

Vol 2(1) pp.1-7 July, 2016  
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ISSN: 2985-8763  
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*Full Length Research Paper*

# African Humanism as a Socialist Solution to the Capitalist Underdevelopment Problems in Nigeria: A Philosophical Appraisal

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Accepted 4th July; 2016

## Abstract

Humanism is the devotion to human and it is the cultural foundation of African society. This cannot be jettisoned by the adoption of Western imperialist culture and its objectives. African humanism is the value-system that portrays humanistic and egalitarian outlook of the people and their society. The Western agents in the name of some African leaders) cannot completely wane of the value-system. So far, such capitalistic exploitative objective is sending some African societies (like Nigeria) backward, instead of forward. The alien influence of the West in their relationship with our societies fashions out an attitude that neither respects the core human values of our culture nor leads the younger members of the community to acquire the true knowledge of African values. This has led to the inferiority complex of depending on the foreign culture which is manifest in our unreflective and blind copy and introduction of alien values into our cultural milieu. This calls for the revisit and invigoration of our human cultural value-system which depicts the authentic African experience. That is, it calls for the establishment of African socialism as the foundation for the remodeling of African society in the light of modernization and cultural confluence.

**Keywords:** Humanism, culture, Africa, values.

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## INTRODUCTION

This writing is a work in African philosophy. It is concerned with the exposition of the different values of African culture which are humanistic. Hence, the relevance of African Humanism comes in. Reference will be made to Igbo culture as we discuss African humanism. The question of values is akin to human society and activities. Every society has set of values covering every aspect of human endeavor. These values are the guiding principles found in human society. The questions are: how humanistic are these African values? What relevant role can they play in the present day dispensation? Humanism is the devotion to human interest. It is the work and dignity of man. It is said that

the traditional African value-system is humanistic, and that in view of the present day cultural upheaval that some of these human values of African culture are waning away. Hence, there is need to reactivate them to enhance the dignity of man.

The value-system is the cultural outlook of the people, and the understanding of the value-system of the people is the understanding of the belief-system and cultural system of the people. The questions are asked: what is the cause of the recession of the humanistic values in African culture? Is our value-system waning away in the face of the threatening alien values engendered by Western colonialism, neocolonialism and imperialism? Is

there anything humanly in the traditional cultural system that should be invigorated? If there is, could then revisit them to remedy the situation and serve as a foundation for the remodeling of African society in the light of modernization and cultural confluence?

There is no gainsaying that our humanistic value-system is in the process of decaying. It is an incontrovertible fact that the advent of colonialism and imperialism nearly caused a complete dethronement of our cultural path. It is evident truth that the worse done in Africa in the relation with the West is the attempt to make us believe that there is no indigenous culture of our own that could enhance human dignity and development.

So far, the interaction with the West appears to deny the egalitarianism and dignity attached to African humanism. Instead of growing upwards, we are going downwards. The West in their colonial era and their contemporary prescriptions introduced educational system that saw nothing of value in African culture. This has brought a crisis in our culture and value-system. Crisis of a culture implies a process of development or degeneration introduced through a particular educational procedure. The West introduced an educational procedure, which as a culture-transmitting process promotes and enhances out an attitude that neither respects the core values of our culture nor leads the younger members of the community to acquire the genuine knowledge of African values.

Stemming from the adulteration and overthrow of our culture of colonialism is the inferiority complex of depending on foreign culture which manifests in our unreflective and blind copy and introduction of alien values into our cultural milieu. This is neo-colonialism which accounts for the subtle and gradual destruction of our value-system. Hence, the call for the reconstruction of our cultural value-system, which depicts the authentic African experience. This calls for the reawakening and reactivating of those positive traditional values that promote human dignity in our society. And this is in the name of African humanism. Under this umbrella, it will be seen that individualism and capitalism are incompatible with African culture.

In the light of devastating Western in human culture, such values as extended family and communalism should serve as the foundational substrate upon which a new system known as African Socialism should be built.

This will give Africa (Nigeria in particular) a modern development. In fact, it is a combination or synthesis of the typical African humanism and egalitarianism, and the modern, dynamic and enterprising efforts of the individuals that can make a united strong and self-reliant society. This is what we call African socialism.

## **THE CONCEPT OF "HUMANISM"**

Most often when people talk of "humanism" a lot of

meanings are conjectured in one's mind. This, by implication means that there are different understandings of the concept. The term "humanism" makes some people uncomfortable because of the centrality of reason and the very high degree of initiative that it accords man in the conduct of his affairs. This conception is as old as classical Greece and as modern as 21<sup>st</sup> century. To these people, it is a philosophical outlook centered on the autonomy of the human being as a dignified, rational being, possessing the source of truth and right. In this perspective "humanism's final court of appeal is human reason rather than any external authority, and its goal is the greatest good in this finite existence" (Gabel, 553). To these people, it is atheism. It subjects everything to human reason and therefore denies God, his role in the life of man. All religionists are against this conception of humanism.

For some other people, there is nothing wrong with the conception. This group recognizes humanism as an intellectual attitude, a posture, a value-system that recognizes the primacy of human reason and accords man a great deal of initiative and freedom. (Dodds, 384) Thus, the person qua person has worth, dignity and integrity. He is an end himself. He has the capacity to shape himself, to move towards perfection. He is the architect of his destiny. Found in this line of thought are Bertrand Russell, Sidney Hook and John Dewey. For them, there is nothing wrong with atheism. This conception explains why the humanists of the Renaissance had as their guiding principle, the 5<sup>th</sup> century Sophist Protagoras' "man is the measure of all things".

While others do not see humanism as a sound thing wholly different from religion since the function (and focus) of religion is to improve and enhance human relation with God and with fellow man. This marries morality and religion of humanism. In this perspective humanism is not secular, but the conception accepts that science and technology must be reduced to the recognition of man's worth socialized, and man educated to respond positively to rapid change. To some extent, this has affinity with African humanism which does not rule out religion. Religion is seen to serve the human welfare.

As indicated above, humanism has received various connotations and denotations among the people and different epochs of the world. It is not the place of this writing to look at the various historical and philosophical conceptions of humanism. As it is, there is no generally accepted definition of humanism. But some attempts have been made to define humanism. J.W. Dodds defines it as "a way of looking at our world which emphasizes the importance of human beings – their nature and their place in the universe." (384). Humanism teaches that every person has dignity and worth and therefore, should command the respect of other persons.

Without prejudices about the supernatural, human is an idea which supports the latent capacity of man as a moral and rational being. Stemming from this perspective, M Black has it that "Humanism is a term applied to the philosophical view that emphasizes man's potentialities." (125).

Reflecting back to the Classical Greek period, it should be noted that the Sophists and the Stoics considered the idea of human dignity. Some reacted against any kind of inhumanity. In the theory of freedom and determinism Gorgias' students, Alcidas insisted that "God has set all men free; nature has made man a slave" (Guthrie, 159). Erasmus (1466 – 1536) had a considerable influence upon the development of humanism. In his book *Essay on Free will*, he expressed the Renaissance view that "man has great capacities for moral improvement" (Stumpf, 208). It is an indisputable fact that the different strands of humanism cannot be incorporated or elucidated in one definition. But what we are interested in are the basic and uniting elements which are proposed by all the definitions. Humanism centers on human life, values and dignity. In other words, "Humanism is an attitude of mind which stresses the dignity and importance of man (Harver, 2150). Having analyzed the general view of humanism, we now direct our attention to African humanism which is our area of interest.

### **AFRICAN HUMANISM CONCEPTUALIZED.**

In the preceding sections, we observe the various meanings and understanding of humanism. Going by the basic elements of humanism, we say that humanism is a world-idea, it is a global concept. But the fact that we often hear about humanism as it applies to a particular set of people or theory – say European, American, Marxists, Existentialists etc, there must be some peculiarities in each. Africa is not an exception. If humanism is a global concept and Africa is within this sphere, then there is African Humanism. In this understanding we consider humanism as the philosophy of a person. It is on this pedestal that Mbiti's conception of African philosophy comes in handy: It is the understanding, an attitude of mind, logic, and perception behind the manner in which African people think, act or speak in the different situation of life (2). African traditional society, and still to a good extent present society, have the human person as prior, central and end point in techno-developmental valuations and engagements. African humanism is manifest in Igbo dicta like *Onye nwere madu ka onye nwere ego* (He, who has a human being is greater than he who has money). *Madukaku* (Man is greater than wealth), *Nwakaego* (Child is greater than money), *Ndukaku* (Life is greater than wealth). "These and numerous others" argues Iroegbu

"tells the story of the priority of human over the material and the economy". (83)

African humanism is related to other conceptions of humanism on the centrality of man in all human endeavors. Unlike the scientific humanism, African humanism holds that moral (human) values are derived from both human experience and the divine law of right and wrong. The worth of these values is measured by this contribution to the enhancement of human life. African humanism's bases man's life in the authoritarian commandments of religions or an alleged cosmic purpose that must be fulfilled. Along this line Mbiti writes: "Africans have their own ontology, but it is an extremely anthropocentric ontology in the sense that everything is seen in terms of its relation to man". (15) Going by this vision of the world, even the gods are at the service of the human person. Through intermediaries of the Supreme Being, the minor deities (ancestors included) must care for man. When they do their human service well, they are revered. When they perform badly, they are deprecated. It is in this line that Omoregbe writes, "The spirits of ancestors are believed to be living blissful lives in the spiritual world, able to help the living in times of difficulties and deserve to be honored by the living". (24)

African humanism vis a vis social, political and religious aspects is a sine qua non in our context. Socially, Africans interact, relate to one another and attend to each other's needs. In the political arena, it is obvious that Africans are not left out. The African man said 'No' to racial oppression during the colonial era. Very often, we see in Africa, people designated with the 'title': "Freedom Fighters". These are people who believed that the worth of man be restored where it is denied. The efforts and attempts to crush colonial imperialism to the grassroots also portray the African humanism politically. Africans have made great contributions in the political history of the world. Among these are; "Politics without bitterness" proposed by late Alhaji Ibrahim Waziri of Nigeria, "Ujamaa" of Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and "Conscientism" of Nkrumah of Ghana.

Religiously, Africans have the idea of human affection, sacredness of life, sympathy, communalism among others. Moral ideals are attached to religion. African religion inspires dedication to the highest ethical ideals which are centered on human relationship. For instance, any attempt to terminate life "illegally" is seen as a taboo (ARU). The word "illegally" here implies that there are exceptional cases like self-defense in the war. As our focus is on Nigerian people's welfare, references and analogies will be drawn from the Igbos as an exemplar of African humanism. This does not mean that we shall be limited only to the Igbos but to use them as a central instrument to pass on our concept of African humanism.

The Igbos form one of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. Like their neighbors, they belong to the Negro race of Africa and speak a language found in West and Central Africa. (Nwala, 15). The Igbo people live in the area between Benin and Igala, the Cross River and Niger Delta City-States. According to Ekwunife:

*The Igbos inhabit areas of Southern Nigeria between latitude 5 to 7 degrees North and longitude 6 to 8 degree East. The area covers about 15,800 square miles, the bulk of which falls within the equatorial rain square mile.* (2)

Regardless of cultural differences between the groups there are certain characteristics typical of Igbo society. The Igbos respect age and leadership comes from the elders. Respect is not servility and is balanced by the belief that birth does not confer an advantage on any man. The Igbo society is egalitarian, every man considering himself as good as everyone else and demanding a voice in his local affairs. It is not the place of this essay to catalogue the general characteristics of the Igbo people; rather it is an essay whose aim is to analyze African humanism as portrayed by Igbo culture.

### **CAPITALISM AS A THREAT TO THE BENEFITS OF MODERN AFRICAN HUMANISM**

African (Igbo) humanism is more manifest in the traditional setting. African communalism was the basis of life before the advent of colonialism and its attendant capitalism and individualism. Africans have their own culture, their own values and their own identity derived from their experience and from a common heritage. And this is different from European culture, values and identity. The bane of the African predicament in the present day dispensation is of two folds- the shift from the African traditional egalitarian communalism to individualism and from African humanism to materialism.

Hitherto and in true African traditional culture, the conflict between the individual and the society, it was the society or group that had the pre-eminence and the superior claim. The social conscience was at its highest, the individual was motivated to action by the interest of the community to which he belonged. There was private conscience, but it served as public morality. The individual found the possibilities of his being as an individual, not in himself, but in the community. That community was the cradle that gave him life, welcome and education. That community defined the values he would embrace and the social standing, he would receive or aim at achieving. His life is Life-in-community, life-with-others. His personality was if) part defined by his communion in community. (Iroegbu 87) Since the interest of the Individual was attuned to that of his community, there was none of the present preoccupation with individual and personal wealth, comfort, security and

affluence.

Even the good virtue of egalitarianism inherent in African communalism has been misconstrued and distorted to mean nepotism; the concern for the welfare of a brother has been interpreted to mean the concern for members of my extended family my village and my clan or tribe. It should be noted that nepotism, clannishness and tribalism are alien, they are products of colonialism. It is an indisputable fact that there is a shift from humanism to materialism. Whereas In the traditional African Society, the economic arrangement was for the welfare of all the people, in the present time, they are to enable those who have the access to make as much profit as possible. The welfare of the people is divorced from the concern of the people that used to carry through major developments in the community have been abandoned, to a large extent. The production is no longer for human satisfaction and to meeting the needs of many; rather it is entirely profit- motivated and profit-oriented. The preoccupation of the manufacturing sector is the maximization of profit, the size of the dividend to the shareholder. The profit-motif has to some extent overwhelmed all other human considerations. To be successful in "business" is to be able to swindle your associate and partner.

Undermining African humanism are over concerned with one's self importance and preoccupation with self-aggrandizement, and these naturally lead to total Indiscipline, starting from the self to the society. Writing in this direction, Akinpelu says:

*Preoccupation with accumulation of wealth, the get rich-mania, bribery and corruption to maintain and increase the level of one's affluence, conspicuous consumption and profligate living, unconscionable display of wealth to the annoyance and deliberate spite of the laboring masses-all these vices, and many more are traceable to the break-down in social conscience .... (7)*

Another debilitating effect of the principle of individualism and materialism is the hindering of the achievement of political concord and harmony. The bitterness and acrimony that characterized our political life have caused the loss of confidence in the people. The freedom and tolerance that characterized the African traditional political system are not just there. There is that intimidation, harassments and threat among men. Men are no longer respected as human and the welfare of the masses to divorce from the f concern of the individual and entrusted to the government which is remote from the masses. The questions arise: shall we continue in this way? Can there not be a way out? Is African humanism, not better than the insensitive European culture which has bastardized our value system?

## AFRICAN HUMANISM AS A SOCIALIST SOLUTION TO THE CAPITALIST PROBLEMS IN NIGERIA

From the analysis so far, we noted that the African value-system is humanistic and quite different from a European value-system which is quite individualistic. Unlike the Western scientific conception of humanism, African humanism is that which is fused with religion. The Western scientific humanism explicitly rejects all traditional religions and aims at the promotion of human welfare in man's actual concrete existence. It may be described as a philosophy that asserts the dignity and worth of man; it rejects supernaturalism and advocates the maximum welfare of all human beings here on earth. (Porters 24)

African humanism is more of a religious belief than political or social procedure, The African man is a religious man and his concept focuses on the dignity and interest of human life. African humanism holds that moral values are divine laws of right and wrong. The worth of these values is measured by their contribution to the enhancement of human life. By implication morality and religion are interwoven and therefore cannot be seen in isolation when discussing African humanism. It is a truism that when ethical ideas are based upon religion they carry authority because of belief in the religion. There may not be a logical connection between the two, but a strong psychological connection does exist.

Given this picture, it is said that African religion despises immorality. Any such receives a condign punishment. Some of those immoral acts are vandalism, murder, treason, suicide, illegal sexual intercourse and many others. All these are against humanism which enhances the protection of human respect and worth. Onwubiko declares that: "It has been admitted by African and European authors that Africans do not live without religion" (24). African Humanism has to do with what man values, what he cherishes. The religious beliefs of the Africans never allow them to go against humanism. Therefore, those who claim that humanism is antagonistic to religion should bear in mind that they are on the wrong channel. If ever it is, it should never be applied to Africans. The importance of religion to African humanism lies on the fact that religion may inspire dedication to the highest ethical ideal. The cultivation of moral devotion and creative imagination is an expression of genuine spiritual experience and aspiration. It is in this perspective that it is believed that African social values center around human worth and form a comprehensive system which has behind it some identifiable metaphysical beliefs, about man and his world.

Given the religious backing and undertone of African Humanism what is the bane to its degeneration? Why is our humanism giving way for alien culture? What is the cause of the poor moral level at the present time? In all,

it could authoritatively be said that colonialism and its attendant capitalism are the bane to the receding and degenerating humanistic Africa value- system. The introduction of alien culture of colonialism and imperialism seen in the light of Marxism and (African socialism) has depersonalized man's sensuous life in that his sense becomes "subservient to crude need". This is opposed to "humanized" sense which relates itself to things for the sake of the things. (Ucheaga, 125). It should be noted that the two fundamental principles of which can explain a lot of what we feel to be morally wrong in the society are individualism and materialism.

For the traditional African life is essentially "communal life". Life is essentially social and that life is fully human, when lived in fellowship with others. Capitalism does not reflect the experiences and aspirations of the people. All the social vices like bribery and corruption, tribalism and many more are traceable to the break-down in social conscience and the age-long principle that the good of the individual is a function of the good of his community. It was against the background of capitalism and its concomitant social vices that spurred people like Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Leopold Senghor and many others agitate for a revisit of but a fine-toned African communalism (African Socialism). According to these people, capitalism is irreconcilable with the egalitarianism and communalism of traditional African society- African nations should reject the inequality, individualism and capitalism brought into Africa by European (Western) imperialism. In line with Nkrumah, we Africans should adopt a developed form of communalism which will take care of present day experiences and aspirations (modernization) without losing its humanistic and egalitarian function. This form of developed communalism is, according to Nkrumah, "African socialism". By adopting socialism, African Societies will not only be going back to their roots, but will be adopting it in its developed form. This form of arrangement is people or community-oriented.

As against the individualism engendered by capitalism in the name of privatization or personal ownership the new social and economic arrangement will take the community more pricey than the individual. In case of conflicts between the expansive individual liberty and necessary demands of the community arise; such must be generally resolved in favor of the community. The Euro-modernists have criticized this quest for communalism as inhuman and oppressive. In response, we ask; would they prefer an oppressed community to the oppressed individual? Moreover, is there any society where the individual is totally free? According to Iroegbu:

*In those societies where the individual has tried to run wild in a pseudo liberty of the moderns, the fact today is that the same individuals have become*

*enslaved in boredom, loneliness unhappiness, and downright disenchantment. They are now wretchedly dissatisfied with life and society in their false won liberty (87).*

Reasoning along this line, we hold that true liberty is not liberty against the community. It is liberty-in-community. Any developmental program that marginalizes the community is heading to failure. The understanding is that since the community can do without a particular individual, but the individual can never do without the community, in the conflict of an existential choice, the individual must submit to the demands of the community. The stage of world civilization and modernization has affected the social landscape of African traditional communalism that, it will be preposterous to suggest that we go back to such system. What we advocate like Nkrumah, is "African Socialism". In this sphere of reasoning, the development of modern economic system negates capitalism and its vice and will be a combination or a synthesis of the typical African humanism and egalitarianism, and the modern, dynamic and enterprising efforts of the individuals that can make a united strong and self-reliant people. Along this perspective of modern arrangement of African society Akinpelu writes:

*... the African socialism should not turn out to be a mere distribution of poverty, it could be organized in such a way as to constitute a mass upliftment of all the productive elements in society, and a release of the economic potentialities of all able-bodied citizens (39).*

The most admired value in the traditional African economic arrangements is the social security or economic insurance guaranteed by the social organization typified by the extended-family system. For African socialism of modern time to be genuinely and developmentally human-oriented it must incorporate the extended family system. Under the system, the security is not just for the old age, but also for the poor and disadvantaged members of the family, who have been seen to have made the effort but have not been successful. Children of such unsuccessful adults are a legitimate economic charge on the wealth of luckier members. The underlying principle is that of collective richness or collective poverty.

Any development in this modern era has no meaning if it is not seen in the perspective of African socialism and egalitarianism. In essence, we are saying that socialism via the extended-family-system should be a cohesion factor from which solidarity or mutual aid and support in sharing and living together extends to the Kindred and the entire community. It is a common belief in Igbo setting that community in part gives the individual his identity and assures him necessary belongingness. Man in African traditional culture is not just an individual who

"contracts" to live with others in society, and presumably opts out if the balance of advantages is no longer the African man is first and foremost a member of his family, the extended family and his society in that order before being an individual. According to Lambo,

*The Africans find it difficult to conceive a man as a purely contemplative being, for those human qualities presuppose a world of human relations. Thus the influence of group consciousness is recognized as the motivating ideas and thought (127).*

Lambo's statement presupposes the social and communal nature of African man as against the individualism of the Western Europe. There is a metaphysical belief in the superiority of the claims of the family and the community over the individuals. This echoes throughout the various values of humanism, such as respect for authority and elders, extended family and communalism.

## CONCLUSION

African values as noted in this essay are man-centered and community-centered. This being the case, it is not a surprise that human dignity and the respect for human life are of supreme importance. The cultural values are tailored to ensure a man's tenure of life, right from birth until old age. These strands of African humanism (values) are ingrained in African personality that they are taken as mirrors for our authenticity as Africans. The enduring nature of these values, in spite of cultural upheaval engendered by colonialism is as a result of the inherent humanism associated with them. Anyone who casts a reflection on the ways of speaking about these values is bound to be struck by the preoccupation with human welfare. For an African, what morally good is what befits a human being, it is what is decent for a man, what brings dignity, respect, contentment, prosperity and joy, to man and his community. These cultural values enhance and safeguard African humanistic outlook.

We must point out that it is anthropologically fallacious to say that the Western European values have destroyed the whole of African culture. This is practically not possible. The European value-system is in Europe and stays there. African humanistic values are in Africa and are consciously present here. What comes into contact are elements and products of the cultures which in spite of their influence have left some African humanistic values undiminished. It is on these identified cultural values and Experiences that African socialism is expected to thrive.

Taking all in all, the different strands of African humanism

(values) though may not be specific and exclusive to Africa, they are nevertheless African for they are not only found here, and they are above all present to an eminent degree. It is then consequently imperative that they should be jealously guided, and any development Africa must pursue, must be rooted on in the genuine grounds of those strands of cultural humanism (values). They give us a character that is authentic, distinctive and uniquely African. These humanistic values are people-oriented and tally with our own conditional terrain. So any genuine leadership that is committed to the development that is geared to people's wellbeing and comfort must adopt and adapt African socialism that overrides the present's capitalist trend. This will get rid of the ills of individualism and selfishness which are inherent in the imperialist capitalism operating in some African countries (especially the Nigerian present trend), where the cabal in the name of leadership is promoting privatization and commercialization of national wealth, and dependency on the West for their security. For leadership to achieve national development in this contemporary time, it must promote the ability of the people of the given society (nation) to exercise concerted effort in dealing with their environment. As advocated in this writing, there must be a concerted effort by various governments in Africa to protect, preserve and promote the importance of African socialist culture in order to enhance human dignity. African elites and scholars should as well assist in preserving, developing and promoting the African socialist humanism in order to achieve genuine development, peace, social harmony and unity of their respective nations.

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