

Asouzu's Complementary Ontology as a Panacea to the Problem of Ethnic Idolization in Nigeria

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Abstract

This work is an *exposé* of the ravaging effect of ethnic inclination in our society with a view to attempting a solution using Asouzu's complementary philosophy. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic society characterised by three dominant, and well above one hundred and fifty sub-groups with distinct cultures, languages and social systems. A critical study of the socio-political dynamics of the country revealed a progressive increase in conflicts due to the manipulation of ethnic differences. This, the paper avers is due to a divisive mindset with which we view the world with. Asouzu's complementary ontology is therefore proposed as a way to obliterate this mindset. This philosophy sees all things that exist; including individuals and groups of human beings, as missing links of reality in complementary service to each other. By implication, it means that those actions of ours that tend towards disharmony, hatred, disintegration, and emphasizing ethnicity above everything else are invariably against our interest even when we feel there are the best things to do. The work therefore employed the philosophical methods of investigation, analysis, criticism, speculation and logical reasoning in erecting a framework using Asouzu's complementarity principles on which Nigeria could stand to purge itself of the problems associated with ethnicity.

Key Words: Complementary Ontology, Ibuanyidanda, Ethnicity, Idolization, Missing-Links.

1. Introduction

The term “ethnic” originated from the Greek word *ethnos* which is translated as nation (*Chambers* 449). The term refers currently to people thought to be homogenous in terms of culture, race and having the same ancestry. Ethnicity is the interaction among members of many or diverse ethnic group. It relates to, “aspects of relationship between groups which consider themselves and are regarded by others as being culturally distinctive” (Haralambos and Holborn 2008:159).

An ethnic group or ethnicity therefore, is a description of a natural phenomenon; it is the legitimate expression of the origin and identity of a people. The term ethnicity is a neutral gender, but, due to the ambivalence of the human mind the dyke has been adjusted to extremes that the concept is now conceived in negative terms. The instinct of self preservation, according to Asouzu (2004), is the root cause of this ambivalence of the human mind. It produces divisive differences in the identity of individuals and groups of humans. It also tends to admit things or take such actions that will serve its interest, and exclude others. This “other” that is considered inconsequential, inferior or accidental often times becomes a source of belligerence especially in social relations. This is the case when we have the West and the rest of the world, “Black” and “White”, Hausa and Igbo and so on.

We see these divisive tendencies which encourage the we-them dichotomy as some sort of idols that blurs the mind from the ontological awareness that all humans are manifestations or moments of being in the world; and that each person, or ethnic group should see the other as complement and not necessarily opposite.

The challenges occasioned by the idolization of ethnicity cannot be overemphasized. This is evident in the many intractable conflicts in the world today that are believed to be ethnically induced. Among the numerous examples of deadly ethnic conflicts in our time are; the Arab against Jews, Hutus against Tutsis, Irish against British, Bosque against Spaniard, Kurds against Iraqis, Croats against Serbs, Ukrainians against Russians, Tamil Nadir against Sri Lankans. All these make the headlines every day, yet they are only tips of the iceberg. The heterogeneous nature of groups in every nation seems to be trouble waiting to happen (Jacobs www.directjournal.org).

The Nigerian state is a good example of a multi-ethnic society beset with the challenges of ethnic inclination. A close look at the state reveals a range in types of social system, dress, diet, language, tribal marks and culture which, according to Salawu and Hassan (2011:28), far exceed that to be found elsewhere in the world. The ontological absolutization of this diversity has resulted in major conflicts arising between larger ethnic groups, smaller ethnic groups and between larger and smaller ethnic groups. The consequences of these ranges from wastage of human and material resources, insecurity and inclement environment for investors to hatred for one another, killings, maiming and a general lack of peace and harmony. One of the greatest challenges to Nigeria today is on how to manage her ethnic nationalities to avoid these conflicts.

Using Asouzu’s complementary ontology, this work wishes to fashion out a better approach to the management of diversity to produce functional results for the Nigerian state. This ontology holds that everything that exists serves as missing links of reality (Asouzu 2007:10). In other words, individuals or groups can only live meaningfully in harmonious complementary relationship. Nigeria is in chaos because this principle has not taken root in the minds of its citizens as yet.

2. Ethnicity and the Nigerian Experience

Though ethnic consciousness could be said to have existed right from when human beings began to form themselves into groups; it was when these groups began to interact and

compete with themselves for resources that ethnicity (negative) started. In Nigeria, the colonial urban setting constitutes the cradle of contemporary ethnicity (Nnoli 1980:35). For, it was there that what we refer today as ethnic groups first acquired a common consciousness. This is evident from the fact that the various Nigerians languages have no equivalent concept for tribalism and ethnicity. This perhaps, is because there was no existence of ethnicity, if not the languages would have a concept for ethnicity, thus its origin lies in the pre-colonial order. The fact is that tribalism or ethnicity in Nigeria is a creature of the colonial and post colonial order. According to Lloyd (1967), it was only after colonisation that the term Yoruba land began to be used to refer to the domains of all rulers who claim descent from the mythical Oduduwa, instead of the kingdom of Oyo to which it was previously limited.

As the British colonialists developed roads, railways, postal communication, et cetera, individuals from one linguistic group could more easily migrate to another. Initially, the socio-economic competition between the migrants and their hosts was not sharp. Thus, the latter did not feel threatened by the activities of the former and very little hostility existed between the groups. According to J.A. Sofola (1970:115), interactions between them were so positive that intergroup marriage was fairly common. However, when migrants became many and socio-economic competition with the hosts became more distinct, relations were strained. In reaction, both migrants and hosts organised themselves along communal lines in order to safe guard their interests in the struggle for the scarce and unequally distributed resources.

During the 1920s, these struggles resulted to upspring of kinship and communal unions. There were “Naze family meeting, Ngwu Clan Union, Owerri Divisional Union, Calabar Improvement League, Igbirra Progressive Union, and Urhobo Renascent Convention” (Nnoli 1980: 97). In 1918, the Egba society was formed in Lagos and in other urban centres of the nation.

The migrants were unable to compete with the British for socio-economic resources because of their ill-education; thus they turned their frustrations against their fellow countrymen. They found it easier and safer to blame their plight on advantages possessed by members of other groups. “Once the members of a particular group gained access to the best jobs and other resources they used their positions to find jobs for others or at least pass on news of job opportunities to them” (Nnoli 1980:98). The importance of group became more prominent during the depression and the Second World War. During the depression and the Second World War, the colonial government virtually withdrew from the provision of employment and other services. This heightened the importance and significance of communal and ethnic associations; they became the only hope the individual had of solving his socio-economic problems. This transfer of responsibility from the colonial masters to the Communal Association, contributed significantly to the emergence of ethnicity and the creation of ethnic identity, especially in the cities. “Ethnic identities thus became an issue for the urban migrant when it probably had no meaning for his more parochial parents” (Plotnicov 1967:101).

Though ethnicity started with the colonial government as stated above, ethnic violence was not common during that period as against the happenings today. This, Lucky feels is because, the colonial machinery for limitless brutal repression, and the accompanying total control of state apparatus of governance (which was replicated in the military era), were such that overwhelmed the various ethnic groups even in their diversities and mutual hostilities to the point of individually resigning their fate to the colonial state. Consequently, intra and inter-ethnic differences could not freely manifest in the form of open hostilities and wars as it is in the post-colonial era (Plotnicov 1967:92). The military who took over from the colonial masters operated in the same format as the colonial masters but they were pockets of ethnic clashes here and there – which culminated in the civil war. However, the intemperance of ethnic groups became full blown with the emergence of democracy.

Arguably, we could say that the first leg of ethnic conflict in Nigeria in the present Democratic regime was in July 1999, when some Oro people in Sagamu in Ogun state accused a Hausa woman of coming out when the cultists were outside with their *Gnome*. This led to some altercations, which eventually led to full blown crises, where many people, majority of Hausa and Yoruba tribes lost their lives. The infamy was however, temporarily put to check only when dusk to dawn curfew was imposed on Sagamu. Unfortunately, however, as the infamy was put off in Sagamu, reprisal killings started in Kano. As a result, many people died and properties worth billions of naira were destroyed. Kano residents of Southern extraction who had lived all their lives in Kano had to return to their native land to count their losses. When Kano city was settling down for peace, Lagos erupted with another orgy of violence, visibly as a mark of vengeance of the Kano mass killing of the Yoruba tribe's men. This time, the O'dua People's Congress moved against the Hausa/Fulani traders in the popular mile 12 market and for two days, the area was turned to a killing field.

The most deadly and most recurrent of conflicts in recent times is in the city of Jos which broke its innocence as a religiously tolerant state in 2001. In 2001, ethno-religious riots surged and claimed hundreds of lives and properties worth millions. Jos was once regarded as the city of 'peace and tourism'. Today, it is sarcastically referred to as a city of pieces and terrorism. In 2008, the November crisis evolved after a state wide local government council election. The crisis lasted four days, leaving in its trail, loss of lives and properties. On Sunday 17th January, 2010, Jos witnessed another ethno-religious conflict which was a consequence of ethno-religious intolerance. There were killings, mayhem and a wanton destruction of properties. In Bukuru, houses were completely brought down to their foundations. The tensions spread to Bauchi, Kano, Kaduna, Nasarawa and Gombe states. In fact, ethnic crises in this part of the country has become somewhat perennial and just this year, many lives have been lost as a result of such crises. If a week passes by and no ethnic crises are witnessed, it could be seen sarcastically as "abnormal". It has gotten to a point that crises is seen as normal, while peace could make the people feel far removed from what has become their second nature-ethnic clashes.

Other renowned conflict of note include: the Ife and Modakeke (Yoruba) in Southern West Nigeria; Zongon-Kataf (Hausa) in the northern Nigeria; Aguleri and Umuleri (Ibos) in Eastern Nigeria; Tiv-Jukun of middle-Belt; the Nsadop-Bojie and Ebom and Ebijiakara in South-South Nigeria, and so on.

The effects of these clashes cannot be over-emphasized. Agi (1998:227) summarises these effects when he asserts:

This upsurge of violence in Nigeria has given rise to huge social divisions, avoidable political instability, and unfortunate economic disruption – all of which militates against the overall progress of the nation, and add to international negative views about the Nigerian reality.

Following Agi's observation, it is clear that ethnic conflict affect almost all spheres of societal life – economical, political, social and religious.

According to Julia Johnstone, ethnic conflicts account for the world's 9.2 million external refugees and 25 million internal refugees (<http://hdl.handle.net/10092/892>). According to Hussaini also, ethno-religious clashes increase the number of street children; for some children run to the streets because they lost their parents and bread winners (<http://www.hussainiabdu.info/mydocs/urban%2520>).

Alluding to the same problem of ethnicity, Taiwo (1980: 75) pointed out the fact that the objective of Nigeria philosophy of education cannot be achieved as a result of the diverse interest of the groups. To him, "a country where people are of different races, and each race

tries to emphasize its own importance and there are racial or tribal jealousies, one race fears the domination of another race, it is always very difficult to make for a national system of education” . One can say that, very little or nothing has been achieved in spite of how intelligent the policies seem to sound.

From what has been said above, it is very vivid that ethnic inclination blows hot air and thus need to be stemmed or if possible uprooted from the ground. We believe the starting point to this uprooting is to deconstruct and discolour the divisive ontological mindset and replace this with the ontology of harmonious complementation which would harmonize all differences, and breach the antagonism of the opposite inherent in the mind. This we believe could be done using Innocent Asouzu’s complementary thesis.

3. An Overview of Asouzu’s Complementary Ontology (Ibuanyidanda)

Innocent Asouzu is an African philosopher. He is the founder of the philosophical school of thought known as *Ibuanyidanda*. *Ibuanyidanda* which means “no load is insurmountable for danda the ant” (Asouzu 2007:11) is derived from three Igbo words: *ibu* meaning load or task, *anyi* meaning not insurmountable for and *danda* which is specie of ant. This idea of *Ibuanyidanda* connotes, to the Igbo people, the importance of mutual dependence and interdependence in complementarity of all. For the traditional Igbo philosophers of the complementary system of thought, “for anything to claim existence, it has to fulfil a minimum condition, which subsists in its commitment to a mutual complementary relationship between it and the other units with which it shares a common framework” (Asouzu 2007A:11-12).

This philosophy of *Ibuanyidanda* was therefore, contrived based on Asouzu’s personal knowledge of authentic African traditions in the Igbo community. The world view of the traditional Africans he claims, shows to a large extent, “strong moments of the transcendent ontological categories of unity, totality, universality, comprehensiveness, wholeness and future referentiality as authentic dimensions of thoroughgoing complementarity” (Heinz, A Reaction to Innocent Asouzu’s approach to African philosophy adapted from Asouzu 2007B:10). Based on this African worldview therefore, Asouzu regards reality as an all-embracing whole, where all missing links of reality exist in complementarity. Being is not seen by this philosophy in its old traditional clothing, but as “that on account of which anything that exists serves a missing link of reality” (Asouzu 2007A:10). Thus, a thing can be said to exist if it has the capacity to be grasped within the framework of mutual complementary relationship of all existent realities. Failure to perceive being as missing links of realities as many philosophers and thinkers are wont to do will lead to polarization, fragmentation, bifurcation, reduction, hegemonic tendencies and negative wisdom and so on.

Asouzu’s complementary philosophy is also a reaction against Aristotle’s dualistic ontology. In his metaphysics and throughout his major works, Aristotle articulates a divisive ontology and polarizing dualism. His conception of being for instance, gives out a radical distinction between substance and accidents. As Stumpf notes, Aristotle sees substance as that which is not asserted of a subject but of which everything else is asserted (Asouzu 2007A). That is, accidents adhere on substance without which it has no existence. He sees substance as superior while accidents are inferior, thereby giving the impression that substance and accidents lie in diverse regions of being.

Asouzu believes that Aristotle’s divisive mindset sets a pace for the way most philosophical debates are usually done in the West; such that, most debates in Western philosophy can easily be described as a contest that revolves around the dualism existing between substance and accidents, being and non-being, spirit and matter, experience and intuition and so on (Asouzu 2007A:169). This, he believes, is the mindset that has been transported to other regions of the world through colonialism, slave trade and imperialism.

Thus making the human mind to tend to give primacy and supremacy to itself or the group it belongs and negating external other.

Complementary ontology therefore, arose to discolour this mindset, “it sets out to regain Aristotle’s teaching about diverse modes of grasping being in view of making the distinction between substance (essence) and accidents, cause and effect, matter and form more manageable” (Asouzu 2007A:158).

Asouzu believes that most ethnic clashes and other problems arise due to the type of mindset people adopt in pursuing issues at stake. Also most conflicts endure due to the type of mindset adopted by stakeholders to address their problems (Asouzu 2007A:313). A hegemonic mind set begets a hegemonic method whereas a harmonizing mindset begets a complementary method. In this direction Asouzu accuses the western culture as being limited by their commitment to a hegemonic method which underscores their underlying mindset of polarization and bifurcation. He observes that:

Most realist, positivist and conventionalist theorists give the impression that theoretical and experimental entities are either single observable or unobservable realities. By so doing they negate the mutual necessary intrinsic complementary relationship needed to grasp any entity either real or imagined. This methodological flaw is at the foundation of any explanatory paradigm that has its roots in a bifurcating ontology. One can say that this is one of the most severe flaws endemic to western scientific methods of investigation and its models of explanation (Asouzu 2007A:289-289).

Going further, he observes that the problem with a world-view that is elitist and which polarized differences without any inherent dimension of mediation, is that it produces models of explanation that are often homogenizing reductions. This is the case because they see all matters of explanation as things reducible to the operation of the intellect (Asouzu 2007A:300). For Asouzu, hegemonic modes of explanation are not good explanations; for a good explanation does not only subsist in giving good reasons but takes into account all the units as they are mutually related to each other in an intrinsic complementary way (Asouzu 2007A: 293).

The complementary model of explanation presupposes a mindset that takes cognizance of all possible conditions that might be adjudged necessary to determine the character of a thing or an event, bearing in mind these positions of the subject which convey the moment of interested necessity that is complementary (Asouzu 2007A:295). In this regard all complementary modes of explanation centre on the human person; for explaining an event within complementary framework, one has to bear in mind always that the processes needed to bring about an effect always have an intrinsic character of necessity bestowed by the human agent as of being that is self-conscious (Asouzu 2007A:297). Elucidating further, he remarks:

It is from this background that we put into account, in any type of explanation, all the actors and factors needed to produce an effect. As things that have to deal with a self-conscious human subject, the idea of natural complementary necessary dependence between all things and events, in need of explanation, is not something that can be explained based on mere habits or frivolous deceptive assumption. On the contrary, these are matters that have to deal fundamentally with a being that is self-conscious. Hence, such a moment of necessity follows basically from clear intuition of a subject that is not alone in the world (Asouzu 2007A:297).

From the foregoing quotation the author wishes to explain that the human subject is a being that can be conceptualized only within the framework of mutual complementary relationship with other existent realities. To remove this capacity to exist as a missing link of reality in complementary relationship with others, is to negate what it means to be and even to be human (Asouzu2007A: 301). This means that as human, we are dependent on other beings for meaning and answers; this fundamental insufficiency characterizes our being and draws us outside ourselves, making it possible for us to strive towards obtaining answers, even with regard to those things that we designate as senseless, unsatisfactory, contradicting and incomprehensible (Asouzu 2007A:303). The human being is thus defined by complementary and by virtue of this definition any attempt at the explanation must be defined by a transcendental complementarity, which takes into account all things that are possibly necessary in the past, present and future.

The Ibuanyindanda method comes from a horizon that is defined by two complementary principles, namely, the metaphysical principle of integration and the principle of progressive transformation . In an article in the Journal of liberal studies, Asouzu (1990:82) states that the principle of integration reads, ‘anything that exists serves a missing link of relating within the framework of the totality’, The principle of progressive transformation reads “all forms of human action are towards the joy of being” (Asouzu 2007A:293). Thus the imperative of complementary reflection becomes: “Allow the limitation of being to become the cause of your joy” (Asouzu 2003: 60).

The limitation of being encountered becomes the proof of missing links, and such a limitation is most manageable in a horizon of complementarity where the strives at complementary totality, leaves room for the future possibilities that appears as unidentified missing links of the present or of the past. This explicates the idea of progressive transformation that complement that of integration in a reciprocal manner, so that not even theory and practice should stand as conflict; if the question of meaning must be addressed by a being that is itself a missing link amongst missing links.

In summary, the Ibuanyindanda method which strives at a complementary totality simply combines metaphysical dimension/with physical dimension to facilitate integration of varieties for the practical progressive transformation of epistemological matters in a future referential manner.

4. Asouzu’s Complementary Ontology as a Bridge to Ethnicity in Nigeria

The fact that Nigeria is living far below her potentiality today is very obvious. Given the economic and human endowment of the country one will think that Nigeria should be the true giant that she is called. But far from being the case, the country is known for a record of poverty, strife, robbery, insecurity, terrorism, and recently, kidnapping of people for ransom. According to Babawale and Adelaja (2007:280), two founding fathers of Nigeria; Balewa and Obafemi, made statements that “Nigeria is a mistake of 1914” and “a mere geographical expression” respectively. To them therefore, Nigeria cannot stand the test of nationhood due to her diverse ethnic nationalities. This assertion is confirmed by the happening in the country today. The journey of the country so far has been all ethnic nightmares. And this has far reaching effects on the development and growth of the country; since no country can grow meaningfully without peace and harmony. It is therefore, not surprising that while Nigeria is rich in both human and natural resources on the one hand, on the other hand, she is ranked among the poorest countries in the world. According to a report by the United Nation, Agency for International Development (USAID 2006:6), Nigeria is among the poorest countries in the world with the vast majority of the population living on less than \$2 per day. It claims that, only 40% of Nigerians have access to electricity. Most citizens suffer from grossly inadequate state services such as provision of public utilities (electricity, water, and sanitation), social

services such as education and health or the maintenance of security. Most social indicators such as life expectancy, health and education, have actually declined despite a windfall of oil revenues. This report shows that Nigeria is missing out in almost everything that makes a nation great; industrialization, economic growth, science and technology, infrastructure, political stability and so on.

This scenario is a result of selfish understanding of being and existence; the result of negating the natural principle of complementarity. The principle of complementarity states that, “anything that exists serves a missing link of reality”. For Asouzu, missing links are the diverse units that make up an entity within the framework of the whole and there are complementarily related. There are the imaginable units, fragments, components and combinations that enter into our understanding of any aspect of reality. There are also the modes in which being manifest itself in history. In social relations, missing links are individuals or group of individuals and all the materials that make for social existence. The question is how do these function as missing links? Individuals of any society are made up of different talents, knowledge and skills which help them fit into the society. Their locations and cultures give them the unique characteristics as missing links. This implies that, people function as necessary units towards the progress and growth of the society. When a unit of human beings is therefore removed from the whole, then we say that, that unit is missing. It is missing because it is viewed as discrete and isolated from the whole. By this analysis, individuals are first of all units in units of units (families, communities, race, ethnic groups, states and humanity as a whole). It has been said that there are no two human being that are exactly the same. In the same vein, there are no two groups of human beings that are exactly the same in all respect.

Based on the foregoing, we could say that Nigerian diverse ethnic nature could be made to yield functional effects if the principle of integration is made to take root in the heart of every Nigerian. When the principle takes root in us, then every ethnic group would stop seeing itself as more important than the other. Every individual would stop seeing the other individual as an external other but rather as an extension of the self without which the self would not be complete. When everybody is seen as a missing link, then the we-them mentality which is the root cause of ethnicity would be obliterated. Asouzu believes that all realities are windows to other realities; all mode of beings are essential; that the other person is as essential as we are; the other’s idea is as important as ours; the other person has the same rights as you have; and more importantly the other person is not an opposite other but an extension of the self. This is the idea fully encapsulated in his concept of missing links of realities. That is why Asouzu understands the concept of being as “not being alone”. It means the other person is not inconsequential but a missing part of the self without which the self cannot define its existence. This means that all harm done to the other person is indirectly done to the self. Harming the other is like shooting oneself on the foot. Killing the other would deprive one of the services that the self would have derived from him/her. When this teaching of Asouzu is fully imbibed by Nigerians, then ethnic clashes and violence would cease. Nigeria would become a country where everybody sees every other person as an extension of the self without whom the self cannot truly realize its existence.

5. Conclusion

Asouzu is of the belief that, the tendency to act based on ethnocentric commitment (which is a function of our instinct of self-preservation) is the major cause of ethnic conflict in the world. Ethnocentric commitment is the tendency of the human mind to cling to those nearest to it, hence seeking to protect their interest against what it perceives as the external other. This work believes that ethnocentric commitment is prevalent in Nigeria and has been

the root cause of almost all the conflict in the past and the present, and would continue to pose problems in the future if efforts are not made to nib this in the bud.

To nib ethnocentric commitment in the bud, this work presents Asouzu's complementary methodological principle which states; "anything that exists serves a missing link of reality" (Asouzu 2007:10) as a remedy. It is the belief of the researcher that when Nigerians begin to see one another as serving a missing link of reality and not as fragments of existence, then ethnicity and the problem it breeds would be curbed. This is because when everybody sees every other person as a missing link of reality, then the 'we-them' mentality which is at the root of ethnic divide would be obliterated and the 'we-we' mentality would be enthroned.

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