship relationship, as a relationship shared by people of common origins and attitudes, a relationship with its meaning not in precepts but in a life lived in common. This notwithstanding, in this piece, the burden of the researcher is to unveil the African philosophy of kinship and to see how it can contribute to development.

2. THE DIMENSIONS OF KINSHIP IN AFRICA

Mbiti (1971) understands kinship as a vast network. He wrote,

Kinship system is like a vast network stretching laterally in every direction, to embrace everybody in any given local group. This means that each individual is a brother in-law, uncle or aunt, or something else, and there are many kinship terms to express the precise kind of kinship pertaining between two individuals. When two strangers meet in a village, one of the first duties is to sort out how they may be related to each other according to the accepted behaviour set down by the society. (p. 104).

Furthermore, Kinship can be understood as a culture's system of recognized family roles and relationships that define the obligations, rights, and boundaries of interaction among the members of a self-recognizing group. It could be defined through genetic relationships, adoption, or other

ritualized behaviour such as marriage and household economies. Kinship systems range in size from a single, nuclear-family to tribal or intertribal relationships. Above all, kinship creates a network that gives its members a sense of belonging.

Speaking of kinship, Pantaleon (1995) believes that the Igbo-African world into which a child is born crying *abatala m ya* (I have come into it) is made up of seven characteristics: common origin, common world-view, common language, shared culture, shared race, colour and habits, common historical experience and a common destiny. Without any choice of its own, the child is born into the Igbo world. Even as the baby sleeps in its cradle, it already has its being, performance and *akaraka* (destiny) partly enshrined and construed in the Igbo world. And the attachment of this newly individual to the communal is expressed in proverbs such as, *Ngwere ghara ukwu osisi, aka akpara ya* (If a lizard stays off from the foot of a tree, it would be caught by man). This expresses the indisputable and inevitable presence of, not just the family, but the community to which the individual belongs. According to Uchendu (1965), at the birth of a child, the community rejoices and welcomes his arrival, finds out whose reincarnation he is, gives the person a name and interprets that arrival within the circumstance of the birth. As the child grows, he becomes aware of his dependence on his kin group and community. He also realizes the necessity of making his own contribution to the group.

As observed by Alyward, (1975), the African traditional life is centred around the family. The family is where life is generated, a basic unit of life which represents in miniature the life of the entire people; it is in the family that the values of the clan, the tribe and of Africa are transmitted. The family unit is a centre of learning. The family embraces grandparents and grand children as long as they are traceable, the living dead, the in-laws and the intermediaries which include their ancestors. The African concept of the family also includes the unborn members who are still in the loins of the living. They are, for the African, the buds of hope and expectation.

During one of the feasts organized by Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, his uncle Uchendu revealed the essence of the Igbo-African kinship,

We do not ask for wealth because he that has health and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him. (Achebe 1949, p.132).

Kinship controls social relationships among African people, and since there are different kinds of kinship terms to express the different kinds of relationship between persons, knowing the kind of kinship relationship that unites one with the other is of paramount importance. Once an African discovers the kind of kinship relationship that unites him with the other, he begins to respond to it. For instance, when a Nigerian meets another African elsewhere outside Africa, he would ask him about the country he has come from, having ascertained the country, if he is a fellow Nigeria, the Nigerian relates to him as a brother. But the Nigerian would not stop there, he would ask him again, about the state he has come from in Nigeria; if he tells him that he has come from the same state with him, a profound kinship is established. The Nigerian wouldn't end there, he would ask him again from which local government; if from the same local government, the relationship is deepened. He would go further to ask about his village; if the same village and the same clan, they would relate in an intimate way. If someone were to see me in America and discovers that we are all from Arondizuogu village, he would not just call me a brother; he would call me *nwa mazi*, this would make me feel at home with him and he as well, even though we are both in America.

The concept of personhood within a kinship is not attained in isolation from the community. African philosophy accepts that personhood is something attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through performing the various duties imposed on him or her by living in the community. A person is defined by reference to his kinship, and as such, the reality of communal world takes precedence over the individual. Mbiti (1971) sums up the African view of a person in these words: "I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am" (p.108). This does not mean, as Obiechina (1965) opines that the hold which the community has over the individual African is not so constructive that the expression of individuality is completely frustrated is true. Individuality, instead of being frustrated, is helped and defined by the community. Kinship in Africa survives on the contributions of individual endowments. It is in this

regard that Chidili (1993) opined that the African admits pluralism, but harnesses it and makes proper use of it.

As a result of the strong kinship relationship among Africans, they hold lots of meetings together, so as to offer each member the opportunity to share his own gift with his brothers and sisters, because community itself is seen by the African as a gift from God which must be preserved. Wherever Africans meet, they create avenues for continuous meeting and sharing. When Nigerians meet in Canada and identify themselves, they fix days for meeting and come together to share the successes and difficulties of one another.

With regard to morality, there is a strong connection between moral rules and the type of communal kinship relationships that exist among African societies. A crime committed by a person, say stealing, has implications not only for the thief but also for the kinship relationship; for what is stolen is first of all considered to be a thing of the member of the kinship, perhaps of one related to the thief in one way or the other. In the contention of Adewole (1999), the offence not only affects the victims of the theft but the whole community, and the shame as well also goes to the whole community. In some quarters, the punishment not only affects the thief but also the close relatives, as in the case where a person is asked to leave the village with his entire family.

Genealogy plays a significant role in African kinship system. Thus Mbiti (1971) avers that children are made to learn the genealogy of their people with a sense of depth so as to transmit them to the next generation. Through genealogical ties, the African is able to know how he is related to a certain person in a group. More so, through genealogies, clans (the clan is a major subdivision of the whole tribe) are easily made as the kinship expands. Those clans whose descent is traced back to the father are called Patriarchal clans, while those whose descent is traced to the mother are called Matriarchal clans. If the members of a clan cannot marry each other, they are referred to as exogamous clan, while where marriage within the clan is allowed, it is called endogamous clan. Apart from localizing the sense of kinship, clan system provides closer human co-operation, especially in times of need. In case of internal conflicts, clan members join one another to fight their aggressive neighbour.

As regard marriage in Africa, it is not simply the affair of the individual couple but of the community. The community approves or disapproves a marriage, and invokes God's blessings on the married couple which now constitutes a household in the kinship system. According to Adasu (1985), the birth of a child is a response to prayer as well as a blessing on the community and the family. The child must ensure the continuity of the individual as he is seen as the externalization of the father's personal immortality. Each family must make sure that its existence is not extinguished. For Mbiti (1971), this is the concept that reinforces polygamy in Africa, for unless a person has close relatives to remember him when he has physically died, then he is nobody and simply vanishes like a flame when it is extinguished.

In every African kinship relationship, there is hierarchy based on age and degree of kinship. In this relationship, Mbiti (1971) avers that the oldest members have a higher status than the youngest. Within this hierarchy, there are duties, obligations, rights and privileges dictated by the moral sense of the society. Failure in performing one's duty either as parents and children or otherwise, there are consequences attached to them. It is the duty of kin members to be hospitable to relatives, friends and even strangers. The African kinship system is thus a strong social network, with wide extension capacity.

3. UNDERSTANDING DEVELOPMENT

Eliot (1971), observes that there is no agreement as to what development is. It was coined by developed nations to describe the power and powerless nations. According to Onwuliri (2008), there are various aspects to what constitutes development, however common to all these is a positive change in human wellbeing. The individual and his quality of life must be the centre of the conception of national development. It is in this regard that Schumacher (1975), avers that development should not start with goods, but with the people, their education, organization and discipline.

It is not all about money, profit and the number of industries. Levi and Havinden (1982) understand it as a long-term improvement in the standard of living, as felt and judged to be by

most of the people in the country. Schumacher (1975) names education, organization and discipline as the three ingredients of development. This perspective sees development as an overall social process including economics, social, political, cultural and moral dimensions of life.

In the past, discussions and commentaries on development easily tended to be developed by economists who saw it primarily from the perspective of economic growth. In that context, so long as the monetary value of goods and services (Gross Domestic Product) increased yearly, there was development. According to Nwajiuba (1999), this perspective is false as there could be an economic growth, but not development, that is, if the majority of the people did not benefit from it. Onwuliri (2008), thus opines that development thus goes beyond the narrow lines of economic and material advancement. It is all encompassing. Development is a multidimensional process involving the totality of man in his political, economic, psychological, social relations, among others. As Andre (1970) rightly observed, it is erroneous to see underdevelopment as an original state which must be characterized by indices of traditionalism and that therefore development consists in abandoning these characteristics and adopting those of the western world. Development according to Kanu (2013) is not a completed affair, it is an ongoing process. This being the case, does religion have any contribution to make towards national development?

4. KINSHIP AND THE ISSUE OF DEVELOPMENT

Having discussed the issue of kinship in African ontology, the question of greater relevance is how this kinship can contribute to the development of society. This would be discussed from the political, economic, ethical and social perspectives.

4.1. Kinship and Political Development

The political relevance of kinship is that it creates a room for each citizen to be given a sense of belonging in the political arena, and democracy has no other purpose than the realisation of belongingness for all (Pantaleon, 2000). The neglect of this belongingness, is at the base of most ethnic and political violence in Africa. The sense of kinship helps a government to discover the circumstances that can link human beings who inhabit a country, igniting and increasing in the led a feeling of personal security and group preservation (Pantaleon, 1995). The idea of kinship proposes a system of government which will concede coexistence to all linguistic groups, on the basis of equality, within a framework of political and constitutional warrantees. Such a system of government would protect individual freedom under the rule of law and thus preserve and sustain linguistic groups (Azikiwe, 1978). The level to which each member of the political society belongs determines the future of societies.

4.2. Kinship and Economic Development

The 21st century is characterized by the creation and expansion economic opportunities. Virtually, every activity is geared towards economic interest. When people meet, it is for economic reasons. Friends are made based on economic interests. The yearning for a global village was born out of economic needs (Andre, 2005). But as long as people are robbed of their economic sense of belonging, situations of conflict would always arise.

The Niger Delta crisis is born out of the feeling by a few that they have been robbed of economic belongingness. A situation where few have and many do not have, in relation to resources that is meant for all, is against the principle of economic kinship. Every people who desire a glorious future must employ the ideology of belongingness while taking decisions that border on economic interests.

4.3. Kinship and Social Development

When people who are members of a society do not feel the sense of belongingness, it affects their contribution towards the development of the society. The social dimension of kinship would call for the Jettisoning of all forms of prejudice, be they racial, national, tribal, societal, political, ethical etc.

To postpone the breaking down of all forms of barriers of prejudice, be they inter-tribal or intra-tribal is to postpone the social unity and advancement of a society (Nzimiro, 1978). The social significance of kinship is solidarity, which would create a society where everyone would relate and contribute to the well-being of the other.

4.4. Kinship and Moral Development

When there is breakdown in kinship relationship, and people do not have the feeling of belongingness, lots of anomalies abound, such as suicide, abortion, armed robbery etc. When people feel that they are part of a system, they would carry out their duties responsibly. For instance, situations of suicide arise most of the time when the sense of belonging is lost, mutual trust betrayed, kinship bond broken. When a person undergoes this experience, he sees nothing to live for and as such no desire to go on living (Bernard, 2005). At a time when we are fast losing much of our values of comradeship, strengthening of kinship needs to be emphasized.

5. CONCLUSION

The foregoing has studied the concept of kinship in African ontology. It has further studied the contribution of kinship to development. In this regard, the political, economic, ethical and social contributions of kinship to development were discussed. A cursory glance reveals that scholars have criticized the African concept of kinship as promoting over-dependence, and creating avenue for incompetence and laziness since everyone hides under the shadow of the community; a critical analysis of the African kinship system reveals that it is far beyond that. The strong emphasis on community presupposes a prior acceptance of a degree of individual sacrifice whenever the need arises: so that others may live, so that others may eat, so that others may have joy, and so on. The Igbo proverb *Oke pe mpe, ma nmadu baa uba* (let shares be small but let human beings be many) is instructive here. In clear contrast to this kind of spirit is Western capitalist mentality, which encourages unlimited personal accumulation, leading to aggression and violence, and an attitude of consumerism that undermines solidarity and cooperation. The African good sense of kinship is the factor behind the comparatively low rate of suicide in the continent. The spirit is accommodating: "all are responsible for all". This is the basic content of the African philosophy of kinship. Man is defined by reference to the community. And the feeling that a person matters to the extent that others care about his or her welfare, carries every individual through the vicissitudes of life and makes life worth living, thus rendering the contemplation of suicide remote. This kinship network, when properly harnessed is also a wheel for development, which can take social, economic, political and moral dimensions.

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