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African Communalism and Globalization

Etta, Emmanuel E.

Department of Philosophy

University of Calabar

[E-mail - emmanuel-etta@yahoo.com](mailto:emmanuel-etta@yahoo.com)

Esowe, Dingba Dingba

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies

University of Calabar

E-mail – ddeso2001@gmail.com

&

Asukwo, Offiong O.

International Bible Training College

South-South Campus, Port Harcourt

E-mail: rectorportcourt@yahoo.com; asukwooffiong@yahoo.com

Phone: +2347068683851; +2348023696807

Abstract

The certainty of African philosophy during pre-colonial Africa is no longer in doubt. Doubting such a claim is denying the existence of the African race which may be self contradictory. As this work observes, African philosophy which is all encompassing, is inbuilt in African communalism through which indigenous Africans expressed communal feelings, world views, moral and cultural values based on closed-knit relationship among their kith and kin within a socio-cultural setting. In this connection,

it is the belief of this work that the current wind of globalization that the world is embracing is of no much difference from African communalism. As such, this work suggests that each of the above should complement the other in harnessing developmental strides while pursuing the empowerment of the global economy.

Introduction

On a universal note, “Communalism is conceived as a system that integrates communal ownership and federations of highly localized independent communities” (Wikipedia). By this we can say that communal practice is not a new system of living to man if we take the Bible account of creation into consideration. Even the apostles of Christ lived in communes. What is new is the coinage of the term communalism which is accredited to a libertarian socialist, Murray Bookchin. In his political philosophy, Bookchin defines communalism as a theory of government or a system of government in which independent communities participate in a federation as well as the principles and practice of communal ownership (online). This was the same political structure practiced in traditional African society. Given that the present States’ or Nations’ political structure was in practice then, the African family and cultural structures under respective Kingship pattern were founded on the basis of communal principles. From the nuclear family to extended family structure, there was a family head. Many of these families produced a community with its head. The different communities within a given culture with a common language and other cultural norms formed nationhood with an overall monarch as their head. With this, “they were self-governing, autonomous entities, and in that, all members took part, directly or indirectly, in the daily running of the tribe” (Kitten, online). Communalism in African setting promotes unity, togetherness, brotherliness and cooperation which are vital elements that propel the wheel of globalization. On the basis of these, we will look at the concept of communalism, African communalism, merits of African communalism, effects of African communalism on economic underdevelopment in Africa, globalization, advantages and disadvantages of globalization, effects of economic globalization on African communalism and then arrive at a conclusion.

The Concept of Communalism

For Kwame, Gyekye, communalism is the doctrine that the communality (or group) is the focus of activities of the individual member of the society (36). What that entails is that in communal setting individuals that constitute the socio-political environment and working relationships are involved. In support of that view, Africa Economic Development Institute (AEDI) in one of its special articles defines communalism as a strong allegiance limited to one’s own ethnic group, commonly based on sharing history and cultures, characterized by collective cooperation and ownership by members of a community (Online). Here, basic constitutive elements are spelt out, which grease the hub of communalism. These are cultural history and values

that enhance collective cooperation that make the given culture peculiar. On his part, Tunde Obadina corroborates the above definition, when he defines communalism to mean, the strong identity with and devotion to the interest of one's own minority or ethnic group rather than those of society as a whole. It is a form of nationalism at the sub-national level. He posits further that communalism is based on the assumption of common Identity – belief that people belong to specific groups, sharing history, language, culture and historic space (online). Here, membership of the group is strictly determined by the criteria that define the community and afford members rights and loyalty. Hence, like nationalism, communalism often extends from mere affirmation of the dignity of one's own people to the proclamation of their superiority and denial of the claims and needs of others (Obadina, online). We would now examine the meaning of African communalism.

African Communalism

Polycarp Ikueobe conceptualizes communalism as both an African conceptual framework and a set of cultural practices that prioritize the role and function of the collective group over the individual in a worldwide context (329).

Aborisade Olasunkanmi agrees with the above view, when he argued that communalism in Africa is a system that is both supersensible and material in its terms of reference. Both, according to (Noami 1992) as quoted by Aborisade are found in a society that is believed by the Africans to be originally god-made because it transcends the people who live in it now and it is man-made because it cannot be culturally understood independent of those who live in it. Here, Aborisade avers that the Africans emphasize community life and communalism as a living principle of which the basic ideology is community – identity. Their aims therefore are to produce and present an individual as a community and a culture bearer (Olasunkanmi, online). It is in light of Aborisade's idea above that Kaphagawani opined as quoted by J. K. Kigongo that to assert African communalism (and the authoritarianism of the elders) is not in any way to imply that traditional Africans know no concept of their communities. Rather, African communalism for him, presumes pluralism in that it is essentially a voluntary pooling together of independent and differing efforts and capabilities that makes the African communal life what it is. Thus, in this system, the young are not ontologically less human than the elders. For this reason, Tempels argued that the name is the very reality of the individual (online). Social cohesion according to D. N. Kaphagawani, is a state of affairs whereby individuals in the society consistently pursue certain fundamental virtues on the basis of enhancing a common or social good. And in the African traditional sense, it is called African communalism. Kaphagawani calls it the social structure which pervades traditional Africa in which every member voluntarily cooperates. In trying to place the origin of this lifestyle in Africa, Kaphagawani argued in his discussion on the role of traditional education as further quoted by Kigongo, that epistemological authoritarianism was rampant in traditional Africa precisely because

the elders were the only ones held to have all knowledge and wisdom, so that what they said had to be believed without questioning. This is why according to B. Abanuka, in the system of the community's teaching and learning, the child must learn to know things in relation to what the community wants, being that relatedness is the hallmark of knowledge at this level (73). The point here is that communal knowledge, whose subject is still the individual takes its rise from the needs of the common life in the community and its end is the preservation of the community's life and heritage or laws, customs and traditions (74). Here, the individual cannot form concepts in whatever way he likes. Rather, Concepts are meaningful within the experience of the community (75). All of such situations, led to a political advantage and political authoritarianism, from which emerged the core of political leadership in the traditional society. At this juncture, he explains that through epistemological and political manipulation they invoke the virtues of African communalism.

Heinz Kimmerle while writing on Ubuntu and communalism in African philosophy and Art quotes Leopold S. Senghor thus, the traditional African societies show harmonious forms of life without any antagonism of classes, as it is presupposed in the Marxist type of theory, where there is an ethics of mutual help and of caring for each other. The absence of private ownership of land or other means of production, led to inequality among members of the society. That is the core of what he calls communalism (Kimmerle, online). Moreso, the idea of communalism further implies a way of decision-making which is based on consensus. This consensus is found through dialogues, such that, in a meeting where political decisions are taken, everybody has to participate and to speak. In the words of Julius Nyerere it means we talk until we agree. Such characteristic has also been noted by Nyasani as quoted by Kimmerle, that 'we' of the living members of the community are part of a flow of life that is passing through them from the past to the future. Similarly, as further quoted by Kimmerle a linguistic research has shown that there is a prevailing role of the community in African theory and practice (online).

To sum up all the above, Kimmerle argued that in the notions of Ubuntu and communalism the African community spirit is epitomized. This implies that there is a high estimation of the community in African thought and practice, higher than that of the individual, but not at the cost of forgetting the individual person. This is so because a person is a person in the community and through the others of his or her community. This makes a culture most important especially in granting mutual help, caring for each other and sharing with each other by means of dialogues. Kimmerle points out that all these attributes of communalism do not happen in an idealized way, and so there existed issues like struggles between members of a community, envy, hatred and so on. But in spite of such human traits, every member can rely on support from somebody of the extended family in serious trouble or in danger of life. Kimmerle expatiates on the above, by positing that what remains true of the communalist ideas is that among the

numbers of the extended families and villages in traditional African societies mutual help was and is a widespread trait of the social life. To further substantiate on this, he explains that in a circumstance where a member of a family or a village is in great difficulty he or she is usually not left alone. Rather, somebody will be there to help or to show a way out of the predicament (online). Under communalism, the small community was said to be the main unit of government. Every adult participated both, in decision-making and also in the execution of those decisions. Each gave according to his ability. There were communal governments where public decisions were openly arrived at, issues were raised and discussed openly. Decision-making was thus a process of the resolution of views among all the citizens (Oyewole, 38). For Nyerere as quoted by Sogolo, African socialism is found in the potential human and social resources of traditional African communalism, which derives from our grass-roots and the village solidarity that marked traditional African society (197). This view is similarly supported and argued by Kwame Nkrumah when he opines that “traditional African”, society is egalitarian in structure. He expresses the view that the communalistic nature of Africa, meant that there was no class antagonism or exploitation. However, although he agrees that communalism in Africa seems to be a thing of the past, Nkrumah claims that the African society is still communalistic in spirit. He advocates further that liberalism, individualism, elitism, fascism, imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism are the products of the bourgeois ideology. But that traditional African society is not capitalistic, it is egalitarian and communalistic. Capitalism he says is irreconcilable with the egalitarian and communalism of traditional African society (Ruch and Anyanwu 392).

E. A. Ruch and K. C. Anyanwu in their book *African Philosophy: An Introduction to the Main Philosophical Trend in Contemporary Africa*, posit that the idea of the original value of man imposes duties of a socialist kind upon us. Herein lays the theoretical basis of African communalism. This theoretical basis expresses itself on the social level in terms of institutions such as the clan underlying the initial equality of all and the responsibility of many for one (329).

African communalism can be compared to fraternalism. It is fraternal, not in the sense that it designates some multiple associations which combines some social character with a financial co-operation, but in the sense that it symbolizes a form of life of a people whose different members are held together by some parental link. It is more-so fraternal because, the link existing between members of the community is blood relationship and kinship as all descended from common ancestors. In this sense, group membership is very real to the African. This means that nobody can detach from his community for the community is the vehicle through which religion the life wire of the people is practiced. In other words, the individual apart from the community is not anything real. This communalism is characterized by its different view of man. Man, for it, is man not on account of his colour or religion, but because he acts and lives in

the community, in so far as he participates in the life of the community. This participation constitutes his being as a man. "The individual can only say I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (Nze, 5-6).

According to A. Shorter, African communalism is a mutual society. It is organized to satisfy the basic human needs of all its members. Most resources such as land are communally owned for the benefit of everyone. If for example, a villager requires a new hut, all the men would cut trees to erect the frame and bring grass for thatching, and the women did the mud-plastering for the walls. In the same spirit, the able-bodied would accept responsibility for tending and harvesting the gardens of the sick and deformed. The hungry stranger could without penalty, enter the gardens of the village and take, say a bunch of banana to satisfy his hunger. His action only became theft if he took more than was necessary to satisfy his needs (139). He argues further that the slow, inept and incapable were accepted as a valid element in community life, adding that in such societies, old people are accepted and it is regarded as a privilege to look after them as their counsel is maintained and sought for on many matters. Furthermore, this African communalism according to him is an inclusive one because the title father is not restricted to only one's father but also to his father's brother, and also addresses his or her mother's sister as mother (139). Put differently, John Elijah explains that in traditional African society there was an enviable political system that was built on a uniquely African sense of community, founded on kinship or extended families, in a proportion unequalled and unrivalled elsewhere outside Africa (213). At this juncture, it is pertinent to understand what extended family system means in the African traditional setting and its working in communalistic practice.

The Extended Family System

Nelson Graburn in his book *Readings in Kinship and Social Structure*, explains that an extended family consists of two or more nuclear families- husband and wife relationship, that is by joining the nuclear family of a married adult to that of his parents. According to him, "the patri-local extended family often called the patriarchal family, furnishes an excellent example. It embraces typically, an older man, his married sons, and the wives and children of the latter. In other words, three generations including the nuclear families of father and sons, live under a single roof or in a cluster of adjacent dwellings". (359).

A distinguishing characteristic of the way of life of the African is the predominance of the extended system. In the traditional African society, the family includes not only husband, wife and children but also grandparents, uncles, aunts, and others who may have their own children. In this sense, a number of kindred living with their wives and children come together as one large family. This is because all the members of this family can trace their common descent, and share a common living

place or house-group; they enjoy some consciousness of their identity and a sense of solidarity.

In this traditional setting, “the family also includes the departed relatives who although they are dead, are alive in the memories of their surviving families, and are thought to be still interested in the affairs of the family to which they once belonged in their physical life” (Ogbonna,online). C. Nze argues further in his book *Aspects of African Communalism* that those yet unborn are equally members of this extended family. It upholds the recycling of the dead into the living members of the family through reincarnation. According to him, through this procedure, the population of families is fed and kept up and great bond between the living and the dead is maintained. He believes that in the traditional African society the bond of relationships is based on the fact that every individual is a brother or sister, father or mother, grandmother or grandfather and cousin to everybody else. In other words, he believes that ‘everybody is related to everybody else and for him, this principle is the basis of the life pattern found in the African community. The fountain-head of African society constitutes a social security scheme which has an advantage of a natural pattern of personal relationship, rather than being the responsibility of an institute (Shorter, 139).

From the above views, one would see that the extended family system is inseparable from the traditional African society. It forms the basis for the communalistic living of the African people which stems from the solidarity of the entire families and individuals in the community. This extended family system as a matter of fact is the bed-rock of the communal humanism of the African world view. It is humanistic because it stresses the brotherly love which holds everybody together and demands everyone to be his brother’s keeper. It discourages the dehumanization, exploitation and domination of each other, but seeks to better the living condition of all in all ramification and at all time, in all circumstances. The African communalistic system has a lot of positive effects.

Merits of African Communalism

- 1) The Philosophy behind the African Communalism is that, it guarantees individuals’ responsibility within the communal ownership and relationship (Olasunkanmi, 52).
- 2) The ethics of mutual help and of caring for each other is founded on communalism (Kimmerle, 4).
- 3) The idea of communalism implies a way of decision making which is based on consensus, found through dialogue. Here, political decisions are taken, where everybody participate and speak.
- 4) Democratic participation on major issues was all inclusive. This was noticed in the fact that there was freedom of expression.

- 5) Community spirit - meaning that there is a high estimation of the community in African thought and practice, higher than that of the individual.
- 6) The role and the importance of the individual person.
- 7) African communalism enhances internal security against any possible invasion because of the bond of unity, togetherness and close-knit.
- 8) The whole African society is a living network of relations almost like that between the various parts of an organism.
- 9) Polycarp Ikuenobe highlighted that there exists a moderately liberal African communalism that allows the individual to engage in critical reasoning and acquire rational beliefs within the normal structures that oral tradition and elders provide for the well-being of the community (online).
- 10) Ikuenobe uses the African saying “it takes a village to raise a child”, this, for him, suggests the importance of African communal belief and philosophy and the education belief and philosophy that westerners could gain from learning them.
- 11) He further supports his argument with a conception of personhood and the relationship between the individual and community in various African cultures as dynamics that reflect legitimate and critical African modes of inquiry and representation or morality. In light of the above Ikuenobe explains that, moral thought in African cultures are reflections of communalism, and has features of rationalism, naturalism, humanism etc(online).

However, in spite of the numerous merits of African communalism, some scholars have argued that this African communal lifestyle is the main obstacle to African development.

Effects of African Communalism on Economic Underdevelopment in Africa

There are still many reasons why Africa has a long way to go before reaching economic prosperity. One of the many reasons lies in cultural characteristics of many African societies, such as communalism.

- 1) The argument is that, in Africa, communalism is often praised, and recognized by many political thinkers as the main foundation of traditional society. But that in spite of this, it is one of the most important obstacles to Africa’s economic success, and as well clashes with the mobilization of labour and capital which are important factors of production that contribute to economic growth.
- 2) Tunde Obadina avers that outsiders within the communal communities are viewed as enemies. That though these strangers are well joined into their community, they are not integrated or assimilated, no matter how long they stay (online). For such reasons therefore, people are not inclined to do more or to stay in places where the locals have a strong sense of communalism. This is

so because; they do not want to be treated as second-class citizens or denied the possibilities of integration. This lack of internal integration is a major obstacle to economic development. Etinan Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State in Nigeria is a good example where non-indigenes are not allowed to invest in their economy. They still remain under-developed since they refuse to open up for others to come in.

It has also been noted by Tunde Obadina that communalism is instrumental to much of the recent bloody ethnic conflicts between indigenes and settlers in central Nigeria, and these are people who have lived alongside each other for generations (online). Similarly, AEDI (Africa Economic Development Institute) argues that communalism creates hostility between different ethnic groups; this is attributed to lack of internal integration which ends up hindering economic development.

One of the criticisms against African communalism is that formulated by V. G. Simiyu, a Kenyan political scientist. He argues that communalism in Africa is an idealization of traditional life in African communities. He speaks of the democratic myth in the African traditional societies. He thus makes it clear that hate and struggle were not unknown in these societies (online).

Globalization

Globalization is the process of transformation of local or regional phenomenon into a global one. It can be described as a process by which the people of the world are united into a single society and function together. It involves a combination of economic, technological, socio-cultural and political forces. According to Aborisade Olasunkanmi, globalization is also a process of placing human progress and the opportunities of human ingenuity at the doorsteps of all people. That is, it evokes worldwide cooperation, solidarity, interdependence, prosperity and peace. It is an intensification and acceleration of cross-border interactions which actually or potentially link all individuals, institutions and states into complex structures of mutual but frequently imbalanced dependencies (online).

Here, Bhaagwati (2004) as quoted by Olasunkanmi avers that, the primary point of reference for this development is no longer the nation-state, whose scope of action is becoming limited, but the world as a whole, or at least larger regions with, in some cases, all-embracing institutions. Globalization is also often used to refer to economic globalization that is, the integration of national economies into the international economy through trade, foreign direct investment, capital flows, migration and the spread of technology. It is as well as a suspect, which acts as a vehicle of western cultural and economic imperialism in a nuanced fashion.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Globalization

1. Employment opportunities: This is considered the major benefit of globalization. As companies set up shops in new countries, opportunities are created for employment.
2. Education: With educational institutions spread across the globe, it has become easier to get more from home countries better educational opportunities. This has led to the integration of cultures and people from different educational backgrounds and countries are labouring intensively and developing nations have had accrued to them the most benefits from this.
3. Globalization has also led to international trade in which, trade has become more competitive, leading to the production of high quality products.
4. Globalization has also led to controlled prices. Prices of commodities have become cheaper especially because of the fierce competition noted in the market. There are different products, for consumers to choose from making it a necessity for producers to price them competitively.
5. Socially, people have become more tolerant and open towards one another. Globalization has also led to enhanced communities.
6. It equally paves way to product division among nations. This means each nation is to concentrate in producing what it has comparative advantage to do when participating in international trade.
7. It creates opportunity for consumers to make good choices by going for a cheaper market. That is monopoly of goods by a single country is removed (online).

The disadvantages of globalization are well listed below:

- 1) The most common complaint is that globalization has only served to make the rich even richer while making the poor poorer. It is the general feeling that for managers, it is a great benefit while for nature and workers, globalization is hell.
- 2) Multinationals have been accused of unfair working conditions and social injustice. They have also been accused of not caring so much for the environment, ecological damage as well as natural resource mismanagement.
- 3) Anti-globalists' claims are that globalization has not favoured a large section of the population.
- 4) Globalization has also led to the incursion of diseases especially deadly ones like HIV/AIDS spread by travelers in some cases, to the most remote regions of the world.
- 5) It is believed that globalization paves way to unemployment in industrialized countries since firms may relocate to areas where they can get cheap labour.

- 6) It can create environmental challenges because of the degradation of factory sites.
- 7) It can lead to financial problems as was the case in the 1970s and 1980s when Mexico, Thailand, Indonesia and Brazil invested so much in new businesses but unfortunately, those new investors pulled out of business due to low financial returns.
- 8) It may lead to some poor third world countries becoming poorer and even being exploited by the industrialized countries (online).

Effects of Economic Globalization on African Communalism

As highlighted by Aborisade Olasunknmi, economic globalization has had a great impact on African communalism. His points are listed as follows:

- 1) Policies like the Structural Adjustment Programmes (made during the military government in Nigeria) affected people negatively. It usually manifests through pressure on government to remove subsidies on some usable and essential goods which are meant to protect the poor and the weak.
- 2) As a multiplier effect, individualism has replaced unity of purpose. Individualism is a destructive divisive element in African society and it promotes many of Africans' problems. It affects the African economy because the structure of global economy makes most people poor. This is why individualism as an ideology and principle of life is not encouraged in Africa.
- 3) The philosophy behind the African communalism is to guarantee individual responsibility within the communal ownership and relationship. Incidentally, this is the exact point that western individualism is now destroying.
- 4) Individualism (economic globalization) also creates a situation where the only governing principle is to survive by all means. Here a community phenomenon is seen within the context of the 'I' in exclusion of others. In light of the above, Africa now experiences a scenario where survival has replaced rationality and desperation replaced reason.
- 5) Another effect of economic globalization on African communalism is that, it creates economic difficulty and alienation of people from one another. This situation is shaking African communalism, because Africans today are now re-examining the size and essence of extended families which is one of the pillars of African communalism (online).

Conclusion

A critical look at some salient points within this essay will enhance a balanced argument. To start with, it is pertinent to say that this analysis is mindful of the merits and pitfalls or criticisms for or against African communalism, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of globalization.

Aborisade Olasunkanmi sounded a bit contradictory when he said that, today, individualism which he conceived as a product of globalization has replaced the sense of community; mutual antagonism and that of suspicions have replaced unity of purpose. He argues further that individualism is a destructive divisive element in African society and promotes many of our problems. This is why according to him, individualism as an ideology and principle of life is not encouraged in Africa (online). He argues also that economic globalization evokes a worldwide cooperation, solidarity, interdependence, global prosperity and world peace. For him, an intensification and acceleration of cross-border interaction actually or potentially links all individuals, institutions and states into complex structures of mutual but frequently imbalanced, independencies. At this juncture, suffice it to say without equivocation, that it is a serious contradiction for one to posit that individualism (globalization) with its destructive divisive element against communalism in Africa, could link all individual institutions and or states in any profitable way.

Rather, this paper tends to agree with the same writer, that globalization is seen as a suspect, which acts as a vehicle of western cultural and economic imperialism in a nuanced fashion. But if globalization with its individualistic fashion is based on right intension, then, one could say that globalization is a form of communism or communalism, which professes to make or considers the world as a global village. This of course may not be different from African communalism whose basic ideology is community identity with the aim of producing as well as presenting the individual as a community and a culture bearer. Olasunkanmi acknowledges that African communalism guarantees individual responsibility within the communal ownership and relationship (online).

However, by way of juxtaposition, it would be germane to examine the concept of individuality in relation to social cohesion. In this light, therefore, individuality may be referred to as metaphysical freedom. Infact, David Bidney as quoted by J. K. Kigongo, defines it as the autonomous power of choice and the decision of the will as essential conditions for the exercise of other freedoms. Accordingly, the essence of a human being notwithstanding any form of constraint, control or influence, is inherent in the desire to survive any form of external influence to one's self or conscience (online).

Kigongo explains further that, the concept of individuality or individual freedom is fundamental in determining human life in society, and underlies human thought and behavior. On the other hand, social cohesion in African traditional setting implies African communalism. Here, social cohesion it is argued was instrumental in society's evolution which involved positive inner social and institutional changes. These changes as explained have occurred over time and they provided opportunities for social challenges to ensure social order, integrity and the present and future survival of the society.

In reconciling the two concepts, it suffices as this paper agrees with J. K. Kigongo, that individuality co-exists with social cohesion as they turn out to be basic components of human life in society. Hence, they constitute a dichotomy, without any essential opposites. This is because both concepts exist in the particular epoch of a people's existence theory in subtly different relationships. Olasunkanmi in supporting the above argues that the sociological study of rural communities shows that even in Africa that is proclaimed as being communalistic, individualistic orientation is still noticeable in their lifestyles (online). He posits further that those factors which gave rise to the need for constitutional guarantee that led to the growth of the philosophy of human rights in Western societies are also applicable and relevant in traditional African societies. On the other hand, J. K. Kigongo avers that social cohesion was instrumental in society's evolution which involved positive inner social and institutional changes. These changes he explained occurred over time and provided opportunities for social challenges to ensure social order, integrity and the present and future survival of the society.

At a point, one cannot say categorically that individualism is entirely a Western concept, or that social cohesion (communalism) is entirely an African concept rather, it would be more reasonable to argue that they complement each other in all societies. So, this paper's position is that individualism and/or globalization with its numerous merits and demerits has affected different societies in various ways. Likewise, communalism (African) with its merits and demerits has also affected societies in different ways. This is because over time cultural diffusion has taken place in almost all societies. Thus, whatever may be the effect of economic globalization on communalism, the fact remains that changes are inevitable. And that today Africa has been influenced culturally through cultural diffusion. This is healthy because since culture is dynamic, those obsolete aspects of culture have been removed and new ones put in place. However, this paper would further argue that African communalism remains original to Africa and is foundational to our development and would always be fundamental for the future survival of Africa. Here, we argue that whatever obstacle it may pose to economic globalization, is secondary and should be seen as a necessary evil. However, globalization with its individualistic tendencies should see communalism as complementary in its bid to make the world a global village rather than attempt to destroy basic structures of African communalism like the extended family system and others.

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