

The ambush of African philosophy: an exhumation of classical liberal principles in the evolution of Africa societies

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Abstracting

THE AMBUSH OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY: AN EXHUMATION OF CLASSICAL LIBERAL PRINCIPLES IN THE EVOLUTION OF AFRICA SOCIETIES

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Abstract

The persistent resentment towards classical liberal principles especially individualism and free market in contemporary Africa, represents an outcome of decades of ambush against the ideology despite its clear connections with traditional African philosophy and relevance to the prosperity of modern African states. This work attempts to draw comparisons between social and economic organisation in traditional Africa and classical liberal principles. Contrary to literatures that portray the community as the real and only end in traditional African societies, elements like free trade; market economy; consensus; anarchy and limited governance negates this position. While tracing the cause of Africa's cling to socialism and communism, this paper presents an ideological transition from pre-colonialism to nationalist and post-independent Africa. It concludes by demystifying the arguments of individualism as antithetical to African morality. It also justified the inevitability of classical liberal principles in modern Africa.

Key words: Classical Liberalism; African Humanism; Ubuntu; Individualism; African Morality; Free Market

INTRODUCTION

There is rarely a fiercely contested ideology in Africa as classical liberalism – often relegated to capitalism. The annihilation of the African academia by radical-socialists and Marxian philosophers since the 20th century greatly influenced the presentation of the origins of African life as purely socialist. Whereas, later inquiries revealed philosophical patterns that correlates with classical liberalism and other ideas. They also debunked the universality of communalism and social welfarism in traditional Africa. Although, the social and economic structures in some traditional African communities were communally designed, only because communalism was seen as the formal and best means for societal organization based on factors like population, kinship, and tribal solidarity. On a broader

spectrum, qualities like respect for individual happiness, personal interest and dignity were equally permitted. And in numerous communities as would be later revealed, organization and conduct were not dictated or divinely commanded but humanistic and utilitarian with overarching emphases on improving social functioning and human flourishing (Gyekye 1995).

Philosophers - mostly of the African traditionalist school- and scholars turned politicians like Julius Nyerere (Tanzania), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana) and Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya) through their writings and patterns of governance, glued Africa's history to social-communism. Of course, this was at a period when literatures on African philosophy were scanty and public knowledge of the market system and governance were low. This knowledge void filled by the traditionalists has endured in the African academia for decades with a solid effect on public knowledge. The platform of leadership and scholarship made the ideological inclination quite easy for the traditionalists. Hence, the sustained view of philosophy as an embodiment of opinions best presented by the ruling class and a mere exhumation of Africa's past and rehabilitation of culture (Kasanda 2015, 30-32).

WERE TRADITIONALISTS RIGHT ABOUT AFRICA'S SOCIAL-COMMUNIST FOUNDATIONS?

Well, the absence of technically organized ideologies in traditional African societies made several historians resolved that pre-colonial Africa had no clear patterns that governed behavior except the unearthing of some ancestral practices. Writers like George Dalton identified the inability of Western economists to draw clear parallels between economic systems in traditional African societies to theories developed in the West as primary course to this conclusion (Dalton 1997, 27). Unlike Europe or the Americas where sufficient texts written by generations of historians exists on the cultural and philosophical evolution of the society, it rarely does in Africa.

Most knowledge on the evolution of African philosophy is preserved in arts, tales and other literatures passed from one generation to another. Other evidences especially in archaeological folds rarely exist to corroborate some of the narratives. The colonial masters stole many, some were destroyed during wars and the surviving few gradually vanished due to lack of preservation by successive generations. Meanwhile, empirical inquiry into African philosophy never surfaced until around mid-1900s, most notably when catholic Father Placide Tempel published his *La Philosophie Bantu* (The Philosophy of the Bantu) in 1945 as a response to the misconceptions about the Bantu people of West Africa. Tempel's book set the premise for subsequent studies in African philosophy. He refuted the claims by Western writers and the Catholic Church that traditional Africans had no rational thinking that regulated affairs but led a common primitive life. And similar to Tempel, writers like Alexis Kagame attempted to create the substance for African philosophy by answering meta-philosophical questions -an attempt to create the philosophy of African philosophy- for ease of study due to absence of literatures.

Continued investigations by African writers later revealed that the absence of ideological details noted by Dalton and others actually existed in African communities but can only be studied with cognizance to social structures such as religion and kinship (Ayittey 1991). Similarly, nationalist intellectuals observed that there were indeed patterns

peculiar to each African community resembling some of the propositions later developed in socialism and communism (Khoza 1994). They historically presented the collective purpose against individual purpose by arguing the true and only philosophy in traditional Africa was the philosophy of brotherhood and welfarism, which prevented anyone from getting prosperous than everyone. They practically rejected all notions of self-determinism or personal ambition as non-existence in traditional Africa. They also claimed a strongman leadership of interest as the choice of governance in these communities.

In their accounts, the supreme leader or council held the right over the life of every member of the community and served as the judges of morality. Contrariwise, the philosophy of traditional Africa was not in any way relegated to principles in socialism or communism, but greatly extended to principles advocated in classical liberalism as would be seen later.

In African antiquity, the social-communist setting was not a general obtainable across all communities as claimed by the traditionalists. In some groups, authority was not central, while in others, they never existed. Members were entitled to self-determinism, as many of these communities were either stateless or acephalous. Some had well-organized administrative structures without monarchs or a centralized ruling elite council. In communities such as the *Tallensi* (Ghana), *Logoli* (Kenya) and *Nuer* (South Sudan) there were no institutions that regulated social life but they were purely anarchic (Evans 1940, 5). In communities with clearly defined systems of governance, majority of them had structures for institutional ombudsman and separation of powers among governing councils – comparable to the tripartite system proposed by French philosopher, Baron de Montesquieu in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748). These communities also treasured standards for checks and balances to avoid power concentration or abuse by an individual or group. For example, in the *Igbo* community (Nigeria), authority was shared among groups like the *ofo* (family heads), *ozo* (nobles) and the age grade groups with similar model among the *Yoruba* (Nigeria), the *Bété*, *Dida* and *Baoulé* (Cote d'Ivoire), the *Nuer* and *Dinka Gnoc* (South Sudan), the *Massai* (Kenya), the *Nyjakusa* (Tanzania) and *Tonga* (Zambia) tribes (Sesay 2014). Political decisions rested on the harmony of opinions among council members while individuals typically determined economic decisions. However, the absence of centralised structures of authority did not implied statelessness so to speak because there were customs and understandings that sanctioned deviant behaviors.

Even in communities with centralized authorities, independent institutions limited governance, contrary to claims of a common authoritarian pattern all over. In the political fold, governance only existed to whatever extent public opinion agreed. Most political decisions greatly depended on consensus among chiefs, councils, or the public as it were, with cognizance to individual judgment. This individual judgment was present in form of household representative democracy. Every member of the community belonged to a household, and their opinions formed household interests, which was subsequently represented in councils by their elders or nobles. Societies such as the *Ashanti* (Ghana) and the *Yoruba* (Nigeria) emphasized individual interests through the household, with significant checks on monopolization of interest by their chiefs. And this was common to most communities. Former Zambian and Tanzanian leaders, Kenneth Kaunda and Julius Nyerere resolved to this fact:

Kaunda: In our original (African) societies, we operated by **consensus**. An issue was talked out in solemn conclave until such time as agreement could

be achieved. Nyerere: In African society, the traditional method of conducting affairs is by **free discussion**. The elders sit under the big trees, and talk until they agree (Wiredu 2004).

Clear enough, traditional Africans were resentful towards fortification of an individual to act as sole representative of choice and interest even if the individual was a representative of the gods.

The misrepresentation of the political organization in traditional Africa as akin to social-communism as opined by most traditionalists and nationalists could be attributed to the twisted interpretation of the African virtue of *Ubuntu*: an ideology that depicts African humanism. *Ubuntu* (Zulu/Xhosa) or *uMunthu* (Chewa) is the bedrock of sound human relations in traditional Africa: the collective unconscious of intra-human relations and the essence of morality (Khoza 1994). It was so to speak, the foundation of African morality (Pauw 1996). *Ubuntu*, on the complex fold reflects the African understanding of humanism; dignity; respect and proper conduct. Augustine Musopole, a Malawian theologian saw *uMunthu* as the total human integrity and crucial to cosmic inter-relatedness, harmony and salvation with strong communal dimension (Musopole 1993). Its modern usage is more entrenched in movements like pan-Africanism, Negritude and Black Power, which influenced nationalist struggles for independence (Khoza 1994). Radical nationalist leaders build the interpretation of *Ubuntu* on African socialism –socialism rooted in African culture and values- and to them, it was the ideological foundation in post-colonial Africa. They observed that African life had always been community centered without relevance to personal interest – a bias and opaquely generalized notion as proved in this work. Most of the participants in the 1945 Manchester Conference including Léopold Senghor (Senegal), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Sékou Touré (Guinea), Tom Mboya (Kenya), Wallace Johnson (Sierra Leone) and others, especially Julius Nyerere with *Ujamaa* in Tanzania, vehemently encouraged and practiced socialism in their respective states. Likewise in countries that fought colonialism through liberation wars like, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique and Angola.

In Tanzania for instance, *Ujamaa* was launched in 1967 to regenerate traditions and values similar to pre-colonial Tanzanian societies in a bid to institute a new welfare state void of enterprise or individual interest but with national and collective prosperity as its end. Most of the social arrangements and resurrected cultures struggled to fit in modern Tanzania.

As expected, the system largely failed in both social and economic ramifications. It further impoverished the people and laid foundation for an economically problematic state. Guinea under Sékou Touré experimented with similar variant of African socialism and left a brutal political landscape with an acutely bizarre economy. In places where post-independence leaders verbally advocated for capitalist economy like in Zaïre (under Mobutu Seko), Cameroun (Ahmadou Ahidjo), Togo (Gnassingbé Eyadema), and Gabon (Ali Bongo), cronyism; greed; corruption and obsession for power never allowed for institutionalization of a *free market* capitalism. And these states were practically no different from the former. Meanwhile, understanding the dimensions of African nationalist struggle is a prerequisite to uncovering why socialism and communism took root in Africa.

The fight for independence in Africa centered on two things: to rid Africa of Western imperialism (by all possible means including war), and to develop the economy and cure poverty through radical socialist reforms. Of course, this was at the height of

communism in places like Cuba and the Soviet Union. With the obvious resentment towards the imperialist West, it was better affiliating with the communist East to firstly, ensure their stay in power and secondly, to institutionalize a system for effective wealth redistribution. It eventually made African nationalists grew heavily attached to the communist bloc. They collaborated in adopting economic and social structures of the communist states that would later prove disastrous to nation building in post-independence Africa. They got financial and personnel assistance; socialist principles guided public conduct in replica states; socialism as an ideology got tremendous academic appeal and the new Africa looked more like a glorified communist workshop. This hitherto solidified Africa's ideological apology towards socialist and communist principles.

In tracing the reasons for this easy radicalization, the massive exploitation of Africa under colonialism (starting from the 1870s) was in fact a primary factor. The fattening and industrialization of Europe on the back of Africa's human and natural resources offered capitalism a 'theft' and an imperialist ideology intended to further subject Africa to continuous economic exploitation. This unfortunately coincided with a time when capitalism received immense glory for Western industrialization with Africa beneath the shaft. Logically, any idea that had been responsible for Europe's prosperity other than capitalism would have certainly been an enemy of Africa. Moreover, nearly all political figures in Africa vocally repelled Europe and anything Western during this period. Frequent rants and campaigns against capitalism often made the public appealed to the socialist agenda of politicians and their liberation charisma. Zimbabwean president, Robert Mugabe echoed this resentment in his common nature while observing:

Capitalism did not only plunder our land and other natural resources, thus impoverishing our peasants and making vast communities landless, it also turned a substantial percentage of the population into a poor wage-worker class... The difference between Socialism and Capitalism is, therefore, the difference between equality and inequality, between equity and inequity, between justice and injustice (Fisher, 1978: 206).

It was that bad. These reservations made independent struggles took anti-white racialist and tribal separatist dimensions while most nationalists experienced first-hand, the disparity in development between Europe and Africa as students in the West. Their return nonetheless, strengthened socialist resistance against continued Western capitalist exploitation. It peaked in the early-mid 1900s and majority of Africa subsequently gained independence on the back of social-communist development agenda.

Almost immediately after independence, economies improved with export gains reaching all-time highs with states revenue matured heavily towards the 1970s and 1980s. The joy was however short-lived. Economies like Nigeria, Angola, Rwanda, and Liberia slipped due to negative outcomes in socialist and colonialist arrangements. The promotion of a strong central authority by African socialism permitted politicians to massively loot an overwhelming percentage of wealth created during Africa's economic boom. Corruption, powerful state, public restrictions and suspension of civil liberties were final bullets to the definite failure of the planned state across independent Africa. And the military utilized the familiar one-man dictatorship established under civilian rule to seize power with far worse damages on social, political and economic settings. Factors like the shift of interest among public workers, the irresistible rise of private corporations, the spontaneous reaction in

markets and the increase in individual choices over state despotism caught the ‘central state’ planners off-guard. As a result, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the juggling of economic reforms that created distortions in nearly every fold. Infamous of them was the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) of the Bretton Woods institutions. Hence, finding Africa’s lost glory in socialist and communist drawings never helped Africa, rather, it effectively created the foundations for a sustained problematic statism contemporaries are vigorously battling.

THE PLACE OF INDIVIDUALISM IN AFRICAN MORALITY

There is no denial of the fact that most traditional Africans valued the prosperity of every member of the community with preference on working in unity towards a common goal. There was however, an equal respect and permission for individual choices and interests. Traditional Africans worked on their farms to provide food for themselves and their families with the secondary intent of producing for exchange. There was rarely a case of everyone working on a community farm to produce food for everyone by equal sharing. Africans valued the non-universality of an individual’s abilities or needs, but permitted for charity and fairness in enterprise to ensure a relatively balanced society.

The individual in African philosophy mostly existed as a reflection of his community. He was seen as a product of his tribe less than he was an independent being. His birth and death were to satisfy the wishes of the gods on earth. Like many tribes in Africa, several cultures according to history put the individual as a unique creation with the purpose of happiness and self-realization. In traditional Africa, it was best that the individual remained a social being. This view of man as a societal element primarily applied to his identification as a member of a united community in pursuit of collective prosperity with regards for his individual happiness. However, the expansion of groups during territorial wars and migration, increased community populations while conflict of interests among groups and individuals led to the gradual disassociation from the usual collective interest.

Hence, the idea of the individual as a communal element decreased as societies became bigger. For example, during the hunting and gathering era when community populations were very small, it was easy to commit everyone to a unified goal even as few members harbored personal interests. However, as people integrated and population augmented, the individual began to isolate itself because of the geometric increase in interests of new members against the collective. In some cases, people left their villages in pursuit of personal goals. Even, members of ruling families deserted their clans due to conflict of interest with their kin only to establish new territories later, and the conflict of interest continued to repeat itself prompting the definite decrease of collectivism.

Although, some African societies like the *Xhosa* and the *Zulu* emphasized the ideals of mutuality and community before the individual, there still existed self-interest. Classical liberals argued for a system that observes the society in light of its distinct members, for a society has no existence beyond the individuals that comprises it, while it is in itself a composition of different interests (Butler 2013).

And the socio-economic consciousness of the society is the summary of individual consciousness. Friedrich Hayek puts it clear when he explained that the “associations within civil society exists for specific end while the civil society has no purpose; it is the

undersigned, spontaneous emerging result of all those purposive associations” (Hayek 1988). Despite this similarity in purpose, contentions still exist between the two folds on grounds of economic and social morality among Africans.

On the economic fold, classical liberals outrightly argued for a *free market* economy chiefly run by individual choices and price, and this was a position common in most economies in traditional Africa. Markets were open and less regulated. In centralized communities such as the *Buganda* (Uganda), *Hausa/Fulani* (Nigeria) *Akan* (Ghana) and the *Zulu* (South Africa), there were large and open markets such that it attracted participation from communities hundreds of miles away. Trade ensued among communities in their specialized industries with limited or no restrictions, and one can safely deduce that elements of David Ricardo’s *Comparative Advantage Theory* – a cardinal in classical liberalism - existed in these communities even before it was theoretically developed in Europe.

One similar end to both African humanism and classical liberalism is in their emphasis on peace, progress and respect for human dignity through moral justifications. Though, the interpretation of these morals and their justifications is what differs. In traditional Africa, morality was whatever standard the community agreed to guide general conduct. To classical liberals, it is the respect for individual interests and choices, and both existed as the holding force for societal consciousness. In the former, values inherited through generations like equity and justice ensured a fair use of power and obedience to law to avoid conflicts among members and communities. Similarly, in the later, writers like Ludwig von Mises, Adam Smith and Jean-Baptiste Say, stressed the anti-imperialist and anti-warfare stance of classical liberalism. They saw economic liberty of communities in a fair market system as a way to avoid wars and foster peace. In other words, traditional Africans percept morality as only attainable through inherited values, while classical liberals saw it in form of the peaceful decisions of individuals.

Another misconception is the purported rejection of the principle of cooperation by classical liberals, which is in fact emphasized in their advocacy. The critics argued that market competition will eventually lead to unfair distribution of wealth and that African states were not ready for such experiment. Conversely, classical liberals saw cooperation as important as competition is to the economy. American libertarian writer David Boaz explained that both “cooperation and competition are essential elements of the simple system of natural liberty, and most humans cooperate with one another than they do competing” (Boaz 2015). In reality, cooperation is bound to ensue in a *free-market* economy because individuals cannot provide all their needs themselves and they must interact with others that can provide them in a mutually fair exchange. Then, the cycle goes round to build a system dependent on fair cooperation. Education, transportation, technology, entertainment and especially food are variables too complex in contemporary societies for an individual to produce. That an individual needs these to survive makes cooperation inevitable.

Besides, cooperation gets people their desires the way they please because, production and consumption capacities vary among individuals and it remains best when people determine these themselves. It is much safer than to have people equally providing the general need irrespective of their interests or sharing them equally regardless of their needs. Such scenario has invoked destructive economic bubbles in many African states.

The first generation writers on African philosophy falsely interpreted goodwill and solidarity to be state welfarism and collectivism. Even present writers usually claim capitalism has bitterly failed in Africa due to its emphasis on 'self-interest'. An average African still see the placement of self-interest above the collective as antithetical to African morality and it will ultimately monopolize dividends of the economy to a privileged few, whereas, it is the exact opposite. In a society where people serve the interest of others at the detriment of theirs, such society rests on an economic thread because there are always a group that would not believe in serving others due to ambition or greed. This group will get exceedingly rich while others are busy working in their favor, and those that remained devoted the common-good will eventually get exploited and poor. On the long run, the poor group will likely react to such imbalance with a potential of instigating an economic disaster. This scenario would not occur in a lawful and competitive system where everyone was self-interested because, value and profit is a win-win of a *free market* economy. To be self-interested is not to be greedy or exploitative; it is fairly pursuing one's desires for a betterment of life. Moreover, the individual best answer the question of his self-interest.

Equally, many African academics remain wrong in their notion that contemporary African states practice capitalist systems copied from Western economies (Akpan 2004; Obot 2004; Abiodun 2015). The first lapse is that the so-called African capitalist economies are in fact social-welfarist states with policies that negate the *free market* economy of true capitalism. Their economic systems are acutely crony. A cabal of wealthy men dominates key industries with state legislations protecting them. Such legislations usually include the imposition of high tariffs on industrial supplies to hold back emerging firms in specific industries. They also raise taxes on small businesses with many of their cronies often guilty of tax evasion. They enact stringent policies to limit the registration of new firms and restrict foreign investment in these industries, all in the quest of protecting the interest of the wealthy few. In return, the cabal either heavily finances their political quests or act as their economic joker. These acts are common in the energy, petroleum, transportation and mining sectors of majority modern African states and outrightly negate anything true capitalism stands for. Unbiased rankings and reports on economic policies of these African states continues to reveal series of economic patterns correlative to crony capitalism.

In a *free market* economy on the other hand, policies that favors one group at the detriment of others would rarely exist, because true capitalism means giving everyone equal opportunity at individual pace without chauvinism or protectionism. Every individual would have equal access to market; tax rates on small businesses are relatively low and entrepreneurs can access foreign markets for exchange of materials and finished products. It is a complete opposite of a government controlled socialist system or a crony capitalist arrangement. Countries like of Coted'Ivoire, Mauritius and Mozambique are presently experiencing massive economic growth due to commendable efforts towards a *free market* economy.

On social morality, a peculiar quality of the African life is the zeal to preserve culture and traditions even when in conflict with individual interest. As noted earlier, there was no unified lifestyle in traditional Africa except the common exhumation of culture and ancestral practices. In some communities, the ruling elites determined what was socially morally and what was not. In others, individuals had liberty to lead their desired life insofar it respects the liberty of others. However, as generations, evolved, foreign influence penetrated the rigid cultures and newly inherited lifestyles influenced social moral

standards. For example, practices like monarchy; forbidden of estate; genital mutilation; facial and body markings; execution of homosexuals and twins among others used to be culturally moral and formed the nucleus of social existence. But the effects of cultural interactions as communities expanded with time persistently redefined socially moral behaviors. This is reflective in irregular changes in value and culture of modern African societies. Positions such as predetermined behavioral responsibility and blind adherence to authority ranked high decades ago, but revolts against authoritarianism, tyranny or subjective cultures in recent years corroborates this declination. Sorry enough, many traditionalists still see classical liberal principles as rather anarchist even as some African communities flourished under anarchy. Or adversative to traditional African principles: a sort of threat to Africa's historical identity. Unlike the total anarchy assumption, classical liberals proposed an impartial system of justice in the custody of the state, but in trust, with some monopoly of force (if needed) to guarantee relative balance (Butler 2013). This was the exact structure in most of traditional Africa. Leaders and governing councils were guardians of values and preserved the justice system through impartial adherence to laws while public revolt was an option against tyranny. Like many other race in human history, traditional Africans despised tyranny. The central authority only existed as representative of the gods on earth, to guide the living in the right conducts only. And as Otto Lehto explained, "in addition to being a doctrine of maximizing free and voluntary human cooperation, classical liberalism is a doctrine of legal limits to coercive actions" (Lehto 2015). In African tradition, the individual was as important as life itself, and the respect for his dignity, a virtue. The only difference was that they saw the realization of individual prosperity as more realistic when embedded in the prosperity of his community. Even Kenneth Kaunda, a staunch African humanist agreed when he said:


I am deeply concerned that this high valuation of Man and **respect for human dignity**, which is a legacy of our [African] tradition should not be lost in the new Africa. However "modern" and "advanced" in a Western sense the new nations of Africa may become, we are fiercely determined that this humanism will not be obscured. African society has always been **Man-centered**. We intend that it will remain so (Eze 1997, 42).

His submission serves well an historical correction for contemporaries.

CONCLUSION

That traditional Africa prioritized the community over selfishness is not a contestable fact, but that the community was its real and only end is where the contention lies. The correlation of most African values like free trade and market economy on the one hand, constitutionally limited governance and consensus on the other hand, contradicts pre-existing notions of a unified socialist or communist philosophy in traditional Africa.

Nevertheless, the falsification of classical liberal principles as the sole responsible factor for Africa's present socio-economic predicaments is false. Africa's woes are solely due to political greediness and distortions from continued experiments with socialist ideals.

We can fairly conclude that the negative influence of colonialism was in fact a cementing factor for the sporadic inclination of Africa in anti-capitalist sentiments and not because Africans were not naturally capitalists or that capitalist principles never existed in traditional Africa as presented by most philosophers. Therefore, there exists an undisputable correlation between classical liberalism and traditional African philosophy. 

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