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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Ethical and Socio-Ontological Implications of African Communalism

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Abstract: The spiritual, the social, the economic, and the entire psycho-somatic life of the traditional African people are replete with values and peculiarities that have survived years of Western influences and social crisis. These values still survive today and influence people of African as expressed in their communalistic lifestyle. To the traditional African, communal principles do not just make an individual a human being, but also essentially a community-conscious being; and in this light, Africans feel a strong bond that exists between a person and the community. Consequently, rationality does not just define the reality of one's existence as upheld by Rene Descartes, but also because one belongs to a relational network of one's communal environment. In the African setting, 'being human' is 'relationship,' 'connectedness,' 'communion' and 'community-consciousness'. Nevertheless, this communalistic value which is a culturally attitudinal inherited personality of traditional Africans, is today, embattled and highly influenced by the individualistic theories and practices of the West, the friction of which challenges African views about human existence. Using a qualitative design, this research explores how best to strike an interactive balance between Western individualistic and African communalistic viewpoints in making African people ethically principled humanistic and community-conscious beings. The research recommends that Africa should be reclaimed from the strict reserves of Western individualistic influences through a communalistic approach if Africa is to remain a fertile land that has always yielded and sustained ethical harvests of non-individualism, sacrificial love, social justice, and trust.

Keywords: African communalistic lifestyle, sacrificial love, social justice, societal trust, cultural values, western individualistic lifestyle

1 Introduction

The concept of personality is of great influence in defining and telling who people really are. This follows the fact that certain factors, *e.g.*, cultural background, norms, traditions and environmental experiences, play roles in constituting what a people's personality entails. However, when talking about African personality, many scholars have taken various positions. While some African scholars hold a communalistic view (Mbiti, 1969/1970, pp. 108-109, 189), others maintain an attitudinal disposition (Okolo, 1993; Njoku, 2009), but none has taken an individualistic viewpoint. This implies that the discourse could take metaphysical cum ontological or even social dimensions. Against these divergent backgrounds, this work focuses on what it means to be African. Communalism, a life pattern characterized by the concept and principles of community, is what it means to be truly African. In other words, to be practically African is to be an individual who lives not just for him/herself, but also the community. The community exists for the individual, and any act from either party affects the both socio-ontologically. By extension, this paper examines the ethical and socio-cultural values that inform African personality.

This paper argues that African personality is the elementary attitudinal disposition exhibited by Africans and guided by the principle of communalism, which maintains that individual

members, both visible and invisible, interrelate socio-ontologically. However, in defending this position, the paper shall question whether this personality remains distinctly African in the postcolonial era. In other words, considering the facticity of colonization and its subsequent expansion under the disguise of globalization, can this personality coexist with the principal tenet of globalization, namely, individualism, which is characteristic of Western culture, in contrast to African culture? The paper shall make use of philosophical analysis to advocate that being African requires recognizing the subjective "I-existence" of the individual primarily to restore the individual's rights, while integrating Africanity with the facticity of globalization and the abstract "we-existence". By extension, the paper holds that in the presence of "we", the "I" gains more vitality and essence. The paper concludes with evaluations and recommendations that directly address African realities.

2 African Personality Identified as the Act of Communalism

The position of this paper is that the personality of Africans is better understood through communalistic rather than individualistic considerations. Suffice it to say, therefore, that the concept of community life is as old as the African identity itself. It is the day-to-day existential expression and experience of Africans. It is the very essence of being African. Value is measured in Africa, and by Africans, from two main perspectives: community and humanism. These two ideas are intertwined and inseparable from each other. From the foregoing, it is understood that to be in a community is to be more fully human, and to be human is to be more humane. Being human is the ethical underpinning of being African and part of a community (Abah, 2024). "The point of emphasis here is human value, which re-echoes life at the centre of human relationships in the community. Thus, to be human is to belong to the community, to share in the products of human endeavour and their humanistic inclinations; and to fit into the community life of Africans, the individual must wear a more humane face" (Ugwu, 2021, p. 49).

3 The African Community-Perspective of Value Measurement

The African community perspective of value-measurement is utilitarian in nature; put differently, utilitarian principles are the principal guides to African values. An individual-based value holds no worth for Africans. In fact, when striving to progress, one prays to do so alongside others, because one knows that it is a burden for an individual to be the only one progressing in the community. Livelihood should be communalistic; *i.e.*, expressed in and through the community, and the community should be expressed in and through individuals. In summary, this aligns with the Igbo saying *mmadu bu aku, eze* (meaning "humanity is wealth, humanity is king"). Both ideas carry equal weight in expressing the mutual well-being of community members. This represents a moderatist position of African communalism. It stands in opposition to the radicalist position of African communalism, where the community takes precedence over the individual in their relationship. This moderatist position can be compared to Nze's view, where he states that the African "lives in the community, by the community, and for the community. The community determines and influences his life as he determines and influences the life of the community" (Nze, 1989, p. 2).

One cannot be wealthy if the community is not wealthy; one has no value if the community has no value. The existential worth and essence of an individual are best expressed in and through the community, and vice versa. This is why primary patriotism is patriotism to one's community, a loyalty that extends beyond one's immediate family to include one's kindred, clan, village, town, state, country, or even continent. By extension, this explains why the term "African" encompasses, for example, anyone from the African continent, a Nigerian, an Igbo, an Udian, and so on, down to one's family name. The community exists for the individual, who, in the process of living and embracing the "communitiness" of their existence, fulfils their destiny and in turn uses that fulfilment to uplift and improve the community. This position is insightfully articulated by Gbadegesin of the Yoruba community in the following extended quote:

> "Individual destinies determine the outcome of individual lives. Destiny is the meaning of a person's existence, the purpose of existence. However, this personal life-

> purpose cannot be separated from the communal reality of which the individual is only a part... This is also because the purpose of individual existence is intricately linked to the purpose of social existence and cannot be fully understood outside of it. While destiny affirms an individual's personality, it also connects each person to the community; personality becomes meaningful only when referenced to destiny and community. In any case, destiny itself is a community concept, a means for the community to provide its members with meaning. In the final analysis, a person is what they are by virtue of their destiny, their character, and the communal influences on them" (Gbadegesin, 2004, p. 318).

According to Gbadegesin, an individual's destiny is intentionally shaped to serve the well-being of the community. This Gbadegesian form of radical communalism is comparable to Okolo's view, where he argues that "as a matter of fact, individuals become real only in relationship with others, in a community or group. It is the community that makes the individual, to the extent that without the community, the individual has no existence" (Okolo, 1993, p. 6). This position attributes the subjectivity and individuality of a human being, as a member of the community, entirely to the community, while overlooking the fact that the concept of individuality presupposes the concept of community. Okolo goes further to make a conclusive statement on this point, writing: "Relationships constitute the self to the extent that the African could well echo *Cognatus Ergo Sum* ("I am related [to others], therefore I exist"), borrowing from Descartes's well-known expression *Cogito Ergo Sum*" (Okolo, 1993, pp. 5, 10-11). The radical implication of this is that without relationships, one does not truly exist. While this paper acknowledges the existential significance of the community and interpersonal relationships, it does not agree that one cannot truly exist without communal relationships. This is because existence encompasses more than communal relations, even though such relations have profound implications for positive existence and existential influence.

In line with this, Mbiti asserts: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti, 1969/1970, p. 189). The problem here is that an abstract "we-existence" is presented as justifying the subjective, concrete "I-existence". The question arises: How can my subjective existence be dependent on the "we-existence" as if there is a subjective "we-existence"? Even though Gbadegesin maintains a radical or extremist form of communalism, similar to Okolo, and thus diverging from the position of this paper, he emphasizes that the community plays a vital role in shaping an individual's "beingness", just as the individual plays a vital role in shaping the community's "beingness". This aligns with Agulana's argument, where he states that "it is generally held that it is in the community of other human beings that the life of the individual can have meaning or significance"; hence, the conclusion of his paper is "that both as individuals and as groups, people need the protective framework that community life offers if their lives are to have any meaning or significance. Community... is the only essential means by which humans can achieve their social goals and aspirations" (Agulana, 2010, p. 282). This echoes Opoku's view that "a man is a man because of others, and life is when you are together; alone, you are an animal" (Opoku, 1978, p. 92). Agulana further frames community as an ideology. For him, community is not an abstract concept but a collective of individuals living in a specific region, belonging to a particular community or culture. In other words, it is through interactions and associations with others that an individual fulfils their destiny. As some "spiritually inclined" Africans would describe them, these others are "destiny helpers". In Igbo thought, Agulana's position can be summarized by the saying *mmadu ka eji aga/eje* (meaning "it is with fellow human beings that one attains one's destiny/success"), implying that it is through mutual relationships that one finds fulfilment in life. Agulana succinctly emphasizes his point as follows:

> "Africans are unlikely to concede to the individual an absolutism that puts them in direct opposition to the community... Africans believe that it is only in the community that the life of the individual acquires true meaning. In other words, it is not by living as an isolated being but by interacting mutually with other members of the community that the individual can hope to realize their social aspirations in life. Among the Igbo people of Nigeria, as among other African peoples generally, the obvious limitation on a person's ability to act as they please is imposed by the powerful force known as 'the will of the community'" (Agulana, 2010, p. 288).

Another expression that illustrates Agulana's point is *otu onye anaghi emeri oha*, meaning

"an individual cannot oppose the communal wishes of the people". According to this aphorism, it is the people (*oha*) who "own" the individual, as the individual is a component of *oha* (the community). While it can be inferred that Agulana prioritizes the community and the community's will, his position is notable for recognizing the individual's rights within the "communitiness" of their existence and in relation to the community's will. We will return to this point later.

Agulana's position aligns with Odimegwu's argument that existential resources from the community enrich an individual's livelihood. Odimegwu contends that:

> "Communalism is therefore essentially the spiritual communion of a society; the spirit of being one community, of being united with one's community, of fundamentally belonging to one another and to the community; the consciousness that instinctively directs my search for meaning in life toward the appreciation or valuation of the community" (Odimegwu, 2007, p. 7).

Odimegwu recognizes not only the social but also the ontological dimensions of community; hence, the concept of community forms an essential part of what it means to "be". Similarly, out of appreciation for communal benefits, traditional Africans view it as a burden, rather than a comfort, to be the only one enjoying prosperity in the community. They cannot rest easy, as the African reggae legend Lucky Dube asks in *Blessed is the Hand that Giveth, than the One that Taketh*: "What kind of rich man are you, when you see another man suffering, starving, gnashing his teeth in hardship, when you have at least a little to share with him?" (emphasis mine). Your wealth should be reflected in the well-being of the community, humanly, resourcefully, and in other ways. In short, the true enjoyment of wealth comes from the effects or impacts of that wealth when shared with others. A full experience of a meaningful life is one where others share in your livelihood. This is why a successful prayer is best expressed in the plural "we" (*anyi*). When "we" achieve something, joy emerges, progress, peace, and happiness prevail, and jealousy and unfounded suspicion diminish. This is summed up in the Igbo adage *oririzuru oke, iwe anaa*, meaning "when 'we' participate in or share each other's love and joy, jealousy and suspicion will have no place among the community's people".

As the altruistic Africans would say, *nwa m nweta ma karia m* ("may my child receive more than I do"). The reasoning behind this prayer for success is the full awareness that when your children or extended neighbours benefit, you also benefit. To instil this virtue in children, the Igbo have the saying that *onye a mụrụ, mụta nwanne ya* ("he who is favoured should favour his neighbour"). Thus, whatever one gains in life, no matter how small, African ethics demand that one is obligated to use it to positively impact others. Meaningful and praiseworthy "gains" are not personal but communal; in this spirit, sharing in the act of gaining (*i.e.*, livelihood) is best enjoyed in, within, and by the "we" (community).

4 The African Humanism Perspective of Value-Measurement

The African humanistic perspective of value-measurement deals with the humanitarian consciousness, *i.e.*, the consciousness that the fellow being that exists along with you is not just a being, but a being from the same family who has existential quality, substance, essence, and nature. From this perspective, in the interrelationship among beings, categories of co-existence abound. Spirit beings belong to different categories than visible beings; and among visible beings, human beings differ from animal species, trees, lifeless objects, etc. This perspective of measuring value starts from understanding, foremost, that fellow human being is a human being, and therefore, by the principle of inference, you not only do unto them what you would like to be done unto you, but also what is justifiable by reason. It is all about being humane. It entails 'wearing more humane face' in co-relating with fellow human being.

The African knows that the being with whom they live in the community, and through whom they express their communalistic personality, is a fellow human, not an animal or a tree. The "being-with" in Okolo's philosophy affirms that Africans exist with other human beings to whom they owe moral obligations, obligations rooted in humanism as the guiding principle for their intersubjective relationships. The nature of their relationships is subject-subject, not subject-object. Such relationships are fundamentally classless. This perspective also rejects two ideas: first, the normativist conception of the human person advocated by scholars such

as Ifeanyi Menkiti (Menkiti, 1984; 2004); and second, personhood by some qualities that are not humanly substantial, like colour, rationality, social development, *etc*. What is primary in this relationship is human substance, hence the question is: "Is this being with whom I am 'being-with' a human being?" If the answer is yes, no matter their race/ethnicity, geographical location, level of reasoning, *etc.*, they deserve to be accorded everything human and humane.

This value perspective explains why Okolo identifies the African person as a being whose personality is defined by the attitude of "being-with", an attitude that encapsulates what it means to "be", not only in a community but also in sincere communion (*i.e.*, a relationship guided by a moral sense of justice, equality in all aspects, and, most importantly, humanism). Okolo never separated the humanist perspective of value from the attitude of "being-with" that defines Africans. In fact, he had this to say about the attitude of "being-with" and humanistic value:

> "Being-with... is the humane and socialist attitude to life that forms the essential horizon of the African and their mode of being-in-the-world, their concern for humanity or their involvement with and for others. It may well be called the African brand of humanism... This type of humanism has the entire cosmic order or harmony of one creation with the rest as its ultimate goal, not just human concern, though that is indeed vital" (Okolo, 1993, pp. 16-17).

It must be noted, however, that for Okolo, the attitude of "being-with" is not limited to social interactions but also extends ontologically to include the realm of invisible beings. This is where "being-with" takes on a philosophical dimension. By this, "being-with" becomes a form of peaceful coexistence with all beings across their different existential categories. Thus, it can be said that African communality involves being in communion with both visible and invisible beings at every level of existence. "To exist", therefore, "means more than just 'being there'. It means standing in a particular relationship with all that exists, both visible and invisible" (Ruch & Anyanwu, 1981, p. 124). Okolo himself emphasizes this point clearly:

> "Being-with... is the humane and socialist attitude to life that forms the essential horizon of the African and their mode of being-in-the-world, their concern for humanity or their involvement with and for others. It may well be called the African brand of humanism... 'Being-with' as humanism in African philosophy extends beyond the human universe (and for the sake of humans) to include God, spirits (including ancestors), nature, or reality in its essential existence or dimensions" (Okolo, 1993, p. 16).

As a concept and as a feature of communalistic African personality, "being-with" thus carries both ontological and ethical implications: any action taken in the context of "being-with" has not only social value but also moral consequences. To further elaborate on the philosophical interpretation of this concept, Okolo writes:

> "'Being-with' as an ontological category and as a cultural determinant of the African's mode of being transcends the egoistic and utilitarian needs of the self and the community to which the self belongs. The relationship, in its function, is objective because it is part and parcel of an objective world larger than any specific community. In its ontological relationships (with other existing realities), the self in African metaphysics is attuned... to both the visible and invisible worlds" (Okolo, 1993, p. 10).

Thus, in analyzing the concept, Okolo does not stop at differentiating the African conceptualization of the human being from the European's, but also goes metaphysical to point out that a human being is not just single, but also plural, and in his/her pluralism, they are bound in ontological obligations of being in community and communion with everything that is. For Okolo, even in thinking, humans think collectively, considering both their own well-being and that of others, because they are fully aware of the moral implications of their thoughts. In the reality of African communalism, as Ugwu et al. (2024) put it, the African does not only think (*mind*) or feel (*heart*), but also does both in a way that is intertwined and inseparable in a socio-ontological sense. The African thus becomes a thinking/feeling being. In thinking, the African is critical, logical, and strict to analytical principles, but in feeling, he displays his sense of humanism in empathy, and more importantly, perceive the 'smell' of the blood of his/her fellow human being. This perception of the smell of the blood of his/her fellow is an ontological call-back to both his/her consciousness where thinking emerges and his/her conscience where

his/her humanness emerges. He becomes aware that the being with whom he 'be-with' or is 'being-with' is a fellow who is just like s/he is in every aspect, possessing humanness in their blood. The African universe is not conceived with only the strictness of logic and codes, but also feelings. This dual quality essentially makes the human being, from an African perspective as against the monistic viewpoint of the human being/person as essentially a thinking-being by Western scholars as replicated in Plato, Hegel, Descartes, Leibnitz, *etc*.

It is from this humanistic bent that human existence and its worth are, in Africa, not only measured by rationality through the thinking-mind, but also empathy through the feeling-heart. Thinking (by the mind) and feeling (by the heart) are two inseparable ingredients of human existence. The African does not only think, he thinks along with his/her heart which dilutes the criticality and thinking logicality with emotions and feelings, which are expressions of the will. Thus, it is in this light that a meaningful understanding of Senghor's position would be more adequate, as expressed by Ugwu and Asuquo (2022) when they say "that emotionalism derived from humanism is at the centre of the African rationality for mediation between the feeling-heart and the thinking-mind... Nevertheless, it is part of African nature to think, but to mediate that thinking with the heart in order to balance thought and emotion for the greater good of humanism" (Ugwu & Asuquo, 2022, pp. 99-100). Senghor had earlier articulated a similar view when he stated: "Emotion is Black as much as Reason is Greek", *L'émotion est nègre comme la raison hellène* (Senghor, 1956, pp. 202-203). By this, Senghor was merely attempting "to epistemologically differentiate between two systems or modes of thought/knowing: the white European system, which is more 'ratiocinative, logocentric, and analytic', and the African system, which is 'emotive and rationally humanistic'" (Ugwu & Asuquo, 2022). However, Senghor was quickly misunderstood by some scholars, both African and European, who accused him of claiming that Africans are incapable of reasoning. In his defence, Senghor asserted:

> "This does not mean that Black people have no reason, as others have claimed I said; rather, their reason is not discursive but synthetic; it is not antagonistic but sympathetic. This is another way of knowing. While European reason is analytical through utilization, that of Black people is intuitive through participation" (Senghor, 1956, pp. 202-203).

Some African academic followers echoed this view. Aligning himself with Senghor, Masolo offered his own epistemological re-examination of African and European modes of thought and knowing. Distinguishing between the two systems, he argued:

> "the European is a being of will, a warrior, a bird of prey, pure gaze or stare, who distinguishes himself from his object... In contrast to the 'cognitive white person', the Black person is... a being of nature... he is thought to live in, with, and by nature. He is a sensualist, a being with open senses, with no intermediary between subject and object; he is both subject and object at the same time. He feels more than he sees. It is within himself, in his body, that he receives and tests the radiations emitted by objects of knowledge. He 'dies to himself' to be reborn in the other. He is not assimilated but rather assimilates and identifies himself with the other" (Masolo, 1995, p. 26).

Oguejiofor also defended Senghor in a similar vein to Masolo (Oguejiofor, 2005, pp. 85-89). Furthermore, for Okolo, being African means not only being human but also being humane. This humane mode of existence, "being-with" other beings, must be guided by the ontological understanding that the being with whom you "are with", relate to, or coexist is a fellow being with whom you share humanity, a fellow human being. "The African is not just a being but a being-with, a being-with-others" (Okolo, 1993, p. 6). Thus, "being-with", which defines the communalistic African personality, extends to being humane: guided by the awareness that the other is also a human being. This is the moral foundation underlying communality, the attitude of "being-with". "Being-with" means being humane: not being intimidating, harsh, inhumane, or dehumanizing; not hurting or draining the life from others; and not disrespecting or demeaning the dignity of others. Instead, it means promoting and restoring humanity, ensuring the welfare and comfort of the other being. In fact, existence becomes communal in the sense that the welfare or "otherness" of the other becomes part of one's own subjective existential concern.

Humanism is the bedrock of what it really is to be African, to be characteristically communal, to be identified by the attitudinal disposition of 'being-with', always-in-communion-with-all-

that-is. These statuses give the concept ethical *cum* moral and ontological status. In traditional African society, humanism is lived as an integral African characteristic hence, it could be said that the African so values 'the other' that s/he could say: *mmadu di m ụtọ* (literally, I am sweetened/gladdened by other human beings around me). 'Sweet' as used here punctuates the vitality and existential worthiness of co-existence of human beings. Human being is the greatest pleasure and gift. This implies that the level of happiness the African derives by being with others surpasses anything else, wealth, house, car, *etc*.

Humanism from an African perspective is not only guided by *do to me as I do to you or do me as I would like you to do to me*, but also *as justifiable by reason*. This implies that even if by commission or omission, wittingly or unwittingly, one acts badly towards the other, the sense of African humanism recommends that it is not justifiable to retaliate with the same coin, but to respond to the injury done in a reasonably justifiable way. This is where social justice comes in to cushion the effects of the response to injuries done. In short, it could be conclusively drawn that 'humanism is basic and an essential element of the African traditional worldview'. It is an integral part of African communality.

Humanism is first and foremost measured in the community of human beings. It is measured in human relationships. It is measured by how humane one is in interactions with others, both humans and other elements of nature. One's humanity is expressed through the other. The "other" places significant ethical and moral value on the existential essence of one's worth. The "other" is a pivotal factor and determinant in African communalism. This is because the concept of community implies a sense of plurality, a sense of "more than one", a sense and awareness of the "other", the "fellow human being" beside oneself. Existence has no worth in aloneness, for in aloneness, one could be less than human (by divine design) or naturally become like a beast. Thus, the logic follows that humanity is expressed through humanism, via humanitarian traits such as rationality and awareness of the fellow human beings with whom one exists. Therefore, in the community, humanity resides; and this humanity, combined with human reasoning (a product of consciousness), distinguishes humans from non-human beings.

Ontologically, it is clear that human beings are central to the discourse of existence. Yet, ironically, humans are the weakest and most fragile of all existing beings. This underscores the fact that the destruction of humans leads to "total destruction", the destruction of all that exists. Humanity is at the centre of existence, and humanity is also the ontological meeting point where all beings exert their influences. Humanity is equally the object, tool, or agent of these influences; by this, it is the carrier and medium through which "being-actors" express their influence. Humanity is (1) the primary reason spirits act on both humans and other lower beings; (2) the reason these lower beings are used to transmit influences, acting on themselves and on humans; and (3) the reason humans act on one another. Humanity symbolizes the meaning of ontological influences. It influences and is influenced by both lower and higher beings. Within humanity lies the full expression of ontology. This is the African conception of humanity.

5 Further Analysis on Communalistic Personality and as Daily Expression in African Lifestyle

In the concept and reality of community, the question of "the other" is paramount. The individual is deeply tied to "the other": they see themselves and measure their worth in and through "the other". The concept of "the other" is a key factor in shaping the tolerance, accommodation, and moral responsibility that surround interpersonal relationships. By extension, it implies a subject-subject relationship rather than a subject-object relationship. When it is said that communal principles underpin what it means to be African, it simply means that African life, as Okolo writes, is "feeling involved with others, existing with and for others through participatory living" (Okolo, 1993, p. 12). These are the qualities that "constitute African identity as far as Africans are concerned". This implies that in communalism, the cultural hallmark of Africans, we see "the human factor, the humane attitude, or simply the involvement of human with human, as its existential embodiment par excellence", "the communal spirit, hospitality, generosity, acceptance, and practice of egalitarianism, equality of opportunity for all", "a sense of humour, simplicity (as opposed to sophistication), friendship, openness (or an open personality), kindness, and trust, all characteristic of Africans and clear manifestations of their 'being-with'", and "the pursuit of progress, prosperity, peace, and unity... as well as their struggle against structural evils such as tribalism, mass poverty, classism, colonialism,

neo-colonialism, and violence" (Okolo, 1993, pp. 28-29, 34-36; Ugwu, 2021, pp. 49-50).

The ideals and worth of community are evident in the daily lifestyle of Africans. Africans cannot exist outside an existential framework where their Africanity, their communal way of life, can be expressed, even subconsciously. African culture and personality cannot be separated from communalism, as communalism is the very essence of being African. In fact, the cultural lifestyle of Africans can be summarized by the Igbo sayings *onye ayana nwanne ya* (“never desert your brother/sister") or *inodebe akwu nso ka e ji ataputa ya mmanu* (“the more palm fruits you have, the more palm oil you can extract from them"). By this, existence becomes a shared experience among the beings of a community.

As an identity rooted in traditional African culture, African personality is expressed through the concept of *nwanne*, which denotes brotherhood/sisterhood, unlike the individualized or singularized European concept of kinship, which uses specific terms such as “brother", “sister", “uncle", or “cousin". In an African context, *nwanne* is etymologically derived from *nwa* (child) and *nne* (mother), meaning “child of a mother". When used as *nwannem*, it translates to “child of my mother" or “child of the same mother as me". In other words, instead of using the English terms “brother", “sister", “nephew", or “stepbrother", one simply says *nwannem*. However, *nwannem* is not limited to immediate siblings; it extends to include blood relatives such as nieces, nephews, aunts, and uncles. In plural form, *nwannem* becomes *umunnem*, meaning “children of the same mother as you". Even someone from your extended family, such as your kindred, clan, hamlet, village, or town, is your *nwanne*. Someone from your state or country is also your *nwanne*, a practice most commonly observed when two people from the same country meet abroad. *Nwanne* fosters a sense of unity when one recognizes another as *nwanne ya* (their relative). Thus, the sight of “the other" symbolizes hope, revitalizes life, provides solidarity, and represents renewal. All of this speaks volumes about human existence and what it means to be humane.

In the same culture, families or homes are not isolated. African living patterns are structured so that one’s *obi* (home entrance) leads into the entrances of other homes or families. Additionally, there are *uzo owere* (alleyways) connecting one home to another for easy access. It is not a living arrangement where fences and gates separate one family from another, or where barriers divide family entrances or compounds. Every family is open to others, and they live for one another. Families from different bloodlines share a single *obi* because this is how life is meant to be enjoyed and existential fulfilment achieved in Africa. Today, signs are often posted at the entrances of clans, hamlets, villages, or towns, such as “Welcome to Umuoka", “Umuezike Hamlet", or “Umueke Kindred". Families are localized in a communal structure. This promotes knowledge of one’s bloodline and reduces the risk of taboos, such as intimate relationships or marriages between close relatives, because the closeness and shared experiences from childhood have already instilled a subconscious awareness of their kinship. Even African ontology holds a similar integrative view: the African universe is a unified whole where the physical and spiritual realms intersect for mutual interaction. Thus, in this way of life, circles of existence are also believed to continue in the afterlife.

In this cultural context, when a child returns home and no one is present in their family, they will first go to the *agbata-obi* (neighbour) to ask for a drink. The neighbour has a moral duty to care for the child until their family members return. This duty exists because the child is considered part of the neighbour’s own being. After all, a child you help nurture, educate, and support today may be the one to reciprocate those kindnesses tomorrow. This explains why, in Africa, if a child misbehaves, they are corrected by their immediate family, neighbours, or even passersby, because if a child “goes astray", the consequences are not limited to their immediate family but spread to their kindred, clan, village, community, state, or even country. It is not a matter of saying *obughi nwa m* or *nwanne m* (“they are not my child or relative") or *ogbasaghim* (“it’s none of my business"). These humanitarian tendencies are moral obligations rooted in a commitment to sustaining humanism for future generations.

Ugwu and Asuquo (2022, pp. 82-84) outline many practical ways in which Africans consciously, subconsciously, and even unconsciously express communality as a daily mode of living or “mode of being-with". For example, out of communal consciousness, an African will send a child to a neighbour’s home to fetch fire (*iguta oku*) to start their own fire. They know that such easy access between humans is rooted in the spirit of neighbourliness. When a disaster such as a fire strikes a community member, the community acts as a family, providing the

victim with food, clothing, and other necessities. The victim will be accommodated in another community member's home until the community can build them a new house and help heal their psychological trauma. During such times, community members engage in activities after work, such as *egwu onwa* (moonlight plays), local chess games (*eshi* in Igbo, *eyo* in Yoruba), and storytelling (*ifo*) with didactic and moral lessons. Edeh has elaborated on this communalistic disposition:

> "The Igbo way of life emphasizes 'closeness' but not 'closedness'. There is a closeness in living because each person 'belongs to' others and, in turn, 'is belonged to by' others. By embracing this life of 'closeness' or 'belongingness', an Igbo person becomes immersed in the culture's spiritual essence, love, and through that love, achieves personal fulfilment that transcends mere individuality" (Edeh, 1999, p. 105).

The joy of existence can never be fully explained without this "closeness", not "closedness". It is expressed through this communality, or openness to fellow members with whom you participate and share. In Africa, doors are not closed; they are always open to welcome participants and co-beings who often visit.

Today, many Igbo-African communities still have communal land that is distributed among community members, specifically, adult males who have joined the community's general assembly for meetings. A community may reward a member who is disabled or childless but socially recognized as upright for their moral contributions to the community. Such a reward might take the form of communal farming support for that individual. When an Igbo-African dies, their passing does not end with burial. After the burial, a ritual is observed for several days to complete the burial process (the number of days varies by community and culture). During these days, relatives and friends have the opportunity to meet, interact, share experiences, and comfort one another. For instance, the *Umu Ada* (female relatives of the deceased) are heavily involved in daily affairs throughout the mourning period, while the male relatives (*Umu Nna*) provide for their food and upkeep.

Other expressions of communality include African greeting customs. When two Africans meet, they do not simply say "hi" and go about their business. The Igbo greet each other by saying *kedu ka unumere* or *unu eme agaa*, meaning "how are you all doing or faring?" The word "you" here does not strictly refer to the individual (as it does in English); if referring to an individual, the greeting would be *kedu ka i mere* or *i me agaa* or *i mere agaa*, meaning "how are you (the individual I am speaking to) doing or faring?" The "you" in the plural greeting carries an ontological meaning, encompassing both the present and absent members of the individual's immediate family, extended family, kindred, clan, and so on. In response, the person will say *anyi d' oyi*, meaning "we, not I, are fine", knowing that they are not the only one included in the greeting. If there is a challenge, such as a health issue, they will say, "We are fine, except my wife (or uncle, niece, aunt, or clan head), who is sick." Even if there is no current issue but there was one recently, the greeter may ask, "How is your daughter (or aunt, clan head, etc.) whom you mentioned was sick the other day?" The respondent will reply, "Oh, she is better now." This is the African person. This is a primary distinguishing feature between African and Western cultures. From this perspective, existence is best enjoyed in the "we", not the "I". Thus, the invisible, including those who are alive but not present, as well as invisible family members, extended relatives, kindred, clan, and village members of the person being greeted, are all included in the greeting. Such a greeting can be summarized as "from the seen to the unseen". The communalistic African personality is also reflected in Malcolm X's assertion that "when 'I' is replaced by 'we', even illness becomes wellness" (https://malcolm-x.org/docs/let_mecca.htm). In the "we-existence", the "I-existence" grows stronger.

It could also be said that Africans are nature-friendly, *i.e.*, they cannot live without connecting with nature. They adhere to and appreciate nature as it is, enjoying it through face-to-face and physical interaction. Virtual engagement (*e.g.*, online communication) does not change Africans' preference for in-person, nature-centred interactions. Africans best enjoy togetherness and face-to-face contact rather than virtual interactions. Living under one roof, sharing kola nuts or food, or having blood relations (*e.g.*, brother, sister, aunt, uncle, niece) is viewed as sacred and a form of covenant by Africans. Africans see it as a moral obligation to care for those with whom they share such sacred relationships. Failure to do so is believed to bring a curse that would disrupt the ontological order of the community.

Africans cannot live without expressing their communalistic personality. It is something they express in daily life to the extent that it takes on a moral status, guided by attitudes that benefit everyone. This underscores the saying *Omere nwanne, mere onwe ya* (“he who hurts his relative also hurts himself"). You should never wish harm on a neighbour with whom you share common resources, because nature, through which you share those resources, will act against you and in their favour. The land that produces the food you share, the tree that bears the fruits you share, the spiritual forces that made the shared food possible, the firewood, the pot, and the plate that facilitated the shared meal, and even the air and atmosphere that witnessed the sacred act of sharing, all will ontologically oppose anyone who seeks to harm the other. This is why Africans live with moral consciousness: a life filled with morality, humanism, and concern for one another’s welfare.

Thus, for Africans, the universe is a space where all beings, across their existential categories, relate to one another and share in each other’s “beingness". Being in a community means being in communion and constant interaction with both visible and invisible members of the community. The African universe is conceived as sacred, where both good and evil are rewarded accordingly. Any being can reward or punish you directly or indirectly through another being (Abah & Ugwu, 2021). Okolo elaborates on this:

> “The African universe includes the visible and the invisible, the material and the spiritual, time and eternity, all interconnected and mutually interacting... All reality... for Africans or in African metaphysics reflects a certain harmony... Every existing thing or event contributes to the universal order or harmony, or to its destruction. This means that both humans and other things, visible and invisible, form the great ’Chain of Beings’ that constitutes the African universe" (Okolo, 1993, pp. 8-9).

African communalism, as an expression of African cultural influences and inclinations, is an undeniable fact. It is clearly expressed even in daily experiences and expressions. This aligns with the view of the leading African scholar and philosopher Asouzu, who summarizes communalism with the expression *Ibu-anyida-nda* (“scouts of Pharaoh ants can never be overloaded or overtasked"), depicting how *nda* (tiny tropical Pharaoh ants) forage for food: when they find food, they band together in a coordinated pattern, forming a strong collective to improve their survival. Another expression of communalism is *otu osisi anaghi eme ofia* (“a single tree does not make a forest"). Many other proverbs convey the same value: *igwe bu ike* or *ibe bu ike* (“strength in unity"); *mmadu ka ejiaga* (“we progress with each other’s support"); *ihe nyiri otu onye, onyighi mmadu abuo* (“a task that is insurmountable for one person is manageable for two"); and *ihere mere otu onye, omeghi mmadu abuo* (“one person standing alone may feel ashamed, but two will not"). All these expressions, and more, can be summarized by the Yoruba saying *Fifun ni owo fun, ko to eniaiyi* (“money and material possessions may shine, but they do not equal human worth").

6 Evaluation and Conclusion

This paper acknowledges that traditional Africans are easily identified by their communalistic personality, a personality that emphasizes community sharing. In such an Afro-communal context, the importance of individuality or individual rights is secondary to that of the community. It is within the community that individual members find their true existence; hence, the core principle is “community first, individual second". In other words, without the community, the individual is existentially incomplete. This represents the radicalist perspective of African communalistic personality, and its implications are clearly articulated in the works of scholars such as Mbiti (1969/1970, pp. 19-20, 108-109, 189), Okolo (1993, p. 6), and Menkiti (1984, pp. 171-174; 2004, pp. 324-331). This is one side of the debate.

On the other side, there is the school of moderate African communalistic personality, advocated by scholars such as Famakinwa (2010, pp. 65-77), Matolino (2009, pp. 160-170), Majeed (2018, pp. 3-15), and Matolino & Kwindingwi (2013, pp. 197-205). These scholars argue that the radicalist school’s position should be modified to recognize certain principles of individual rights within the community. They contend that individual rights should not be “swallowed up" by the community; thus, the essential components of human personhood, such as consciousness, volitional power, will, conscience, freedom, rights, privacy, and the reality of existential individuality, must be acknowledged. To achieve a meaningful paradigm shift,

they prefer the term “communitarianism" (rather than “communalism") to describe the African “being-with-ness". More on this is discussed by some scholars (Ugwu et al., 2022, pp. 25-48). “Communitarianism" fundamentally incorporates individualistic principles.

Thus, the flaws of both schools are clear. The radicalist school’s shortcoming is its subordination of individual freedom and the expression of inherent human nature; the moderatist school’s flaw is its encouragement of individualistic tendencies, which can easily be exploited to justify inhumanity and the exploitation of others. While the radicalists oppose the principles of individuality (which define a person as a subject or individual), the moderatists undermine the foundations of communalism, the essence of communal principles and communal ethical values. Under communitarian principles, there is already a threat to the ethical principles and cultural values that should guide the African communalistic personality. However, this paper finds that such an initiative emerged from the influence of Western scholarship focused on intersubjectivity (Odimegwu, 2007, pp. 2-8; Achebe, 1958, p. v).

Nevertheless, this dialectical tension, between the thesis (radical communalism) and the antithesis (moderate communitarianism), paves the way for a synthesis, where the principles or ideological elements of both schools are harmonized in a complementary framework. To strike a synthetic balance between the moderatist school’s principles (influenced by Western ideologies that emphasize the “I-existence") and the radicalist school’s principles (rooted in African socio-ontological and cultural values expressed in the “we-existence"), the “I" should be recognized as the subjective foundation of existence, the source of the “we" consciousness. In other words, while the “I" plays a primary role in forming the “we", the “we" must reciprocate by ensuring the welfare of the “I"s that constitute its foundation.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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