

Some Essentialist Elements in 'Our' Thought Pattern and Their Dangers

By
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Since 'The Civilization of Love site' serves "also as an intellectual minehouse for the recovery of the cultural tradition of the African people and promote the search for a fine unity between the culture and Christian tradition received by our people," I wish to raise a couple of things which I believe could help us in the reassessment and readjustment of our intellectual search for truth. I am doing so not necessarily as a Catholic (which I am), but as a humble questioner.

Some close observers of African thinking, entrenched in literature and philosophy, must have identified some traits running through most of the issues that have been touched or discussed by some African thinkers.

Theophilus Okere, in an attempt to provide the West with an alternative morality, praises the community morality in the "African society,"¹ and underlines the idea of collective guilt among the Igbo. Chinua Achebe argues that the "Igbo people of Nigeria, among whom the story of Arrow of God is set, are second to none in their respect of the individual personality."² On the other side, Oyeka Owomoyela believes that the African societies de-emphasize "the cult of the individual."³ This, in his view, marks the traditional African societies as different from the Western. There are thousands and one examples ranging from Ehusani to Ehiem, from Onyewuenyi and Okoro, to the most recently defended Thesis in Rome⁴, which for lack of space I am not going to discuss. It does suffice, however, to suggest that what these works have in common is the tendency to present Africa, or the different communities in question, as a clump of undifferentiated, inflexible whole.

This type of thinking is essentialist in conception even if it has some good intention of redeeming the image of Africa. And this points to the second misleading aspect: it is reactionary. It is reactionary in the sense that it is produced as an answer to some people's gaze, and not as a way for self-understanding by discussing issues within the community. By 'some people's gaze' I mean the ubiquity of the white man in

¹ Okere, Theophilus. "The Poverty of Christian Individualist Morality and an African Alternative". in: Okere Theophilus (ed). *Identity and Change: Nigerian Philosophical Studies*. Washington D.C: Paidea, 1996.

² Achebe, Chinua. *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*. (1965-1987). London: Heinemann, 1988. p. 214-215.

³ Owomoyela, "Africa and the Imperative of Philosophy..." Owomoyela, Oyeka. "Africa and the Imperative of Philosophy: A Sceptical Consideration," in: Serequerbeham, T. ed *African Philosophy*. New York: Paragon House, 1991p.167.

⁴ Joseph Oladejo Faniran. *An Exploratory Study of Communalism As A Feature of African Communication*. (I'm basing my information on the report by Sr. Mary Bosco Ebere Amakwe, HFSN. <http://www.civilizationoflove.org/pdf/bosco/newtext-african.pdf> / (accessed on 8/31/2003).

'our' discussion. He has challenged us, accused and denigrated our world, and what follows then is a concatenation of what we believe 'our people' really possess, and what the white man should know. There is, therefore, not much difference between what an Ogbete or Ojota market woman and a typical 'our-people-type' of African thinker would say about life. This is because they take off from the premise: 'the Igbo people,' 'the African society.'

The term 'essentialist' denotes the type of thinking or behavior that considers a thing or a people as possessing an eternally fixed identity, a type of model (whole) to which all the parts (individuals) must conform. It is like creating two good premises and allowing your observant listener to draw the conclusion. The simplest example is this: Nsukka people are so and so. Mr. Okobo is from Nsukka. The same absolutist formulations could be made of peoples: Owerri people, Yoruba people, Whites, Blacks.

I would like to take on the article "Between Adam and Steve: An African Experience" by Stan Chu Ilo⁵ as an example of the type of thinking I'm talking about. The essay sets out to denounce the issue of "Ontario Court of Appeal upgrading same-sex relationship to the level of marriage." The denunciation is anchored on the writer's African experience. The writer talks about his experience within the close family unit, and from there moves on to his 'clan experience' "As a child I learnt the ethos of the clan..." Then he raises the family/clan experience a notch higher in the second paragraph, to 'African experience.' There is then a systematic gradation in the order of experiences, from personal to family, and from family to clan and then to Africa.

The leap from family experience to clan experience is already worrying. While no one can challenge the family experience, it is questionable to talk about clan experience the way it is used here. Here we begin to detect some elements of monolithic judgment. Who and who made up that clan? What made up that experience? Did all the members hold the same opinion on the same issue? Did any person care about any differing opinion or orientations? And what are those "time-tested tribal values" that have triumphed "over any kind of moral relativism?"

My major concern with the article, however, is with the second paragraph in which most sweeping statements are made. Consider the phrases: "Among Africans", "My people believe", "We Africans", "For the African woman". These are at best absolutist premises, which make way for conclusions that might not be good for certain individuals within that community. While they may be said of religious communities or the experience of historical events like war or famine or plague, these statements do not hold true of *Weltanschauung*. It is therefore erroneous to talk about human communities, which are made up of people with conflicting values as if these communities were faith based.

At worst this smacks of some dictatorial thinking. One could be a dictator benevolently or malevolently. What these two directions have in common is the denial of dissension and the nipping of

⁵ <http://www.civilizationoflove.org/pdf/eyestosee/soundingoff.pdf> (accessed on 31/08/2003).

opposition right in the bud. When I read 'We Africans' I ask myself: on whose behalf is this person speaking or writing? "For the African woman?" Yes, the African woman of which age? Who is that model African woman?

In the article under consideration, as in many other essays I have mentioned above, there is a dizzying apotheosis of the collective/possessive pronoun. "We"/"Our". Only heaven knows who are behind that archaic mask of "We" or "Our?"

Besides its patronizing tone, what this type of thinking reveals is in truth: the apparent lack of courage to take a stand on an issue and defend it with one's logic. This has characterized much of African (school philosophy) thinking. When this becomes the case, the person builds a glorified bastion of the collective: "We", "Africans" or "My people". "Our experience." If you attack the thinking, you are implicitly attacking the bastion he had constructed, and once you attack the bastion, you are against his people, you are therefore a racist, a tribalist, or a sectionalist.

In the face of this, it is not out of place to shout: Can the real African thinker please stand up!

Having said this, I would like to know what is wrong in raising homosexual partnership to a legal status. I raise this issue because I know that people are genetically constituted in different ways and things are not always as "natural" as we have been taught to believe or as we wish it to be. I think the greatest task of every civilization is to identify and respect what does not necessarily comply with the monolithic whole, or the perceived essence. Chinua Achebe would agree that it is exactly this very lack, that is to say, the inability of the Igbo of *Things Fall Apart* to accommodate the differing minorities that brought about the collapse of that world. Some people were called *efulefus*, twins were thrown away, and there were *Osus* and *Ohus*, and the *Unokas* etc. It is the inflexibility of the mind and the pettiness of the heart (symbolized by Okonkwo) that bring down any civilization more than any force from without.

And this brings me back to the 'we-formulations.' I want to believe that Stan Chu Ilo does not intend to deny that there are men and women in African societies whose genetic codes are tuned towards people of same sex and who truly practice homosexual lifestyle if in closet. If he does not deny this, then the next question becomes: why not create a room for them to live out their lives if they want to? I know that it is not impossible to create spaces for people of different ethnic origin, religious or sexual orientations to thrive within our different communities. This, I guess, could be the greatest challenge facing the African mind in this post-Rwandan era.

What does it require of us to allow for greater diversity within our communities? A little bit of understanding of human nature, which is as varied and variegated as variety can be and the knowledge that there is no "essence" to which all human beings have to comply. What more, creating another space in our hearts to accommodate that which our heads could not comprehend, and then just let be. *Egbe belu, ugo belu* – let the eagle perch while the kite also perches.

According to Stan Chu Ilo, “No person ever got punished because he or she was unmarried.” There are various forms of punishment, first of which is the formulation “for the African woman”. People’s gazes are also forms of punishment. And moreover the Igbo patriarchal system doesn’t seem to have a space for an unmarried woman to thrive as a person. I take a family ‘A’ for an example. This family has three sons and a daughter. This daughter is unmarried. She is fifty years old. The sons have all inherited the pieces of land and, perhaps the eldest son inherits the house. For the fact that women do not inherit landed properties (in most Igbo communities) this woman is forced to depend on the mercies of her brothers. I that not a form of punishment The system does the punishment, for it has already skillfully excluded her from taking part in a normal human living; it has denied her a voice.

But the Igbo society is changing, and it changes in such rapid ways that the only common thing that could be said of all the communities is, in Heraclitean words the fact of change. The age of sweeping statements about Africa or any African community should, I think, belong to the past. This, I guess and prophecy, and hope for, is the age in which our thinkers would take on ideas and sieve them with the power of logic, and put them to the test of critical analysis. The European ethnologist published their studies – however they did them – under such titles: Among the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger; Bantu Philosophy; Yoruba Cosmology etc. Centuries later, we are still continuing with these ethnological formulations.

In Arrow of God, Chinua Achebe beautifully paints the picture of what I think a human community should look like. He does it in the family of Ezeulu. Ezeulu is portrayed as a person who recognizes and welcomes multiplicity of lifestyles. He asks his wife “Do you not know that in a great man’s household there must be people who follow all kinds of strange ways? There must be good people and bad people, honest workers and thieves, peacemakers and destroyers; that is the mark of a great obi.⁶ I understand this family also as a metaphor for a community, for Nigeria. It is part of every great community to accommodate differences, and aim at maintaining a fine balance between them. This might be what the Ontario Court of Appeal had just done.

Thus issues must be discussed because they are issues and not because they are ‘my people’s’ issues of beliefs.

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⁶ Chinua Achebe. *Arrow of God*. London: Heinemann, 1986. p.46.

